Introduction to Species Counterpoint

In 1725, an Austrian composer and theorist named Johann Joseph Fux wrote a theory textbook called *Gradus ad Parnassum*, in which he outlined his method of teaching how to write *good counterpoint*.

Counterpoint is the combination of two or more melodies, each one as important and interesting as the other.

*Gradus ad Parnassum* means "Steps to Parnassus." Parnassus referred to the highest peak in Greece, and was used as a metaphor for perfection.

Gradus ad Parnassum was a big hit, used (or at least praised) by composers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn. The system that Fux used is referred to as Species Counterpoint, because it involves going through increasing levels of rhythmic complexity which are labeled as Species I, Species II, and so forth.

Interestingly enough, the language Fux was advocating was not the counterpoint of the common practice period to which he belonged, but the more strict rules of counterpoint used by composers of the Renaissance more than a century earlier.

Specifically, Fux was a starry-eyed admirer of the Italian Renaissance composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, who he considered to represent the peak of compositional artistry... something he felt was being lost or even squandered by his Baroque and Classical contemporaries.

Of course, it's worth pointing out that Fux didn't actually have access to much of *my* music!

Right. So the language Fux is teaching is really an interesting ideal: based partly on his perceptions of Palestrina's musical language as delivered to him through Italian theorists, and partly on his own ideas of what he thought the language should be.

But let's cut Fux some slack here: as theorists, we're all guilty of this to some degree.

Anyway, let's get started! Going through Fux's steps for learning counterpoint gives us a glimpse of how the masters learned their craft and a feel for the environment in which they developed their own musical languages.

Hurray! Let's go, Giovanni, and bring the beautiful light of perfect composition to these eager students!

Yeah, Joe, about that... you do realize that your idea of perfect composition is just a blissfully awesome thing?

Yes, that's just what I was thinking!

No, I mean that it's super fun? Yayyyyyyyyyyyy!

**Introduction to Species Counterpoint**

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Fux

Palestrina

**Gradus ad Parnassum:** A theory textbook written by Johann Joseph Fux in 1725.

Species Counterpoint: A method of teaching counterpoint that involves going through increasing levels of rhythmic complexity, labeled as Species I, Species II, etc.

Johann Joseph Fux: An Austrian composer and theorist known for his theory textbook *Gradus ad Parnassum*.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina: An Italian Renaissance composer whom Fux admired.

Gradus ad Parnassum: Greek peak used as a metaphor for perfection.

Common Practice Period: A term used to describe the music written between approximately 1550 and 1750.

Renaissance: A period in history characterized by a revival of interest in the culture of classical antiquity.

Baroque: A period in history and art characterized by grandeur and elaborate ornamentation.

Classical: A period in history and art characterized by balance, clarity, and restraint.

Counterpoint: The combination of two or more melodies, each as important and interesting as the other.

Composition: The act of writing music, especially a musical work.

Musical Language: The specific style and conventions of music used by composers in a particular period or region.

Parnassus: A peak in Greece used as a metaphor for perfection.