

A Practical Approach to the Renaissance Counterpoint Based on Zarlino's Pedagogical Principle

Yumi Kim

Abstract—This paper presents distinctive features of diverse contrapuntal issues discussed in Zarlino's *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, thus illuminating his extensive knowledge of teaching counterpoint and suggesting a supplement point with respect to a logical order of his discussion. In accordance with useful instructions based on his empirical analysis of counter-point, this paper provides his valuable teaching strategies and practical applications to the Renaissance counterpoint class. Especially in the fourth chapter, this paper summarizes his five pedagogical assumptions and applies those to a real situation. This process could support teachers to more realistically acquaint students with sixteenth-century contrapuntal idiom and with actual writing skills of the contrapuntal discipline.

Keywords—Gioseffo Zarlino; *Le institutioni harmoniche*; *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (*The Art of Counterpoint*); *Counterpoint pedagogy*

I. INTRODUCTION

A counterpoint has a long and distinguished history, but its teaching method is often compartmentalized from real music. It is probable that counterpoint has bred ingrown academic traditions whose relation to musical practice often seems extremely limited even more than any other musical discipline. A main problem of scholastic approaches is that they frequently use rigid rules for flexible general principles, and thus fail to provide actual instructions in enough varied musical situations. Of course, an inspiring teacher can fill in the gaps and make the subject seem relevant, at best. However, at worst, the student would be constrained by a hodgepodge of inconsistent rules and diffuse advice, and waste a considerable amount of time struggling to avoid situations that are musically unimportant. A common fault may be to confuse practical rules with pedagogical stages.

Gioseffo Zarlino's *Le institutioni harmoniche* (hereinafter referred to as *Le institutioni*) is one of the most influential theory treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It marks the culminations of the art of presenting musical examples within an intellectual culture in which music theory had achieved its own place. Also, his *Le institutioni* is a work that treats the

importance of both practice and theory equally. It consists of four parts: The first two parts deal with the philosophical and mathematical bases of music, namely *musica theoria*; and the last two parts show Zarlino's practical approach of writing counterpoint and of using modes in music, namely *musica practica* (Palisca c2001, 752-753). *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (translated as *The Art of Counterpoint*, hereinafter referred as to *Contrapuncti*) is the third volume of *Le institutioni*, and herein Zarlino emphasized that singable music is of the greatest importance, which is a foundation of his educational philosophy. Zarlino operated within a manuscript musical culture, and from within his affiliations with choirs and his studies with Willaert. *Le institutioni* covers both speculative and practical matters, and provides the essential instructions for writing counterpoint for Renaissance styles.

The first purpose of this paper will be to present general contrapuntal issues discussed in Zarlino's *Contrapuncti*, so as to shed light on his distinctive educational philosophy and to strengthen a weak point, which will be considered in the next two chapters. I will approach counterpoint as a form of training in musical composition instead of as a discipline in itself, like Zarlino, treating general principles of counterpoint not rigidly, but in ways that are transferable to real musical situations. Accordingly, an essential goal of this paper is to provide practical pedagogic applications to the Renaissance counter-point class based on Zarlino's teaching strategies. In the fourth chapter, I will sum up his five pedagogical assumptions and apply those to a real situation by providing my own examples as well as Zarlino's. This process could help teachers to more realistically acquaint students with sixteenth-century contra-puntal idiom and with actual writing skills of the contrapuntal discipline.

