Hindemith’s voices

Paul Hindemith’s two–volume work on counterpoint is the summation of years of thinking about the subject and of teaching it. The volume on two-part counterpoint is widely available as Vol. II of Unterweisung im Tonsatz, translated as The craft of musical composition Book II. ¹Beyond this, the picture for the English reader becomes more complicated. The work on three-part counterpoint (Unterweisung Vol III: Übungsbuch für den dreistimmigen Satz) is still available only in German.² Despite the volume’s bulk and detail, Hindemith was never completely happy with it, and it was published only after his death. A projected volume on four-part writing was hardly begun.

Forming a rounded picture of Hindemith’s theory of counterpoint (hereafter CP) is therefore difficult. But the basic principles are fully laid out in The Craft of musical composition Book II (hereafter CMC II) and comprehensively elaborated in Unterweisung Vol. III (hereafter CMC III).

The translations below from CMC III are my own. I have included some of the original German phrases to convey something of Hindemith’s colloquial and forceful idiom. Hindemith illustrates his ideas in CMC II and III with generous music examples, rewarding the persistent reader with an anthology of original works, including complete short madrigals and motets. It seems to me that previous discussions of the CP have not concentrated sufficiently on the examples, and I will attempt here to redress the balance.

Many teachers and composers have a copy of CMC on their bookshelves. How many read or teach from it is, I suspect, another matter. In this essay, I will try to summarise the salient aspects of Hindemith’s theory and to assess its relevance to present teaching and compositional concerns.

² Hindemith, Unterweisung im Tonsatz III: Übungsbuch für den dreistimmigen Satz Schott 1970
Hindemith’s CP grows directly from his theory of harmony explained in *The craft of musical composition* Book I (CMC I). I do not propose to explain this in detail, but it will be necessary to refer to it to make his CP clearer. Like many theorists of the twentieth century, Hindemith felt the need to base his ideas upon scientific fundamentals. The problem for the modern reader is that one musician’s acoustic principle is another’s nonsense. In the acoustic wars that wracked the early century, with Helmholtz’s *On the sensations of tone* cited as scripture and the harmonic series invoked, deity-like, by contending factions, Hindemith fought with distinction. The results can be found in CMC I. In this discussion I propose to steer clear of these controversies and discuss the CP itself.\(^3\)

The most important aspects of Hindemith’s harmonic theory for the purposes of understanding the CP are the charts of pitches and intervals which he calls Series 1 and Series 2 respectively:

![Series 1 and 2](image)

**Example 1: Series 1 and 2**

Hindemith has his own way of numbering intervals, with the unison as 1 and the octave as 8. The perfect fifth is therefore 5, the major sixth 6, and the interval between them, 5/6. From this information, other numbers can be worked out: a minor third is 2/3, a semitone ½, and so on. Here Hindemith is moving towards a Fortean designation dependent upon abstract interval-content rather than the placing and bias of the interval within the tonal system. But as I will indicate below, this designation is not without its problems. Hindemith’s two-voice theory is based almost entirely on Group A intervals; these intervals are also

---

\(^3\) There are many discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of Hindemith’s acoustics. See, for example, William Thompson, ‘Hindemith’s contribution to music theory’, *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (Spring 1965), pp. 52-71.
important when he comes to discuss the chordal combinations that are the foundation of his three-voice method.

Both Series operate on the principle of increasing tension the further to the right one reads. The ordering of the twelve tones in Series 1 has nothing to do with a twelve-tone row. On the contrary, the first note is a tonic or ‘source tone’ and the subsequent notes are defined by their level of tension in relation to it (and not to each other). In Series 2, divided into sub-groups A and B, the tension level also increases from left to right. Hindemith describes the intervals on the left as having the greatest harmonic value while those on the right have the greatest melodic value. The tritone stands outside both of these categories, for according to Hindemith its status is neutral until a third pitch is added.4

