Ensembles like the Jupiter String Quartet regularly play fugues, canons, and other polyphonics compositions.

Polypho

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How Melody Gained its Independence

By Jon Chappell

This month's installment of our three-part series on melody traces the evolution of polyphony through the ages. *Polyphony* is a fancy word for "many voices," but in the musical sense, it just means more than one melody going on at once. And it took hundreds of years for humans to discover that you could place two or more melodies against each other and have it sound good! So while you may think it's as natural as breathing to sing the round "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," it actually took the best musical minds of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance to invent the system that, today, any four-year-old in the back of a car can use to drive you crazy.

For thousands of years, before the development of music really got going (around the 1300s), creating and notating music was fairly primitive (see Fig. 1). People could sing and play melodies, but the idea of harmony was a pretty foreign concept. One way to make music "bigger" and fuller was to sing and play the same melody an octave apart (like when men and women sang together), but early musicians had a tough time actually separating pitches from their original melody notes to form harmony. In time, however, they began to see that if they staggered the music, singing the same part, but starting it at different times, the results were more interesting and sometimes even sounded better than the original. Figure 2 shows a simple canon. The canon was the first way of changing monophony (one sound) to multiple sounds, or polyphony.

Just why some notes sounded better together than others was unclear, because musicians had yet to come up with a harmonic system. But musicians figured they were on the right track because music sounded better when it was split up, staggered, and stacked upon itself. When people analyzed the "good" and "bad" sounds from this process, they were establishing the foundations of harmony—a way of putting tones together that would have a pleasing effect, independent of what the melody was doing. This was the beginning of polyphony, which was taken to a high art through the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

GETTING SPECIFIC

A special kind of polyphony, called counterpoint, arose in the Baroque period, which followed the Renaissance. *Counterpoint* is the relationship between two or more melodies that are independent yet form an *interdependent* harmony. While polyphony more generally describes multiple voices, *counterpoint* describes a passage where one melody is set in contrast with another (as shown in Fig. 3).

Musicians of the Renaissance employed counterpoint a lot, but in the Baroque era, they really got it down to a science, especially in the form of the *fugue*. Before the fugue, composers focused on writing beautiful, independent phrases that would line up well with one another. In the Baroque,

the vertical harmony itself was more the driving force. This was necessary as more voices were added. Harmony itself was also developing, allowing music to become more complex.

So even though polyphony sounds more complex than *homophony* (playing a melody over chords, as separate elements), polyphony was developed first. The idea of playing a chord—the simultaneous sounding of three or more notes as a self-contained entity—was foreign to people. It wasn't that they couldn't get used to the idea of having more than one note sounding at the same time; they just thought you had to do it by singing two melodies together. It took a long time for people to say, hey, it's okay to have just chords without any melody attached! So for two reasons, musicians started backing away from polyphony: 1) It had become overly complex; and 2) Harmony was coming into its own as a self-sufficient entity—it didn't need to be the result of converging melodies.

LEAVING POLY BEHIND

It's important to understand how musicians' views developed regarding polyphony and homophony. In the Renaissance, harmony was considered more the result of consonances (pleasing simultaneous sounds) *incidental* to the smooth flow of polyphony, while in the Baroque era the consonances themselves became important, and were felt as functional chords.

Things began to get pretty knotty in the polyphony department. The height of polyphony in the Baroque is evidenced by the fugue, as shown in Fig. 4, which could be comprised of four or more voices. Look at the difference in musical complexity between the fugue in Fig. 4 and the single-voice chant in Fig. 1. After the high Baroque period, musicians "got back to basics" with homophony. So after monophony *developed into* polyphony, homophony then became a *reaction against* polyphony.

Homophony became the driving force for the Classical and Romantic periods, and remains the dominant texture for all popular music today—including music that de-emphasizes or drops melody altogether (like rap and hip-hop). In the three-way face-off among monophony, polyphony, and homophony, homophony is the big winner, and the primary technique most songwriters use today.

Jazz artists like Stan Kenton combined homophony and polyphony, especially when improvising.

POLYPHONY IN MODERN TIMES

Because of all the homework done by our musical ancestors, we now have both polyphony and homophony at our disposal. We don't have to worry about choosing one over the

Apples in Stereo reached back to Baroque-style textures for their song "The Velocity of Sound."

other, because we can employ elements of both in our music. Typically, popular music relies on homophony, but we can use elements of polyphony whenever we want—to provide variety and interest in our music. Let's take a look at some modern-day styles that employ polyphony.