DOI: 10.5176/ 2382-574X_2.1.7

II. AN OVERVIEW OF ZARLINO'S LIBER DE ARTE CONTRAPUNTI

Zarlino's *Contrapuncti* provides broad background and invaluable instruction for training to write counterpoint. His references from the major composers of his own time display that he was well aware of their technical advances and most extensively used manners. The *Contrapuncti* is divided into an introduction and eighty chapters, and those chapters encompass basic ideas of music, general precepts of counterpoint, and numerous instructions or advice for writing a real composition. The first twenty-five chapters encompass fundamental ideas of counterpoint, such as a definition of counterpoint, intervals, consonances and dissonances. He initiates his discourse with following questions: "What is counterpoint?" and "what is the purpose of learning counterpoint?" According to Zarlino, counterpoint is "a kind of harmony that contains diverse variations of sounds or steps, using rational intervallic proportions and temporal measurements; or that it is artful union of diverse sounds reduced to concordance" (Zarlino, 1968 [1558], 1). In the latter part of the book, Zarlino presents a clear statement in terms of why musicians should study counterpoint as follows: "...a musician cannot perfect himself solely by reading and rereading books; ultimately to understand the things I have been demonstrating and others to be shown, he must consult with a person skilled in counterpoint" (226). Zarlino provides answers to those questions, which helps students to acquire various compositional elements by studying counterpoint through this treatise.

A full-fledged discussion about writing counterpoint begins at chapter 26, and he points out the importance of choosing or creating a *soggetto*, a subject, because he treats the *soggetto* as the most fundamental element of counterpoint. Then, Zarlino turns to the discussion of general precepts in counterpoint exercises, from the simplest to the most elaborate, to discuss the counterpoint as a *real* composition. In chapter 28, he points out how to begin writing a composition first: It must start with a perfect consonance (55). Through ten chapters, he then explains how to progress from one note to another in detail. With regards to treating a dissonance, he describes that dissonances can be permitted in diminished counterpoint when used incidentally, and that dissonant intervals or relations often give a little pleasure but have beautiful effect when combined with others (69). In terms of his explanation about the progression from one consonance to another, it is remarkable that consecutive perfect or imperfect consonances of different ratios may proceed to consonances of different ratios. Also, in this context, he points out that contrary motion and independence of melody should maintain equilibrium among the parts by presenting various examples of good or awkward progressions. Then, he rounds the second part

off at chapter 39, by stating that the composition should be terminated with a perfect consonance. Perhaps the second part of the book – chapters 26 to 39 – is one of the most effective parts of Zarlino's practical approach to counterpoint because he deals with a variety of instructions and advice for writing real compositions in these chapters, as explained above. Such detailed explanation could provide substantive instructions to a novice composer who struggles for creating even one progression to another note.

Zarlino distinguishes counterpoint by two kinds: simple and diminished. He defines these two as follows: "The simple is composed solely of consonances and equal note-values placed against one another. Diminished counterpoint has dissonances as well as consonances, and may employ every kind of note-value, as the composer wishes" (2). Furthermore, he extends his discussion to more complex compositional techniques, such as fugue in chapter 51, imitation in chapter 52, double counterpoint over chapters 56 to 58, and three- or four-voice compositions over chapters 59 to 66. Zarlino also discusses basic ideas of music, such as mensuration in chapter 48 and over chapters 67 to 70, rests in chapter 50, cadences in chapters 53 and 54, and harmonies at the latter chapters of his book. In particular, he provides many examples of cadences from actual music. According to Zarlino, a cadence gives resting points in the harmony or notifies terminating sections of the harmony. It originally concludes on a unison or octave and consists of a progression in which two voices move in contrary motion (142). In simple counterpoint, cadences should be comprised of entirely consonant and equal note values, while cadences in diminished counterpoint include some dissonances and a variety of note values, as well as syncopation.

In terms of pedagogical perspective, his categorization of counterpoint into two types is one of the brilliant ideas among Zarlino's discussion. It was a completely different take on counterpoint with Johann Joseph Fux. Fux introduces five separate species counterpoint and provides a set of strict rules, restricting himself to what Zarlino would call "simple" counterpoint. Fux's teaching method does have great pedagogical value, and its advantage is best understood independently of stylistic issues. The followings are strong points of Fux's method that are commonly acknowledged: First, using a *cantus firmus* in whole notes provides a musical structure for the overall form; second, the restrictions that Fux provides help to simplify the understanding of dissonances; third, the learning progression from two-part, to three-part and to four-part writing is very logical; and so on. For these reasons, Fux's pedagogy becomes spectacularly successful, and his *Gradus Ad Parnassum* remains general things that are in use to this day.

However, as the student advances, many of its pedagogical constraints often become stultifying.

