COUNTERPOINT AND LINEARITY AS MANIFESTED IN THE MUSIC OF GEORGE GERSHWIN

BY

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DISSERTATION

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The music of George Gershwin has remained ensconced in concert programs ever since the premiere of \textit{Rhapsody in Blue} in 1924. His music possesses everything that popular music has, namely memorable, catchy tunes and a clear-cut sense of direction. Although a tonal composer, many of his harmonies are complex sonorities that elude any attempt at a functional analysis. Many of his works possess a wide array of themes that are often superimposed and combined in sophisticated and subtle ways. While many of his works may initially appear nearly formless, there are in fact many techniques of thematic unity and development at work.

The unifying element in Gershwin’s music is counterpoint and an ever-present sense of linearity, duality, and opposition. Harmonic sequences are often not generated by conventional, pre-determined progressions, but rather by the linear motion of each individual note, as though it were its own independent voice. Instead of setting tunes against standard accompaniments, Gershwin often layers a distinctive countermelody above or below the primary melody, in addition to imbuing the accompanying patterns with a sense of line in themselves. Instead of employing root-position chords obsessively, as was common in popular music of the day, Gershwin creates coloristic chord successions derived primarily from stepwise (linear) motion.

Although Gershwin’s music has not undergone nearly as much scholarly analysis as that of the older masters, a substantial literature nonetheless exists, notably the writings of Steven Gilbert and Allen Forte. Steven Gilbert in particular
has written several illuminating works dealing with counterpoint in Gershwin’s music. It is my primary goal in this paper to uncover specific contrapuntal, linear, and sequential patterns that Gershwin employed, as discovering these structural elements is imperative in truly understanding Gershwin’s compositional process. These elements also give further evidence that counterpoint and linearity remain at the heart of his musical thinking and procedures, whether they are generating harmonic progressions, layering multiple melodic lines, developing thematic material, or creating smooth, linear chord progressions.
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INTRODUCTION

The music of George Gershwin has remained ensconced in the repertoire of all types of musicians since his untimely death in 1937. Indeed, since Paul Whiteman’s historic Experiment in Modern Music concert on February 12, 1924, during which Gershwin’s perennially popular Rhapsody in Blue was premiered, Gershwin became one of the most successful composers the world had known and his popularity has never waned. What is it about his music that has endeared it to millions of people? Classical, jazz, pop/rock musicians, and laymen alike enjoy it equally, and its universal appeal is undeniable. Why did the work of tens of thousands of contemporary composers fall into oblivion with the passage of time while Gershwin’s seems to retain all of its freshness? Some answers to these rather difficult questions are apparent. His affinity for writing memorable tunes and infectious rhythms has doubtless contributes to his unceasing popularity. However, there were multitudes of others who can be said to have possessed similar skills but who have not been fortunate enough to have enjoyed even a fraction of the immortality that Gershwin has. Amongst the more elusive reasons that Gershwin’s music has enjoyed such immense popularity is his pervasive use of linearity and counterpoint.

Ever since people have combined multiple tones simultaneously, counterpoint has played a vital role in music composition, and it is present in most types of music to varying degrees. Counterpoint plays an indispensible role, perhaps the greatest role, in directing the forces of agreement and opposition, tension and relaxation, direction, and climax – elements that play out supremely well in
Gershwin’s music.\textsuperscript{1} However, many may question whether the investigation of contrapuntal and linear elements in Gershwin’s music is a totally worthwhile pursuit, Gershwin being a composer who initially became famous writing popular songs and Broadway shows. Although he is not the first composer to come to mind when discussing counterpoint (notwithstanding that examples of canon, fugue, and stretto do exist in his oeuvre), it nevertheless plays a critical role in nearly all of his compositions. In fact, the late Robert Russell Bennett, one of Broadway’s leading arrangers, once made counterpoint’s importance in Broadway and popular music unequivocally clear, stating that it is the indispensible element in arranging: if it is absent, the audience’s enjoyment will be diminished, even though they may be unable to say exactly why.\textsuperscript{2}

Although not immediately apparent, Gershwin’s music is replete with contrapuntal/linear thinking, which is perfectly congruent with his continual desire to acquire greater skill and elevate Broadway and popular music to new heights (not unlike what Scott Joplin tried to do with ragtime in the 1900s and 1910s). Although there are relatively few examples of strict, learned contrapuntal forms such as fugue and canon in Gershwin’s output, counterpoint and linearity are nevertheless of paramount importance in his work. They typically manifest themselves in more abstract ways, akin to the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century usage of linear harmony as exemplified by composers such as Chopin, Wagner, and Rachmaninoff. His

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{1} Kent, Kennan, \textit{Counterpoint, - 4th edition} (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hal, Inc., 1999), 1
\textsuperscript{2} Kennan, 1
\end{flushleft}
accompanying patterns usually possess linear, even melodic components, and his harmonic progressions, which are often predicated upon linear principles of motion and voice-leading, can be said to be contrapuntally inspired. In general, Gershwin’s counterpoint can be said to be divided into four distinct types – layering of multiple melodic lines (fugue and canon, for example), linear harmony, counterpoint through thematic development, and accompaniments of a linear nature.

Copious volumes concerning Gershwin’s biography line the shelves of libraries. In 1931, six years before Gershwin’s death and before works such as the Cuban Overture and Porgy and Bess were even written, the first Gershwin biography appeared in print, written by close friend and colleague Isaac Goldberg. Since then, as new information surfaced (and within the years 1931-1937, new works written) many new biographies have appeared, notably those by Edward Jablonski, William Hyland, and perhaps most definitively, by Howard Pollack. It is safe to say that Gershwin’s life has been thoroughly and meticulously documented from a number of different perspectives. The same scholarly attention has not been given to the music itself however.

Although far fewer sources regarding serious analysis of Gershwin’s music exist than do those concerning his biography, there are still a handful of excellent ones. Beginning in the 1980s, the first of such sources appeared by Allen Forte and Steven Gilbert, both of whom were pioneers in the study of Gershwin’s music. Steven Gilbert in particular, has contributed perhaps most significantly to Gershwin musical scholarship. Three Gilbert sources are of particular importance, these being
his 1995 book *The Music of Gershwin*, the 1984 article “Gershwin’s Art of Counterpoint”, and his article “Nice Work: Thoughts and Observations on Gershwin’s Last Songs.”

*The Music of Gershwin* is the most comprehensive source regarding analytical aspects of Gershwin’s music. While touching upon contrapuntal aspects in Gershwin’s music, he primarily deals with elements of melodic manipulation and development, structure and form. Having been a former student of Alan Forte and schooled in the methods of Heinrich Schenker, he primarily uses Schenkerian graphs to illustrate his points. Using such graphs, he is able to depict “basic melodic, contrapuntal, and harmonic structures” and to show why “Gershwin tunes work as well as they do.” In fact, it is exactly this near universal appeal that motivated Gilbert to attempt to discern and delineate the structural traits that make Gershwin’s tunes so memorable. In addition to Schenkerian graphs and score excerpts, he also uses excerpts of other composers from the classical literature as a basis of comparison.

In “Gershwin’s Art of Counterpoint”, Gilbert utilizes a similar approach as in *The Music of Gershwin*. In fact, the former provided a useful springboard for the latter work. In this article Gilbert naturally focuses more on the contrapuntal aspects of Gershwin’s music but also focuses on other areas such as thematic manipulation and variation technique, focusing primarily on the *Concerto in F, I Got Rhythm Variations*, and *An American in Paris*. His article *Nice Work: Thoughts and Observations on Gershwin’s Last Songs* is in a similar vein. Although all of his works
are invaluable in understanding Gershwin’s music, as well as for beginning to understand his use of counterpoint, my work I feel will elaborate on Gershwin’s use of counterpoint in much more detail. Being based on Schenkerian analysis, Gilbert’s observations naturally focus more on the overall schematic elements such as pivotal chords and chord progressions without categorizing various usages or making connections from work to work. Furthermore, his work tends to use Schenkerian methodology, whereas it is my aim to analyze Gershwin’s counterpoint in comparison to various nineteenth century techniques, accounting for every minute detail.
CHAPTER 1

GERSHWIN AND CONTRAPUNTAL LAYERING

Gershwin’s unique usage of counterpoint manifests itself in a variety of ways throughout his music, and it can be viewed as falling under one of four categories – overt layering of multiple melodic lines, harmony dictated by the linear motion of the individual voices, accompaniments which possess a linear/countermelodic character, and counterpoint achieved by means of thematic development. Although few in number, fugues and canons indeed exist in Gershwin’s output. This is unsurprising given Gershwin’s ardent interest in and respect for the great composers before him, as well as his unceasing drive to acquire further musical knowledge and compositional acumen. Below is an excerpt from the fugue from the opening scene of Porgy and Bess, which demonstrates Gershwin’s deftness at handling intensely contrapuntal forms quite well.

Example 1. Gershwin – Porgy and Bess, Act 1, Scene 1
As can be seen from Example 1, the subject, in the upper staff of the reduction, with its off-beat accents and syncopations, harsh minor seconds and harmonic piquancy, is a fine example of the application of older, European idioms in twentieth-century American music. The subject is stated in G Minor, punctuated, as would be expected from Gershwin, with spicy dissonances and blue notes. In spite of the application of modern idioms, Gershwin still adheres to tradition. After completing the subject, which begins on the fifth scale degree of the tonic (‘D’), the answer, as would be expected, commences a fifth higher on ‘A’, the fifth scale degree of D Minor, the dominant degree of the tonic (see Example 2). After the completion of the answer, we get what would be expected in even the strictest of fugues in the most learned style, which is the subject being restated in the tonic key of G Minor (Example 2). This is just the beginning of Gershwin’s masterful treatment of contrapuntal textures and techniques.

Example 2. Gershwin – *Porgy and Bess*, Act 1, Scene 1
Instead of beginning the fugue with merely one voice stating the subject, Gershwin commences with two opposing ideas. In fact, the very sense of disagreement so palpable in this fugue is in many respects the very essence of counterpoint.\(^3\) Perhaps most immediately apparent is the rhythmic independence between the parts. For now, let us think of the upper part, the fugue subject, as its

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own voice/part and the lower part, although comprised of two separate voices (and containing the same rhythmic values) as another voice/part (see Example 1).

Gershwin first assigns each voice its own distinct rhythm. The lower part even fills in the rests in the subject, which, being a distinctive characteristic of the subject, makes the sense of opposition between the lines all the more intense. In the third measure, the two voices share the same subdivisions but are still rhythmically opposed due to the different placement of accents, which result in different rhythmic groupings. It is worth noting that the 3+3+2 pattern used in the lower voice in the third measure of Example 1 is a favorite of Gershwin’s and can be found in many of his works.

These two lines contain all of the principles considered most prevalent in skillful seventeenth- and eighteenth-century contrapuntal practice, namely 1) each lines must have its own integrity, 2) each line must contain adequate independence regarding contour and rhythm, and 3) the lines must be sufficiently in common so as to fuse into a satisfying, convincing whole. 4 Each voice is uniquely melodic, and the differing rhythmic values, particularly during the first two measures, offer plenty of contrast while the third measure balances it with more rhythmic similarity (yet still differing as a result of the accents) to create a cohesive whole. Gershwin continues with the opposing elements in the fourth measure with strikingly different rhythmic values and contour, while he balances out the remaining two measures of the subject with more cohesive rhythmic values. Although they are contrasting, the

4 Kennan, 19
rhythms contained between the two parts in mm. 4-5 blend seamlessly due to the fact that they each fill in the other’s rhythmic gaps so that the resultant rhythm is that of continuous sixteenth notes (surface rhythm).

Gershwin proceeds in the expected fashion, having the answer enter at the dominant scale degree of G Minor (tonic), as can been seen in Example 2. Opting to discontinue the countersubject heard from the beginning of the fugue (although it will reappear later, as we will see), Gershwin nevertheless is able to achieve sufficient variety and opposition with the other two parts. In m. 9 of the fugue (third measure of Example 2) he harkens back to the 3+3+2 motive from m. 3 of Example 1, which is heard in opposition to the subject. Further contrast is added in m. 11 by the introduction of a new rhythmic element altogether – quarter notes in two-note slurs – in the lowest voice. Upon the next statement of the subject in the tonic, now framed by counterpoint in the outer two voices, Gershwin decides to retain the countersubject heard during the first statement of the answer (lower voice of Example 1). This is an especially intriguing yet adroit use of what is known as invertible counterpoint. In invertible counterpoint, two or more distinct voices, each with an individual melodic line, are presented and then, upon a subsequent presentation of said voices, are interchanged regarding relative position – that is, the upper voice becomes the lower and vice versa. 5 Other layers of counterpoint add to the passage’s complexity.

5 Kennan, 115
Example 3. Gershwin – *Porgy and Bess*, Act 1, Scene 1 – continuation of fugue (transition from head to tail of subject against countersubject)
The fugal exposition would appear to end at m. 19 (Example 3, m. 4, seen below). Although there is no clear-cut cadence to help delineate this point the melody of the subject itself ends, and the sixteenth note rest of the entire ensemble also assists in helping define this juncture. Taken from the 3+3+2 passage from the countersubject, Gershwin uses the three-note grouping (x in Example 3) to build a brief bridge passage of four measures that is highly imitative and stretto-like. Then at m. 23 (eighth measure of Example 3) the fourth and last statement of the subject appears in the lowest voice, an answer on the dominant scale-degree of D Minor, over which Gershwin utilizes the two countersubjects first heard simultaneously at m. 13 of the fugue (Example 2) and the first restatement of the fugue subject in the tonic key. Also beginning in m. 23 is the introduction of yet another opposing element in what is the tenor voice, elided from the counterpoint from the previous stretto-like bridge section.

After the end of the fugal exposition, Gershwin proceeds with freer counterpoint and utilizes the stretto material (again, derived from the 3+3+2 motive) to continue linking the section and ultimately modulate to the unexpected key of E Minor, wherein he continues with middle entries in the new key. He maintains the two countersubjects previously mentioned and adds another motivic and rhythmic element in the bottom voice. He then continues with an answer in the new dominant of B Minor and again retains the two countersubjects while adding a new yet related element in the upper voice. After this entry on the dominant Gershwin creates a climactic, culminating effect by layering, from the bottom up,
multiple elements heard thus far – the off-beat repeated notes of the fifth measure of the subject (acting as a pedal-point, a device often used in traditional European classical music to create tension), the 3-note groupings of sixteenth notes heard in the subject beginning on the second half of m. 2 (demarcated by the accents on every third note), and the 3+3+2 rhythm of descending steps heard from the countersubject. Upon reaching the climax, we are left to discover that Gershwin is not done yet, as he proceeds with the same device of layering these three elements again, from the bottom up but this time a fourth higher.

After so much discussion of the constructions of the fugue as a whole, it is important to note the primary cell on which it is based, the subject, for Gershwin also demonstrates his formidable compositional sophistication by the manner in which he constructs the subject itself. This fugue subject is one that is known as a “head and tail” subject.\(^6\) A head and tail subject is one that contains two distinct and contrasting parts, often separated by rests or longer note values.\(^7\) In Gershwin’s case the “head” can be described as going through the first half of m. 4 and being composed strictly of sixteenth notes and rests, punctuated by periodic accents, which highlight the syncopation. The “tail” is made separate by a thirty-second note rest and the beginning of new rhythmic values – the thirty-second note flourishes


\(^7\) Kennan, 232
(which leads to the highest note of the subject, also accented), the off-beat repeated eighth notes, and the subject’s only pattern of eighth and two sixteenths.