The first distinct point about CP emerges here. It will be noted that the perfect fourth is placed far left in Series 2. This for Hindemith means that it is an interval of high harmonic value, in other words consonant. And this is precisely how he treats the fourth in his exercises. Another point about intervals shows Hindemith’s divergence from standard ideas. In traditional counterpoint, each note of an interval has in theory equal weight. Hindemith oversteps this idea and argues that one note has more weight than the other, and that this note is in consequence the root of the interval. This point is controversial. Anyone experienced in elementary ear training knows that even students with good pitch sense can confuse perfect fifths, for example, with fourths, because their ear is biased in favour of hearing one pitch as the fundamental. But Hindemith goes further than this by arguing that one pitch is of intrinsically more weight than the other.5 The root-tones for Group A intervals (the ones pervasively used in CMC II) are as follows:

Example 2: intervals with root-tones

---

4 CMC II, p.111
Armed with the table of pitches and intervals and with the theory of root-tones, the reader is in a position to engage with the first exercises in CMC II.

Example 3: two-part working with degree-progression

What Hindemith calls the Model is the given voice, in this case the soprano. The second voice is the added one. The bottom line represents what Hindemith calls the degree-progression; it is not an additional line of counterpoint. (To make this clear in examples below, I have put the degree-progression in smaller notes.) The degree-progression adumbrates the root-tones (see above) of the two lines of counterpoint. Hindemith summarises this in his Rule 54: ‘All harmonic progressions may be traced back to a melodic line which consists of the root-tones of the separate intervals, and this constitutes the degree-progression.’ (CMC II, p. 95)

Hindemith’s Example 148 (p. 103) illustrates a more elaborate working, with degree-progression:
The upper voice here is elaborated with what Hindemith calls melodic formulae: passing notes, suspensions, auxiliaries etc. Hindemith’s treatment of these is discussed at great length in the early chapters of CMC II, and it does not greatly differ from the standard practice. Some exceptions are discussed below. The treatment of the fourth, D-G, in bar 8 well illustrates his understanding of this interval treated harmonically. Traditional theory might explain the D-F sharp as the true harmony, despite the F sharp’s metrical weakness, with the G as a strong passing dissonance. But this would not explain the role of the second G in the bar; and Hindemith’s annotations make it clear that he regards the F sharp as an auxiliary and the D semiquaver as an anticipation. The fourth, D-G, is therefore the governing harmony.

The degree-progression is also a diagnostic tool for weak melodic and harmonic progression, as illustrated in Hindemith’s examples 153 and 155:
Example 5: two-part working with improved degree-progression

In the first working here, Hindemith remarks upon the poor upper voice with its ill-defined final cadence, but he thinks the real weakness is exposed by the static degree-progression, and he suggests changing this first. This results in extensive changes in the added (top) voice, and just one in the Model, the third note from the end. This exercise illustrates in concise form many of the persistent features of Hindemith’s CP. The introduction of accidentals is dictated not by any consideration of modulation or tonal balance but by the immediate demands of voice-leading, such as avoidance of awkward intervals both vertically and horizontally. To this extent, and despite the exercise’s comparatively primitive character, the student is already working within a twelve-tone environment where the sounding of any pitch is theoretically possible. This point will be further elaborated upon below.

As the degree-progression is a fundamental aspect of Hindemith’s CP, it may be helpful to summarize its role:

(i) It is not an independent voice but the adumbration of the root-tones of the actual working.
(ii) It need not have the self-standing melodic conviction of the actual voices, but should nonetheless from a coherent melodic unit.

(iii) A weakness in the degree-progression (too much of a particular note, too many diminished or augmented intervals etc.) will usually point to a weakness in the exercise.

Counterpoint is the art of combining melodies, and it is surprising how little time traditional methods often give to the matter of melodic construction. Chapter V of CMC II is called ‘Principles of melodic construction’ and is Hindemith’s typically exhaustive treatment of this subject. He states in Rule 43: ‘In any melody, tones combine with harmonic cells which consist of broken intervals of series A.’ (p. 67) Hindemith here is reformulating the traditional idea that the small, often step-wise units of melody can combine into broader units which may have triadic outlines. This point is elaborated on p. 69:

‘Let us constantly keep in mind that in melodies, two kinds of tone-grouping occur:

