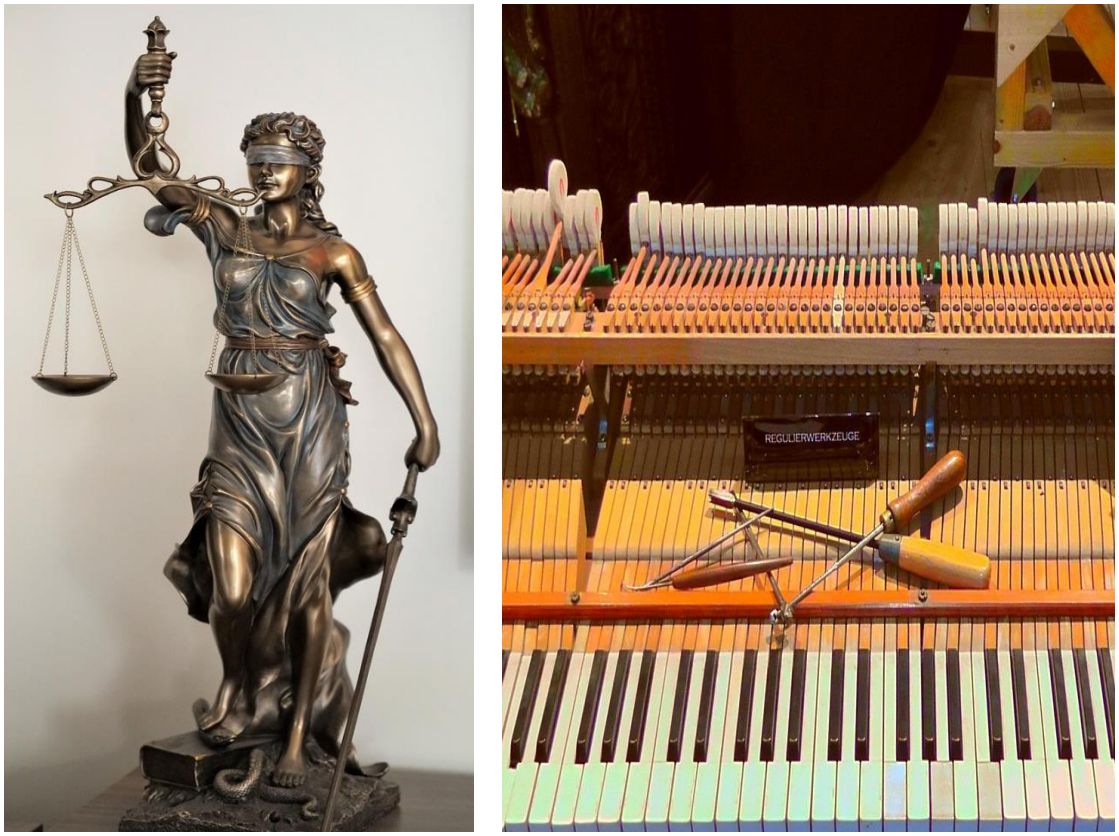
Why Study Harmony and Counterpoint?



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The study of harmony and counterpoint is, in my view, essential for all composers and arrangers. It doesn't matter what style you write in: pop, jazz, classical tonal, classical non-tonal, avant-garde; you need to know how the basics work. I would say that counterpoint is marginally more important than harmony, being geared up to generating actual lines of music, whereas harmonic study tends to be more analytical. But more on that later.

Over my lifetime, I've seen a new wave of neo-tonal composers come into fashion. This is perhaps a reaction against the previous post-war generations who presented serialism, pan-chromaticism, set theory, stochastic music, aleatoric music, minimalism, maximalism, electro-acoustic, spectral, modernist, post-modernist and a whole host of uncategorised music, often pathbreaking, experimental, good and bad

alike. A lot of this is currently out of fashion at the moment, which, to my mind at least, is a pity.

But now we are in predominantly gentler, rolling tonal landscapes again, including some signs of consolidation with the radicalism that went before. That's encouraging.

What bearing does the study of harmony and counterpoint have on either of these recent major waves in music?