In comparison to Fux's discourse, in a manner of speaking, Zarlino's discourse in *Contrapuncti* seems insufficient for students to systematically acquire rudimentary musical elements and fundamental contrapuntal precepts. However, one of the great strengths of Zarlino's approach is that it answers students toward writing real compositions. Zarlino provides the necessary rules of a single counterpoint only in a few chapters. He then turns the discussion over to the diminished counterpoint and presents numerous suggestions and counsels for composing in an ad hoc manner. It is interesting that, whenever Zarlino proposes useful compositional advice, he makes use of the auxiliary "may," which is used to suggest something that is possible. It advocates that Zarlino places emphasis more on teaching the writing of graceful and elegant works than on elaborating rules. In fact, Fux's examples often seem rather awkward because a purpose of the examples is to provide a mere guideline for students to acquire the precepts. Thus, it is not unusual that they seem to exist for exercising rules, not prompting real works. On the other hand, Zarlino's examples incorporate actual music, especially that of Willaert. In addition, there is a possibility that Zarlino indeed incorporated more of Willaert's works and teaching materials than he credits (Judd 2000, 198). This can be proven by examples that he proposes because they encompass a variety of occasions and venues over the period of years of his formal study with Willaert. Whether this is true or not, he puts forward that studying great composers' works is the most helpful way to learn about composing music. The following statement from *Contrapuncti* supports the idea: "Theory without practice, as I have said before, is of small value, since music does not consist only of theory and is imperfect without practice. This is obvious enough. Yet some theorists, treating of certain musical matters without having a good command of the actual practice, have spoken much nonsense and committed a thousand errors" (226).

A center of the *Contrapuncti* is obviously the *soggetto*. At the beginning of the discussion of writing counterpoint, Zarlino discusses how to choose the subject before talking about all other things because the *Soggetto* is a beginning point of composition. Zarlino was the first theorist to deal with various kinds of the *Soggetto*, which include a pre-existing or newly created *cantus firmus*, *cantus figuratus* or even several imitative parts. The *soggetto* could affect the selection of church mode, and in turn influence the organization of parts. For the most part, the examples that he provides are for two-voice counterpoint, and there are several - mostly two - contrapuntal examples written against a same subject. By giving various counter melodies to one subject, he

emphasizes the importance of choosing or creating good subjects. The *soggetto* summons up a series of imitations. It could be accompanied with a continuous melody throughout a passage, and appears in segments dispersed among the various voices. Particularly, in numerous examples Zarlino is used to employ imitation techniques at the beginning, thereby further emphasizing the *soggetto*.

A last distinctive feature of Zarlino's discourse is his comparison of musical with rhetorical ideas. In other words, he conflates an idea in music with one in poetry to make his point clear. For example, he states that writers adorn and polish their words with various embellishments as they please. And likewise, musicians have to bring maximum pleasure to the audience through various movements and harmonies, so that music can create beauty and charm the ear (53). His literary discourse for music draws into a discussion of "musical hearing" naturally. Thus, Zarlino considers that all music have to be sweet, soft, and harmonious, and that musicians have to pursue euphonious music, through proper harmonies and a variety of motions (111). It would please listeners. This could be a main purpose of learning counterpoint.

III. A PEDAGOGICAL APPRAISAL OF ZARLINO'S LIBER DE ARTE CONTRAPUNCTI

Since learning is the cognitive process of acquiring skill or knowledge, efficiency would seem to demand an order from easier to harder. In addition, since learning involves using the information that was learned and developing an ability to re-teach, it is very crucial to organize a variety of ideas in a logical and careful way. In this sense, a music theory treatise, if it is particularly written for an educational purpose, has to follow the logical learning process, beginning with smaller steps of finding basic musical ideas and moving to acquire more difficult ones.

As discussed, Zarlino's *Contrapuncti* includes a great deal of practical advice in terms of writing real compositions. However, contrapuntal rules that he provides seem to be in flux and not obviously organized. The rules he provides are surrounded by all manners of advice, and the order of the precepts seems slightly mixed up, not subject to a general procedure. However, the variety of advice given in regard to practice indicates Zarlino was a good teacher. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that Zarlino wrote the book not as a textbook for the counterpoint exercise but rather as a sort of supplement to ways of teaching already in use. In addition, we must remember that the *Contrapuncti* is the third part of *Le institutioni*, and thus in some ways it may

be a practical supplement to the theoretical first two books.

