

Canon Composition: Lesson Nr. 1

This lesson presents the "Forward/Backward Method" of canon construction. It assumes you have at least some rudimentary knowledge of harmony theory and counterpoint. Otherwise, see my little introduction to counterpoint: <http://www.musiccarroll.com/counterpoint.pdf>

by Michael L. Carroll

1. Select two whole notes to represent the final chord change.

2. Work backward.
Copy and paste the previous whole note chord change to the lower voice and transpose down an octave.

Piano

4. Add harmony in upper voice.
Choose different chord change than previous.
Use mostly 3rds, 6ths and octaves, because these are nicely invertible.

Pno.

3. Add harmony in bass line. Use good principles of counterpoint. If upper voice goes down, make the lower voice go up.

5. Repeat steps 2 and then 4, moving backwards two measures.

Pno.

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2

21

Am Dm C F G C

Pno.

6. Repeat step 2 again.
Now we have arrived at measure 1 with a C in the bass. That's a good starting point.

Now we have 8 measures and we are ready to start the forward process. We could have kept working backward and obtained a longer phrase, but 8 measures are good for illustration purposes.

29

Am Dm C F G C

Pno.

7. Retaining the pitches of the two original whole notes, subdivide the whole notes into smaller notes. Interpolate between the melodic intervals.

8. Copy and paste the lower voice produced in 7 into the upper voice and transpose up an octave.

37

Am Dm C F G C

Pno.

9. Write in the lower voice a counterpoint to the upper voice, retaining the pitch levels of the whole notes for the first notes of each measure. Use contrary motion and complementary rhythms to give the voices independence.

45

Am Dm 10. Repeat step 8. G C

Pno.

11. Repeat step 9.

53

Am Dm C F G C

Pno.

12. Copy over measure 5 and transpose. No need to copy measure 6, since we are finished.

Here's a variation obtained by starting at Step 7 (the beginning of the forward process) again.

61

Am Note the A fits the Dm harmony

Pno.

65

C F/C Note the F fits the harmony C

Pno.

Here we have put the lower voice in the upper and the upper in the lower. Now the upper voice leads.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano (Pno.).

The first system begins at measure 69. The upper staff (treble clef) contains a melodic line with eighth notes and quarter notes. The lower staff (bass clef) contains a bass line with quarter notes and half notes. Above the staff, the chords Am, Dm, and C are indicated. A note in the upper staff is circled, with the annotation "Note the A fits the harmony" pointing to it.

The second system begins at measure 74. The upper staff contains a melodic line with quarter notes and eighth notes. The lower staff contains a bass line with quarter notes and half notes. Above the staff, the chords F, G, and C are indicated. A note in the upper staff is circled, with the annotation "Note the F fits the harmony" pointing to it.

Summary:

1. We worked backwards with two measure harmonic / melodic changes. This determined that the imitation was going to be at temporal spacing of two measures. We could have chosen any two note temporal spacing: Two half notes, two quarter notes, two eighth notes. The key, however, is that the change from one note or harmony to another is the fundamental unit of harmonic / melodic progress.
2. We used a melodic imitation at the octave. We could have chosen any other interval with or without additional octaves. But we kept it simple with the octave. With intervals of 2nd and 7th, we get very strong harmonic progressions.
3. After we worked backwards to a reasonable beginning, we then started working forward with rhythmic subdivisions of the whole note changes. We propagated these forward by copying them into the upper voice and transposing upward by the same amount as we previously transposed downward.
4. We kept it simple without any key modulations or secondary dominants. We could have enriched the harmony and added more drama by using dissonant intervals (of 7th and 9th chords, e.g.). Note that we didn't slavishly follow the pitch relationships to a 't'. Rather, we allowed the harmony to dictate some adjustments as in measure 3.
5. Note that in the upper voice (and in the lower with the exception of the last note) the whole note sequences do not repeat any notes. This is a goal to strive for, but is not to be taken as a rigid rule. It helps to avoid harmonic and melodic monotony.
6. Note also that the most of the inventiveness seems to take place in the forward process. Bach was known to say that anybody can be taught the rules of harmony while a good sense for melody was a gift from God.
7. In the next lesson, we will add some of these other elements and experiment with other imitation intervals.