The “head” and “tail” of the subject are in fact derivative of previously used material in this scene however, attesting to Gershwin’s determination to create cohesive wholes in nearly everything he wrote, a trait also evidenced by those who knew him well such as Oscar Levant and Arthur Loesser. Both of them confirmed that he was attracted to the “long line and free development of melodic material in Brahms” and that he “was profoundly impressed with those qualities in the works of the great masters of music that gave them their long-lived vitality; the qualities of originality, resourcefulness, workmanship, cohesion and large-scale planning which permit these works to triumph over the changing fashion of centuries” 8 Therefore, it is unsurprising to find such sophisticated and well-wrought compositional techniques of creating large-scale unity present in Gershwin’s works. The “head” of the subject is clearly derived from the opening portion of what is known as the “Craps” theme and also what is known as “Crown’s” theme. The “Craps” and “Crown’s” theme can be seen below in Example 4, along with the fugue subject itself. These two elements, first heard separately and with much temporal distance between them, seem to merge inexorably closer until they converge, culminating in the climactic fugue.

Although rather few in number, other examples of imitative/polyphonic writing do exist in Gershwin’s output. Another notable example is from the third

8 Davis and Pollack, 381
movement of the *Concerto in F*, an excerpt of which follows (Example 4).

Example 4. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 3rd Movement, rehearsal 16

This excerpt is an example of a canon, more specifically an accompanied canon. Beginning at rehearsal number 16, it uses the second original theme to be introduced in the movement (the second chronological theme being taken from the first movement) as its basis, once again demonstrating Gershwin’s adroit use of thematic development to create cohesion.
The leader of the canon, essentially the alto voice, (treble staff of second piano part, Example 4) begins the main melody on the second half of beat one. On the second half of beat two the tenor voice (bass staff of first piano part, Example 4) begins with what appears to be the following voice and octave lower. However, this turns out to be a false entry, as the potential canon between the alto and tenor is abandoned after a mere two measures. The true canon is therefore between the alto and the soprano (uppermost voice), which enters on the second half of the second measure of rehearsal 16. This two-voice canon, three beats apart, continues for 13 measures. On the second half of beat two in the fourth measure of rehearsal 16, the tenor voice returns with the same melody as the alto and soprano, thus creating another canon between it and the leader. Here appears a rare three-voice canon, although this passage constitutes only a brief moment of the entire movement. Because this is an accompanied canon, the lowest voice contains material that is not actually a part of the canon proper. Since this accompanying material is nevertheless still based on the melodic material of the canon itself (it is in fact the exact opening 7-note fragment of the canon melody), the effect is that of an intense and involved stretto, especially with the tenor entrance four measures after rehearsal 16 begins, turning the section from a two- and three-voice canon.

The Concerto in F does not contain the sole example of canonic writing in Gershwin’s oeuvre, for another notable instance occurs in the Cuban Overture. Written in 1932 and premiered that August, this work coincides approximately with

9 Kennan, 103
the commencement of Gershwin’s studies with Joseph Schillinger, and along with other contemporary works such as the *Second Rhapsody, ‘I Got Rhythm’ Variations*, and the shows *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let ‘Em Eat Cake*, shows a marked and conscientious advance in Gershwin’s writing, especially regarding form, orchestration, and counterpoint.

Written in an essentially ABA form, the B section in particular contains some adept displays of contrapuntal writing, especially two very strict canons. The following excerpt (Example 6) presents a strict canon at the octave. The leader is the uppermost voice of the top staff (oboe) and begins on the first measure of the example on A. It continues for two measures accompanied only by sustained chords in the strings. After two measures the follower (lower staff of first piano part of Example 6) enters exactly an octave lower. The canon continues for four full measures once the follower enters, the excerpt of which is shown below.

Example 5. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture*, mm. 4-9 of Section B (Andante sostenuto)
Another strict canon occurs shortly after the aforementioned excerpt, also at the octave and with a very similar accompaniment in the strings. As in the first example, the leader plays for two measures before the follower enters. This can be seen below in Example 6.

Example 6. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture*, canon at octave (Section B)
Not long after, Gershwin again introduces another canon at the octave and the leader plays for two measures before the follower enters. The canonic voices are again composed of the two uppermost voices, but the accompaniment is more rhythmically elaborate, adding another contrapuntal layer. This canon plays out differently than the previous example however. Seven measures into the following example (Example 7) Gershwin aborts a strict canon at six measures into the excerpt, but nonetheless continues the overall canonic texture. Measure 7 of the example is basically a repetition of the previous one, thus extending the canon by a measure. In the following measure, m. 8 of Example 8, the lower voice of the uppermost staff, the follower, would appear to be continuing the canon, as it is imitating the upper voice from three measures prior. However, Gershwin here has the voices overlap, as the canonic imitation is taken over in the upper voice in the ninth measure of the example. Beginning on the eleventh measure Gershwin subtly and seamlessly begins a new canon at the octave, which will wind up lasting a full nine measures. In short, Gershwin begins a strict canon at the octave, aborts it after seven measures, but
continues the canonic and overall contrapuntal textures, and elides these passages into another strict canon at the octave. The full example is shown below.

Example 7. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture*, Section B
Gershwin also uses canon as a means of achieving thematic development and unity. Although comprised of busy, kaleidoscopic layering throughout, to the point of containing more than can be fully absorbed upon an initial hearing, the *Cuban Overture* is in fact a very tightly-knit work.\(^\text{10}\) The following example illustrates Gershwin’s use of an inverted canon at the octave as a means of thematic development, as well as directing the music to its last and most climactic statement before the more subdued yet haunting middle section.

Example 8. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture*, mm. 154-159

In this inverted canon, the following voice states a mirror image of the leading voice. Here, the following voice begins two beats after the leader and is in inversion. Especially noteworthy is that the interval of a perfect 4\(^{th}\) that frames the

\(^{10}\) Steven Gilbert, *The Music of George Gershwin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 170
motive of this canon is the primary melodic cell from which most of the material of the work is derived.\textsuperscript{11}

Aside from fugue, canon, and other highly imitative forms, there are other less imitative but equally overt examples of contrapuntal technique in Gershwin’s output. One particularly fine example is from the musical \textit{Let ‘Em Eat Cake} (1933). A sequel to the Pulitzer-prize winning show \textit{Of Thee I Sing} (1931), \textit{Let ‘Em Eat Cake} was written a year after Gershwin commenced studies with Joseph Schillinger, and it reveals a high level of sophistication not seen as often in earlier works. Originally written as an exercise for Schillinger, the song "Mine" from the musical is every bit as tuneful as anything Gershwin wrote and indicates a marked and conscientious advance in his contrapuntal writing.

The refrain of “Mine” resembles what is known as a quodlibet, a form in which two generally well-known, previously composed tunes are superimposed, usually against accompanying material.\textsuperscript{12} Traditionally the effect is humorous but in “Mine” the effect is that of peaceful, yet confident, serenity.

\textbf{Example 9. Gershwin – Duet (refrain) of “Mine” from \textit{Let ‘Em Eat Cake} (1933)}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example9.png}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{11} Gilbert, 166
\textsuperscript{12} Kennan, 278
After a 4 measure introduction, the refrain begins with a languorously sparse yet lilting melody, consisting primarily of long sustained notes in stepwise and triadic motion. After the customary 32 bars, Gershwin continues with what is apparently the refrain. This new melody, consisting primarily of stepwise motion, continuously uses the more active rhythmic pattern of the passage marked ‘x’, and is periodically adjusted in terms of range to fuse with the overall harmony.
On the repeat, Gershwin does something that may have initially come as a surprise, but was, in fact, not entirely new in popular music. Gershwin adeptly demonstrates his contrapuntal skill and ever-present desire to create unified wholes, even in the realm of musical theatre, by superimposing the original melody with the new one. These two melodies combine seamlessly, as though destined to be together. The original melody, with its long sustained notes and stepwise motion, is perfectly conducive to be combined with the more active melody introduced 32 measures after the introduction. Although the inspiration for "Mine" almost certainly came from similarly constructed tunes by Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern, two composers Gershwin idolized, “Mine” nevertheless resembles a quodlibet regarding contrapuntal technique and construction (unlike a quodlibet, the tunes of “Mine” were newly composed). It should be noted that Irving Berlin, a composer whose work was well-known to Gershwin, utilized similar techniques, and it is likely that there was more direct inspiration from him rather than from Bach or Schillinger.

Gershwin conscientiously utilized contrapuntal techniques throughout *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. However, in spite of such concerted efforts, he did not feel that the counterpoint was used as effectively as it could have been. 13 Regarding the show and its counterpoint, he expounded his thoughts on the matter to an interviewer: “It is that very insistence on the sharpness of a form (counterpoint) that gives my music the acid touch it has – which points the words of the lyrics, and it in keeping

13 Ewen, 210
with the satire of the piece. At least, I feel that it is the counterpoint which helps me do what I am trying to do.”  

Let ‘Em Eat Cake’s significantly more successful predecessor, Of Thee I Sing, contains a great deal of contrapuntally rich, sophisticated music as well, not least of which is the overture. Amongst a great deal of harmonic progressions predicated on linearity, there are passages in which Gershwin superimposes melodies in a very similar fashion to “Mine,” as well as other examples soon to be discussed. Early in the overture (m.16), Gershwin introduces a passage based on a fragment of what we will eventually hear as the song “Because, Because.” After subjecting it to a great deal of development, he develops it further by turning it into a highly decorative, filigree passage (uppermost voice of example 10) and combines it with the entire refrain of the song “Who Cares?.” While these two melodies are not exactly combined verbatim as the melodies were in “Mine,” this is nevertheless a formidable contrapuntal feat that infuses a great deal of vitality and overall interest in the overture while also contributing to the overture’s cohesive structure and unity.  

Example 10. Gershwin – Overture to Of Thee I Sing (1931), mm. 56-72

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14 Ewen, 210
15 Wayne Schneider, “Gershwin’s Operetta Overtures: Medley or Composition?,” The Gershwin Style (1999): 42
As can be seen in Example 11, Gershwin employs much the same technique later in the overture in mm. 131-136. In the climactic build-up to the full statement of the title song and immediately following the recitative of the solo violin, Gershwin again combines “Because, Because” fragments with fragments from “Of Thee I Sing,”
as though he were foreshadowing the latter's imminent arrival. Example 11 illustrates this aptly. “Because, Because” fragments occur with the larger, dotted notes and the fragments of the title song are indicated by the small notes in the upper part of the treble staff.

Example 11. Gershwin – Overture to Of Thee I Sing (1931), mm. 131-136

As exciting as this moment is, it is in fact not the first time that this sort of superimposition of melodies has occurred in the overture. At m. 34, after the “Because, Because” snippets are introduced and developed, Gershwin tantalizes the listener with a mere glance at the title song, which is stated above the “Because, Because” fragments in the violins.
In mm. 40-41 (Example 12), Gershwin employs a similar tactic, this time combining the “Because, Because” fragment with the ending notes, E-C-C-D of the tune, “Who Cares?”, the latter being placed in the treble staff. The beginning notes of the four-note “Because, Because” fragments (x) create a series of accented passing tones against the E-C-C-D of “Who Cares?” above.

All of this unequivocally indicates that Gershwin expended a great deal of thought and care into the creation of this overture, treating it as an organic whole as opposed to a haphazard conglomeration of 32-bar tunes strung together, as many musical comedy overtures were reputed to be.  

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16 Schneider, 45
Of Thee I Sing contains a number in which melodies are first introduced separately, and then superimposed within the same song. “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?”, the second full number after the overture, follows a similar compositional scheme to “Mine.” After an elaborate introduction in which Gershwin presents several integral themes, Gershwin proceeds into the first main portion of the song, marked Allegretto giocoso and written for female chorus. The tune for this section comes from that of the opening bars of the introduction, another example in which Gershwin skillfully creates cohesion in larger structures through thematic development. The follows examples, 14 and 15, show the tune as it appears in the introduction and how it appears upon the entrance of the voices, respectively.


Example 15. Gershwin – “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?” – entrance of voices
This section, beginning with the entrance of the voices, continues for twenty-four measures, after which there is a brief interlude. Gershwin then proceeds with a completely different tune sing by a different female chorus, also lasting for twenty-four measures (Example 16).

Example 16. Gershwin – “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?” – *Of Thee I Sing*

After another brief interlude, Gershwin then deftly combines these two separate tunes, bringing the number to its most climactic moment thus far, after which the male singers enter. The two tunes sung by the female choruses are shown in combination in Example 17 below.

Example 17. Gershwin – “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?” – combination of two tunes (Act 1)
As remarkably effective as this example is, an even more intricate example of contrapuntal writing can be seen in Scene IV of Act I. The male lead, John P. Wintergreen, approaches this climactic moment with a solo number in E-flat Major, extolling his newfound love Mary Turner, and in particular her formidable skill at making corn muffins.
Example 18. Gershwin – *Of Thee I Sing* – Finaletto, Act 1 – Scene IV

![Musical notation]

**Wintergreen**

Some girls can bake a pie Made up of prunes and quinces; Some make an oyster fry, Others are good at blintzes. Some love-ly girls have done Wonders with tur-key stuf-fin's; But I have found the one Who can real-ly make corn muf-fins.

After sixteen measures Gershwin sustains a Vdom7 chord (B-flat dominant 7th) while Diana Devereaux, the female antagonist, sings a recitative-like passage consisting primarily of repeated B-flats, but also highlighting an ascending M2, which returns to its original note, a gesture accentuated at the end of Wintergreen’s solo immediately preceding the recitative.

In the next section, Gershwin combines not one but two separate melodies with Wintergreen’s solo, resulting in three distinct melodic layers sounding simultaneously, all of which perfectly coalesce into a seamless whole.
As impressive as the threefold combination of melodies is, it is also highly worth noting that although the additional tune are new and tailored to mesh with
Wintergreen’s solo, they are in no way random, arbitrary, or unrelated to the surrounding material, as they are all clearly derivative of the all-important melodic motive that can be best expressed by the PC contour analysis +2, -2, +2. The female chorus sings a drawn-out rendering of this motive while the male chorus, the “Committee” sings a rhythmically driving, almost frenetic rendering of the motive.

Note too the fact that every characteristic of skillfully composed contrapuntal music as listed Kennan’s counterpoint book is present in this example – each line possesses its own integrity, there is sufficient independence between the individual voices regarding rhythm and direction, they are sufficiently similar, they imply a sound harmonic succession, and they consist primarily of consonances. Gershwin is not necessarily concerned with rigidly adhering to eighteenth-century practice – parallel octaves exist, and certain intervals requiring “proper” resolution are left unresolved if not emphasized. As influential as contrapuntal processes were to Gershwin, strict eighteenth-century practices would have been irrelevant if not inimical to the sounds Gershwin wanted to create, destroying the jazzy, piquant flavor that is so characteristic of his work.

_Porgy and Bess_, quite possibly Gershwin’s greatest masterpiece, is replete with contrapuntal devices and workings, many of which are spun in a similar fashion as in the aforementioned examples. One of the opera’s most celebrated and moving songs, “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” aptly illustrates Gershwin’s skill at negotiating counterpoint as well as any. Similarly to “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?,” Gershwin commences with a single melodic idea presented in its entirety, although
in “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” it is sung only by Porgy and lasts for only twenty bars as opposed to twenty-four. After Porgy's solo, the same tune is taken over by Bess, and after twelve measures the tune diverges from Porgy's initial tune and proceeds with differing material, which leads to what appears to be a more conclusive direction. However, Gershwin restates this same section, with Bess singing the main melody and Porgy now singing a melodic countertheme. As with the aforementioned examples, the fusion of these two melodies could not seem more natural, expressing the love of the two singers. Porgy's countermelody complements the main tune, fills out the harmony, adds counterpoint, all while standing well on its own as its own tune.

*Porgy and Bess*, Act 2, Scene 1
A final example of such contrapuntal deftness regarding the combination of multiple tunes occurs in the rarely heard, posthumously published *Two Waltzes in C*. The first waltz, heard after an elaborate introductory section, is based on the song “Tonight” from the commercially unsuccessful show *Pardon My English* from 1933. The second waltz was composed later, and the two were often played together on two pianos by Gershwin and long-time lover Kay Swift, a gifted pianist and composer as well. It was edited by Ira Gershwin, adapted for solo piano by Saul Chaplin and published in 1971. In spite of its posthumous publication and arrangement, all of Gershwin’s contrapuntal ideas and techniques remain fully intact and apparent.