Let's look at the limits of such study first of all, playing devil's advocate against. The study of harmony does not really equip you with methods for generating harmony (unless you want to use roman numeral analysis to do so, which rather feels like the tail wagging the dog!). It's essentially an analytic tool. It analyses chord structures and progressions of a period roughly spanning the 18th and 19th centuries, so it does come with an inbuilt period-specificity. Counterpoint is broader. We don't really talk about 'Wagnerian counterpoint' (maybe we should?) probably because the techniques and voice-leading principles are much the same as in Bach's time. But counterpoint is more oriented towards equipping you with tools for actually generating lines of music.

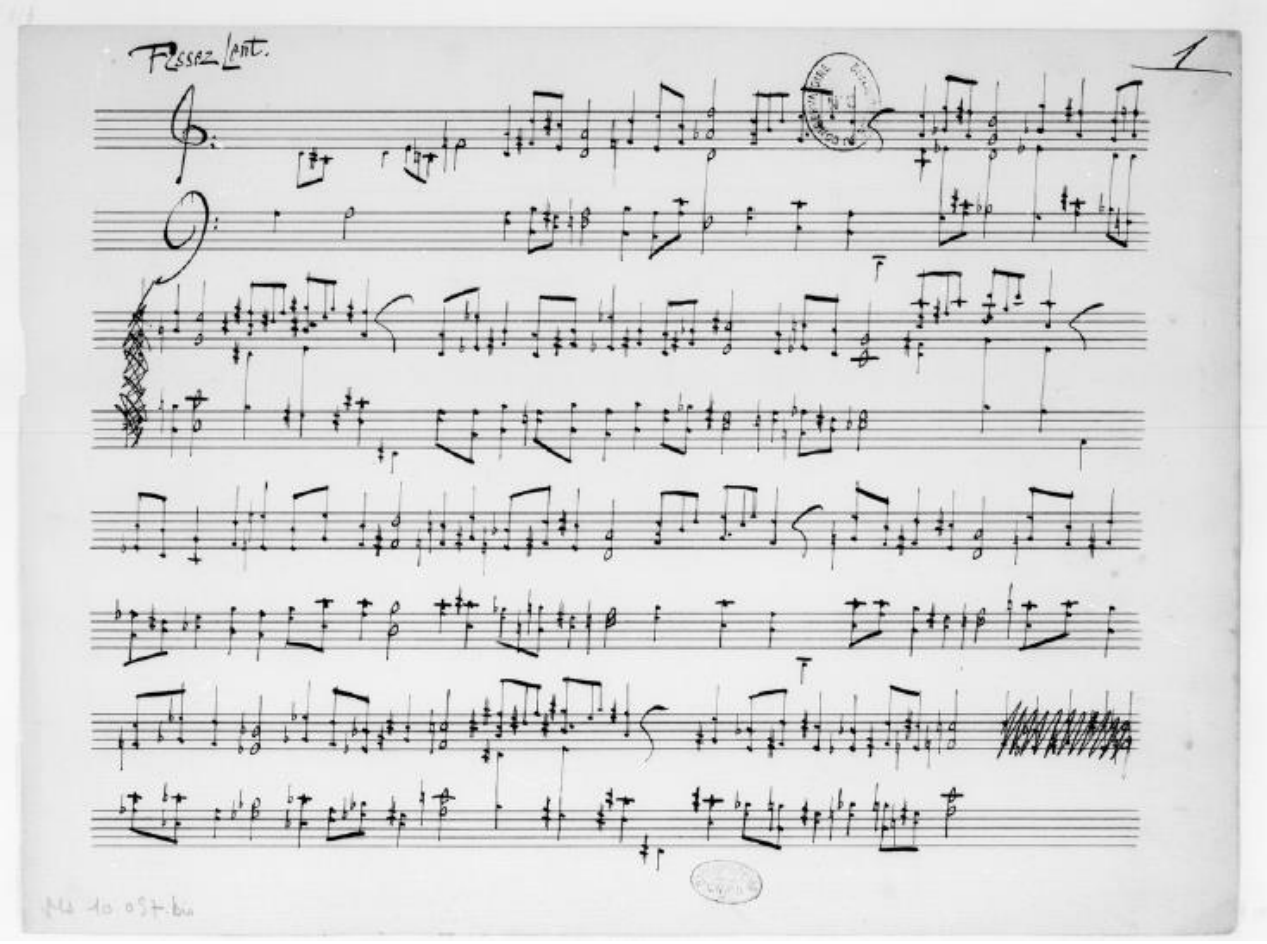
The analysis (still in its infancy) of Wagner's harmony is so cumbersome if you apply roman numeral analysis, that I think he must have used more linear methods of generating his heady chromatic concoctions, or maybe even some random method of fragmentary transpositions, kept private and now lost. Wagner, like Proust, was a master of spiralling subordinate clauses; harmonic regions within regions, as Schoenberg perceived, which so many people have mistaken for 'endless melody'.