Therefore, if we would like to utilize the *Contrapuncti* in a Renaissance counterpoint class, we would need to move some ideas to more appropriate places, to reorganize their orders logically. Table 1 displays a process of Zarlino’s discussion in *Contrapuncti*. As shown in table 1, there is logic to the contents. A position of the discussion about cadence, however, seems problematic as it comes after the descriptions of fugue and imitation. Of course, near the beginning of the sequence in chapter 39, Zarlino refers how to terminate a composition, but he only presents a rudimentary idea, like that a composition must end with a perfect consonance. Only in chapter 53 does he really discuss cadences and give extensive instructions for the cadence, citing many substantive examples used by composers during his age, and presenting types of cadences used frequently or occasionally. He then brings up the idea how to evade cadences and shows a way that such evasion is accomplished when it is appropriate (151). It is still curious though why Zarlino situates this discussion rather later in discourse. Certainly it is complicated, yet the major discussion about the cadence might better be introduced in between chapters 39 and 43.

In terms of learning counterpoint, it is also important to comprehend basic ideas of music, such as intervals, consonances and dissonances, scales, and a progression from one note to another - horizontal movement. He discusses these elements at some length, in chapter 3 to 25 and chapter 35 to 38. In particular, his discussion about progressions includes the following details: First, some parts of a composition should progress in contrary motion; second, when each voice ascends or descends together, one part should proceed by leap, another by step; third, the standard progression from one consonance to another is unison – third – fifth – sixth – octave, and vice-versa (59-84). These explanations are of course accompanied by various examples depending on the situation. However, it seems unusual that there are no clear descriptions or definitions of basic motions, even where these would be logically expected. It is obvious that one needs to acquire clear knowledge on the types of horizontal motions before discussing how to progress from one note to another. He provides only precepts and advice that are related to linear progressions, not definitions. The absence of clear definitions is problematic. Probably, Zarlino supposes that every reader already knows such rudimentary ideas. In addition, since he concentrates on the practicalities and lessens his concern for the speculative especially in the *Contrapuncti*, he may simply want to emphasize practically useful instructions.

TABLE I. THE ORDER OF DISCUSSION IN LIBER DE ARTE CONTRAPUNTI

Chapter	Contents	
26	Subject	
27	Usage of consonances and dissonances	
28	General description of counterpoint	How to begin
29-38		How to progress
39		How to terminate
40-41	Simple counterpoint	
42-43	Double counterpoint	
44-47	Advice for writing real composition	
48	Mensuration	
49	Syncopation	
50	Rests	
51	Fugue	
52	Imitation	
53-54	Cadence	

IV. ZARLINO’S FIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Zarlino’s *Contrapuncti* could be, nonetheless, a very useful book in the Renaissance counterpoint class, particularly as it embodies a wealth of essential advice derived from his pedagogical experiences. In this chapter, I would like to suggest five pedagogical assumptions implied in his *Contrapuncti*: (1) At the introduction of the class, he may discuss why students learn counterpoint, and its history briefly; (2) even if he provides contrapuntal rules, these need not be expressed rigidly, as the point to be made is that the number of possibilities is infinite; (3) he may present examples from previous composers; (4) he may give assignments based on pre-existing *soggetti*; and (5) he may have students to share their exercises, and they could play, listen to, and figure out those in a class. I will discuss these assumptions in detail, bringing together Zarlino’s ideas and my own proposals.

First, in accordance with Zarlino’s discourse, a teacher could start the class with some questions with following questions: What is a counterpoint, what is its historical origin, and why do we learn counterpoint? Zarlino initiates his discourse of counterpoint with these ideas in the *Contrapuncti*, as he might consider that the goal setting will encourage students’ motivation, self-regulation, and achievement in academic settings. By answering to those questions throughout the whole class, most students could have a clear idea why they are there, and what is to be gained.

