CANTUS FIRMUS: PRINCIPLES OF MELODIC MOTION

Compiled with reference to:
  Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition* (Columbia UP, 1989);
  Janet Schmalfeldt, *Guidelines for Composing a Cantus Firmus*;

General

The cantus firmus is a single-line melody designed to establish and inhabit a given tonal or modal region. It is the starting point in the study of species counterpoint. A discussion of the internal characteristics of the cantus firmus, prior to a consideration of the contrapuntal principles associated with the practice of adding one or more additional voices to it, serves as an introduction to the principle of good *melodic motion*. While a specific set of harmonic, or vertical, considerations governs the manner in which multiple voices are combined in species counterpoint, the basic principles of voice leading will inform the melodic, or horizontal, aspects of contrapuntal composition.

Tonality: We will concentrate our energy on cantus firmi that anticipate the system of major-minor tonality; the Ionian and Aeolian modes can be seen as forerunners of the major and minor modes.

Rarely, the Dorian, Phrygian, and Mixolydian modes may be employed. For a discussion of these modes see Salzer and Schachter, pp. 9-11.

The cantus firmus must *begin and end on the tonic*.

Rhythm: Cantus firmi are written entirely in whole notes; the lack of rhythmic profile, while compositionally limiting, serves to set the principles of good melodic motion in relief.

Length: 8 to 16 notes.

Range: The distance from the lowest note to the highest should not exceed a tenth; the much narrower range of a fifth or sixth is quite acceptable.

Types of Motion – Steps and Leaps

Stepwise Motion: The overriding principle governing the construction of the cantus firmus is that it be easily sung. Steps are much easier to sing than leaps, therefore the cantus firmus should favor stepwise motion.
Leaps: It is acceptable to leap by third, fourth, fifth, sixth and octave.

It is forbidden to leap by intervals larger than an octave, or by a dissonant interval (sevenths, as well as all augmented and diminished intervals).

Leaps of a fourth or larger should be followed by a change of direction (preferably a step, possibly a leap of a third). Leaps of a fifth or larger must be followed by a change of direction (preferably a step).

The cantus should not contain more than two leaps larger than a fourth.

Avoid two consecutive leaps in the same direction.

Avoid more than two consecutive leaps.

Avoid a large leap in the same direction as a preceding step.

Forbidden Melodic Motions

In addition to the restrictions on leaps outlined above, the cantus should avoid:

- Outlining a dissonant interval – where, even with intervening pitches, the high and low points of a given melodic curve outline a dissonant interval (augmented fourth/diminished fifth, seventh, etc.);
- Ascending to the leading tone without continuing up to the tonic.

Climax

The cantus should lead to a high point and then descend back to the tonic. This high point will be called the climax, and must not be repeated. When the cantus is in the bass voice the climax tone can be the lowest note.

Additional Principles – Balance, Variety, and Continuity

- There should be several changes in direction.
- Stepwise motion should not continue in one direction for more than five consecutive tones.
- While stepwise motion should predominate, the cantus should contain two to four leaps.
- The immediate repetition of a tone is prohibited.
- No single tone should predominate (generally, a tone should appear no more than three times).
- Avoid: repetition of groups of tones or sequential repetition (patterns of three or more tones).

Ending

The final tone must be approached by step. Most cantus firmi end with a descending step (2-1); if, however, the final tone is approached from below, the ascending step must be a half step (i.e., leading tone to tonic); in the case of the minor mode, this necessitates raising the seventh scale-degree, and possibly the sixth as well (to avoid the forbidden leap of an augmented second).