Of course, you can decide to hear a harmonic progression in advance – just grab a pre-analysed harmonic ready-made such as I, IV, V7, I and embellish it; there you go. You can even add some bitonal filigree on top to disguise the fundamental harmonic simplicity. Many of Ravel's harmonic progressions are classical (with more dissonant chords), unlike those of Debussy, which avoid traditional formulas.

Alternatively, you can choose not to 'pre-hear' your harmony at all and just let the material emerge as the result of some arbitrary process. This is essentially the best lesson from serialism, where most harmony is worked out unheard in advance thanks to the fixed order of intervals. This approach can be really interesting and valuable. (You could even serialise or apply random numbers to create a tonal progression.) This can get you out of the rut of harmonic cliché or ingrained habits. But

whatever system or method you use, don't become a slave to it. Even Schoenberg went against his rows and changed notes if he didn't like them! Generate material, then sculpt it as your ear wishes.

Interestingly, long before note rows had even been thought of, Erik Satie was expanding the boundaries of what could be done with the most conventional of chords. In the remarkable *2ème Prélude du Nazaréen*, Satie took the 6/3 chord (first inversion triad) as his starting point and restricted himself to that basic material. This chord, for centuries the provenance of the continuo in operatic recitative, is used in this piece almost like a small set or interval block projected onto many chromatic transpositions. Satie varied the spacings of each of these first inversion major, minor and diminished triads, using close and open spacing. The result is extraordinarily fresh and original. It's astonishing to realise that he wrote this modern-sounding music in 1892. Here it is, in his own beautiful spidery hand (and not a barline in sight!):



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The following year in the *Danses Gothiques* and *Vexations*, Satie did it again, this time with a stream of diminished triads in 6/3 position, creating one of his most characteristic (and weird) sounds. He probably set up a process of juxtaposition without necessarily 'hearing' it in advance. Nothing in any book on harmony will point you towards such a method. This is because harmony books are not geared towards being creative. So why should a composer bother with them?

Works of art make rules; rules do not make works of art.

A quote by Debussy, who went through very rigorous training in harmony and counterpoint with pedagogues such as Emile Durand, Albert Lavignac and Ernest Guiraud. He rejected most of it later, but needed to learn, in order not to reinvent the wheel. If you don't fully understand something, you will keep exploring it when you could be exploring something new instead.

This is why performers don't really need a full knowledge of harmony and counterpoint, in my opinion. They need to keep a sense of the mystery, as they are non-verbal physical actualizers of music, using their bodies to transmit what's on the page to the listener. They don't need to know about Neapolitan or augmented sixths, suspensions or accented passing notes. If it helps them learn the music, then that's its only real use.

There was one notable exception when a remarkable composer was apparently excused the discipline of studying harmony and counterpoint. Iannis Xenakis, who trained initially as an architect and mathematician, impressed his teacher Messiaen so much with his background and intellect that the latter took the unprecedented risk of advising him not to refresh his theoretical music studies but to apply maths and architecture to composition. (And that coming from a teacher who firmly believed you should study the disciplines, too!) It's a wonderful story, which paid off in this exceptional case (and both were truly extraordinary composers), but I would just point out that Xenakis had already studied some harmony and counterpoint, going on to attend Messiaen's famous classes in analysis – which would have filled in the gaps almost by default! What a way to learn…

My own teacher, Alan Ridout, did a really clever thing with me. He saw that I had been very disillusioned by a previous over-zealous and critical harmony teacher who scorned my compositions. He just let me write, but criticised so constructively and suggestively until one day I simply

asked: ‘Alan, could I study harmony and counterpoint, please?’ Great teaching.

Satie went back to school (the Schola Cantorum) in 1905 to study counterpoint with Roussel, a man three years his junior. Like Schubert 77 years previously, Satie felt the need to expand his contrapuntal knowledge at that point of his musical development. This gave rise to an interesting misunderstanding with Debussy, who was strongly against the move. He thought it would stifle Satie’s original voice, but in reality it was a mere filling in of gaps that Debussy probably assumed were already known by his friend. The music that followed this period of study was no less magnificent that what had preceded it.