Early 20th Century songwriter Irving Berlin was prolific and versatile, and wrote three well-known songs that were examples of counterpoint in American popular music: "You're Just in Love, "Play a Simple Melody," and "An Old-Fashioned Wedding" (from *Annie Get Your Gun*) all employ counterpoint between a man and a woman. In fact, the duo Jason Danieley and Marin Mazzie perform these songs as a medley on their recording of them.

Counterpoint can be used for dramatic purposes, too, and so is a handy technique employed in musical theater, where char-

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Technology in Counterpoint

A repeating melodic line doesn't always have to be performed by another player; it can be executed very well by a digital recording device, such as a digital delay or a loop recorder. Because this method is precise, easy, and inexpensive (you don't have to pay extra performers), some composers have sought to use technology to help them derive contrapuntal effects using few musicians.

Steve Reich, one of the most famous composers of the minimalist movement, wrote "Electric Counterpoint," in collaboration with jazz guitarist Pat Metheny, relying heavily on pre-recorded loops and digital delays. Each theme in "Electric Counterpoint" uses a basic figure from a Central African horn melody that Reich learned through an ethnomusicologist. The composer then builds up that melody into an eight-voice canon via looped recording, while the remaining two live (performing) guitars and bass play melodic patterns that result from the contrapuntal interlocking of those eight pre-recorded guitars. Here, the counterpoint is felt not so much in the way that longer lines of fugues and canons are, but in short, rhythmic, rapidly repeated pitches that change more slowly over time.

acters often sing together, sometimes in conflict (political, romantic, or otherwise). In *Les Miserables*, for example, the song "One Day More" has different characters all singing different parts to the same accompaniment. In "Counterpoint Cocktail," from *La Cage Aux Folles*, each character reflects in song on his or her reactions to an uncomfortable situation.

In jazz, performers and composers like Thelonious Monk have experimented with polyphony in their playing and writing. In traditional jazz, the melody, bass, and chords are a given, and their roles are clearly defined. But Monk experimented with inner voices often creating a counterpoint with the melody, as shown in Fig. 5. Of course, if you listen to Dixieland jazz, you'll hear the individual lines playing on top of each other, usually in the last chorus, or climax, of the song, as all the instruments play an improvised melody simultaneously. This too is a free-form approach to counterpoint—where the instruments break out from written harmonies—to be heard on equal status with each other.

Many rock bands have adopted polyphony, too. The Beach Boys, with their complex vocal parts, have traces of polyphony in their song "God Only Knows" during the interlude, sung on "scat" syllables such as *ba* and *ooh*. Then in the song's outro, the repeated hook line "God only knows what I'd be without you," is stacked, overlapped, and extended into a long contrapuntal (a fancy term that means "hey—it's counterpoint!") section, along with some high *ooh*'s to fill out the high parts. On the heavier side of rock, the metal band Savatage employs vocal counterpoint for a *neo-classical* effect (common in '80s and '90s metal) in "The Wake of Magellan." Indie rockers Apples in Stereo use Baroque-influenced textures in "Velocity of Sound."

CONCLUSION

You don't have to know the relationship between polyphony and homophony to appreciate the benefits of polyphony. But you can certainly understand why complex forms like the fugue lost out in favor of simpler approaches that involved strumming chords on a guitar and singing a melody over them. And because music is an art, not just a science, it is influenced by trends and a desire to change the status quo. So because polyphony was established and homophony was new, it seemed like the logical place to go. But with polyphony being so useful a tool, and providing such a nice contrast to ever-present homophony, musicians today can freely use both in combination, without having to worry about what's "stylish." Just don't be surprised when polyphony and complex multi-voice textures make a comeback! ⊤

Example 1

Gregorian Chant. Just look at it; it doesn't even look like music to our modern eyes. But this is what music looked like for hundreds of years—simple notation with vague symbols for a single voice.

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Example 2

Mozart Canon. A "round" is a type of canon—a piece where the melody is repeated in another voice after an interval of time—as in this simple piece by Mozart. An easy way to spot a canon is the terraced (staggered) approach to the voices' entrances.