(a) A retarding grouping: harmonic cells, harmonic fields;
(b) An accelerating grouping: [here Hindemith lists the various kinds of melodic formulae using his own symbols: passing notes, suspensions, auxiliaries etc. ]’

A good melody will demonstrate a balance between accelerating and retarding features. The main retarding feature is the grouping of the pitches into harmonic cells, by which Hindemith basically means outlines of the triad. The main accelerating feature is stepwise progression, always for Hindemith the main carrier of melodic propulsion and expressivity. The two aspects of melodic construction might be summarized like this:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of feature:</th>
<th>Means of producing it:</th>
<th>Surface manifestation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retarding</td>
<td>Repeated tone; wide</td>
<td>Harmonic cells/fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(harmonic) intervals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerating</td>
<td>Melodic formulae (passing</td>
<td>Stepwise progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>notes, suspensions etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: melodic features

Example 6 is Hindemith's presentation (CMC II, p. 75) of a melody with harmonic cells mapped below and stepwise progressions above. A horizontal line represents a semitone. The diagonal lines represent connections between notes, a dotted line indicating looser connections. (Note that the diagram mistakenly represents the note B as 'h', evidently a carry-over from the German original.)

Example 6. Melody with stepwise progression and harmonic cells

It is interesting to note that the lowest line of the harmonic cell graph (at the bottom of the diagram) picks out mainly a broad step-wise progression, the key pitches of which outline an ascending C major chord. The upper lines of the melodic progression (above the stave) emphasize octave transfers, for example
$D^2-D^1$ in bar 2, $E^1-E^2$ in bars 3-4, and $F^\#^1-F^\#^2$ in bar 3. These transfers in fact disguise a step-progression, $D$ (bar 2) – $E$ (bars 3-4) - $F^\#$ (bar 3) – $G$ (bars 5-6).

The chapter on melody makes for dense reading, for Hindemith’s love of categorizing can betray him into a taxonomical maze. But he is fully aware that there is no formula for composing a good tune:

‘[The learner]…must not suppose that, with an intentional employment of harmonic cells and of step-progressions, talent can be replaced by diligence, or that inspiration can be supplanted by clear calculation.’ (p. 77)

Hindemith’s conception of counterpoint is not baroque-tonal. But neither does he discuss modality as such. Some readers may find this a drawback. In exercise 192, for example (p. 129), the listener is likely to hear most of the music in C major, despite its beginning and ending on D. And in exercise 194 (p. 130), the necessary F sharps are put in as accidentals throughout. To the student uninitiated in the modes, these examples might appear puzzling. The explanation for this brings us back to the twelve-tone basis of Hindemith’s system touched on above, in that the two Series, at least theoretically, allow for the deployment of all twelve pitches and all intervals from the outset. Pitches the status of which may appear ambiguous in major-minor terms can be explained by reference to the guidelines for voice-leading and harmony that Hindemith gives.

Chapter X of CMC II is Hindemith’s minutely painstaking explanation of how to accomplish a two-part working. The explanation may appear cumbersomely disproportionate to the final result: almost eight pages of explanation (pp. 140-147) for a simple two-part working of the 8-bar melody Was soll ich aber heben an. Yet the exhaustive method is not, as Hindemith concedes, necessary for every working. The student who performs four or five exercises with this kind of care will become more fluent. Decisions that have at first been pondered over can later be left to instinct. It is a common complaint against explanations in theory books that they can make the simple appear complicated, and few would quarrel with the principle that a concise explanation is generally best. But the objection is more often motivated by impatience than anything else. Explanation is necessarily a slower and more laborious process than listening. And the
justification is the one given by Hindemith on p. 132, namely, that the slow process of dissecting the work procedure into listening and evaluation will necessarily affect the audible outcome, one hopes for the better.

This last point is worth dwelling upon. At no point in CMC II does Hindemith hurry his discussion of a subject. He might, on the contrary, err on the side of meticulousness. In this way he avoids the danger of the student’s theoretical grasp moving far ahead of what his ear is capable of assimilating. For Hindemith the process of aural development is two-fold: the absorbing of the aural data and the evaluating of it: is this a good harmonic progression; is the melodic writing dull at this point? It is too often the evaluating element that is neglected.

