A Crash-Course in Renaissance Counterpoint

Towards a Better Understanding of Basso Continuo Repertoire

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I. Introduction

In the period of the birth of *basso continuo*, it is certainly true that musicians and composers began to think more 'vertically' and less 'horizontally,' meaning that harmonic thinking in terms of block chords began to challenge the long-reigning contrapuntal procedures of Renaissance composition. This probably happened for a number of different reasons, not least of which is that it simplified accompaniment, thereby making self-accompanied singing more practical as well as freeing more attention to expressing the text.

However, the highly evolved and complex system of Renaissance counterpoint could not have just disappeared overnight. In fact, despite the radical challenges that it sustained around 1600, Renaissance counterpoint still informed how music was made throughout the whole Baroque (think of music today nearly a century after the 'collapse of tonality'). This is just to recognize that in many ways we are coming to the *basso continuo* repertoire from the opposite direction from its composers: the dominant approach to making music in our day involves melodies over chords, whereas theirs was one where individual but inter-dependent parts meshed to form a texture.

It might do us some good to get some basics as to how Renaissance music theory worked. Though the whole corpus of rules is huge and took years to learn and master, we can be selective and brush on a few small topics that are fairly easy to grasp and will offer the most help in understanding the 'horizontal' component of *basso continuo* repertoire. This will lead to more confidence in a number of musical contexts, including analyzing original repertoire to make decisions about harmonization, handling questions of musica ficta/printing errors, playing divisions, and improvisation.

For starters, for a moment prohibit yourself from thinking in vertical harmonies (i.e., "d minor"). Chord names don't really exist yet in theoretical discourse. There is no major/minor tonality system, no circle of fifths or key signature system (for the most part, there was only the signature with one flat and the one with no flats). Of course, because it's impractical to completely abandon all of our modern theory, we continue to use certain ideas from it while modifying and augmenting it with some concepts from the body of Renaissance theory.

Most importantly is that you begin to think of each note as being some type of interval away from the lowest sounding 'voice' at any given time. This help sheet takes only the basic rules of two-voice counterpoint as its point of focus, leaving aside the complexities of multi-voice polyphony.

II. Intervals

There are three types:

A) Perfect consonances
   1) Unisons (U)
   2) Octaves (8)
   3) Fifths (5)

B) Imperfect consonances
   1) Thirds (3) (both major and minor)
   2) Sixths (6) (both major and minor)

C) Dissonances
   1) Seconds (2)

2) Fourths (4) - this may seem surprising, but it's true![*]
3) Sevenths (7)
4) All augmented and diminished intervals.

Beyond the octave, there are compound intervals that become more or less interchangeable with their simpler counterparts:

9 = Octave + 2
10 = Octave + 3
11 = Octave + 4
12 = Octave + 5
Etc.

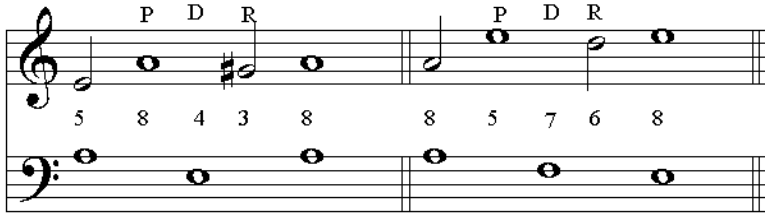
For our purposes, the main guidelines to know are:

1) Upper parts must be perfect or imperfect consonances with the bass
2) Perfect consonances tend to begin and end phrases. These are treated with care since parallel motion is hard to avoid (there are special ways to approach and leave them – best is by step-wise contrary motion).
3) Imperfect consonances are preferred within phrases; they have fewer restrictions.
4) Dissonances are normally passing notes on weak beats

However, dissonances are allowed on strong beats if they undergo a special three-part procedure:

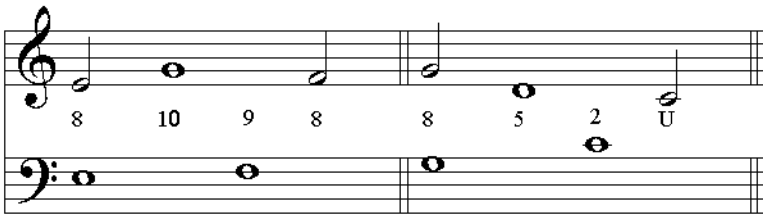
a) *Preparation* (P) – one of the two pitches is already put in place on the previous weak beat, and often in performance begins to crescendo towards the 'moment' of dissonance.
b) *Dissonance*(D) – the dissonance occurs on the strong beat (and is hopefully savored by performer and audience alike!).
c) *Resolution* (R) – one voice moves down a step on the next weak beat to make a consonance.

