

Two-Voice Counterpoint Symbols

Harmonic intervals¹ 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
<i>Perfect</i> P1 & P8 P5	M7 & m7 P4 ³ M2 & m2
<i>Imperfect</i> M3 & m3 M6 & m6	<i>All A and d intervals</i>

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
<i>Perfect</i> 1 & 8 5	7 4 2
<i>Imperfect</i> 3 6	<i>All A and d intervals</i>

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*

Musical score for J. J. Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum*. The score shows two voices (treble and bass clefs) with interval numbers written below the notes. The intervals are: 8, 3 6, 3 5, 3 4, 8 6, 3 2, 3 6, 3 6, 3, 5 3, 1 (unison). The number 1 is enclosed in a box labeled 'unison'.

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

Musical score for J.S. Bach, Chorale, "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott," Soprano-bass counterpoint. The score shows two voices (treble and bass clefs) with interval numbers written below the notes. The intervals are: 8 2, 3 4 5 3 4 6, 8 7 5 8 3, 8 6 5 3 3 4, 3 3 5 8.

Sing, or play, the 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*.

¹ Chelsey Hamm and Bryn Hughes, "Intervals," from *Open Music Theory*, Version 2 (OMT2). Available online at: <https://viva.pressbooks.pub/openmusictheory/chapter/intervals/>.

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 is formed with the *bass* and consonant otherwise. In two-voice writing, we will always treat the '4' as a dissonance.