Second, the teacher provides general rules of counterpoint, and at the same time he has to clarify that there is bound to be exceptional cases - even unexpected

ones – when they write a real composition. Zarlino proposes basic counterpoint rules in his *Contrapuncti*, but he does not overemphasize the priority of precepts, and otherwise emphasizes that exceptional circumstances naturally exist. When he presents a rule of composition, he frequently refers to room for exceptions, as follows: “True, the added parts do not conform to all the given rules; but enough of this” (170). Since he thinks that creating greater beauty in counterpoint is more important than following the rules, he highlights “pleasing the ear” in every chapter: “Composers must seek to avoid unpleasantness to the ear” (75); “it becomes sweeter and softer to the ear” (80); and “there is no doubt that every composition will be sweet, soft, and harmonious, and the listeners will be pleased and grateful” (111). All of the precepts as well as advice that he gives are based on the idea that the music must gratify and never offend the ear. Thus, the teacher should let students remind that composers write a composition to provide pleasure to listeners, as well as of that all of precepts and advice are just guidelines to write a contrapuntal work that is pleasant to the ear.

Third, a teacher could introduce good examples from previous composers to help students understand the function of rules. Zarlino’s *Contrapuncti* includes about two hundred odd musical examples, some of which appear to be newly composed in support of its contrapuntal precepts, others of which relate to precepts with compositions by exemplary composers (Judd 2000, 198). According to the original printed version, the former are usually simple and appear in several formats, ranging from a single part to those for two voices, and written as separate parts rather than in score, as shown in figure 1. This format also applies to examples for three and four voices. In fact, it is normal Renaissance practice so that we can expect that it certainly has pedagogical value. Students may struggle to read a score at sight and have a hard time to remember one voice while reading another. Yet this struggle makes such formats more valuable, because they would be trained naturally to memorize the *soggetto* by turning over the pages back and forth to read each voice. Students could acquire more things by experiencing other works so that the pace of learning counterpoint would be accelerated.

The fourth assumption is that Zarlino almost always gives exercises with pre-existing subjects or examples. C. C. Judd organizes and adduces musical citations and sources in Zarlino’s *Contrapuncti*, as well as the last volume of *Le istituzioni harmoniche* (202-205). She demonstrates that Zarlino’s examples are mostly from Willaert, and often from the works of Josquin, Ockeghem, Brumel, C. Festa, Jachet, Gombert, Lupus, Mouton, Morales, La Rue, Rore, and of course his own works. Since all those are masterpieces, it would help students to acquire good melodies and beautiful counter-melodies. If

he gives his students assignments for exercising counterpoint, perhaps those are tied to existing works. By providing a preexisting source with the assignment, he may let students add a voice and then compare their own exercises with the preexisting work. Figure 2 is a two-voice work from the *Contrapuncti* (104-105). Zarlino takes the upper voice from by Willaert, and adds his own lower voice. Willaert’s subject is well-made and striking, has a proper balance between stepwise motions and leap motions, and flows naturally. With regards to the added voice created by Zarlino, there are several characteristics: (1) A subject does not need to start earlier than other contrapuntal voices, as he states in chapter 44; (2) he is fond of using an imitation technique at the beginning of a phrase (3) he always employs suspension figures at the cadence; (4) he often adds half rests at the cadences to abate a closing effect in the middle of the piece; (5) he employs ascending or descending stepwise quarter notes frequently, and this is one of distinctive features of Zarlino’s contrapuntal works. By using successive stepwise motions and interlocking one voice with another, he creates amazing parallel thirds. Particularly, my favorite part is an octave leap on the added voice at ms. 35. By leaping above octave, and then by descending through stepwise motions, a real drama is given to the ending of the piece.

Figure 1. A facsimile version of a two-voice work in Zarlino’s *Le istituzioni harmoniche*

Figure 4. New “Scimus hoc nostrum meruisse crimen,” the subject by Willaert and the added part by the author

Figure 5. Newly composed contrapuntal work by the author, and the motif by Zarlino

Lastly, one can imagine Zarlino letting his students take an active part in the classroom. He would share students' works together in the classroom. He would let students listen to, sing, figure out their works in turn, and discuss in detail: Whether the music is pleasing to the ear, whether students follow the rules, whether the melodic contour is nice or awkward, and whether the melodic movement is appropriate or weird, for example. This is attributed to the fact that he always emphasizes hearing by ear and sets the goal of counterpoint as a singable music, as follows: "Let me just add that if we follow all the given rules about what can and cannot be included, we can write a counterpoint that is singable in each of the manners illustrated, with great variety of harmony" (167-168). Singing together not only provides a novel and amazing experience but also helps the composer hear his own work through other's voices. Furthermore, students could get a new and different scheme from their classmates and develop their ideas by discussing other's work and by proposing their own suggestions. Such participation provides students with a valuable chance to practice their compositions.