The first waltz is a noodling, wavy tune that traces a descending perfect fourth from F to C via a chromatic scale, and then returning to the original note of F, again, also by way of a chromatic scale. What is also interesting to note is that the melody is in the left hand in the tenor range while the accompanying figures are featured in the right hand in the soprano and alto range, at least for the first eight measures of the tune.
Example 21. Gershwin – *Two Waltzes in C* (1933), measures 51-66

As with the examples from *Let ‘Em Eat Cake, Of Thee I Sing*, and *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin presents this tune in its entirety first, as it stands perfectly well as its own section. After some intervening transition measures, Gershwin carries on to the next tune, Waltz II, and presents it in its entire 36 bars, the last several of which serve a transitioning function.
Almost in exactly the same manner as in the aforementioned examples,
Gershwin adroitly superimposes both Waltzes I and II on each other, and the effect
is striking, as the two melodies seem so well-suited to each other, with Waltz I (left
hand, tenor range) helping to harmonize the music in addition to adding
counterpoint. These two combined melodic lines fulfill every requirement of good
two-voice contrapuntal writing.

Example 23. Gershwin – Two Waltzes in C (1933), mm. 128-143

Although not without precedent, Gershwin aptly illustrates the efficacy of
time-honored contrapuntal techniques such as fugue and canon in modern idioms.
Such techniques are not at all anachronistic to modern and popular music and in
fact, enhance them. As we see from these examples, counterpoint plays a crucial role
in defining the structure, harmony, and even overall character of Gershwin's music. Counterpoint, then is truly the key to understanding the workings of Gershwin’s compositional process.
CHAPTER 2

GERSHWIN AND LINEAR HARMONY

While the term counterpoint almost invariably evokes learned forms such as fugue and canon, counterpoint, in fact, manifests itself in a number of other, albeit rather abstract, less apparent ways. One of these ways is linear harmony, which was of central importance in the workings of the music of George Gershwin. Linear harmony can be described as “melodic lines that connect chords smoothly using the significant tones with careful rhythmic placement.” In short, it refers to vertical sonorities that are predicated on the smooth, linear motion of each of the voices of the harmony as opposed to harmonies predicated on any specifically vertical progression and formed by the disjunct motion of the voices.

The examples in this chapter are essentially homophonic textures, whereas the examples in Chapter 1 are examples of polyphony in Gershwin’s music that more closely resemble the type seen in the music of Bach. In this chapter the music still adheres to an hierarchal texture in the sense that there are voices that clearly play more subordinate roles (chordal accompaniments, for instance) versus a voice(s) that plays a more obviously melodic role. These textures are far from devoid of counterpoint, as individual voices, especially in Gershwin’s music, move according to linear/contrapuntal principles. This type of counterpoint is elucidated in the work and research of Dr. Christos Tsitsaros of the University of Illinois in

17 Bert Ligon, Connecting Chords with Linear Harmony
Clear examples of linear harmony abound in Gershwin’s music. Although doubtless a tonal composer, a great deal of Gershwin’s harmonies are non-functional in that they are not triads, 7th, or 9th chords, but rather harmonies that result from the linear motion of the individual voices. However, even when primarily using triads, 7th, 9th, and 13th chords, ones that had been well-ensconced popular and modern music by Gershwin’s day, Gershwin still often is able to create progressions that move in a linear fashion. Note mm. 13-17 of Bess’s solo from the song “Bess, You Is My Woman Now”.


A mere glance at the left-hand part of this orchestral reduction is evidence that Gershwin was thinking in terms of linearity regarding the individual voices of
the chords when determining their position, resolution, and even the harmonic progressions themselves. It is also worth noting here Gershwin’s affinity for Romantic period music, as strikingly similar writing can be found in the work of Frederic Chopin. Observe the following excerpt from Chopin’s *Prelude in E Minor*, Op. 28, No. 4.

Example 25. Chopin – *Prelude in E Minor*, Op. 28, No.4

While clearly tonal and certainly conducive to functional harmonic analysis, it is apparent that the harmonies, contained in the left hand, are achieved through linear harmony, with each note of each chord being treated as though it were its own individual, independent voice. While the contrapuntal aspects of this prelude
may not be readily apparent and while some of the spellings may appear arbitrary, viewing these progressions in regards to linear harmony makes the counterpoint clear. According to Dr. Tsitsaros, Chopin’s specific enharmonic spellings more clearly illuminate the linear/contrapuntal aspects of the left hand patterns, more so than the more traditional spellings would have. Furthermore, he also asserts that the chord progressions themselves are not bound by the parameters of any conventional harmonic but are rather the result of the voice-leading of individual chord tones. He cites this specific prelude as a particularly effective example of this concept in his Advanced Keyboard Studies class. As we can see, the similarities between this and Example 24 are striking, and this brand of contrapuntal manifestation is of paramount importance in Gershwin’s writing.

In both the Gershwin and Chopin excerpts, Example 24 and 25 respectively, repeated three-note chords in eighth notes progress to the next chord via the movement of one, two, or more rarely all three voices moving in stepwise descending motion, often with dissonances and extensions being accentuated by being placed on the downbeats. An equally similar passage occurs between “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?” and “Because, Because” from Of Thee I Sing, shown in Example 26. The similarities between the left hand chord progressions of this and the Porgy and Bess and Chopin excerpts are uncanny.
What is especially noteworthy in these passages are the dissonances and their treatment, as they contribute greatly to the contrapuntal effect in spite of the relative lack of rhythmic variety in the particular use of counterpoint. First, there is the difference between the two different types of dissonances, harmonic and contrapuntal, and how they are used. In harmonic dissonance, the dissonant note is considered as a part of a dissonant chord, and is treated as such. For example, in traditional classical harmony, sevenths and ninths were considered dissonant and thus if used in a chord required resolution. On the other hand, contrapuntal dissonance is created by non-harmonic tones approached in a melodic, linear

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18 Piston, 44
fashion, which are distinguished by their disagreement with the harmony against which they sound. Harmonic dissonances can be treated as contrapuntal dissonances and very often are. For instance, many sevenths and higher extensions are regularly treated as appoggiaturas, suspensions, or passing tones. 19 The two aforementioned Gershwin excerpts exemplify this idea clearly.

Our of the various non-harmonic tones, suspensions are considered to be the most contrapuntal for several reasons. They avoid rhythmic stress where the other voices, and overall harmonic rhythm, are likely to have already given a strong beat. In suspensions, the tone held over must at the point of suspension, become a non-harmonic tone after previously being a chord tone, and then resolve by step, typically to a chord tone but certainly not always, especially in more modern idioms.20 In the case of suspensions in particular, one gets a sense of the suspension “lagging” behind the rest of the voices, thus creating a sense of differing rhythmic motion, greater independence, and thus a greater sense of counterpoint. Note the third eighth-note in the first measure of the following excerpt, on which lies, in ascending order, a Bb, C, F, and G (Example 26).

Example 27. Gershwin – “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?” – Of Thee I Sing

19 Piston, 45
20 Piston, 47
While extensions and richly dissonant tones are all part and parcel of Gershwin's harmonic language and thus not necessarily requiring resolution, there can be little doubt that the top F of the left-hand chords in the first measure of Example 27 is essentially treated as a 4-3 suspension, resolving to a C 4/3 chord. Two measures later the very same thing occurs, albeit in a different inversion.

Example 28. Gershwin – “Who Is The Lucky Girl To Be?” – *Of Thee I Sing*

Were one unclear about the nature of the G-Bb-F-C sonority on the downbeat, the strikingly analogous passage just mentioned and the subsequent resolution of the F to E to form a 7-6 suspension should clear matters. The second measure of Example 28 presents a more ambiguous case however. As it has long been established that sevenths and other extensions were no longer considered dissonant and thus not in need of resolution, the E in what amounts to an F Major seventh chord on the downbeat would appear to merely be the seventh of that chord. Major seventh chords are not exactly aberrations in Gershwin’s output, so the seventh, E, would not appear to be compelled to resolve downward. However, one can glean from the score that this ‘E’ is approached and resolved in much the same way that the two previous examples are, thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether it is a chord tone or suspension, or even serving a dual function. What is clear though is that the harmonic treatment here is thought of in linear,
contrapuntal terms.

A passage from “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” Example 29, works very similarly, and the left-hand part bears strong resemblances to the Of Thee I Sing and Chopin excerpts. Both consist of three-note chord textures moving in eighth notes, proceeding to the following chord via stepwise motion in one or two, or more rarely, all three voices.

Example 29. Gershwin – “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” – Porgy and Bess, Act 2, Scene 1

In the second half of the second measure, we have the vertical sonority of, in ascending order, G#, B, F#, and C# (the D# on beat three acts as the 5<sup>th</sup> of a G# Minor 7<sup>th</sup>). This is nearly identical to the chord of G – Bb – F – C from the previous example, only transposed up a half-step. They are treated nearly identically as well – the F# from the F# Major chord of the first measure is held over to the second half, suspended and then resolved downward to E# to create a 7-6 suspension. As in the Of Thee I Sing excerpt, Gershwin employs another ambiguous use of a major seventh – is the E# the seventh of a major seventh chord of a suspension requiring resolution? Although it is approached and resolved in the same manner as in the Of Thee I Sing excerpt, Gershwin was probably not thinking in terms of the seventh
“needing resolution.” Rather, he was almost certainly more interested in the linear motion created between the three voices of each chord and how they move (or remain stationary) to create the next chord. Interestingly enough, the right hand octave B (B also being sung in Bess’s part) seems to indicate a suspension, notwithstanding Gershwin’s modern harmonic language. In this case it is a 4-3 suspension and more interestingly by the time it resolves to the expected A#, the harmony has already forged ahead, as the E# from the previous sonority already resolved to the D#. This and the previous three Gershwin excerpts are also examples of linear intervallic progressions. Such progressions can be seen in the works of Handel, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and nearly all of the older masters. In these progressions, harmonic sequences are characterized by a specific interval pattern between a pair of voices, which can also serve to prolong a chord (move within) or move from one chord to another. In spite of such ambiguities regarding harmony and voice leading, these passages in no way disaffirm the fact that Gershwin composed them with a contrapuntal mindset. In fact, the ambiguities may substantiate it, as the occasional lack of clarity regarding harmony demonstrates that Gershwin was thinking more in terms of distinct contrapuntal motions and sequences as opposed to conforming to any predetermined, standard harmonic practices.

There exists another type of harmonic progression employed by Gershwin

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that works slightly differently, although just as much predicated on contrapuntal principles. These are progressions in which the chords, at least the primary, skeletal notes, move in a distinctly contrapuntal fashion and possess a clear, sequential logic regarding how and where they move. This type of progression is often called an “omnibus progression,” a progression in which chromatic lines move in opposite direction. Omnibus progressions have their origins in the descending chromatic bass lines spanning a fourth (known as a “lament bass”) of the passacaglias of the Baroque Era. In its fullest form, omnibus progressions often contain bass lines that span a whole octave and cover every note of the chromatic scale. Because of the fact that the outer voices in omnibus progressions mostly move in opposite directions, they are also called “chromatic wedge progressions.” The term “omnibus” comes from a Latin word meaning “all” and describes a musical progression that is unclear and contains all of the notes in the chromatic scale. Omnibus progressions are therefore clearly based on the opposing linear motion between the voices and not as concerned with creating standard harmonic progressions. They do not typically contain as much rhythmic variety as other counterpoint, but nonetheless contain contrapuntal principles.

The music of Gershwin is replete with contrapuntally-inspired omnibus progressions. To illustrate, let us begin with a brief but illuminating example from *Rhapsody in Blue.*
Example 30. Gershwin - *Rhapsody in Blue*, 4 measures preceding E Major-Theme

| F#4/2 | B6/5 | d half-dim.7 | C♯7 | C9 | B7 |

While the contrapuntal forces at work here may not be readily discernible, upon closer examination of the harmonic progression and more importantly, how Gershwin moves from one harmony to the next, the counterpoint becomes ever clearer. The harmonic progression is as follows:

While several of the adjacent harmonies make perfect sense within the parameters of traditional harmony, such as the resolution of the F♯4/2 to the expected B6/5, just as many do not, such as the B6/5 to the d half-dim.7. Clearly Gershwin was not aiming for this specific harmonic progression per se, but was rather thinking of a larger progression of F♯7 – B7 (the first and last chords of the first measure of the example), filled in with chromatic harmonies reached via contrapuntal motion. The second and third measures of the example also adhere to the same pattern.

The outer-voice counterpoint, on which the sequence is based, form the primary contrapuntal elements. They move in contrary motion (a contrapuntal characteristic and common in omnibus progressions) with the lowest note descending and the highest note ascending. Both move almost entirely by half-step except for the very last interval of the right hand, which is a major third. The lower
voice in the right-hand, serving as an alto within a four-voice texture, also adheres to a sequential pattern, moving up a minor third and down a half-step twice, followed by one more descent of a half-step. With such indisputably clear sequential logic and linear motion, it is difficult to believe that this passage was achieved any other way than by contrapuntal means.

Example 30 also provides a good example of a contrapuntal V – I progression. This passage is a prolongation of a dominant chord (B7), embellished with highly decorative harmonies predicated on linear principles. This can best be seen in the following graph which includes only the notes essential to the linear intervallic progression in the upper staff with the primary structural notes (the prolonged harmonies) in the lower staff.

Example 31 – Contrapuntal V – I graph of Example 30

While perhaps not omnibus progressions in the truest sense of the term, very similar contrapuntal inspiration appears in a number of other passages throughout the rhapsody. For instance, take the passagework contained in the beginning of the tenth measure into rehearsal number 4, three bars after the piano begins its virtuosic, cadenza-like passage.
Each vertical sonority in itself represent clear-cut seventh or ninth chords, the progression of which is as follows. $\frac{4}{2} = G \text{ half dim.} \quad \frac{4}{3} = D \frac{4}{2} = E b 9 = C \frac{4}{2}$.

Each of these chords in and of themselves represent nothing new, especially given that Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, by which point the rampant chromaticism of Wagner and other late German Romantics was decades old and the extreme, atmospheric, and often functionally non-tonal chromaticism of composers such as Scriabin, Ravel, and Debussy (not to mention Schoenberg’s then nascent 12-tone system), was becoming well-ensconced in the harmonic vocabulary of modern composers. Nevertheless, the progression of these chords is rather unorthodox, especially given that Gershwin was really a tonal composer, notwithstanding the extreme chromaticism in which he so often engaged.
As with the previous passage, this one is best understood in light of the linear motion between each of the four voices that comprise each chord. By examining the outer two voices of each chord in Example 32 (beginning with the E and D on the & of 1 in the first measure of the example) as though they form the soprano and bass of a four-voice texture, we see that there is a clearly defined contrapuntal force determining their direction, which is predicated on sequential logic. The lower voice simply descends by a half-step from D to Bb while the uppermost voice, beginning on E, creates a sequence by ascending a minor 2\textsuperscript{nd}, descending a minor 3\textsuperscript{rd}, ascending a major 2\textsuperscript{nd}, and descending a major 3\textsuperscript{rd} (x in Example 31). Gershwin repeats this passage again a perfect 4\textsuperscript{th} lower (from E – B) which also begins a half-step lower than the last chord of the previous measure, thus continuing the overall chromatic descent. Therefore, one can see that this passage and its attendant harmonic progression is determined by the clear-cut linear motion between the outer voices. The lower voice is filled in with a minor 3\textsuperscript{rd} dyad a tri-tone above each of the bass notes, which also proceed downwards by chromatic step. As with Example 30, this passage, intensely chromatic though it may be, is simply a prolongation of an E7 chord (acting as a dominant chord), which is achieved through linear means.

