ON DISSONANT COUNTERPOINT

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AS designating a particular type of technical procedure it is probable that the term "Dissonant Counterpoint" was used for the first time about 1913. Tonally dissonant composition was, of course, employed prior to this date by both Scriabin and Schönberg; but it appears to have been an elaboration and extension of the old diatonic and chromatic harmony rather than a revolutionary reversal of it. And since we have seen for the last thousand years a steady increase in the number of consonances, it is plain that the distinction between consonance and dissonance may be regarded as a psychological and therefore a relative one; so that a future generation may judge this work of Scriabin and Schönberg as consonant writing. On the other hand the distinction between consonance and dissonance may disappear or at least weaken to such an extent that it will not be a very important factor in composition. Much music of the last five years, 1925-1930, tends in this direction.

Dissonant Counterpoint, however, rests upon a distinction which forms a logical basis just as independent of changing notions of consonance and of the harmonic extensions of the *Sacre* and the *Fünf Orchesterstücke* as does the old counterpoint itself. But whether it can serve as well as a means of communicating a wide variety of artistic experience is a matter that only time can decide.

Dissonant Counterpoint was at first purely a school-room discipline—a link between the preparatory studies in harmony, counterpoint, canon and fugue of a regular composition course and the "free" composition of the second decade of the twentieth century, which was the forerunner of present-day electicism, neo-classicism and stylization. It was based upon the perception of a difference, sincerely felt but also logically postulated, be-

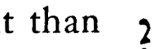
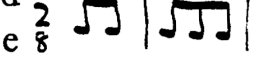
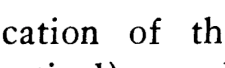
tween consonance and dissonance. The octave, fifth, fourth, thirds and sixths were regarded as consonant and the tritone, seconds, sevenths and ninths, as dissonant. The species were as in the old counterpoint. The essential departure was the establishment of dissonance, rather than consonance, as the rule. Thus, in the first species, in two parts, no consonance was allowed; and from the second onwards it was consonance that had to be prepared and resolved. The manner of this (by skip rather than by step) successfully differentiated the result from its prototype. But by definition the procedure was on the whole one of negation and contrariness. (The chief fault of the Schönberg school, as of all the others, seemed to lie not in the handling of dissonance, but of consonance. All went well as long as a thoroughly dissonant structure was maintained, but upon the first introduction of consonance, a feeling of disappointment, of defeat, frequently occurred. It was as if there were holes in the fabric.) The conventional thus became a thing to be avoided, not because it was in itself bad, but because one was, for some unknown reason, unable to use it rightly.

The effect of this discipline upon all who have given it a fair trial has been one of purification. Much composition especially in the first species and in all two-voice work, was so austere that it seemed impossible to connect musical feeling with it. Progress, however, soon held out a bright promise; but with four-voice undertakings the complexity became such that consistency with the theory was difficult and the writing grew, as in the old counterpoint, homophonic and chordal, rather than contrapuntal.

The transformation of this discipline from a mere adjunct of the craft into an integral unit in the technic of the art involves the utilization of several new principles.

The first of these involves a recognition of rhythmic harmony as a category on a par with tonal harmony. We must distinguish the rhythmic interval and chord and classify the rhythmic consonances and dissonances. This brings about the abandonment of the five species of the old counterpoint. The rhythmic structures of the old counterpoint were suited to a predominantly consonant tonal system. Rhythmically speaking, modern composition is still in the state in which it existed tonally

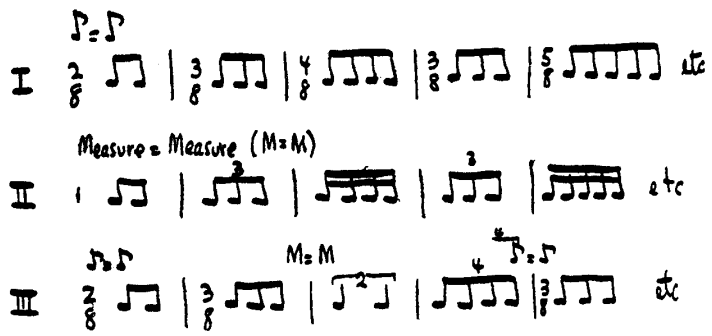
during the days of Hucbald, that is, it makes use only of combinations (ratios) involving the series 1:2:4:8:16 etc., and, on the other hand, of the series 1:3:6:9:12 etc. (1:5, 1:7, 1:10, etc. being very rare). As tonally in 900, so rhythmically in 1900, the relations 2:3 and 3:4 represented the ultimate in harmonic comprehensibility.