V. CONCLUSION

Zarlino's *Le istituzioni harmoniche* was at the center of *musica practica* at that time and was the most comprehensive theory treatise of the sixteenth century. Especially in the *Liber de arte contrapunti*, he not only elucidated all traditional aspects of counterpoint in detail, but also attempted to provide invaluable advice and effectual conditions for polyphonic composition. Even though some ideas seem not to correspond with the logical order of discussion, it is certain that those have a powerful pedagogical value. This paper suggests that following assumptions could be inherent in Zarlino's conception of teaching counterpoint: (1) setting a clear goal of counterpoint, (2) acknowledging number of possibilities or exceptions, (3) familiarizing well-made examples, (4) exercising counterpoint with preexisting *soggetto*, and (5) sharing the ideas in the classroom. The essential premise of these pedagogical principles can be summarized in one sentence: Zarlino would like to train his students to develop the "contrapuntal ear." He would encourage students to sing each individual line out loud, thus providing for an intimate acquaintance with inner details of music, otherwise impossible to reach. Since the basic motions between tones are comparatively limited, many patterns become familiar to students, when they sing, listen to, and ruminate about it with their classmates. The more exercises students do of each type, the more they become familiar with the ways in which notes can be

combined. Therefore, this paper recommends Zarlino's five pedagogical principles on the basis of the *Contrapuncti*, which could apply to Renaissance polyphony class in these days. This may be the only way to evaluate counterpoint that will be consistently relevant to the real problems faced by a musician.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First of all, I would like to thank God, the Almighty, for having made everything possible by giving me strength and courage to do this work. I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Leslie Blasius and Dr. Brian Hyer for their advice, patience, and guidance through this process. I would especially like to thank my amazing husband and my parents for the love, support, and constant encouragement I have gotten.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Willaert. *Hymnorum Musica*. Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1959.
- [2] C. C. Judd. *Reading Renaissance Music Theory: Hearing with the Eyes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- [3] C. C. Judd. "To Discourse Learnedly and Compose Beautifully: Thoughts on Gioseffo Zarlino, Theory, and Practice." *Music Theory Online* 19, vol. 3, September 2013.
- [4] C. V. Palisca. *Zarlino, Gioseffo*. Vol. 29, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by S. Sadie, 751-755. London: Macmillan Publication, c2001.
- [5] D. M. Kidger. *Adrian Willaert: A Guide to Research*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- [6] G. Zarlino. *Le institutioni harmoniche*. A facsimile of the 1558 Venice ed. New York: Broude Bros, 1965.
- [7] G. Zarlino. *The Art of Counterpoint*. Translated by G. A. Marco and C. V. Palisca. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968 [1558].
- [8] J. J. Fux. *Study of Counterpoint: From Johann Joseph Fux's Gradus Ad Parnassum*. translated by A. Mann. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965.
- [9] M. Feldman. *City Culture and the Madrigal at Venice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- [10] P. Schubert. "Counterpoint Pedagogy in the Renaissance." in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, edited by T. Christensen, 503-533. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Yumi Kim is a Ph. D. student in music theory at Temple University and acts as a composer. She earned her master's degree in music theory at University of Wisconsin-Madison and Yonsei University. She got an award for "the most perspective scholars" by the Musicological Society of Korea through her first research paper, "Chromaticism as a Structural Determinant as Seen in Schoenberg's Early Songs," which was published in *Journal of Musicological Society of Korea* in 2011. Her research focuses on the hermeneutic analysis, musical narrative, Schenkerian theory, and a pedagogical application of Schenkerian analysis.