The most common (upper-voice) dissonances are 4-3 and 7-6. Sometimes the resolution note is raised a step, especially at cadences:

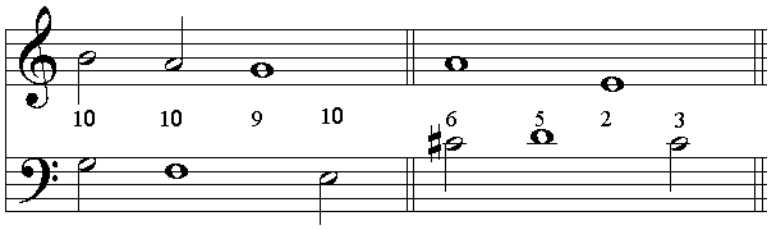


[*] This is a little complex, however. Sometimes there are so-called 'consonant' fourths, as in the common cadential harmonic figure 3443 over the dominant. Here the dissonant fourth on the third beat is 'prepared' on the second beat (but over the same bass note!).

The dissonance 2-U (or 9-8) is usually avoided since it resolves to the 'empty' octave/unison. Although this is used in later baroque music, in terms of strict Renaissance counterpoint, the examples below are false!



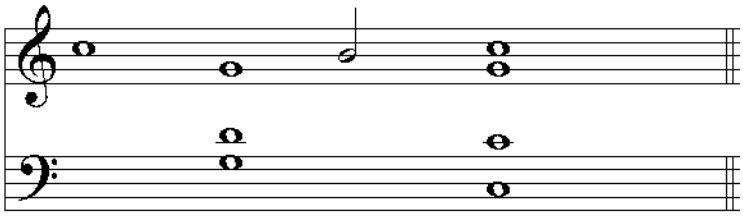
However, this dissonance can be resolved by the *lower* voice going down a step (9-10 or 2-3):



Augmented/diminished intervals were rarely used, they are only for especially expressive moments in pieces by rule-breakers like Gesualdo, Monteverdi, d'India, etc.!

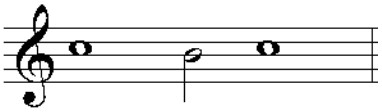
III. Cadences

A. A 'perfect cadence' has four components (voices):

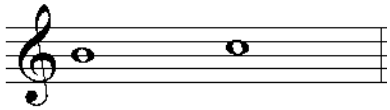


There are four different cadential 'clauses,' each of which is named for what each voice typically does in the above cadence:

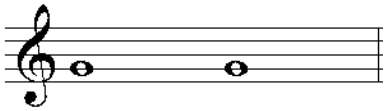
1. Discant clause:



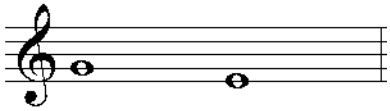
or, a simpler version without the dissonance:



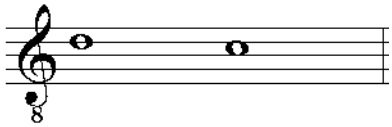
2. Alto clause:



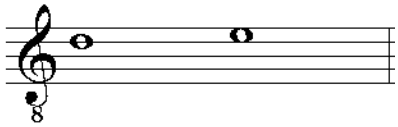
or sometimes:



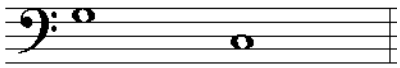
3. Tenor clause:



or sometimes:

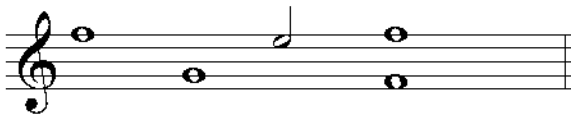


4. Bass clause:

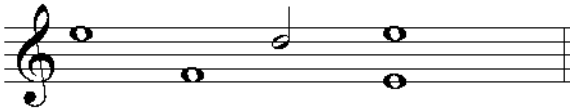


B. An ‘imperfect cadence’ is one in which the lowest sounding voice does not perform a Bass clause.

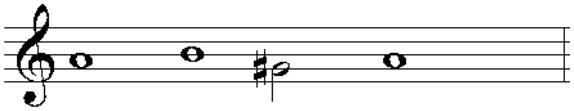
1. The most common of these is the ‘tenor cadence,’ which, predictably, has a tenor clause in the lowest part:



2. The version above the above cadence where the half-step is in the tenor clause is called a '*mi* cadence' after the solmization syllable which is landed upon:



3. When the descant clause is in the bass, it's a so-called 'descant cadence':



In the context of basso continuo repertoire, this cadence becomes a 'bass suspension,' and often occurs when you have the figure 5/2 or 4/2.

4. There isn't any such thing as an 'alto' cadence, since the alto clause cannot be the lowest voice (it would result in the *finalis* being a dissonance).