An even more remarkable deployment of the same type of contrapuntal unfolding of a harmonic progression occurs in the skillfully-wrought overture to Of Thee I Sing. Observe the following passage beginning on m. 42.
Aside from the low pedal point D in the bass, this passage is clearly dictated by a sequential pattern based on linear motion. Essentially a three-voice texture (the left-hand of Example 33, a piano reduction of the orchestral version, exactly doubles the right hand), each note of the each chord is treated as though it were its own separate voice, independent of the others and therefore not required to resolve to any specific note because conventional harmonic and voice-leading parameters. Once again the outer voices of each chord (beginning with the Db and Ab on the “& of 1” on the treble staff) can be viewed as the skeleton of the progression, moving essentially in contrary motion, while the middle voice doubles the lower one at a major 3rd above. The chord progression it delineates – Db Major – A Minor 6/3 – Cb Major 7 – Gb Augmented 6/3 – Bb Major – makes little sense within the confines of tonal practice. When viewed in the light of the contrapuntal motion of the skeletal voices (outer-voice counterpoint) and how they converge to form the harmony, it is perfectly clear.
As impressive as this contrapuntal display is, as well as how it helps shape the harmonic progressions, Gershwin’s efforts at thematic development and unity also shine through, for the upper voice (beginning with the Ab in Example 33 and marked x) is the beginning of the tune of the title song. Compare the similarities between the two, which are too striking to be coincidental.

Example 34. Gershwin – “Of Thee I Sing” from Overture to Of Thee I Sing

What is also worth noting is how Gershwin came to choose the precise contrapuntal motions that resulted in this particular passage. Wayne Schneider asserts that Gershwin likely composed this passage backwards. Knowing that a D Major harmony would end this passage (further strengthened by the D pedal point seen in the last measure of Example 32), Gershwin simply determined the number and spacing of the sequential patterns and the intervals between the patterns. From there he simply had to work the patterns out in reverse order.\(^22\) The pivotal harmonies are as follows.

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\text{Db – Bb – B – Ab – A – F# – G – E – F – D}
\]

While contrapuntal only in the most abstract of senses this progression nevertheless creates several linear layers and over-lappings. It can be seen as the

\(^{22}\) Schneider 1999, 43
sequential pattern (from the roots) forming a descending minor 3\textsuperscript{rd}, ascending minor 2\textsuperscript{nd}, descending minor 3\textsuperscript{rd}, descending minor 2\textsuperscript{nd}, etc., from Db all the way until D is reached. By starting on either the first or second harmony and proceeding with every other harmony henceforth, a descending whole-tone scale is created and if starting on the second (B-flat) the whole-tone scale lands on D, the goal harmony/note of the entire progression.\textsuperscript{23} Example 33 is also a prime example of a linear intervallic progression, based on the intervallic pattern of 5 – 6 – 7 – 6 – 5. This sequence of intervals can be seen in the outer-voice counterpoint of both hands of the reduction. The symmetry of this linear intervallic progression is also worth noting, for it forms a palindrome.

Gershwin does not exhaust this technique nor the material before the end. Ten measures before the Alla breve risoluto and 14 measures before the final section of the overture, in which the refrain of title song is stated in its entirety, Gershwin employs the same variation of the initial segment of the title tune and uses similar deployment regarding development and sequencing, shown in the following example.

Example 35. Gershwin – Overture to Of Thee I Sing

\textsuperscript{23} Schneider 1999, 44
Here, the outer voices of the piano reduction form the skeleton of the progression and again, move in contrary motion – further evidence of contrapuntal thinking. Gershwin even adds a third layer by including a major-third dyad in the center, which descends by a half-step. The outer voices maintain the sequence, marked x and y and each progressing up by whole step (+T2). When combined, these three individual layers, each moving in accordance with a definite contrapuntal/linear logic, form decadent but decorative and tonally non-functional harmonies, excepting of course for the beginning chords on the downbeats of every other measure (the beginning of each new sequence).

The counterpoint also results in a linear skeletal chord progression, very similar to what we saw with the previously discussed passage in Example 32, based on the same snippet of the title tune. Gershwin commences the sequence on a Bb Major triad and continuing to the downbeat of every other measure, we are presented with C Major, D Major, E Major, and F# Major triads, before the sequence is aborted. This of course delineates an ascending whole-tone scale, which is a clear parallel to the previously analyzed passage in Example 32. This also adds further credence to the notion that Gershwin was thinking linearly as opposed to vertically, not only in terms of voice-leading, but also in terms of the overall harmonic progression.

A number of passages created by a similar usage of counterpoint can be found in Gershwin's Concerto in F. Even within the opening orchestral section, during which the first themes are heard before the piano enters with the second
theme, several notable examples of this type of counterpoint occur. The passage six measures before rehearsal number 2 provides a simple yet effectively illustrative example.

Example 36. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, mm. 22-27

The contrapuntal workings are actually rather apparent at first glance, the contrary motion between the right- and left-hands of the piano reduction being clear. It is not difficult to discern that the outer voices once again act as the skeleton that binds the passage together and gives it its own governing logic. This logic is best elucidated by labeling the four-note right hand motive \( x \) and the four-note motive in the left-hand as \( y \) (both of which mirror the other). \( X \) undergoes the transformation of \(-T_3, -T_3, -T_3,\) and \(-T_3\), while \( y \) undergoes the transformation of \(-T_3, -T_3, -T_3,\) and \(-T_3\). The last statements of \( x \) and \( y \) are rhythmically altered from the others, being quarter-note triplets as opposed to eighth notes. Each group of \( x \)
and $y$ is separated by an eighth-rest and in the case of $x$, each new group begins on the same note on which the previous group left off. By observing the beginning notes of each group of $x$ and $y$, one can see that there is an underlying sequential logic dictating their direction, for the beginning notes of each group outlines a fully–diminished seventh chord – D fully-diminished is outlined by $x$ and B fully-diminished in $y$ (enharmonically the same chord). While the beginning chords of each group form a readily recognizable, tonally-functional harmony, the sonorities that follow are merely decorative and determined purely by the linear motion. The middle voices move in parallel motion with the uppermost voice of $x$ and continuously remain a perfect fourth and major seventh below said voice in order to fill out the harmony. This working-out is common in Gershwin’s music – to begin a contrapuntally-derived sequence on a tonally functional chord with the remaining sonorities being a result of the counterpoint.

Likewise, the harmonic progression that commences five measures after rehearsal number 2 is predicated on the very same variety of contrapuntal treatment – a sequence beginning on a clear-cut triad, outer voices moving in contrary motion (highest note ascending and lowest voice descending) and with a variety of tonally-nonfunctional harmonies in between. This is another example of an omnibus progression, with the bass notes descending in primarily chromatic motion and with tonally unclear progression of harmonies above.
Example 37. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, mm. 32-36

In the case of this specific passage, most of the harmonies do conform to easily analyzable chords. The progression, however, is not based on functional harmony but rather the linear motion of the voices. Observe a very similarly constructed passage in the piano at rehearsal number 9.

Example 38. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, rehearsal number 9
As with numerous other examples, stepwise motion prevails and again, contrary motion between the uppermost and lowest pitches reigns supreme. Here, it forms a quasi-sequential pattern with the first chord beginning a sequence on a C major triad and the ending chords of the sequences being triads as well, as though Gershwin was aware of these pivotal moments and was deliberately trying to accentuate them with clearer harmonies.

A very similar passage in which confounding harmonies are created due to contrapuntal motion occur in the *I Got Rhythm Variations*. Begun in late 1933 and completed in January, 1934, the *I Got Rhythm Variations* was composed for a tour with the Leo Reisman Orchestra and was regrettably one of Gershwin’s least successful concert works (he ultimately lost money on the tour, paying additional expenses out-of-pocket).24 The work betrays the influence of his then teacher Joseph Schillinger perhaps more than any other work of his, and is replete with contrapuntal finesse, amongst many other formidable compositional techniques regarding development and structure.

In spite of the deployment of new techniques, there are a number of passages in which the harmony is still determined by counterpoint, and thus have their precedent from works Gershwin wrote before he even met Schillinger. For instance, take the passage from mm. 19-20 in the orchestra part (piano reduction shown).

24 Ewen 1986, 215
Example 39. Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations* (1934), mm. 19-20

The passage is very much akin to the previous examples in several ways. The outer voices form the skeleton, move primarily in contrary motion, and adhere to a definite sequential pattern, which in turn forms the ultimately decorative harmonies. The uppermost voice can be heard in four groups of four, each group of four being labeled x. Each group is composed of four ascending semitones outlining a minor 3rd, and then descending a perfect 5th to repeat the process again. The beginning note of each x descends a major 3rd and outlines an F augmented triad. The transformations of x are -T4, -T4, -T4.

The lowermost voice of the passage begins on Db and simply forms a descending chromatic scale, and thus form the counterpoint against the uppermost voice. The latter is reinforced by an additional voice a perfect 4th below, and thus the two uppermost voices form a series of parallel 4ths, while the lowermost voice is reinforced by a tritone above. The beginning sonority, Db – G – C - F is based on quartal harmony and can be seen as a slight variation on the previous sonority in the upper voices, in which the D was natural and thus formed a series of vertical perfect 4th’s and in turn the four notes of the pentatonic scale that form the basis of the melody.
Another similar passage also occurs in the introduction form mm. 29-31, in which the outer voices once again form the pivotal pitches and move in contrary motion, with the upper voice ascending and the lower voice descending. They move primarily by step and are completely diatonic with the upper voice being strengthened by notes a 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 5\textsuperscript{th} below, thus forming a triad. Although occasionally functional harmonies can be detected, there is little arguing that this passage was conceived based on contrapuntal motion between the voices.

Example 40. Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations*, (1934), mm. 29-31

Also observe the passage nine measures into rehearsal number 3 (Example 40). Although superficially appearing quite different, these two examples are in fact constructed in very similar manners. That is, they are both composed according to outer-voice counterpoint, with each voice moving in contrary motion. The lower part of the reduction clearly shows this technique, but the upper part reveals a new element, moving in parallel motion with the lower staff of the lower piano part a tritone away and in contrary motion with the upper staff of the lower part.
Once again there is contrary motion between the outer voices with filler harmonies in between. The upper three notes of the right-hand (lower piano part of the reduction) for the upper three notes of what is perhaps the most common voicing of a C dominant 13th (Bb – E - A) and proceed in parallel motion, while the left hand begins on G-flat (doubled at the octave) and descends chromatically to land on C. This may very well be another passage that Gershwin composed “backwards.” He likely knew that he wanted to end on a C dominant 7th chord two measures after the beginning of this passage. The previous chord (second measure of Example 40) results in a C dominant 7 #9 as a result of the contrapuntal motion from the previous chords, which in turns resolves smoothly to the unequivocal C dominant 7th chord.

Gershwin also uses motivically-derived material to create such passages of linearly-driven harmony. Take the following passage from the Cuban Overture from
1932, which is constructed very similarly to the excerpt in Example 38.

Example 42. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture* (1932), mm. 83-88

Gershwin employs a sequence consisting of a rising, chromatically ascending four-note figure, labeled $x$ in Example 41. Beginning exclusively in quarter notes, Gershwin introduces a half note on the second note of $x$, thus rhythmically displacing the sequence, which follows the transformation of -T4, -T4, -T4, -T4 (outlining an augmented triad). The motive of a tetrachord realized as an ascending stepwise pattern is especially prevalent, and although the four-note, rising chromatic figure that comprises $x$ does not spell a tetrachord or perfect 4th, the motives are similar enough in contour and thus possess a loose, abstract connection.

Here the harmonic progression is again indisputably driven by the counterpoint. Each four-note rising chromatic figure begins with a dominant 7th b9 b5 chord. The lower voices (left-hand of the second piano part in the reduction) contain the root, 3rd, and 7th while the lower voice of the right-hand part contains the flat ninth. As the left-hand voices and lower voice of the right-hand move in parallel motion, each of the vertical sonorities that result can be viewed as a variant of a dominant 7th b9. The uppermost voice thus determines the variant, as it
moves in contrary motion against the remaining voices. The resulting chords are thus C7 b9 b5 - B7 b9 #5 - Bb7 b9 - A7 b9. As with many of the other related examples, thus progression was likely composed “backward” – Gershwin almost certainly was aware of the harmonic destination and devised a contrapuntally-based sequence beginning on a particular harmony to generate a passage that would logically lead to the end in an allotted number of beats. Also observe the opening measures of the Two Waltzes in C.

Example 43. Gershwin – Two Waltzes in C (1933), mm. 1-8

After the initial B half-diminished 7th chord, Gershwin engages in a similar process as the example from Rhapsody in Blue just mentioned. Were one to attempt a harmonic analysis using traditional Roman numeral symbols of the eighth-note chords that follow, one would quickly be confounded. Although each
individual eighth-note chord can be given a specific name, there are a number of interpretive possibilities for each one. Upon closer inspection of the linear of the linear motion that determines the motion of the right and left-hand parts, Gershwin’s harmonic choices become clearer. The right-hand simply moves in accordance with the melody of ‘Waltz I’ (descending and then ascending chromatic motion) filled in with augmented triads underneath. The left-hand begins in ascending chromatic motion, which also moves in contrary motion to the right hand, and then proceeds in descending motion outlining a fully-diminished seventh chord.

As with the *Rhapsody in Blue* excerpt, the only way to truly understand this passage and how it works is through counterpoint. As with the previous example, the outer voices, doubles at the octaves, unquestionably form the skeleton. The upper voice, in the right hand, winds up being the opening melody of “Waltz I,” so its thematic significance cannot be disputed. The lower voice, in the left hand, also follows a definite linear pattern The octave A#, possibly an outgrowth of the A of the previous chord, reaches up to C# via chromatic stepwise motion and then proceeds downward by delineating a C# fully diminished 7th chord. This and the melody notes heard in the right hand are in contrary motion with each other, which is a hallmark of contrapuntal writing. Gershwin simply fills in the middle of the right-hand octaves with major thirds to make each one an augmented triad. When viewed in conjunction with the left-hand pitches, we have what is harmonically, both in terms of individual sonority and progression, an ambiguous passage, but when viewed in terms of counterpoint, we have a passage that is recognizable.
CHAPTER 3

Gershwin’s Accompaniments

It hardly seems appropriate to label Gershwin’s accompaniments as such, for they are so much more. They are intricate, well-wrought, relevant, and organic components of the musical fabric. Practically never does Gershwin merely delegate routine, filigree passagework to his accompaniments. Although often inspired by the commonly used accompanying patterns of his day, notably the octave in the bass (or tenth or single note) followed by a chord in the tenor range, Gershwin never “cuts and pastes” what can easily sound like stylistic clichés into his works. Although certainly not devoid of sound voice-leading and contrapuntal principles, these types of accompanying patterns can easily sound tiresome and overused.

Many classic rags and stride pieces, the type of music with which Gershwin grew up and were ultimately amongst his first musical encounters and inspirations, use the “octave-chord” type of left-hand accompaniment, often with little or no contrapuntal interest whatsoever. For instance, *Louisiana Rag*, published in 1897 and one of the very first rags to appear in print, is a good example. As seen in Example 38, it is clear that counterpoint is not even of secondary importance, for the left-hand plays a completely subordinate role with little interplay of “disagreement” with the right-hand. Furthermore, it is also evident that it is thoroughly bound by the parameters of conventional harmony and that the harmonies determine the directions the left-hand, and for that matter, the right-hand as well.
Although less contrapuntally inspired than the music of Gershwin, the music of the great ragtime composer Scott Joplin nevertheless displays a considerable amount of linear thinking and voice-leading. In Example 45, observe the teasing glimpses of countermelodies and meticulous attention to voice-leading from Joplin's seminal and immensely successful *Maple Leaf Rag*.

Example 45. Scott Joplin – *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899)
While the type of accompaniments seen in *Maple Leaf Rag* are certainly present in Gershwin’s music, more typical of his style of accompaniments are chromatically weaving lines in the tenor range, as can be seen in a very early publication of his – *Rialto Ripples* of 1916, when he was only eighteen years old. While not exactly polyphonically complex, it nevertheless reveals Gershwin’s sense of line and counterpoint, even in accompanying left-hand patterns.