Another aspect of traditional technique that Hindemith dislikes is thematic and motivic imitation. He gives a compositional reason for this when he says that the creative ability is to be schooled by constantly finding new voice progressions without leaning slavishly upon the Models:

‘Where invention and exact calculation fail, we can still help ourselves with an imitation. Entire fugues which meet all school rules, but which do not contain a single tone of music, can be built in this way.’ (p. 153)

The three-voice counterpoint treated in CMC III is based upon Hindemith’s list of chords compounded of series A intervals:

Example 7: interval A chords

These six basic chords (*Grundakkorden*) have only A-interval content. Hindemith likens them to vowels. An obvious problem in three-voice working is to determine the root-tone of chords. This is done by finding the strongest interval in the chord, the root-tone of which will obviously be that of the chord (CMC III, p 13). The reader of the German text should be alerted that Hindemith uses the word *Akkord* to denote any true three-note chord, whereas *Klang* is used to denote any chord with less than three notes, including a three-note sonority with a doubling.
Hindemith admits that the reduction of the possible material to six chords of three voices cannot match the expressive force of a full orchestra. On the other hand, there is also less room for harm (Unheil), and the danger of overstretching the material is reduced. The student will attempt to make ‘even of these short exercises technical, expressive and stylistic masterpieces’ (CMC III, p. 81). In any case, we do not, in a contrapuntal context, think principally in chords. Hindemith says that chords in counterpoint have the same function as words in prose, assuming significance only according to their context.

Hindemith now introduces a controversial point. He says of awkward intervals like the augmented second that determining their use as steps or leaps ‘will now become meaningless’ (der Gebrauch der 2/3 so geregelt wird, dass die Frage nach Schritt oder Sprung bedeutungslos wird CMC III, p. 26). This statement recapitulates CMC I where he states: ‘An interval approximating the [acoustic] ratio 5:6 will invariably be heard as a minor third, whether it is written as an augmented second, a minor third, or a doubly diminished fourth.’ (See Halliday, p. 190) Within Hindemith’s quasi-Fortean numbering system this makes sense: any interval of three semitones is simply that, regardless of how it is spelt. But in melodic practice the idea is surely problematic. This brings us back to the teacher of elementary ear-training, who will know that for every ten students who can sing A absolutely in tune, he will be lucky to find one who can sing B:

Example 8: interval 2/3 with different spelling

Hindemith’s argument is all the more surprising because he advocates a vocally based counterpoint rather than an instrumental one, in which he sees great dangers for the development of the student’s ear.

A complete example of three-part working with step progression is given at example 24, p. 186:
Example 9: three-part choral working

Hindemith observes here that the degree-progression is a well-balanced line (gutausgewogene Linie) with the one possible drawback of a weakly delineated tonic. Because of his distinctive understanding of the role of melodic formulae, Hindemith permits the parallel fifths at bar 4. The B flat is a lower auxiliary note.
whereas the E flat is a harmony note. He calls these ‘parallel fifths of differing function’ \( (\text{Quintparallelen verschiedener Funktion}) \). Like his treatment of the harmonic fourth, this is a good instance of Hindemith’s relationship with traditional method, which he follows much of the time, only to part from it at decisive moments. The comparative freedom of dissonance treatment in the later parts of CP is shown by the D anticipation, bars 7-8, jumped to by a perfect fifth.

Hindemith also gives a version of this exercise with a different middle voice, resulting in a slightly altered root progression (p. 187). The retention of the outer voices while composing a new middle one must seem a strange procedure. Hindemith in fact regards the middle voice as subsidiary to the outer voices. This will surprise many counterpoint teachers who, while admitting that the middle voices can seldom attain the expressive independence of the top or bass, see many three-voice exercises where the student has clearly worked out a two-voice texture and added a middle voice with little melodic coherence of its own.

