# Two-Voice Counterpoint Symbols

Harmonic intervals[1] are traditionally classified as *consonant* (stable) or *dissonant* (unstable).[2] Consonant intervals are subclassified as *perfect* (static) or *imperfect* (dynamic). Figure 1 shows the traditional categorization of *specific intervals* within the octave as consonant and dissonant.

**Figure 1**. Traditional classification of harmonic intervals as consonant and dissonant

| Consonant | Dissonant |
|---|---|
| *Perfect*<br>P1 & P8<br>P5 | M7 & m7<br>P4[3]<br>M2 & m2 |
| *Imperfect*<br>M3 & m3<br>M6 & m6 | *All A and d intervals* |

Using *generic intervals*, Figure 1 may be simplified to the eight *counterpoint symbols* (1-8) shown in Figure 2.

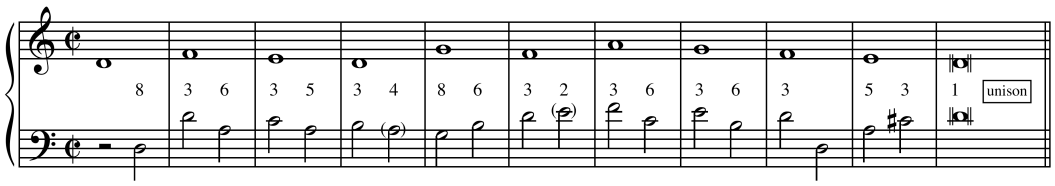
**Figure 2**. Counterpoint symbols

| Consonant | Dissonant |
|---|---|
| *Perfect*<br>1 & 8<br>5 | 7<br>4<br>2 |
| *Imperfect*<br>3<br>6 | *All A and d intervals* |

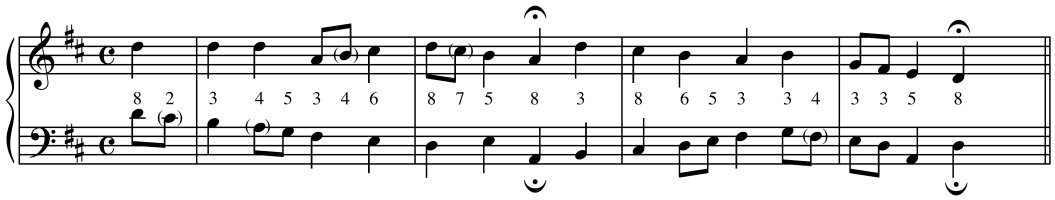
We will use counterpoint symbols to analyze the *interval progression* created by two voices (Examples 1 & 2).

**Examples 1 & 2**. Interval progression analysis

J. J. Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum*




J.S. Bach, Chorale, "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott," Soprano-bass counterpoint




Sing, or play, the two examples above. Tones that create a dissonance are enclosed within parentheses to show their *embellishing* function. *Compound intervals* (greater than the octave) are collapsed to their *octave equivalents*: i.e., 9 to 2, 10 to 3, 11 to 4, 12 to 5, 13 to 6, 14 to 7, 15 to 8, etc. The symbol 1 is reserved for the *unison*.

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[1] Steven Laitz, *The Complete Musician*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2011), pp. 15-16.
[2] We refer here to *musical* consonance/dissonance – as opposed to *sensory* consonance/dissonance (i.e., *beating* and *roughness*).
[3] The P4 is a special case. We will consider a P4 to be to be dissonant when it it formed with the *bass* and consonant otherwise. In two-voice writing, we will always treat the '4' as a dissonance.