Music 231
Cantus Firmus Writing

These notes are a distillation of Salzter/Schacter's Counterpoint in Composition. It is in no way a substitute for reading and working through the actual text book.

New Material
- Constructing a melodic line with a desirable shape, sense of direction, a balance of steps and leaps, continuity, variety and correct handling of leaps
- Consonant and dissonant horizontal intervals

I. General considerations
A. Cantus Firmus = a given line against which counterpoint will be added
B. Simplest melodic (horizontal, linear) organization
   1. Harmony, rhythm, and motive are excluded, so not a melody, but an abstraction
   2. Aesthetic qualities still important
   3. “Reveals in embryo many of the characteristics of more highly developed musical organisms” (p.3)

II. Rhythm and length
A. All whole notes (to minimize any rhythmic dimension)
   1. When all tones receive equal stress, there are no hierarchical groupings
B. 8 - 16 tones

III. Tonal materials; melodic range
A. All notes must be diatonic (not chromatic—no accidentals)
B. All melodic lines should be suited to the voice
C. Unusable intervals:
   1. Larger than an octave
   2. Augmented and diminished intervals
   3. Sevenths
   4. Chromatic half-steps example: c-c# (diatonic half-steps are OK: c to d-flat)
D. Usable intervals: m2, M2, m3, M3, P4, P5, m6, M6, P8. descending m6 and M6 are seldom used (hard to sing).
E. Range
   1. Maximum = M10
   2. Usual = P8
   3. Many use just M6 or P5

IV. Direction
A. A Clearly defined beginning and goal achieved by single climax and clear shape supports tonal motion
B. Climax may be highest or lowest note
   1. A low climax works best in the bass register and should be reserved for two-part counterpoint

V. Continuity is achieved by using predominantly stepwise motion

VI. Variety is achieved by
A. two - four leaps
B. several changes in direction

VII. Use of leaps
A. Leaps larger than a 3rd should be followed by a change in direction (preferably stepwise)
B. Leaps are usually prepared by stepwise motion from the opposite direction
C. A leap up of a P4 does not need to be prepared by stepwise motion from the opposite direction
D. Avoid two consecutive leaps in the same direction
E. Avoid two consecutive leaps forming triads
F. Avoid more than two consecutive leaps

VIII. Balance
A. Avoid excessive motion in one direction by any means
   1. Conject: no more than five notes
   2. Conject with thirds: no more than M6
   3. Conject motion followed by a leap in the same direction
IX. Unresolved melodic tension
   A. Avoid outlining a dissonant interval: an outlined interval is the interval formed by the first and last tones of a motion in a single direction
   B. Do not climax on the leading tone

X. Repetition of a single tone
   A. Immediate repetition of a tone is not allowed because it emphasizes that note
   B. Do not use the climactic tone more than once
   C. Do not emphasize a single tone through overuse or by leaping from and then back to it

XI. Repetition of groups of tones
   A. Repetition of groups of tones (immediately, or with intervening material) implies motivic work, which is avoided in species counterpoint
   B. Sequences are avoided for the same reason

XII. Beginning and end
   A. Start and end on the tonic in the same register (it is ok to have an unprepared leap at the very beginning)
   B. Penultimate note is either the leading tone or supertonic (the supertonic for our purposes)
   C. The penultimate note should not be preceded by a leap larger than a third
   D. Usually ends from above: scale degrees 3-2-1 or 4-2-1 (1-2-1 & 7-2-1 are also possible)

XIII. Modal cantus firmi
   Not used for this class

XIV. Writing cantus firmi
   A. Use the alto clef
   B. To further deemphasize rhythm, do not use bar lines (except for the double bar at the end)
   C. For practice, write several in different major and minor keys, varying the length and placement of the climax

Please note: the information on this page has been assembled with the help of Dr. Ronald Caltabiano