What is the function of the degree-progression in three-voice working? Its function in two-voice texture is clear enough: the merging of two melodies into one. This is scarcely more controversial than the divergence of one into two, as so often happens in Bach’s solo violin and cello writing. But there may arise an increasing dissatisfaction with the principle as the number of voices increases. (I wonder if Hindemith became aware of such a problem, and if it contributed to making the completion of CMC more difficult for him.) This is to say that one might well not hear the degree-progression of Example 8 above as the real adumbration of the three-voice texture. It might be one possible version; but it arguably not the only one. Furthermore, in elaborate three- and four-part writing such as Bach’s chorales and chorale preludes, it is often difficult to determine exactly which note is basic to the harmony and which is decorative, an obstacle which makes determining the root-tone almost impossible.

Hindemith attacks the method of counterpoint that makes instruments rather than voices the primary medium. He argues that instrumental thinking leads to

\[\text{\footnotesize 6 Both Brahms and Bruckner were much occupied with the question of when parallel octaves and fifths might legitimately occur. See ‘Bruckner’s Oktaven’ by Timothy Jackson in Music & Letters, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Aug. 1997), pp. 391-409.}\]
the abandonment of a technique based on simple elements (*Satztechnik vom Einfachen*) in favour of exotic and speculative combinations of notes designed for almost exclusively instrumental purposes (*fast ausschliesslich instrumentale Zwecke*). These are quite unsuited to the requirements of unaccompanied voices (*für echt vokale, dass heisst für das Zusammengehen mehrerer unbegleiter Singstimmen*). This is the kind of outburst that got Hindemith marked down as a curmudgeon and reactionary. But behind it lies a concern that the student’s ear keep pace with his eye, a principle which is not far removed from Schoenberg’s ideas about composition and ear-training.\(^7\)

This brings him to a crucial point. Hindemith’s choice in CMC III of what he terms work material (*Werkstoff*) is an intriguing mix of hymn tunes and folk material from a variety of sources, German, English, Irish, American, French and also plainchant. His explanation of this (CMC III pp. 192-193) is that this material gives the student a chance of developing a personal idiom based more on understanding of the material than on stylistic mannerisms. For this purpose, he argues that the oldest material is paradoxically the most modern (*dass Älteste noch immer oder schon wieder Allermodernste ist*).

Here speaks the Hindemith whose performances with his Yale students of *Orfeo* and pre-baroque works are now regarded as landmarks of the early music revival. This concept of work material strikes me as one of the most potent ideas in Hindemith’s CP. Much of traditional teaching of counterpoint and harmony is vitiated by confusion about style. Let us grant that a fledgling composer should study tonal counterpoint. But why should this study be restricted to the styles of two periods only, the 16th and 18th centuries? The drawback of the stylistic method is that the student is given two quite distinct, and arguably incompatible, tasks: one, to write technically ‘correct’ exercises, and the other, to imitate a particular style which, in the case of Bach, is an extraordinarily idiosyncratic and difficult one. The principles of so-called strict counterpoint might seem to raise them above these stylistic objections. Here, if anywhere, we have a style-free method of imparting the basics. But this practice is open to many even more

---

serious objections, for what composer living or dead has written species counterpoint in the way that Schoenberg, for example, presents the subject, without even a text to set?8

What Hindemith offers against these approaches is something akin to the Basic English of CK Ogden. Ogden and his associates started by asking how much English a foreign student needed in order to get by. They concluded that 850 words of general vocabulary plus 150 of specialized vocabulary adapted to the student’s needs (his job, for example) were sufficient. Similar criteria of selection were applied to grammatical constructions, idioms and so on. This way of approaching the subject – at once personal and utilitarian – strikes me as being akin to what Hindemith is attempting to do. Hindemith’s CP is underpinned by a Bauhaus-like concept of adapting means to very particular ends that are themselves determined by the nature and even the severe limitations of the material one works in. The prime criterion of success is no longer the replication of styles (a method that surely owes more to the musicological-historical interests of most university departments than to an aspiring composer’s needs) but the student’s performative ability in executing basic, stylistically neutral (über Stile sich erhebenden), strategies.

