

Point against point: *contrapunctus* as a metaphor in early contrapuntal theory

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The Latin word *contrapunctus* derives from the phrase *punctus contra punctum*. But the contemporary (medieval) etymological explanation varies from theorist to theorist. Analysis of such explanations provides an approach to the early view of counterpoint. To survey music treatises in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I have done search through the files contained in the *Thesaurus Musicarum Latinarum* database, while following Bernhard's *Quellenverzeichnis in Lexicon musicum medii aevi* for their dating.

Whereas the one occurrence in the fourteenth century has *punctus contra punctum* in its full form, the phrase is modified in most of the twelve relevant passages in the fifteenth-century writings. This fact means that something the original form conveyed was lost in the fifteenth century.

In *punctus contra punctum*, the original spatial nature of *punctus* comes to light as it goes with *contra* (against), because a point as an entity having a precise position but lacking extent is most appropriate for what something is *against*. These two words combined, meaning "Point against point," form a vivid spatial metaphor, which a modified combination does not present. This observation may be paraphrased as the following: in the earliest theory, counterpoint was perceived spatially as note against note, but this perception grew fainter in a later period.

As is evident from early neumes, representation punctuatum of notes was not native to West Europe. It involves indication of individual pitches. When transition from nondiastematic to diastematic neumes took place in the eleventh century, Greek scale theory transmitted by Boethius and developed by medieval theorists such as Hucbald and Guido was instrumental. Counterpoint, the most distinguishing musical style of West Europe, owes its very constitution to Greek theory of music.