It is necessary to distinguish clearly between the melodic (horizontal) and chordal (vertical) use of both tonal and rhythmic intervals. Thus a minor second is far more consonant melodically than chordally. Similarly, the relations  and  are far more consonant than the relation  The classification of the rhythmic intervals in their chordal (vertical) sounding may be accorded the terms mild, medium and strong, starting with 2/3 and graduating toward such as 4/7, but never containing any numbers other than 1, 2, 3 and 4 as numerators. Performance of these, with satisfactory correctness in any tempo, with *rubato, accelerando* and *rallentando* can with a little practice be expected of any good musician. Intervals such as 5/6, 5/7, 6/7, etc. can be expected only in fast or moderately fast tempi, at least for the present. Generally speaking, it is wiser not to write polymeters that cannot be executed with musical accuracy, unless accompanied by a statement to the effect that they are merely indications of a free type of performance that cannot be better notated in any other way.

In the second place even though we have not yet organized the remaining resources of musical technic, as we have those of pitch and metre, we must foresee the possibility of separate "harmonies" of dynamics, tone-quality, accent, etc. Our scales of these resources are so far very crude. But the underlying distinctions which may eventually make such scales practical are well recognized and of a nature that justifies us even now in the use of terms like consonant or dissonant dynamics and consonant or dissonant tone-quality.

Third, the recognition and cultivation of an art of Dissonant Melody. Like its chordal structures, the melodic line of the old counterpoint was a consonant one. A proficiency in 'dissonating' the single melodic line becomes a prerequisite to practice in

dissonant counterpoint. In Dissonant Melody, three orders can be distinguished:



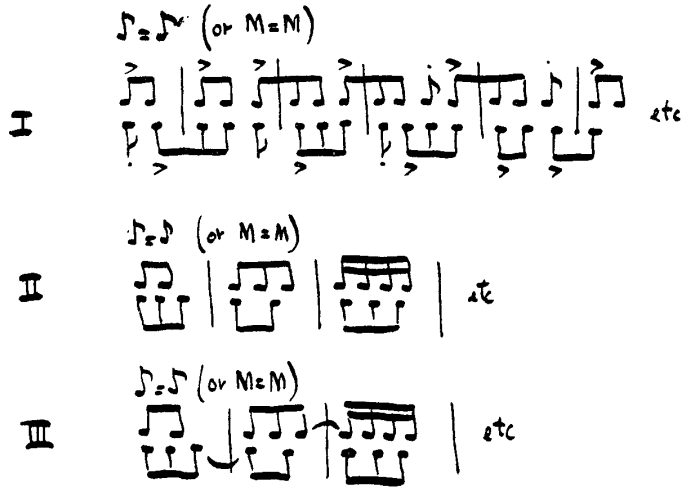
It must be remembered that the art of counterpoint (as a simultaneous combination of independent melodies) had begun its metamorphosis long before 1600. In Palestrina chordal (vertical) psychology often seems to dominate the polyphonic (horizontal). Homophony soon triumphed and has been the dominating factor ever since. Even Bach, with his admirable balance, leaned decidedly more toward a chordal than toward a contrapuntal fabric. But perfect balance is impossible. Times change. Emphasis is placed by each generation in a place which the preceding generation has ignored or slighted. We have had a great deal of homophony. The impulse and the logic point toward a new polyphony, "heterophony." And since this means real independence of parts, it follows that the parts must be so different in themselves and the relation between them (which makes their simultaneous sounding agreeable) must perforce be such that their difference rather than their likeness is emphasized. This is possible upon a basis of dissonance; but with the slightest error in the handling of consonance, our homophonically over-educated ears will infer chordal structures not intended and the polyphony will be lost. So it becomes necessary to cultivate "sounding apart" rather than "sounding together"—diaphony rather than symphony.

The fourth principle relates to the percentile ratio of consonant and dissonant tonal and rhythmic materials. Just as the greatest music of the past was composed without fear of dissonance, so those who attempt the sublime in dissonant writing must not fear consonance. Otherwise one is hopelessly restricted to painting only in tertiary colors, to using only words of more than two

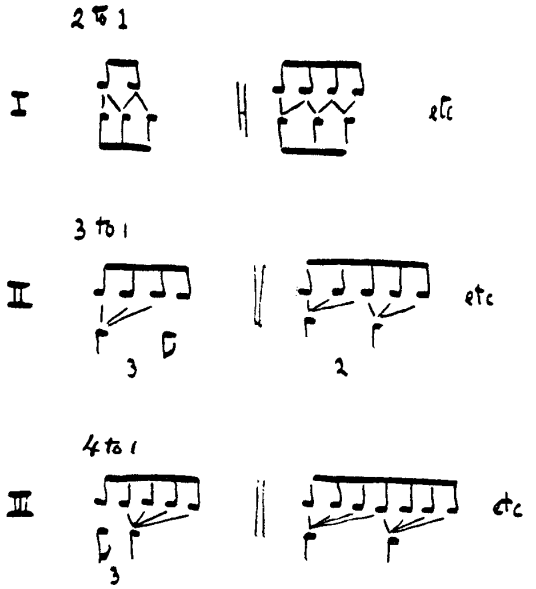
syllables. It is difficult to make a major triad sound in order in a dissonant composition, but if it is properly dissonated it is not only possible but good.