Here Hindemith’s CP may prove relevant to the situation in many university departments and academies. Though it was never much admitted, the older method of teaching depended much upon the circumstance that most students were fluent keyboard players. By the time these students got to counterpoint class, half of the teacher’s work had already been done for him or her. The present situation is quite different: to the modern student, the word keyboard is as likely to mean computer keyboard as piano. With such students, teachers can find the attempt to instill the niceties of baroque keyboard style useless. Hindemith’s method, voice-based and independent of ‘style’, may prove a

8 Objections to species counterpoint are not new. At precisely the time that Schoenberg and Hindemith were writing their treatises an impatient and damning indictment of the practice of species came from the unlikely source of the traditionalist and now rather scorned authority William Lovelock. See his essay, ‘Musings on strict counterpoint’, The Musical Times, Vol. 77 no. 1126, December 1936.
workable alternative. Immensely practical musician though he was, he would not, one senses, have scorned tools like music software and midi playback. To return to the model of Basic English, one could argue that counterpoint would now be better taught as a ‘foreign language’ than as the ‘native idiom’ that it was to generations of pianists and organ scholars.

It might be argued against Hindemith’s idea of employing pre-existent work material that it reduces counterpoint to melody-plus-accompaniment. His answer to this objection is interesting, for he refuses to allow a hard and fast distinction between the melody-and-accompaniment style on the one hand and the unfolding of independent voices on the other, saying that the structural and harmonic basis of both styles, the homophonic and the contrapuntal, is the same:

‘A glance at the work of the great contrapuntists will confirm for us that their structural principle is no mere assemblage of melodies’ (dass nicht nur blosse Summierung von Melodien ihr Konstruktionsprinzip ist). Hindemith in fact does not believe in the idea of a ‘utopian polyphony’ (eine ebenso utopischen hundertprozentigen Polyphonie); a harmonic-vertical dimension will always assert some degree of influence.

In CMC III Hindemith expounds what amounts to a theory of the psychology of listening, especially as it relates to multi-voice polyphony. It is possible only to hint at its outline here. Hindemith acknowledges the impossibility for the listener of processing three voices equally. Where the ear tires of complicated voicing, it reverts to a harmonic kind of listening, and where it tires of this, it reverts to perception of rhythmic pattern.

A respect in which the CP might be found lacking is that of form. This problem may be traced to Hindemith’s procedure of using the Model for the earlier exercises and the pre-extant work material already described for the later. In these circumstances, the given melodic material already dictates the shape of the piece. A student is likely to come away from CMC being none the wiser about such basic subjects as binary dance forms, unless the teacher supplements Hindemith’s material with his own. Hindemith discusses the subject of form on pp 145-152 of CMC III. He advises that the tonal succession (tonaler Ablauf) of
the piece be worked out first. A degree-progression should then be worked out for this, and from this the controlling two-part framework (die übergeordnete Zweistimmigkeit) developed. Note that even in three-part working, Hindemith emphasises the priority of a two-part frame, a possible residue of his study of Schenker. The third voice is then added. This explanation in fact says little about the overall tonal scheme of a piece. Hindemith proceeds to discuss the idea of harmonic density (Dichte) and its distribution throughout a piece, but the discussion is hampered by the lack of music examples. Passages like this may reflect the unfinished state of CMC III.

This weakness perhaps points to another in the CP, namely, the lack of a real theory of modulation. One might argue that the twelve-tone aspect of Hindemith’s theory to some extent covers this: if all twelve pitches are potentially in circulation, any key change is possible at any moment. But the perplexed student wishing to know which key is best, and how to get there smoothly, might find this of little help. And most of Hindemith’s examples are rather too short to illustrate the principle of modulation in any way other than the most local.

