Gradus ad Parnassum  
(Steps to Parnassus)  
Practical Rules for Learning Composition  
Johann Joseph Fux (c. 1660–1741)  
Publication: Vienna, 1725  
MT40 .F8 1726

The Source: Gradus ad Parnassum is an eighteenth century guide to music composition. Counterpoint was its primary focus, and the manual was used for teaching general compositional skills. The treatise was used by many composers (including Haydn, Mozart, Bach, Telemann, and Beethoven) as an instructional guide for their own use as teachers. The book is organized by chapter, beginning with the simplest form of counterpoint of two parts and progressing to the more complex forms of counterpoint, including the fugue. The text was written in conversational format, between a master and pupil (both from Fux’s perspective). Written in 1725 and paid for by the imperial court, Gradus ad Parnassum (commonly referred to as “the Gradus”) was translated into German, Italian, English, and French by the end of the eighteenth century. In English, the title translates as “Steps to Parnassus.” Such a title equates the mastery of composition and counterpoint with reaching the highest point of the Grecian mountain range just north of the famous city, Delphi. Gradus quickly became the standard text on counterpoint for the practice of composition for the time in which it was written.

Description: Gradus measures 12.5 inches long (spine length) by 8.5 inches wide by 1.25 inches deep. Covered in soft brown leather, the 290 year old book is in good condition, considering its age. The front and back inside covers display a curious zebra striped pattern of pastel colors. Though the leather cover is slightly frayed, the thick, sturdy pages are all still intact and legible. Faded red color lines the pages’ outside lining. Shiny, golden hues bedeck the spine where the title is also displayed. There does seem to be some possible moisture damage, including foxing evident by the red specks found on various pages. Foxing, named for its color, is the result of a chemical reaction occurring over time due to oxidation of the paper materials, which produces reddish, or rust colored spots.

Significance: According to Wollenberg in an article taken from the periodical Music & Letters (1993), the initial response to Fux’s work was quite incredible. Wollenberg quotes Alfred Mann (the late Twentieth Century German musicologist), saying that copies of Fux’s publication were “sold out within a year” and that there were “clamorous demands for its translation.” Such positive reception indicates that the minds of the eighteenth century must have been in agreement with (or at the very least, fascinated by or eager to learn about) Fux’s approach to counterpoint and composition. However, there were later individuals who disagreed with these assertions. The Gradus text is still relevant today because, as stated in Fux’s publication, no matter the context or type of piece, the fundamentals and importance of part writing rules remain the same and, in free composition, those ideas must hold true. Even today, the importance of good part writing rules are stressed in music theory classes at the high school and collegiate levels. Students begin learning how to perfectly build a passage of four voices without breaking any of part writing rules. However, contemporary musical composition does not always follow all of the rules set forth in the Gradus. Later composers such as Muzio Clementi (1752–1832) and Claude Debussy (1862–1918) referenced the work’s title in their compositions.
Other Information: Writing the book in a conversational style, Fux allowed himself the chance to think in both the roles of teacher and student, articulating his ideas, as well as finding what questions one might have for clarification and understanding. Fux assigned the master (teacher) the name Aloysius and the student the name Josefus. Each is significant in its own right. Aloysius, the name given to the master, is best known as the patron saint of students within Jesuit colleges. Fux, according to Wollenberg, also equated the master in the conversation with Palestrina, by whom Fux was immensely influenced. Josefus, the pupil, can be (not surprisingly) equated with Fux’s own middle name. Thus, when considering Palestrina to be the master, Fux inserted himself into the dialogue as if Palestrina were mentoring him directly. The Palestrina-Fux and Aloysius-Josephus dialogues allow Fux to be both master and pupil, just as he would have considered himself indirectly a pupil to Palestrina, yet a master to his own pupils.