Example 46. Gershwin and Will Donaldson – *Rialto Ripples* (1916), mm. 5-8

In Example 47, observe the more hidden ascending, stepwise line on beats 1 and 3 (accented notes) in the left-hand of the B section of the rag. Again, not an intricately polyphonic passage, but one that illustrates Gershwin’s polyphonic thinking in his works and that he nearly always imbued a sense of line in almost every part of what he wrote.
A similar usage of chromatically ascending lines as a counterpoint to the melody can be seen in Example 47, the third of his *Three Preludes* from 1927. In the B section of this ternary form, a long chromatic ascending line can be heard in the tenor line that spans a minor 10th, while the alto voice imitates the melody of the upper voices.

While certainly not imitative in a fugal or canonic sense, the alto voice does add an increased sense of opposition, as it creates differing rhythmic patterns and additional syncopation. When combined with the left-hand, one can discern several lines all in counterpoint with each other. It is worth noting that very similar, stepwise-moving chromatic passages used as counterpoint can be heard in the piano writing of *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*, as well as Gershwin’s improvisations.
Even more typical of Gershwin's accompaniments are groupings of parallel chords that move, often chromatically, in counterpoint to the main melody. This is exemplified in the piano arrangement of “Clap Yo’ Hands”. While possible to analyze the first measure as G7 – Ab9 – Ab 9 – Bb, this measure, and the one that follows, makes much more sense when viewed in terms of the contrapuntal motion of the accompanying layers. In this light, it seems likely that the goal harmony of the first and second measures are the chords that occur on beats 4, which in turn make the overall progression become I-V (Bb – F), with the chords on beats 1-3 leading up to their respective goal harmony linearly. Gershwin also counters the ascending chords of the first two measures with chords that not only differ rhythmically, but also the proceed in descending stepwise motion, as can be seen in Example 4.

Example 49. Gershwin – “Clap Yo’ Hands” (1926), mm. 1-4

![Example 49](image)

One of the most striking examples of Gershwin’s counterpoint in his solo piano music is his arrangements of the song “Do It Again”, from the Gershwin Songbook of 1932. The song itself is an early yet superb effort from 1922, and thus Precedes the rhapsody by two years. The first eight measures are shown below.
This baleful melody begins statically on a sustained A and at the end of the second measure begins a stepwise descent, landing on D on the downbeat of the third measure. Melodies consisting of long or repeated notes followed by stepwise motion are common in Gershwin’s writing, and this is a notable example. The sustained A creates tension and the “answering” stepwise descent creates a sense of relief. In this case it also creates a sense of tonal ambiguity, as the tune outlines a dominant to tonic progression in D Minor. However, the key of F Major is affirmed in this arrangement by the sustained F in the bass, although the F6 chords contribute to the overall languid feeling of the song.

Regarding the counterpoint, one hardly seems to notice it as every component is so natural, as is almost always the case with Gershwin’s contrapuntal writing. Against the melody, heard in the upper voice of the right-hand, are blocked chords and dyads in the lower voices of the right-hand. This type of accompanying
pattern can hardly be said to be aberrant in Gershwin’s piano writing and in popular piano music of the time in general. While it is an integral part of the piece, offering rhythmic motion and harmonic support, it cannot be said to contain a great deal of contrapuntal interest.

It is the left-hand that contains the truly contrapuntal lines. While Gershwin could have easily continued with the blocked quarter-note chords in the left-hand, or even an octave-chord type of accompaniment, this would have begun to sound banal very quickly and listeners would likely tune out. Instead, Gershwin weaves an embroidered countermelody in the left-hand, first by accentuating the dominant C by way of accented upper and lower neighbor tones and then leaps up an octave to middle C and begins a chromatic descent. The G# on the second half of the second measure resolves to A in the third measure and begins a brief, canon-like imitation of the melodic descent heard in the right-hand a measure before.

The counterpoint temporarily abates from mm. 4-6 in favor of more conventional accompaniments. The melody itself, still heard in the upper voices of the right-hand and filled in with chord tones, has become more rhythmically active and complex, being in quarter note triplets. Therefore, excessive counterpoint here would have greatly detracted from the tune and likely sounded forced or artificial.

Gershwin continues the counterpoint in m. 7 with another canon-like imitation in the tenor range of the descending right-hand melody. Observe too the contrapuntally-inspired accompanying figures appearing in mm. 9-10. Viewed as the 7th of a half diminished 7th chord, the accented notes on the second half of each
beat have the effect of the contrapuntal dissonance of an appoggiatura, resolving to a half-step below and thus creating the effect of a fully diminished 7th chord. These notes further emphasize the contrapuntal nature of the passage, not only in the rhythmic opposition they create, but also in the contrary and oblique motion created between the outer voices. Gershwin continues the usage of linearly driven non-harmonic tones in the tenor range in m. 11 with accented passing and neighbor tones. Also observe the countermelodic nature of the inner voices in the right-hand in mm. 13-14 against the sustained A and F in the upper voice, which comprise the main melody.

Example 51. Gershwin – “Do It Again”, mm. 9-16

Upon the return of the main melody in m. 17, Gershwin adds not only harmonic variety but also further contrapuntal interest, which can be seen below in Example 52. In place of a sustained A for six beats as we heard at the beginning,
Gershwin plays the A an octave higher and for only one beat. This A is then proceeded by chromatically ascending first-inversion triads, beginning with a D Major triad on beat two of m. 17 until landing on the G of the third beat of m. 18, which is where the main melody recommences. This chromatically rising series of chords is a pointed contrast to the countermelody heard in the left-hand, which is the same as the one heard in the beginning of the work. The parallel first-inversion chords are merely a contrapuntal elaboration of a I chord.

Example 52. Gershwin – “Do It Again”, mm. 17-20

Also note the contrary motion created in the penultimate measure. Gershwin creates greater interest with the overused dominant-tonic progression (heard from the last chord of m. 30 to the first chord of m. 31) by elaborating the tonic chord with contrapuntally based progression which results in a decorative harmonies which, as was the case in Example 50, are elaboration of a I chord. Using the same first-inversion triads in the right-hand as in the above passage, Gershwin leads to the necessary tonic triad via a DM-EbM-EM-FM progression against which is heard the descending, stepwise melody head in m. 2, moving from A to D, which in turn resolves by step to C. There is also another canon-like imitative passage: the left-hand in the penultimate measure is imitative of the right-hand octave melody in the
previous measure, creating the fleeting impression of a canon at the sixth.

Example 53. Gershwin – “Do It Again”, mm. 29-32

Another example from the Gershwin Songbook that displays Gershwin's penchant for creating accompanying patterns of a countermelodic nature can be seen in “Somebody Loves Me”. The melody occurs in the tenor voice and above it he weaves an elaborate countermelody. The main melody of the song, in the tenor voice, consists of half and quarter notes ascending stepwise. The countermelody, being mostly in descending triplets, makes the counterpoint that much more apparent and effective. The syncopation in the countermelody in the second measure also provides a rhythmic contrast that heightens the contrapuntal effect.

Example 54. Gershwin – “Somebody Loves Me” (1924), mm. 1-3
Although Gershwin rarely employs the “octave-bass” pattern for lengthy periods at once, the pattern nevertheless is an important part of Gershwin’s pianistic compositional tools. Even when using this all too common pattern, he is able to make it fresh and original, never losing his sense of linear motion and counterpoint. His solo piano arrangement of the 1924 song “Fascinating Rhythm” (from the Gershwin Songbook) aptly illustrates this.

Example 55. Gershwin – “Fascinating Rhythm”, mm. 11-14

The left-hand in mm. 11-13 demonstrates Gershwin’s ever-present sense of line even when he utilizes a pattern that is all too often bereft of any discernible counterpoint. One can even trace two linearly inspired progressions – one in the lowest note (the single notes of the “octave-chord” pattern) and in the upper notes of the tenor-range chords. Both move with a distinctly linearly-based logic and with a clear sense of voice leading.

Measures 19-26 demonstrates this principle, but in a slightly different way. Gershwin reverses the “octave-chord” pattern and moves from a tenor-range chord to a single-note pedal point (Bb).
Although theoretically possible to proffer a functional harmonic analysis, this passage and its attendant harmonies make a great deal more sense when seen in light of the counterpoint, which in this case is the right-hand melody set against the chromatically descending chords of the left-hand. This also may very well be another passage composed “backwards.” The pedal Bb’s in the first four measures of the example and the pedal Eb’s in the last four would seem to indicate a prolonged Bb-Eb progression. It would also appear that the D-Ab-C on the third beats of the second and fourth measures of the example would be the goal harmony, for when heard in conjunction with the pedal Bb’s, it creates a Bb9 chord, which is lead to linearly by descending chromatic motion. The same can be said for the G-Db-F chord heard in the left-hand on the third beat of mm. 6 and 8 of the example. They create an Eb9 when heard in conjunction with the pedal Eb’s, which are also lead to by descending chromatic motion.
Also from the *Gershwin Songbook*, the arrangement of the song "Liza" (originally form the 1929 musical *Show Girl*) demonstrates a great deal of contrapuntal sophistication. Here Gershwin seems not only fully cognizant of the contrapuntal aspects of the song, he actually seems to accentuate them with relish, thus corroborating the notion of this being a contrapuntally inspired piece. Already from the opening 4 measures, the counterpoint and overall linear inspiration are apparent.

Example 57. Gershwin – “Liza” (1929), mm. 1-5

In this arrangement, the longest and most pianistically elaborate of the eighteen arrangements found in the *Gershwin Songbook*, there are several elements of the accompaniment that act as contrapuntally inspired layers. The left-hand is in essence a variation of the “octave-chord” pattern observed earlier, seen so often in ragtime and stride piano. Here it is primarily a tenth-chord pattern, with the upper note of each tenth preceding the lower note of the tenth by an eighth note.
The left-hand tenths clearly delineate the ascending tenths heard in the original piano-vocal score, but this idea is also reinforced in the left-hand chords, which also progress in a chromatically ascending pattern, thus strongly paralleling the tenths.\textsuperscript{25}

The contrapuntal techniques do not end here however, for embedded in the right-hand, in between the octave half notes that form the main melody is another layer. Not only do the middle notes of the right-hand form a clear, linearly inspired accompanying figure, they also form on each strong beat (beats 1 and 3) a series of contrapuntal dissonances – appoggiaturas and the most contrapuntal of non-harmonic tones, suspensions.\textsuperscript{26}

Beginning at m. 17, the B section of what is a 32-bar, AABA form, a new tune is introduced, and with it, another contrapuntally wrought accompanying figure. While not exactly a countermelody, it is seems clear that is was composed and thought of in a linear fashion.

Example 58. Gershwin – “Liza”, mm. 17-20

As can be seen in Example 57, Gershwin begins a reprisal of the entire 32-bar form at m. 33, with a number of variations. These variations seem to only confirm

\textsuperscript{25} Gilbert 1995, 131
\textsuperscript{26} Piston, 45
the contrapuntal aspects and voice leading discussed earlier. The right-hand melody, this time filled in with thick chords, is again in direct counterpoint to the left-hand, which ascends chromatically and stepwise. Gershwin even emphasizes the aforementioned voice-crossings with pianistically challenging flourishes. The right-hand takes over what would be the “chord” part of the left-hand accompaniment in the tenor range and emphasizes the voice-crossings through the sixteenth notes which are resolved by the left-hand.

Example 59. Gershwin – “Liza”, mm. 33 – 35

The piano writing at the beginning of the “Liza” arrangement closely parallels a passage in Gershwin’s most famous work, *Rhapsody in Blue*. In the following passage, the piano solo beginning at rehearsal number 32 takes over the melody in the right-hand, in whole notes reminiscent of the opening three ascending notes of the lush E-Major theme.
This whole note melody is in counterpoint with a theme that is derivative of the last three ascending half steps of the E Major theme. Here, the middle voice, doubled in the left-hand, is an inverted rhythmic alteration of the last three ascending half steps of the E Major theme.

Also in *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin uses linearly conceived accompanying patterns, notably in the solo piano part. Nine measures into rehearsal A, immediately after the piano’s first virtuosic cadenza, the solo piano states the main melody of the work for the first time, which was first heard in the clarinet at the very beginning. Against it, Gershwin uses a series of chromatically descending steps in the alto voice (lower voice of the right-hand) while the tenor voice (upper voice of the left-hand) plays a series of ascending, primarily chromatic steps in contrary motion to the alto. These both are in counterpoint to the melody and are also derivative of the three-note “Tag” motive discussed earlier.\(^\text{27}\) The sense of counterpoint created through contrary motion can be seen throughout the remainder of the example.

\(^{27}\) David Schiff, *Gershwin – Rhapsody in Blue* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 19
In the second two measures of this excerpt, notice how although in the same rhythmic values there is nonetheless counterpoint by way of contrary motion between the hands. Some of the chord progressions in these two measures can really only be understood when viewed in terms of the contrapuntal motion between the hands, and how the hands intersect to form different sonorities that are contrapuntally based. Similarly, Gershwin uses stepwise and contrary motion to create contrapuntally based passagework in mm. 8-14 of rehearsal number 5.
Even when Gershwin uses more typically accompanying patterns, such as steady, repeated chords, linearity is still at work. Composers have used linearity to create smooth harmonic progressions for centuries. The triad, the primary building block of Western harmony, can be stated in three different positions, and while root position is the strongest, passages consisting exclusively of root position chords in accompanying passages can quickly sound jerky and clumsy, and are essentially devoid of any contrapuntal or linear interest. Much of the ragtime and stride piano music of Gershwin’s day excessively use root position chords in the bass, and while certainly not disagreeable, especially in the hands of such skilled composers as Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, James P. Johnson, and Fats Waller, they nevertheless have little basis in linearity and almost exclusively provide rhythmic and harmonic support.

While we certainly do see the “octave-chord” accompaniment in Gershwin’s music, his harmonic progressions and predicated much more on linear motion and are thus of much greater contrapuntal interest. Take, for example, the opening piano solo from the *Concerto in F*.

Example 63. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, piano entrance
The sustained double whole notes in the bass clearly form the harmonic basis and move entirely in descending stepwise motion (whole-half-whole steps). This motion, which creates the harmonic foundation, is clearly linearly conceived and provides additional counterpoint to the melody, as well as to the countertheme in the lower voice of the tenor (lower notes of the quarter notes in the left-hand). These bass notes also create parallel motion with the melody notes, resulting in the overall progression of the intervals M7-M7-M9-M9. It must be remembered that by the time Gershwin composed the concerto in 1925, such intervals were long a part of the tonal vocabulary and thus not considered in need of resolution. Nevertheless, they create an intriguing yet ambiguous series of chord progressions, although still creating a perfectly satisfying sense of direction. For instance, the last two measures in the excerpt shown (Example 63) can just as easily be considered an Ab Major chord with an added sixth or an F Minor triad in first inversion.\[28\]

Similarly, rehearsal number 3 of the second movement provides an example of a harmonic foundation being predicated on linear principles of voice leading. However, unlike the segment just discussed in Example 62, here the chord

\[28\] Gilbert 1984, 424
progressions are much more conventional and unequivocal. Likewise, Gershwin uses the linear motion of the harmonic basis as a way of modulating. In the sixth measure of the following excerpt (Example 64) he composes an Ab 7 chord for the duration of the measure. Already being clearly in Db Major, one naturally expects the bass to move down a fifth or up a fourth to Db and along with it, a Db Major chord. Instead, the linear motion of the bass continues upward to an unexpected A natural, which in turn becomes the third of a first-inversion FM triad, which also turns out to be the key of the modulation.

Example 64. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement, piano entrance
Similarly, the slower A Major theme from the Second Rhapsody follows very much the same principles of linearity regarding harmonic progressions. The melody is clearly stated in the upper voices, while against it, the harmonies move in a contrapuntally-based, ascending stepwise motion. Although each chord progression in itself is conducive to functional harmonic analysis, the motion of one chord to the next is doubtless constructed according to linear principles.

Example 65. Gershwin – Second Rhapsody, rehearsal number 21
Also similar in spirit, observe the ascending stepwise motion of the bass notes in the song “Liza” from the *Songbook* of 1932.