Another problem with Hindemith’s theory is the lack of a clear method of visual presentation. He devises an ingenious set of symbols for the steps of the scale, and another for the various types of melodic formula. These take a certain amount of getting used to – another reason perhaps why CMC is so little consulted. But in the longer term they help to keep the written text uncluttered to an extent that makes one wonder why a similar scheme had not been devised earlier. The problems arise when Hindemith wants to demonstrate visually all the levels that are unfolding in an exercise or analysis. Take for example his analysis in CMC I of Machaut’s Il m’est avis. In addition to the two staves of the score, there is a melodic analysis of the main voice, a degree-progression and step progression of the same, a map of the two-voice framework, also with degree progression, a map of the main tonal moves, and also a line of symbols for what Hindemith calls harmonic fluctuation. This makes eight staves in all. The music itself begins to disappear under its analytic apparatus. Even less clear is

\[9 \text{CMC I, p. 206}\]
the exact relationship between all these analytical levels. This problem, marked enough in the simple texture of Machaut’s song, renders almost unreadable the analysis of Schoenberg’s Klavierstück op. 33a.10 (It is strange to think that Hindemith sent this piece on its long march through the analytic literature.)11 Hindemith simply never devised a method of visual representation as elegant as that of Schenker, whose work he knew well.

Figure 2 is a brief summary in table form of the some of the strengths and weaknesses of Hindemith’s CP. This summary is necessarily subjective, and I could imagine readers wishing to switch some items between columns. But it might provide some helpful discussion points for readers coming to grips for the first time with the thorny texts of CMC II and III.

10 CMC I, p. 217
11 The composer Humphrey Searle offers criticism and an alternative reading of the Schoenberg, but using Hindemith’s principles. See Humphrey Searle, Twentieth century counterpoint, a guide for students, Williams and Norgate 1954, pp.67-69
### Strengths

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Not stylistic-dependent. Work material drawn from rich variety of sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Systematic unfolding of material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>‘Twelve-tone tonality.’ Not tied slavishly to the major-minor system. No artificial division between tonality and chromaticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Extrapolation of two and three parts into the degree-progression emphasizes melodic basis of counterpoint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Degree-progression offers the student a way of checking the quality of exercises, though it may be more effective in two- than in three-voice workings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Voice-based. Everything should be singable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Weaknesses

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Lack of clear teaching of form. Could explain the central ‘fantasia’ part of the structure more fully.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Equivalence theory of intervals like 2/3 contradicts traditional understanding and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Lack of fully elaborated theory of modulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Unwieldiness of presentation. Hindemith’s system would benefit from a clearer visual presentation (cf. Schenker).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Autonomy of inner voices insufficiently stressed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: strengths and weaknesses of CP

A remarkable aspect of the early twentieth century was the devotion shown by giants of the period to the problems of pedagogy, even as they addressed themselves to beginners. This was not simple magnanimity. The most basic materials of music were being fundamentally reshaped, and it was clearly an urgent matter for Hindemith, Bartok and Schoenberg to ask the most basic questions about what constituted a dissonance or a consonance. Paradoxically,
as the tonal system broke down, they felt that younger composers needed a thorough grounding in it.

Hindemith has been criticized for his evident disdain for atonality. Yet his dislike of the idea is inherent in the very basis of his harmonic thinking and his CP, for both Series 1 and Series 2 make no particular distinction between dissonance and consonance. Rather, they express a continuum which allows for the use of any sonority – be it major third or minor ninth, or any chord – from the outset, though of course the student is likely to use the consonant sonorities more to begin with. If this puts Hindemith at odds with Schoenberg, it surely makes his theory more consonant with the intuitive way in which most composers now approach this issue. It is partly for this reason that Hindemith's theory tells one much about his practice as a composer, for the more advanced music examples in CMC are genuine, if simple, compositions by Hindemith. In this he is unlike Schoenberg. Schoenberg's theoretic writing reveals little about his mature style. In fact, anyone who wanted to refute Schoenberg the composer could do a lot worse than to cite Schoenberg the tonal theorist. This is the grand contradiction at the heart of the Schoenbergian project that he never resolved. In an early and very influential review of CMC, the composer Virgil Thomson seized on this point:

When modernist composers write, for pedagogical reasons, handbooks of their craft, either they must pretend for the moment that modernism does not exist, or else they must revise the classical theory in order to make it fit the epoch's practice. The first of these, the ostrich or blind-man's-buff attitude, was adopted by Arnold Schoenberg and by Walter Piston when they wrote their manuals of harmony.