Translations/Modern Editions:

Quote: “Composition in three parts is the most perfect...for if any other note was to be added to it, it would only be repeating any of those contained in the triad.” - Johann Joseph Fux

Bibliography:


GRADUS AD
PARNAASSUM,
Sive
MANUDUCTIO
AD
COMPOSITIONEM MUSICÆ
REGULAREM,
Methodo novâ, ac certâ, nondum antè
tam exacto ordine in lucem edita:
Elaborata à
JOANNE JOSEPHO FUX,
Sacrae Caesareæ, ac Regiae Ca-
tholicæ Majestatis Caroli VI. Ro-
manorum Imperatoris
SUPREMO CHORI PRÆFECTO,

VIENNE AUSTRIÆ,
Typis Joannis Petri Van Ghelen, Sac. Caes. Regiaeque Catholicae Ma-
jestatcis Aula-Typographi, 1725.
Si autem Cantus firmus in superiori sit parte, sequens modo faciendus sit.

His ergo cognitis, & illos, quos de alius Spectibus iam data sunt, facilem tibi futuram spero hujus Specti Compositionem: sed iterum, atque iterum admonitionem te volo, ut frequentis tactus vel maximè rationem habeas, si non in progressiendo obiem esse offendere cupis. Ergo Opus sagratturate, omnes in prima Lectione prescriptos Cantus firmos ex ordine sequiendo.
EXERCITIIV.
LECTIO QUINTA.

De Contrapuncto duplici.

Per Contrapunctum duplex intelligitur Compositio artificiosa, eoque modo constructa, ut partes ejusdem inter se convertibiles esse possint, & pars, quae modò superior, nunc per inversionem inferior existat: lic meâ sententiâ dictum, quòd præter inversionem partium, eæterum re nullâ immutatâ, duplicem & ratione acuminis, gravitatisque differentiam exhibeat Melodiam. quàm praefatas, elegantissimæ resides quæ Contrapunctum huic fit usus, cum in omni Compositionis generi, tum maxime in Fugis pluriem subjectorum ligamine nere, tum post seraphicæ compertes; idcirco ubere combinandis, paulò post experientiâ comperies; variæ Generis hujus riori quoque explicatio illustrandum. Variæ Generis hujus species à nonnullis statuuntur; ut: Contrapunctum duplex in Tertia, Quarta, Quinta, Sexta, Octava, Decima, Duodécima, &c. Nos autem reliquis, quorum ob angustias aut exiguitatem, aut cum alis fermè coincidunt, eas tantum modo
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Sive MANUDUCTIO
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jestatis Aulae-Typographi, 1725.
Joseph. Vifum mihi est, aliat asperam ex mi contra sa exorituram relationem. Nee obesse arbitror generi Diatonico, cum b. mollia illa non substantialiter, sed accidentaliter ex necessitate immixta esse constet.

Aloys. Optime animadvertisti; ob eandem enim rationem nonnunquam etiam Diesces adhibendae sunt: sed ubi, quando, perspicaci ponderandum est judicio. Ex praeceptibus exemplis fatis memoriam tenere videris ea, quae ad hanc Speciem requiruntur. Reliquos tres adhuc supertites tonos: G. A. C., ne nimis prolixii limus, privato studio persequantos tibi relinquuo. Sit igitur

EXERCITII I.
LECTIO QUARTA,

De quarta Contrapuncti Specie.

Species hae constat duabus minimis contra semibreven in uno eodemque loco positis, virgulâque curvata subductis, quarum prima in Arhsl, secunda in Thele veniat, necessa est. Quae Species Ligatura, vel Sincope appellari consuevit; etique duplex, Consoantiae, & Dissonantiae.

Ligatura Consonantiae est illa, cujus utraque minima, & in Arhsl, & in Thele Consonantiae est. Exemplis res clara fiet.

Ligaturæ Consonantiae.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
E & \text{S} \\
\text{C} & \text{S} \\
\end{array}
\]

Ligaturæ Dissonantiae, cujus primaNota, nempe in Arhsl quidem Consonans, (quod semper esse debet) secunda vero in Thele dissonans est, ut in sequenti exemplo videre licet.