Example 66. Gershwin – “Liza” from *Songbook*, mm. 1-5

Beginning on the expected tonic in root position (DbM), Gershwin creates a series of chord progressions that not only create counterpoint against the main melody but that also create a thoroughly smooth, linear progression. It becomes apparent from these example that the sense of line is practically never lost anywhere in Gershwin’s music.
CHAPTER 4

Counterpoint Through Thematic Development

It has already been made clear that Gershwin’s accompanying configurations posses strong contrapuntal inclinations, especially when viewed in comparison with the prevailing “octave-chord” pattern of contemporary ragtime, stride, and popular songs. Gershwin was in fact intensely concerned with creating unified and organic wholes with his compositions. Creating unity through thematic development is an especially prevalent feature in his music, and many of his contrapuntal layers are generated through thematic development.

As early as 1924, when Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue*, thematic development was already an integral part of Gershwin’s compositional process. Such intricate, sophisticated writing is certainly present in *Rhapsody in Blue*, in spite of fallacious claims that it is a formless, cut-and-paste composition, even by such esteemed musicians as Leonard Bernstein.29 The famous E-Major theme illustrates this well.

This theme is first heard in the orchestra at rehearsal number 28. As can be seen in Example 66 below, we are presented with three ascending half-steps in double whole-notes three measures into the theme. This is also where the horns present the countermelody (middle/alto voice of right hand in Example 62). This countermelody fits the melody above it so well that it is difficult to believe that it is in fact a development of the three ascending half-steps against which they’re played.

29 Schiff, 15
As with the previously mentioned solo piano passage in which the same counter-melody is used, the horns present a tune that is in melodic inversion of the three ascending half-steps and in a rhythmic variation.\footnote{Schiff, 20}

Example 67. Gershwin – *Rhapsody in Blue*, rehearsal number 28 (E-Major theme)

Gershwin’s propensity for extensive thematic manipulation is evident elsewhere, and the countermelody of the E-Major theme is far from exhausted. As a matter of fact, it can be heard in from the very first piano entrance. With the piano entrance we are presented with what is known as the “Tag” theme or “The Man I Love” theme, due to its resemblance to the latter. Directly underneath this theme, in the right-hand, is a variation of the chromatically ascending notes of the E-Major theme in counterpoint to the “Tag” theme.
Incidentally, the “Tag” theme appears in many different guises throughout the rhapsody, some overt and some covert. It occurs in re-orderings, inversions, retrogrades, and intervallic diminutions. Even the counterpoint heard against the “Tag” theme of the first piano entrance can be heard as a variant of the “Tag” theme itself. Once aware of the “Tag” theme and all of its variants, it becomes apparent that the “Tag” theme permeates nearly every aspect of the rhapsody in some way, shape, or form.31

An especially remarkable example occurs at rehearsal number 34. Here Gershwin takes the melody of the piano entrance at m. 19 and uses it as a launching pad for the piano’s virtuosic passagework beginning at rehearsal number 34. Although seeming like flashy, whirlwind of sound, the theme is indeed slyly embedded within it, for it is outlined between the repeated C-sharps and the upper notes of each chord in the right-hand, thus delineating the line C♯-D-C♯-E. In the orchestra part (trombones – indicated in the left-hand of the second piano of the

31 Schiff, 21
reduction) is a diminution of the E-Major theme.

Example 69. Gershwin – *Rhapsody in Blue*, rehearsal number 34, orchestra entrance

As can be easily gleaned from these examples, Gershwin’s accompaniments almost invariably possess at least some contrapuntal inspiration as well as a sense of thematic development and unity. As especially illuminative example cam be seen in the opening piano solo of the *Concerto in F* from 1925. The melody, or second theme (Example 69) of the first movement, is in the upper voice of the right-hand, as is to be expected more often than not. The accompanying figures, in the tenor range of the left-hand (the lower of the double notes), form a distinctly linear type of accompaniment. While not exactly a countermelody, they are certainly linearly inspired, and as it turns out, happen to be a variation of an especially prevalent motive that aids in unifying the movement. The accompanying notes in question, a chromatically ascending group of three notes (Ab – A – Bb) that form a type of hemiola, are in fact a variation of the group that follows in Example 66.
The connection between the accompanying counter-theme heard in the lower voice of the tenor line to the three-note, hemiola group that follows later becomes clear upon subsequent hearings and analysis. This connection and others like it work to unify the piece as a whole. Observe the following measure that contains this crucial segment, marked x in the following example.

Example 71. Gershwin – Concerto in F, 1st Movement – 3-note motivic cell

This portion of the melody may be seen as being derived from an even more basic thematic cell heard just one measure earlier – another 3-note figure likewise
moving in ascending stepwise motion and by longer rhythmic values.

Example 72. Gershwin – *Concerto in F, 1st Movement*

Gershwin not only has more to say with this particular theme, but also has another tune to set against it. With the main melody (second theme) now reinforced in octaves in the right-hand and the 3-note counter-motive doubly reinforced in octaves in the left-hand, Gershwin adds to it yet another theme, which is melodic enough to be considered a true countermelody. These three melodies/motives are combined again, not only at rehearsal 11, but also at rehearsal number 29, which essentially functions as a recapitulation in this loose sonata-form movement. This example clearly shows that Gershwin rarely employed overused accompanying patterns in his solo piano writing. Rather, he expended much thought and care into his accompanying figures, which as we can see, are rarely mere accompaniments, but full countermelodies and motives contrapuntally conceived.
Beginning immediately after the piano’s first cadenza at the Allegro, Gershwin spotlights the 3-note motive for the first time, although its occurrence here isn’t exactly new. A simple, ascending, stepwise motive of a mere three notes, this motive turns out to be a crucial element in unifying the work, as well as in regards to the work’s counterpoint. This motive also generates the rhythmically altered, hemiola version that follows.

The occurrence of this motive at the Allegro immediately following the first piano cadenza is slyly and subtly used, as contrapuntal accompaniments in the orchestral introduction. The melody at rehearsal number 2, for instance, is accompanied by this same 3-note motive, descending in augmentation. Gershwin repeats this same melody contrapuntally two measures later in sequence, a minor 3rd higher, as can be seen from the following excerpt (Example 69).
At rehearsal number 3, however, is an even more elaborate variation of this jaunty, dotted-rhythm melody and its accompanying counterpoint. The entire texture can be viewed as 4-part counterpoint, with the lower three voices acting as the accompanying figures, but each presenting variation of the 3-note motive in question. The upper voice of this accompaniment, in the English horns and represented by the upper voice in the first piano part of the orchestral reduction, can be heard as a rhythmically and chromatically altered version of the motive heard at the *Allegro* following the piano cadenza. The middle voice of the first piano part (upper voice of left-hand, Example 74) is a rhythmically and melodically altered version of this motive as well, for Gershwin adds the extra F, a tritone below the B that commences each 3-note group. Finally, the lowest two voices, in the bassoons, contain a rhythmically altered inversion of the 3-note motive as well. These three layers, an ingenious display of contrapuntal acumen and thematic development and unity, are all set against the dotted-rhythmic melody heard earlier, which also
becomes an integral part in unifying the movement as a whole.

Example 75. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, mm. 39-41

Two measures into rehearsal number 3, Gershwin adds an ascending, chromatic scale in triplets, which form a clear counterpoint against the second half of the dotted-rhythm melody. Gershwin proceeds with this same material sequentially as he did in the analogous passage from rehearsal number 2, transposing everything up a minor 3rd. Five measures into rehearsal 3, he continues in the same, primarily chromatic ascending fashion as in the passage beginning 5 measures after rehearsal 2, but this time with even more contrapuntal interest, particularly in regards to rhythm. The contrapuntally inspired harmonic progressions, are the same.

Gershwin has far from exhausted his imagination regarding how to further manipulate the 3-note motive in terms of development and counterpoint. Five measures into rehearsal number 14, Gershwin introduces a new theme that it is
derived from the same 3-note motive discussed earlier.

Example 76. Gershwin – *Concerto in F, 1st Movement*, mm. 5-12 of rehearsal 14

Begun on two repeating C’s, the 3-note stepwise motion becomes clear by the second half of the measure, with the inverted motive appearing in the upper voices (E-flat – D- C). The presentation of this motive is in fact twofold, for the lower voice, following the same rhythm and offering harmonic support, states the original ascending motive, but chromatically alerted (G – G#– A). This also reveals a
refined sense of voice leading, as the two voices, each presenting a version of the 3-note motive, move stepwise and in contrary motion. Not only that, the diminished fifth created by the G# and D resolve traditionally to a minor 3rd on A and C. Gershwin continues this descending 3-note motive and presents it on D and C, respectively, each combined with the ascending version of it in the lower voice, as counterpoint and harmonic support.

Nine measures into rehearsal number 14, Gershwin combines this same twofold, 3-note figure, contrapuntally conceived in and of itself, with the dotted-rhythm melody heard from the introduction. In fact, this can be viewed as the first full presentation of the dotted-rhythm melody, and the first full presentation of the 3-note melody being discussed can be viewed as being first heard in full at the Allegro. The fragments of motives heard in the introduction can thus be seen as a “backwards” development – the developmental fragments which comprise larger sections are heard before those sections are.

At the Poco meno, sixteen measures into rehearsal number 25, Gershwin introduces a new theme – a perky, jaunty tune in the solo piano, with a left-hand pattern not too dissimilar to the “octave-chord” left-hand configuration we see so often in the ragtime and stride piano music of Gershwin’s day. However, in spite of being in 2/4, perhaps the most common time signature in classic ragtime music, Gershwin still does not employ the “octave-chord” pattern only on the eighth notes, but rather presents us with a more syncopated, jazzier version of this pattern.
Then at rehearsal number 26, the piano part, unchanged from that of the previous section until 15 measures into rehearsal 26, takes on a more subordinate role as an accompanying figure to the orchestra's theme – the same lush, grandiose E-Major theme heard from rehearsal numbers 20-22, this time transformed by way of rhythmic diminution and being transposed to Db Major, thus giving this theme an entirely different character. This affords yet another exemplary instance of Gershwin taking a distinct, fully independent theme and setting it contrapuntally against another theme, thus relegating the former to a less highlighted yet equally important role.
The piano takes over the spotlight again at rehearsal number 29 with the same melody based on the 3-note motive, first heard at ten measures before rehearsal number 8 (Allegro), and this time in rhythmic diminution. Set against it in counterpoint, the orchestra contains the aforementioned theme originally heard in the piano at rehearsal number 9, contrapuntal in itself, with the familiar expanding contrary motion, which in turn determines the harmonic progression. This is one of the many examples of Gershwin superimposing different themes that, while they stand perfectly well on their own as independent melodies, they also coalesce seamlessly when combined.

Example 79. Gershwin – Concerto in F, 1st Movement, rehearsal number 31

Likewise, observe the passage beginning fifteen measures into rehearsal number 31. Gershwin now has the orchestra take over the 3-note theme (this time in rhythmic augmentation) with a variant of the dotted-rhythm motive in the piano. While this superimposition of melodic material does not yield the array of decorative harmonies, remaining rather static over an Eb 7th, the fact that
Gershwin was thinking in terms of contrapuntal layers is evident.

Example 80. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, mm. 15-16 of rehearsal 31

Even in the coda, the contrapuntal layers do not abate. The coda, beginning at rehearsal number 34, once again is based on several contrapuntal layers, all of which are motivically linked to previously heard themes. The piano is in the forefront, with its right-hand taking the spotlight with a variant (although a very similar one) on the melody heard in the orchestra five bars into rehearsal number 14, itself constructed from the near ubiquitous 3-note motive heard in some way, shape, or form throughout almost the entire movement. The accompaniment, in the soloist’s left-hand, is clearly the descending 3-note motive repeated unceasingly (and thus becoming more rhythmically displaced) until nine measures into the coda. The “accompaniment” in the orchestra proves once again to be more than a mere accompaniment, as it contains a great deal of thematic relevance. Not only is it linearly wrought, it is also derived from the dotted-rhythm theme heard so often.
throughout the movement in various guises, this time in straight eighths and without repeated notes.

Example 81. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 1st Movement, rehearsal number 34 (coda)

![Example music notation]

Even amongst Gershwin’s sternest critics and detractors, the second movement of the *Concerto in F* elicits the highest of praises. It is indubitably perfect in its form, structure, and orchestration, and the tunes are, as to be expected with Gershwin, of the highest inspiration. The orchestral introduction in particular, is one of the most evocative and atmospheric passages in Gershwin’s output. After a brief three measures in which the horns introduce a small fragment that turns out to be an integral unifying motive, Ab – Bb – Ab – Bb (+P2 - -P2 - +P2), the introduction gets fully underway.

Although Gershwin’s music was indelibly influences by the Blues, few examples of 12-bar Blues exist in his oeuvre. The beginning of the second movement of this work is one of them. However, even here Gershwin alters the form slightly by
extending it to 16 bars, affixing an additional four bars of V-V-I-I, which is essentially a repeat of mm. 9-12 of a typical 12-bar Blues progression, having the effect of an afterthought or codetta. 32Notwithstanding artistic liberties, this still conforms to 12-bar Blues patterns rather clearly. As with the first movement, Gershwin’s unique contrapuntal treatment is not lost in this movement – quite the contrary.

After the movement officially gets underway beginning on bar 4, Gershwin introduces an alluring theme in the clarinets and bass clarinets, and which is also strongly related to the opening three notes – Ab – Bb – Ab - of the horn statements in the very first three bars of the movement, only this time in melodic inversion. Then one measure later, while the clarinet melody continues, a solo trumpet emerges from the distance, but nevertheless immediately beckons the listener’s attention. The celli (bass notes) provide the roots of each chord, as is typical of a 12-bar blues, while the two melodies proceed throughout the remaining bars, opposed yet complementing each other. The long, sustained notes in the trumpet part (treble staff of upper piano part of the reduction, Example 82) provide the perfect place for Gershwin to add more active melodies in counterpoint to it, a technique employed by the classical masters as well.

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Beginning at rehearsal number 3, Gershwin hails in the solo piano and with it a new theme. For now the accompaniment is really just that – chords primarily in quarter notes that clearly outline a conventional harmonic progression but have little discernible thematic significance. Eight measures into rehearsal number 3, Gershwin repeats the same phrase heard at the beginning of rehearsal number 3 but now transposed up a major 3\textsuperscript{rd}, from Db Major to F Major, as well as with an
additional element in the orchestral accompaniment – a snippet of the melody of the central E Major theme beginning at rehearsal number 10. This fragment, played by the clarinets and set contrapuntally against the melody in the piano, is another example of Gershwin engaging in “backwards” development of thematic material, which we also saw in the first movement. These developmental fragments of future themes are introduced before the themes themselves are fully heard, as a means of unification and foreshadowing.

Example 83. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement, rehearsal number 3

Gershwin proceeds in a similar fashion beginning at rehearsal number 4. The piano melody, which takes off with the descending triadic arpeggios from the theme from rehearsal number 3 and which is subsequently based on the tail of the initial theme, is combined contrapuntally with a new theme and presented in the orchestra. The orchestra’s new theme, beginning with the three repeated Bb’s with grace note A’s (pick-up measure to rehearsal number 4, Example 79) leads the listener to think that it will present the same theme as previously heard in the solo
piano in rehearsal number 3. By the second measure of rehearsal number 4 however Gershwin diverges from the initial theme at rehearsal number 3 and has it morph into yet a new theme. Like with the previously mentioned example that takes place during rehearsal number 3, this new theme turns out to be a fragment of a longer theme that will take place imminently, therefore adding a deft use of thematic unification and foreshadowing on Gershwin’s part, not to mention the use of counterpoint in combining the two themes.

Example 84. Gershwin – *Concerto in F, 2nd Movement*, pick-up to rehearsal 4
At and throughout rehearsal number 5, both tunes, from rehearsal number 3 and the segment of the new one from rehearsal 4, are presented in their entirety and combined. This affords yet another of the many examples in Gershwin’s output that proves that the elements of linearity and the sense of opposition so essential to the contrapuntal spirit are ever-present in his music. In spite of the sense of opposition, Gershwin’s melodic combinations never seem ill-matched, but rather seem perfectly suited.