Thomson proceeds to point out that the manuals of d'Indy and Hindemith are in the second category, and he continues:

I call [The Craft of Musical Composition] the most comprehensive procedure [of tonal analysis] I have yet encountered, because it is based on acoustical facts rather than on stylistic conventions. At least, it proposed an analytical method that can be applied to the tonal structure of all written music of Europe from
medieval to modern times, whether or not that music observes the syntax of ‘classical’, which is to say eighteenth and nineteenth century, harmony.  

Some of this enthusiasm seems misguided. In particular, Hindemith’s claim to have invented a theory that can embrace the procedures of Machaut and Schoenberg equally is one that the modern reader, sensitive to the claims of all-embracing systems, is likely to treat with justified scepticism. Yet Thomson gets to the crux of the matter when he refers to putting ‘acoustic facts’ before ‘stylistic conventions.’

With Hindemith and Messiaen there is a link between theory and practice. Schoenberg’s theoretical writings after Harmonielehre make for intermittently fascinating but at last frustrating reading. Firstly, they are in such a fragmentary state, the projected magnum opus on composition being scarcely more than a collection of headings, sub-headings, and jottings of varying degrees of interest. Despite the manifold objections to strict counterpoint as a method of teaching, Schoenberg’s book on the subject offers no rationale at all for devoting the amount of time to it that he does. The importance of the subject is simply assumed. Another respect in which Hindemith’s method differs from Schoenberg’s is that Hindemith’s depends little upon analysis and mainly upon practice. This may also increase prejudice against it within the academy, which has often turned the Schoenberg pedagogic texts into treatises of analysis, thus consigning them to a fate which would have puzzled Schoenberg.

The reader of Hindemith’s CMC may reflect that composers do not usually make the best theorists, Milton Babbitt and George Perle being exceptions that prove the rule. The more densely speculative parts of CMC I can remind the reader of the kind of enthusiast who builds a battleship out of balsa and cardboard - commendable enough for the effort and knowledge put into it, even if it is not much of a battleship. I have tried to suggest in this essay that the reader of CMC

---

12 Quoted by Forte, 1998, p. 5.
13 Arnold Schoenberg, *The musical idea and the logic, technique and art of its presentation*, edited, translated, and with a commentary by Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff. Indiana University Press, 2006
14 Arnold Schoenberg, *Preliminary exercises in counterpoint*, edited by Erwin Stein, Faber and Faber, 1988
might be as well occupied in studying the extensive music examples as in reading the text. From Hindemith’s examples and his glosses on them one gets the irreplaceable sensation of watching the master in his workshop. Perhaps in any theoretical work by a composer, this is how things should be.

Whatever its limitations, Hindemith’s contrapuntal method is a profound, extended and systematic exploration of the subject. This makes one wonder why it has suffered such neglect. The most obvious reason is also the most plausible. Hindemith’s theory has suffered the fate of his music, which is now unfashionable. Geoffrey Skelton’s fine biography presents the unsettling picture of an international celebrity (with a conducting timetable as impressive as Karajan’s) who felt bitter and isolated in the new world order of Boulez and company. Skelton remarks that by the time of Hindemith’s retirement from Zurich University, only one doctoral candidate was registered with him. (The thesis topic, ironically enough, was Schoenberg’s quartets.) From the 30s through the 50s, it was axiomatic to describe Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartok and Hindemith as the quadrumvirate of high modernism. But Hindemith’s obituary in the Musical Times of 1964 was already an elegy for the wheel that had fallen off the wagon. Yet his sense of humour never deserted him, and the aging composer even retained something of his youthful irreverence, as in the Pittsburgh symphony of 1958, probably the only repertoire work to quote both Webern’s Symphony op. 21 and the Woody Guthrie song ‘Pittsburgh is a great old town’. This music will have to wait for a more sympathetic hearing than we are ready to give it. Meanwhile, The craft of musical composition remains the most combative and original treatment of counterpoint by any modern composer. Musicians could afford to be more possessive about it.

---

15 Geoffrey Skelton, *Paul Hindemith, the man behind the music*, London, Gollancz, 1975
16 Musical Times,