

Get to the Point of Counterpoint

■ Counterpoint developed as a kind of musical “follow the leader,” starting with a melody and a group of other singers following after. Some of the most complex music has its roots in this simple structure. Loosely defined as different melodies happening at the same time, counterpoint has been a fundamental part of music performance and composition since the development of polyphony in European monasteries during the Middle Ages.

ROUND

Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream;
mer-ri-ly, mer-ri-ly, mer-ri-ly, mer-ri-ly, life is but a dream!

CANON

FUGUE

EXPLORING NEW STYLES AND SOUNDS WITH ROUNDS, CANONS, AND FUGUES

ROUND: A form of counterpoint at its most basic, the round turns up in many popular children's tunes and is also popular in folk circles. In a round, several instruments or voices, play or sing the melody at equally spaced intervals—after two bars, after four, after six, and so on. The result is a melody that usually outlines a simple chord progression and forms its own accompaniment. Common examples of rounds include “Frère Jacques” and “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.”

CANON: Canon is a slightly more complex form where different instruments or voices sound in a pattern, separated by a single beat or by several measures. The melody can be repeated exactly, but slight variations of it sometimes appear in succession. One of the most popular uses is Johann Pachelbel's “Canon in D.” On a recording of this famous tune, listen to the gradual introduction of different rhythms and how they run one on top of another. Music from earlier periods, like the Medieval and Renaissance eras, makes frequent use of canons, including ones with small subdivisions of the beat and intricate rhythms.

FUGUE: The fugue developed in the 17th century out of other contrapuntal styles, and Johann Sebastian Bach is considered the composer who took the fugue to its peak of development. Fugue takes the pattern of pitches from a single melody and then restates them in different transpositions. A melody called the “subject” is stated, then restated by another instrument or voice in an inversion—a fifth higher or lower. New melodies called “countersubjects” will appear in contrast to the original melody, creating additional layers of rhythms. The original subject and the countersubjects will often occur at regular intervals, similar to a round, but sometimes they will appear before the first melody has run its course. This kind of pile-up of melodies is called stretto. One example of fugue is Bach's “Tocatta and Fugue in D minor” famous from the Walt Disney film *Fantasia*.