Example 85. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement, rehearsal number 5
Rehearsal number 8 has the effect of a recapitulation, framing and rounding off the previously heard sections containing the solo piano by harkening back to the beginning. As is typical of Gershwin's writing, he does not repeat verbatim the opening section at all, but rather adds another contrapuntally conceived line. The clarinets still play their lazy, bluesy theme in parallel second inversion triads as in the beginning, and they are also accompanied by the solo trumpet. The trumpet plays a variation of its original melody, opening with alternating Db's and Fb's, thus accentuating the interval of a minor third which is so prevalent in Gershwin's music (the motive of a minor third will become of enormous importance later in the movement.) Lastly, Gershwin superimposes another melodic line on the clarinet and trumpet duet in the flutes. Beginning with several, repeated Ab's, one is led to believe that the melody first heard in the solo piano at rehearsal number 3 is to be presented, but Gershwin diverges from it and continues in a different fashion, still complementing the harmonies and spirit of the passage and retaining the linear spirit.

The combination of multiple thematic components of a composition or movement of a composition towards the end of the work is not without precedent, certainly. Although it seems certain that Gershwin was not thinking of this example, a famous one is the finale of Mozart’s Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551, also known as the “Jupiter” Symphony. In the coda of this masterful work, Mozart’s combines five separate themes heard throughout the work in 5-voice invertible counterpoint. Gershwin does not do the very same thing here, but the
similarities in spirit of combining multiple themes at the end of the work are present.

Example 86. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement, rehearsal number 8

The melodically emphasized minor third interval previously heard in the trumpet solo at rehearsal number 8 becomes of great importance not only regarding thematic development and unity but also counterpoint. Five measures into rehearsal number 9 the solo piano commences another cadenza. Straightaway the minor thirds take the forefront by being played incessantly in the right-hand (alternating Ab’s and Cb’s) for four measures against chord progressions that are predicated by linear logic rather than conventional harmony.

Example 87. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement, mm. 5-9 of rehearsal 9
Nine measures into the piano's cadenza the minor thirds are again of melodic and contrapuntal significance. The piano's left-hand once again foreshadows the opulent theme of the E-Major section soon to be heard, and against it is the minor third motive. While perhaps not as melodically captivating as a tune, the minor third motive is nevertheless more than a mere conventional accompaniment with no linear qualities plugged in. Its distinctive rhythms are in direct opposition to the left-hand's melody and although certainly an accompaniment to the left-hand, it is nevertheless of much more linear interest than a more conventional chordal accompaniment, not least because of its motivic relevance (see Example 83 below).

Example 88. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement, pick-up to m. 13 of rehearsal 9

The heretofore elusive E-Major theme discussed, of which only fragments have been heard several times in rather inconspicuous places, sounds in all its glory at rehearsal number 10. The motivic relevance of the minor third becomes unequivocally clear when listening to the E-Major theme, for the two groups of four notes (x in Example 84) outline this very same interval. D is the first note of the first x while B is the last note of the second x, which together form the first portion of the phrase. Furthermore, B is the beginning note of the third x and G# is the last note of the last x, while both x’s form the answering portion of
the phrase. Not only are we presented with the minor third interval with D – B and B-G#, but there entire phrase is framed by D-B-G# as well. This is not to mention the fact that the interval of a second, also a major unifying motive of the movement, is prominently featured as well.

Example 89. Gershwin – Concerto in F, 2nd Movement, E-Major Theme

While studying with Kilenyi from around 1918-1923, Gershwin engaged in numerous theory, composition, and orchestration exercises, in addition to the usual regiment of harmony and counterpoint. By all accounts he worked on such assignments with alacrity and meticulous care. Among these exercises were transcriptions of short of works such as Bach Chorales for string quartet and eventually, an original composition for string quartet, the still relatively popular Lullaby. ³³

The string quartet is a perfect medium for realizing contrapuntal ideas and there is small wonder that it has remained, even throughout the 20th century, one of the most revered (and feared) combinations of instruments for which to write. Not only because of the highest of standards set by the works of every modern

³³ Ewen 1986, 59
composer's predecessors, but also because of the clarity (and subsequent exposure) resulting from four individual voices. Gershwin puts to use what he learned from his experience writing for string quartet in the second movement of the *Concerto in F*. Beginning on the pick-up notes to rehearsal number 12 of the second movement, a string quartet, which displays thoroughly contrapuntal writing, accompanies the melody in the flute, which in turn is answered by the piano, the excerpt of which can be seen below.

Example 90. Gershwin – *Concerto in F, 2nd Movement*, rehearsal 12

Beginning on the pick-up notes to rehearsal number 12 in the second movement, Gershwin employs a string quartet, played by members of the orchestra, to further develop thematic material but also as the basis of a section bridging the orchestra’s initial presentation of the E-Major theme and the solo piano’s presentation of the same theme. Above the string quartet is a solo flute that plays a slight variation of the repeated-note theme first introduced by the solo piano at rehearsal number 3 (Example 83).
On the first sustained, whole-note B, the string quartet accompanies the flute with a distinctly linear support. The upper strings, doubled at the third, move in a linear fashion and in contrary motion to the bass, which in turn form another counterpoint to the solo flute. Three measures into rehearsal number 12 the solo piano enters, as if out of nowhere, answering the flute. Gershwin repeats these several measures again, transposed up a major second, and this time in a quasi-canonic imitation. (Example 91)

Example 91 – Gershwin – *Concerto in F, 2nd Movement, rehearsal 12*

The flute and piano are paired together once again at rehearsal number 17. For the remaining twelve measures, the piano, for the first time, takes up the initial theme heard from the beginning in the clarinets, while the countermelody first heard in the trumpet is now played by the flute. While the counterpoint in this movement may not be immediately apparent (perhaps because it is so natural and
skillfully executed) it is nevertheless an essential component regarding how it is crafted.

Example 92. Gershwin – *Concerto in F*, 2nd Movement final 12 measures

Gershwin’s next concert work for piano and orchestra is also the least often performed, this being the *Second Rhapsody*, but it also reveals a great deal
regarding Gershwin’s development of counterpoint. In late 1930 Gershwin, with his brother Ira, were invited to Los Angeles to write words and music for the film *Delicious*. With the recent invention of sound films, or “talkies,” the movie industry in California was becoming immensely prosperous and was one of the few to boom during the Great Depression. George and Ira were paid handsomely for their work and certainly put forth their greatest efforts, although much of the music written for the film was excised during the editing phases, as was all too common. All was not lost however, as an extended sequence Gershwin wrote for a city scene eventually evolved into the *Second Rhapsody* in 1931 (a small fragment of the work was in fact used for the film). Wanting to depict hectic city life and the metallic, machine-like nature of it, his original title was *Rhapsody in Rivets*, until he settled upon the more generic title *Second Rhapsody*.34

With the opening two bars (an asymmetrical 4/4 followed by 5/4) one can immediately understand the original title with its pounding, machine-like repeated notes in the bass of the solo piano part. Following is a sequence that firmly substantiates Gershwin’s proclivity for symmetry as well as counterpoint. Over a dominant pedal point on C (held by the sostenuto pedal in the piano) the hands fan outwards in contrary motion (a very familiar pattern by now), each hand following a clear sequential pattern. This is also an example of Gershwin likely “composing backwards,” for the last iteration of the pattern happens to land on an unequivocal C

34 Pollack, 62
dom. 7\textsuperscript{th}, which in turn leads directly to an F Major added 6\textsuperscript{th} chord (F Major is the tonic chord). This passage is also tempered by the fact that it is exclusively diatonic and that the spans framing each pattern (a seventh in the left-hand and an octave in the right-hand) remain consistent throughout.\footnote{Gilbert 1995, 158}

Example 93. Gershwin – Second Rhapsody, mm. 1-6

On m. 7 the contrapuntal layering starts to become even more apparent. The theme beginning in m. 7 is naturally akin to the one introduced in mm. 1-2 in the solo piano, both being based on repeated notes. This new theme is in the forefront from mm. 7-14 but at m. 15 Gershwin adds a new layer. Now the theme heard at m. 1, the “rivets” theme first heard in the piano takes the spotlight in the trumpets

\footnote{Gilbert 1995, 158}
while the newer theme heard at m. 7 continues but in a more subordinate role.

Example 94. Gershwin - _Second Rhapsody_, mm. 10-11 (B theme)

At rehearsal number 2 Gershwin continues to layer more counterpoint. Now the strings have taken over the "rivets" theme while the trombones take over the theme heard at m. 7. Now Gershwin adds another countermelody that is melodically and rhythmically opposed to the other two, moving in stepwise motion as opposed to repeated notes and in quarter note triplets, quarters, and whole notes.36

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36 Gilbert 1995, 160
Later, the two themes switch roles. Six measures into rehearsal number 6, the piano takes over with the slower “rivets” theme first heard in m. 7 while the orchestra takes over the faster “rivets” theme in eighth notes, as can be seen in the following example.
Three measures into rehearsal number 7 Gershwin reverses the roles and instrumentation of the themes again another example of invertible counterpoint. Now the piano has the faster “rivets” theme in eighth (decorated with upper and lower chromatic neighbor tones) while the orchestra has the slower “rivets” theme above.

Example 97. Gershwin – *Second Rhapsody*, mm. 3-5 of rehearsal 7

Eleven measures into rehearsal number 7 Gershwin adds yet one more layer. The piano and orchestra continue with their respective themes, albeit transposed from the passage just discussed, and to it the tail motive of the faster “rivets” theme, three ascending stepwise notes in sixteenth notes is superimposed on the other two themes right from the beginning of the phrase.

Amongst the most impressive examples of Gershwin’s use of counterpoint to achieve thematic development and unity is the *I Got Rhythm Variations*. Almost straightaway, in mm. 15-18 of the introduction, Gershwin deftly combines the melody of the first four measures of the theme itself with the last four measures of the same theme, thus setting the tone for the rest of the work as being especially
contrapuntal. These measures can be seen below in Example 98.

Example 98. Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations*, mm. 15-18

It is also worth pointing out that the sustained chords in the strings (presented as the upper voices in the second piano part of the reduction in Example 98) are based in quartal harmony (stacked fourths) and form the opening four notes of the song itself (albeit ordered differently), which are themselves based on the pentatonic scale, a favorite of Gershwin’s.

Not only that, but three measures later he introduces the ascending four main melody notes, which outline a pentatonic scale, in even quarter notes, and then proceeds to transpose this segment up a minor seventh. Against these two presentations of the four primary notes of the theme, above in the flutes and bells, Gershwin presents an inversion of this theme on the second half of each quarter note, in counterpoint with the main theme. After these two presentations the roles are switched – the voices that contained the main melody notes intact now present
them in their inversion while the accompanying flutes and bells present the main melodic fragment in its original form.\textsuperscript{37} The accompaniment is really not an accompaniment at all, but rather a backdrop for contrapuntal workings and further thematic development and cohesion.

Example 99. Gershwin – \textit{I Got Rhythm Variations}, mm. 21-26

A similar process can be seen at rehearsal number 3, the beginning of the interlude passage that leads into Variation 2 (Example 95 below). The main melodic segment can be heard in the trumpets, trombones, first clarinets, and oboes, beginning with the quartal harmony of A-D-G-C and proceeding in parallel motion from there. Here Gershwin elides one statement of this four-note fragment after another – C-D-F-G elides with G-A-C-D. This outlines a pentatonic scale in its entirety which is basis of the melody of the title song. The accompaniment, in the

\textsuperscript{37} Gilbert, Steven, “Gershwin’s Art of Counterpoint,” \textit{The Musical Quarterly} Vol. 70, No. 4 (1984): 436
violins, flutes, and piccolos, is a shimmering, brilliant display of sixteenth notes that we soon find is anything but arbitrarily chosen. The bottom part (lower staff of the upper piano part of the reduction in Example 96) commences with the notes C-D-F-G, and then continues its way back down on the notes from which it came, and proceeds in this wavy, cascading fashion throughout the example. It is apparent that the four notes on which this accompanying pattern is based, C-D-F-G, are in fact the four primary notes of the theme of “I Got Rhythm.” Furthermore, the upper staff of the upper piano part is a variation of the lower part, using the exact same notes and playing them in a mirror image (inversion) of the other.  

Example 100. Gershwin - *I Got Rhythm Variations*, rehearsal number 3

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Gershwin is not done showing off his compositional prowess yet. Four measures into rehearsal number 21, the last variation, the cellos and basses enter

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38 Gilbert 1984, 438
with another of the four primary, pentatonic notes that comprise the first portion of the song *I Got Rhythm* – Ab – Bb – Db – Eb, all in eighth notes. Two measures before rehearsal number 22, the piano enters with the main theme but in a different rhythm than the accompaniment in the cellos and basses – groups of two repeated sixteenth note chords followed by a sixteenth note rest beginning on the ‘and’ of beat 1. Not only does this form a counterpoint with the aforementioned accompaniment in the low strings, it also forms a counterpoint against the left-hand, which states the same theme in inversion.

Example 101. Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations*, 3 measures before rehearsal 22
Observe too the deft combination of the last two measures of the first statement of the melody proper (“Who Could Ask For Anything More?”, heard in the piano part in parallel sixths) against the ascending Ab-Bb-Db-Eb ostinato in the bass, which outlines the pentatonic scale on which the tune is based, as well as the first four notes of the tune, in order but in differing rhythmic patterns.

Example 102. Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations*, 2 measures before rehearsal 23
Finally, at rehearsal number 26, the strings introduce another cascading figure that uses three separate groups of four notes (‘x’ in Example 96), each group containing the same four notes that begin the song “I Got Rhythm” and outline a pentatonic scale, this time inverted and transposed. Against it in the tenor range (upper notes of the bass staff of lower piano part of reduction) in the trombones and first horns, we are presented with a variation of ‘x’, this time in quarter notes, first as the first four notes of the title song and then in inversion.  

Example 103. Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations*, rehearsal number 26

Contrapuntal layering through means of thematic development reached new heights in Gershwin’s immensely popular concert work *An American in Paris*, written in 1928. The counterpoint and its thematic relevance becomes clearer when the motives and their various transformations and discussed first. Of utmost

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39 Gilbert 1984, 440

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importance is the interval, both melodic and harmonic, of a third, both major and minor as well as ascending and descending. The prevalence of the third is made clear straightaway in the opening measures, for the notes C-D-E are the very first notes to be stated (minus the grace note B). Albeit displaced in terms of register, the sequence C-D-E and the third outlined as result becomes ever clearer as the melody progresses, for the notes are stated in succession and in the same register in m. 4. This will henceforth be known as motive a.

At m. 8 Gershwin begins a contrapuntal, quasi-canonic passage based on a new motive of a descending, stepwise upper tetrachord, known as motive b. The F on which the first descending tetrachord begins is also the ending note of a descending three note, stepwise passage, which is motive a in inversion. Thus the F elides the inverted motive a and motive b. Upon the entrance of motive b, the imitative entrances, each an octave lower, begin, thus creating the counterpoint.

As intricately woven as these threads that comprise the main theme are, Gershwin is not through layering more contrapuntal lines. Within the first presentation of the main theme, Gershwin is already including counterpoints that are thematically related and furthermore, on multiple levels. Take the counterpoint seen in Example 103, which is heard in the flute against the main theme.

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40 Gilbert 1995, 113
41 Gilbert 1995, 112
The sustained C and the subsequent D-E-D sixteenth note triplet followed by another sustained C clearly allude to motive \( a \). However, as the counterpoint progresses, the upper notes of each figure also expand. Therefore, what begins as the D-E-D sixteenth note triplet become D-F-D to a sustained C and then D-G-D to a sustained C.\(^{42}\) The upper notes of each figure therefore result in another variant of motive \( a \) and is a clear example of “composing out,” the technique of embedding relevant thematic material in less obvious ways throughout the entire composition as a deeper unifying element. This motive will be called counterpoint 1.\(^{43}\)

At m. 12 Gershwin reprises the main theme, but this time with a different contrapuntal layer – a rising, chromatically ascending motive spanning a minor third. The span of a third links it to motive \( a \) and is prominent enough to have its own label, counterpoint 2.\(^{44}\)

\(^{42}\) Gilbert 1995, 113

\(^{43}\) Gilbert 1995, 113

\(^{44}\)
The intervals of thirds play an important role as an accompaniment that is contrapuntally conceived. At m. 16 the main theme continues in the upper registers but the bass notes outlines a chord progression that clearly delineates the thirds intervals.