In the fifth place, we must realize that from the point of view of form the music of the last fifty years has tumbled headlong downhill. Wagner, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, Strauss and their contemporaries did create some very long works. But these were progressively less and less successful. And their successors have lacked either the skill or the desire to erect monumental edifices. Fashions have become whimsically disorganized by special intent. Only the shorter compositions have pronounced good form. Diffuseness of inner organization in modern music, where a maximum of material is spread over a minimum time, contrasts unfavorably with the music of Bach and Beethoven, in whose work a minimum of material is often made to cover a maximum time. We need to give special attention to the question of organic structure, for without it the dissonant texture is made far more difficult to sustain. Tonal and rhythmic centricity, though of a different kind from that in the old music, must be established and maintained, if compositions of more than a few minutes' duration are to be made. Economy of melodic resource suggests the elaborating of some radically new forms. There are many promising lines to follow and their classification as consonant and dissonant form is by no means far-fetched.

It is profitable to consider three orders in Dissonant Counterpoint; (these, added to the three orders of Dissonant Melody make six in all) :



and also three species (presented in the illustration below):



Interestingly enough, the octave and the unison take the place of the tritone as *diabolus in musica* and must consequently be avoided. Chordal structures of six or more different constituents may often contain an octave. But the consideration of these belongs to a study of dissonant chords rather than to dissonant counterpoint. Melodically, the repetition of any tone or the sounding of its octave, unless after a separation of at least five different ones, is almost invariably bad. As a rule, the seventh or eighth can so repeat, provided the accent is different. Exceptions to be noted concern the 'pivoting' around a given tone (care being taken, of course, to dissonate the phrases) and the occasional use of the reiterated tone. But the last has become so much of a cliché as to recommend a more sparing use. Of course, not more than two consonant or three dissonant intervals of the same kind can occur in succession with dissonant effect. This is also true of rhythms, though a rhythm may be repeated much sooner than a tone.

As to the matter of tuning and scale, the abandoning of the old tonality leaves us with a vastly decreased set of tonal intervals and the poverty-stricken duodecuple scale. In the old harmony, each key could be played in several different contexts and yet always represent a different interval. For instance: G sharp-B, A flat-B, A flat-C flat, etc. And they really sounded differently! (This gave rise to Rameau's principle of *double emploi.*) Thus

the twelve keys of the pianoforte actually served satisfactorily as a set of upwards of fifty. The duodecuple scale is an infinitely inferior field. We cannot be satisfied with it.

Many suggestions have been made for the amelioration of the situation. On the one hand are the further arbitrary divisions of the present equal temperament—third, quarter, sixth, eighth-tone systems—giving more tones per octave but no more relationships. Arguments against these have been cogently expressed elsewhere. On the other hand the temptation of just intonation is always present, even though we do not yet fully understand the relation between pure tunings and tunings only slightly off the pure. The fact is, we are now using the twelve-tone, equal tempered scale and it is extremely doubtful that we can get away from it except gradually. For the moment one may recommend the abolition of the now fictitious double-sharps and double-flats and the alloting of a flat and a sharp to each of the seven tones A, B, C, D, E, F, G, theoretically a twenty-one tone scale. With even a little composition "away from the piano," differences such as that between the augumented octave and the minor ninth grow upon one. Add to this more performance on instruments that can play such differences and more insistence upon truer thirds, sixths, sevenths, seconds and ninths (in spite of falser fifths and fourths) and musical feeling will probably show a way toward a solution of this vexing dilemma more satisfactory than the facile and arbitrary division of existing (and faulty) scales. This would eventually lead toward the cultivation of some intervals smaller than the semitone—such as were used in the enharmonic division of the Greek tetrachord and such as can still be heard in the ragas of India and in the folk-songs of many peoples.

For the present, however cramped in the variety of intervals *within* the octave, we are for the first time in many centuries unfettered by the conventional European vocal range in the choice of intervals larger than the octave. In rhythm and in form, too, modern music has a wider field of materials to choose from than at any time in our history. Perhaps the apparent narrowness of the tonal field may be a healthy influence, forcing us to yield the over-emphasis upon tonal organization and so to give more time and energy to bringing to its level the neglected factors of rhythm and form.