Satie was not the only radical composer to take theoretical study seriously. John Cage studied counterpoint, form and analysis with Schoenberg, and harmony with Adolph Weiss, a composer and bassoonist who had played under Mahler’s baton in the New York Philharmonic. But after an initial honeymoon period, Cage began to find Schoenberg pedantic, and he struggled to master the writing of chorale preludes. This is interesting, because it begs the question: why study to write something so anachronistic, or essentially pastiche? Why do we harmonise our Bach chorales? I think the answer lies partly in that the struggle to master something from the past can yield insights that mere analysis cannot. It’s just an exercise that can give you tools for use elsewhere, even if that’s only merely problem-solving in your own music.

Fellow radical composer Henry Cowell gave Cage some splendid advice (from his prison cell!) about applying the value of Schoenberg’s teaching to vastly different ways of constructing music, without rejecting them for the draconian way they were imposed. Cage subsequently became critical of his own *Second Construction* (1940) which, although imaginatively written for percussion and prepared piano, was in his opinion too fugal, repetitive and over-reliant on his training. But at least he had something to kick against. Later, in a conversation with Varèse, he concluded that anything useful from harmony could be learnt in half an hour. I disagree with that, because both composers (like Debussy) were simply forgetting just how long it took *them* to learn that half-hour nugget of usefulness.

This leads me to another issue when studying harmony. What tradition does the teaching method come from? Schoenberg spoke of European traditional techniques, but in his books there are very few examples of French music and certainly none of English. For European, we should

really read Austro-German. Perhaps Cage reacted against Schoenberg in a way similar to Debussy against Wagner – intense admiration and initial absorption giving way to an awareness of differences in musical culture. Debussy was a fierce French chauvinist; Cage probably less so with his nascent American tradition, but distinctly aware of a non-European-centred culture ahead of him to start developing.

It's therefore useful to be aware of the pedigree of whatever treatise you choose to study. In English music, from Dowland through Tallis to Purcell, there is a wonderful harmonic flavour of cross-relations between simultaneous raised and flattened seventh degrees (the so-called English Cadence). But many French, German and American treatises set strict rules against such wonderful clashes, which to my mind feels like a form of cultural imperialism!

That’s why it’s important for composers to study harmony and counterpoint critically and judiciously. You need those disciplines to cover the basics, then to define who you are by absorbing and kicking against their limits, cultural, technical or otherwise. You can transform them, like Debussy or Cage, to serve your own aims. But know them first. They can help shine a light on who you are.

And if you are not a composer concerned with ‘originality’ or ‘voice’, it’s perhaps even more useful for you to study these things. Know the tradition inside out, but don’t just stop at Bach and Beethoven. Are composers aware of how far they get with their traditional harmony studies? There are many tonal composers working today whose harmonic and tonal palettes are not even as exploratory as Schubert. Why not go further and look at late Romantic harmony? There’s nothing wrong with updating your technical knowledge throughout your creative life (look at Satie). Sometimes this ‘filling in’ can help show if you are imitating unconsciously. But of course, if such imitation is for expressive ends of yours, that’s fine.

The attentive reader will have gathered that I am addressing two very broad types of composers here. On the one hand I see composers who innovate, concerned with being individual, experimental, authentic and having their own voice. On the other, I see composers who are more concerned with expression, being more ‘traditional’ and comfortable using clichés, or at least devices which are not necessarily their own invention. I’ve noticed that this latter group of composers tends, interestingly, to be people who have been, or are, performers. But there’s healthy crossover between these two types, and I urge both to explore

the other side of the coin and not descend into uncreative polemic. Each can certainly benefit from the intelligent study of harmony and counterpoint, if only for different outcomes and reasons.

Two final, humbling quotes to finish with:

Franz Schubert (in the last year of his life, on looking at the scores of Handel's oratorios): *Now for the first time I see what I lack; but I will study hard with Sechter so that I can make good the omission.*

Erik Satie (in the last year of his life to friend and composer Robert Caby): *There is a musical language. One must learn it.*

Ivor McGregor September 2025
(written without using ChatGPT)

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