Example 3
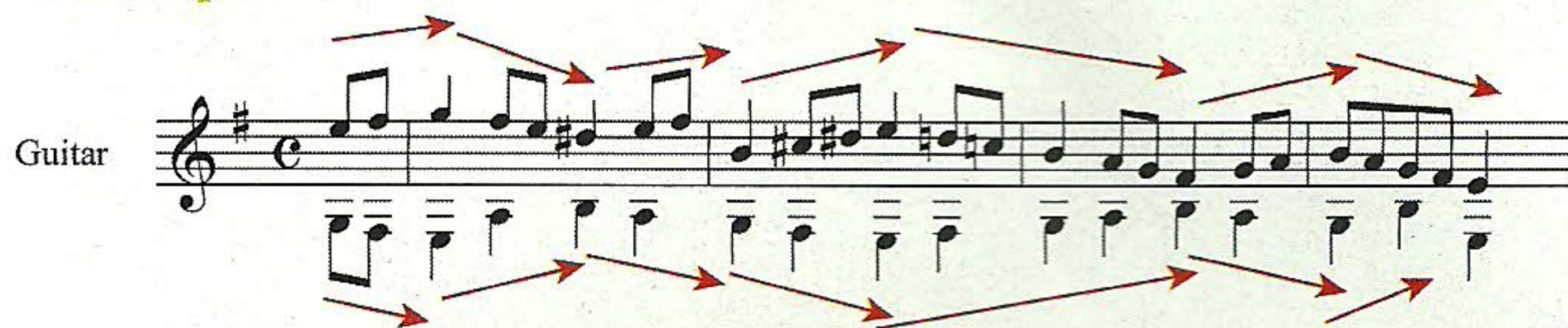
Bourée in E Minor. This is a well-known piece that every classical guitarist learns in his first year. But it's ingenious in its craft. Notice that the two lines are always in strict contrary motion, a style of counterpoint that further emphasizes the voices' independence by having them move in opposite directions.

Example 4

Compare this four-voice Bach fugue to the music in Fig. 1. How far music has come! Note where each of the four voices enters, circled in red.

Example 5
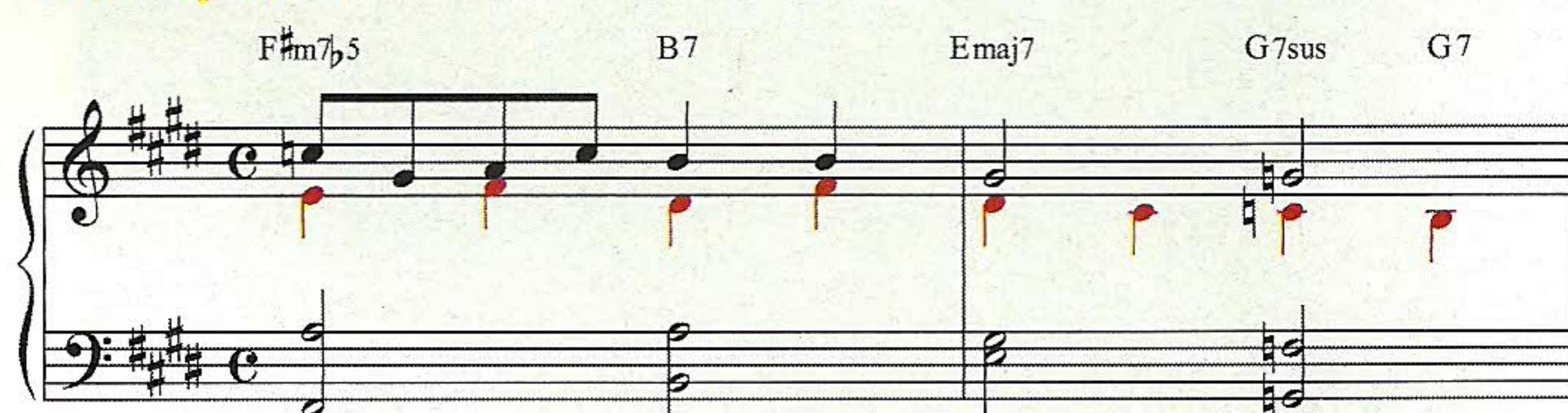
Jazz Counterpoint. Jazz composer Thelonious Monk would often introduce counterpoint in an inner voice (shown in red notes), combining polyphony and homophony.