Example 106. Gershwin – *An American in Paris*, mm. 16-17

The bass notes (chord roots) progress from D Major, F# Major, E Major, to G Major, a progression that highlights the thirds relationships (D-F# and E-G) which

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44 Gilbert 1995, 114
is justified much more by the contrapuntal motion of the bass notes rather than any conventional harmonic progression. Likewise in mm. 18-19 we encounter similar treatment of another contrapuntally conceived motive, counterpoint 2. Here the chromatic, stepwise motion of counterpoint 2 dictates the harmonic progression, but here the motive is in inversion – descending as opposed to ascending. This is another progression that is again predicated on contrapuntal treatment, especially when viewed in light of the importance of the motive on which the harmonies are based and how they coalesce with the melody notes.

Example 107. Gershwin – *An American in Paris*, mm. 18-20

Later, at the *Grazioso* section, we hear an even more elaborate contrapuntal handiwork. The main theme is heard again intact, but this time counterpoint 2 is heard against it in its inversion. Gershwin adds yet another motivically relevant layer as a counterpoint to accompany the main theme – a rhythmic diminution of the inverted counterpoint 2.\(^{45}\) Nearly every element is much more than a mere accompaniment. These “accompanying” figures are not only thematically related

\(^{45}\) Gilbert 1995, 115
and aid in adding cohesion to the work but also possess distinct and independent linear characteristics. It is also worth noting that five measures into the Grazioso section Gershwin begins a canon at the unison but aborts it after two measures – brief, to be sure, but nonetheless further evidence that counterpoint was on Gershwin's mind.


Perhaps one of the most aurally striking motives is the repeated sixteenth note figure first heard in m. 7 and which undergoes a number of contrapuntal treatments, not to mention extensive thematic development. Gershwin employs this
motive as part of a number of imitative sections, to which it is especially conducive. First of all there is the trumpet-trombone exchange beginning at mm. 20-23, which Resembles a canon at the sixth (Example 109, seen below).


A similarly constructed passage occurs in what is called main theme 2, which resembles (or of which it is at least derivative) the repeated note motive. The tail end of this theme contains a motive that strongly reminds the listener of the repeated note motive, not least because of the same rhythm but also because of the closeness of the register (alternating steps versus repeated notes). Gershwin employs the same canonic treatment with this motive as he did with the aforementioned passage between the trumpet and trombone. Here it is between the clarinet and horns. Note the rhythmic augmentation in the last horn entrance of this motive (last measure of Example 110 below), as well as the occurrence of the descending third via stepwise motion (motive a) in the measure preceding the canonic treatment. 46

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46 Gilbert 1984, 442
An especially exhilarating moment in which Gershwin employs thematic cohesion in a contrapuntal treatment is at the climactic *Con fuoco* section. Here Gershwin layers elements of main theme 1, main theme 2, as well as motive $a$, a constituent of main theme 1. As can be seen from the piano reduction in the following example, the brass contain an ascending version of motive $a$ which elides with a descending (inverted) version of the same motive, thus creating the arc-like shape of Eb – F – G – F – Eb, etc. Gershwin reinforces this with doublings a perfect fourth and sixth below, resulting in a series of parallel first inversion triads. 47 This pattern is begun in eighth notes but after four measures it proceeds in sixteenth notes, thus propelling the music even more precipitously to its cadence in a whirlwind of sound.

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47 Gilbert 1995, 117
Example 111. Gershwin – *An American in Paris*, three measures before *Con fuoco*
Above the motive a configurations in the brass, the strings play the beginning snippets of main theme 2, which is in itself derivative of the repeated note motive. Finally, in the bass registers, we have measures 3 and 4 of the main theme 1, transposed and repeated in sequence descending by thirds until resting on Eb. This portion of the main theme 1 repeats on Eb until the end of the passage. 48 As with the other passages, it is clear that Gershwin had a strong affinity for thematic unity but contrapuntal layering as well, as each part in itself in not only thematically related but linearly conceived.

Shortly before the Con fuoco section mentioned earlier, Gershwin introduces a motive that is derived from the more abstract motive of the interval of a third. This motive is a rising, stepwise group of three notes in the form of a triplet, followed by a descending triplet of the same three notes. Above this is the motive from the very opening measure, which of course outlines a third in a more abstract, indirect way. In measures 2 and 3 of the following passage, Gershwin even employs a brief canon-like imitation in the bass.

Example 112. Gershwin – An American in Paris, 9 measures before Con fuoco

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48 Gilbert 1995, 118
Beginning at the *Subito con brio*, Gershwin introduces another melody that is again directly taken from the cell of the interval of a third. The basic melody can be seen as being comprised of two distinct parts – E-F#-D# (the outer notes form a third) and the answer, E-D#-C# (also outlining a third). At the pick-up to the ninth measure of the *Subito con brio* section, the melody is answered by a variant of the repeated note motive from earlier, as shown below.

Example 113. Gershwin – *An American Paris*, mm. 4-15 of *Subito con brio*

Later, Gershwin introduces a new component to the melody, a rising, stepwise tetrachord followed by eight repeated eighth notes and a descending tetrachord. This is answered above by its own diminution.
At the **Vigoroso** section shortly after, Gershwin sets the repeated note motive in counterpoint against the new theme just mentioned, which can be seen in the following example (Example 115).

Example 115. Gershwin – *An American in Paris, Vigoroso*
Finally, in the following passage Gershwin sets the opening fragment of the newly stated melody and subjects it to a descending sequence in fourths. Against it he sets it in counterpoint the diminution of the tetrachord-repeated note theme, seen below.

Example 116. Gershwin – *An American in Paris*

![Example 116. Gershwin – An American in Paris](image1)

In the following measures, Gershwin combines the diminution of the tetrachord-repeated note theme with the melody of the very opening bars, seen below in Example 116.

Example 117. Gershwin – *An American in Paris*

![Example 117. Gershwin – An American in Paris](image2)

Such ingenious use of thematic development as a way of creating contrapuntal layers is equally evident in the overture to *Of Thee I Sing* from 1931.
The melodic interval of a second, major or minor, is of paramount importance in unifying this work, as well as helping develop its counterpoint. In the opening measures of the overture (Example 117), we are presented with the melody of what will turn out to be the first song immediately following the overture, *Wintergreen For President*.

Example 118. Gershwin – Opening measures of overture to *Of Thee I Sing*

In Example 119 below, observe how the melody of *Wintergreen For President* is put in the bass (left-hand of piano reduction) and thus becomes a counterpoint to the linear progression in the treble staff. This combination also creates contrapuntal dissonances such as suspensions every other measure in
the example.

Example 119. Gershwin – Overture to *Of Thee I Sing*, mm. 12-15

The interval of a second becomes is a major unifying motive in the overture, and this interval is especially pronounced in the song “Because, Because.” The beginning of the song’s melody is first heard in m. 16, although it is foreshadowed much earlier in mm. 2, 4, 6, and 8. These measures contain the “Ahs” from the song “Wintergreen For President” and although they are an inversion of the “Because, Because” motive, and in minor as opposed to major seconds as well, the connection between the two is clear nonetheless (similar rhythms helps underscore the connection, too).49

Example 120. Gershwin – “Because, Because” motives from *Of Thee I Sing*

In mm. 28-29 Gershwin layers essentially four melodic lines on top of each other in counterpoint, all of which are thematically related to the “Because, Because”

49 Schneider, 43
cell of a melodic second. The beginning two measures of the song are heard clearly in the upper voice, and variants of this motivic cell can be heard in the others. What is basically the tenor voice contains the same motive in even quarter notes (D-C-D-C), while the bass contains the same motive at E-D-E-D, a major second higher. The interpolated Bb on the ‘& of 1’ in the bass voice of the piano reduction are decorative, while the accents on the second beat D further reinforce the connection of the motive of a second. Finally, in what amounts to an alto voice, we have the same motive but in minor seconds and in an inversion, reminiscent of the second measure, which is itself taken from the “Ahs” of “Wintergreen For President” and which is itself derivative of the melodic second cell which unifies much of the work.50

Example 121. Gershwin – Overture to Of Thee I Sing

contin. 8va ad lib.

In m. 34 (first measure of Example 120), Gershwin clearly states the “Because, Because” motivic cell of a major second, alternating B-A’s, in the uppermost voice of the piano reduction (not including the small notes above the

50 Schneider, 44
treble staff). Against it, one voice below, is another thematic transformation of the “Because, Because” motive, this time a rising minor second (E-F), but not alternating as frequently, changing from E-F only on the second beat. Against this in the uppermost voice of the left-hand of the reduction is another E but this time descending to an Eb a minor second below, which mirrors the E-F just discussed. This passage provides a god example of how Gershwin saturates passages with motivic cells so efficiently and effectively. The upper notes above the treble staff mark the first appearance of the theme of the title song, which provides yet another contrapuntal layer.

Example 122. Gershwin – Overture to Of Thee I Sing, mm. 34-35

Finally, one measure later Gershwin again engages in intense thematic manipulation to achieve contrapuntal ends. Here again the material is derived from the “Because, Because” motive of a second. Here the sharply dotted rhythms of the song appear in the uppermost voice of the left-hand part. The voice directly below and the uppermost voice partake in a counterpoint similar to what we just encountered. Both move in the same rhythm (quarter-quarter-half note), both on the same note (E, but different octaves), and both state a minor second (a variant
of the “Because, Because” motive) in contrary motion. Two measures later, while the tenor voice still contains the dotted rhythms, the lower tenor voice and uppermost voice continues to work in the same way and in contrary motion but with the directions of each voice reversed, and on different notes (lower on G and upper remaining on E).\textsuperscript{51}

Example 123. Gershwin – Overture to *Of Thee I Sing*, mm. 36-39

Such intense, compressed motivic manipulation as seen in the overture to *Of Thee I Sing* is certainly present in the infrequently performed *Cuban Overture* of 1932. As was previously stated, most of the material in this work can be said to be derived from the motive of a tetrachord, from which the inverted canon discussed earlier is based. This motivic cell is heard explicitly starting at m. 6, and proves to be the basis of the accompanying figures as well.

\textsuperscript{51} Schneider 1999, 45
In m. 27, after dizzying whirlwinds of sound, the music begins to settle down and we are finally presented with a full theme played with a simple accompaniment.

In m. 34, after two measures of a double whole note G, a figure directly taken from this tetrachord motive, in fact a literal statement of an ascending, stepwise tetrachord, is heard, marked x in Examples 124, 125, and 127. It is not, however,
the first time this particular permutation of the tetrachord motive has been heard.
In m. 8 (see Example 124, lower staff of upper piano part of reduction) this presentation of the motive is heard for the first time in counterpoint against the eighth note tetrachord motive permutation heard above, the same one that is the basis of the inverted canon and is marked $y$ in Example 119 and 121. The counterpoint is further accentuated by the essentially contrary motion.

Example 125. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture*, mm. 31-34

In m. 38, during the second half of the aforementioned melody, is a “tail” figure more rhythmically active than the more static first half. This “tail” is also derivative of the tetrachord motive, its range encompassing a perfect fourth. The following two measures bring about a variation of the previous two in which the framing interval is expanded from a perfect fourth (G-C) to a major sixth (F-D).
Example 127. *Cuban Overture*, mm. 38-41

These measures become involved in an especially skillful deployment of three-part counterpoint. These two measures are restated at a different interval and against it are two completely contrapuntally conceived lines, both of which are derived from the tetrachord motive. The two previously mentioned measures are presented in the middle voice, and the upper voice presents a quasi-augmented rendering of the former. The lower voice, while not explicitly connected to either of the upper two, is nevertheless generated from the tetrachord motive.

Example 128. Gershwin – *Cuban Overture*, three-part counterpoint

Observe too the savvy use of invertible counterpoint four measures later, in which the middle voice now become the upper voice.
More invertible counterpoint based on the same themes occurs later in which all the voices are rearranged. Here the voice previously on the bottom is now on top, while the voice previously on the top is now on the bottom.

Not long after, shortly before the more haunting, sedate middle section, Gershwin combines a kaleidoscope of nearly every variant of the tetrachord cell heard thus far. The primary melody is heard in the upper voices of the right-hand of the first piano part in the reduction, which, as was said, is based on the tetrachord motive (see Example 125). This is especially apparent with the quarter note triplets
(G-A-B) leading to C from the third to the fourth measures in the excerpt, as well as in the seventh measures of Example 129, in which the tetrachord A-D is clearly delineated in the melody. In the left-hand part in the first measure of the upper piano part of Example 129 is the “answer” heard initially in the introduction, and in the fifth measure, in the right-hand of the second (lower) piano part, is a variant of the melody first heard in m. 2 of the work (Example 130, marked ‘x’).

Example 131. Gershwin – Cuban Overture, mm. 339-346
Beginning in the third measure of the following example (Example 131), notice how Gershwin contrapuntally combines the sustained note melody with the variant of the tetrachord motive heard as a group of descending steps. The sustained notes previously heard are here varied, with tremolos and off-beat repeated A eighth notes filled in with chords, the bottom note moving chromatically from A to D#. The tetrachord motive heard against it is of course the descending four note group heard from mm. 6-8 from the very beginning, in which the four note group is continuously rhythmically displaced.
In the slow middle section, Gershwin uses a melody that can be viewed as being in two groups, each group clearly framing the tetrachord motive. In this work Gershwin achieves a motivic tightness that would rival that of a Beethoven sonata or symphony, all while using the variants of the primary tetrachord to create remarkably effective counterpoint.
CONCLUSION

Myths, stigmas, and stereotypes, whether positive, negative, or neutral, surround nearly every individual who made significant contributions in the creative fields, especially someone as much in the public eye as George Gershwin. Many such myths and stigmas certainly contain a kernel of truth, while others seem to be flat out erroneous, making one wonder how such notions ever came into existence in the first place.

Counterpoint itself has many stigmas as well, namely for being a dry, academic, archaic art form that is inimical to expressiveness and freedom. Practically all of Bach’s works attest to the contrary, and certainly contrapuntal works of Beethoven’s, notably the Gross Fuge, strongly dispel the myths of fugues being little more than exercises in polyphony. Even though fugues and canons were in use and fashion from the dawn of tonal harmony, they have persisted and become thoroughly ensconced, not only in music education, but in modern compositions as well.

Although fugue and canon exemplify counterpoint to the highest degree, and to skillfully write successful fugues and canons one must not only possess a solid musical education and acumen, but must also engage in a great deal of practice. In a general sense, counterpoint is the state of opposition and independence between layers of music within work. As remarkably adroit and effective as his few example of fugue and canon are, Gershwin’s counterpoint goes much further than that. In his music there is an omnipresent sense of line in nearly every moving
part. Basses move independently of the melody, countermelodies move independently of the other parts, and each voice/line possesses its own linear design.

Although a tonal composer, Gershwin often uses completely decorative, non-functional harmonies. These harmonies are dictated by counterpoint and linearity. Whereas much earlier music was almost completely dependent on the harmonic progressions on which it was based, with Gershwin it is the harmony that is so often subservient to the counterpoint, the latter dictating where the former will go.

Most of all, counterpoint is a sophisticated working out of multiple musical ideas simultaneously, each being melodic, independent, and important in its own right, regardless of such arbitrary boundaries imposed upon it such as “style”. How such moving parts coalesce into an effective whole is the mark of a great composer. Gershwin manages to compose music according to such sophisticated principles extraordinarily well, and thus deserves to be considered worthy of being ranked among the greatest masters.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


