Kinds of contrapuntal motion

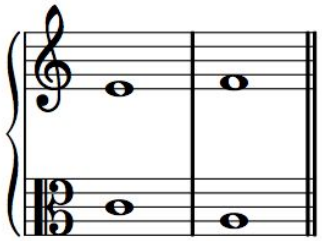
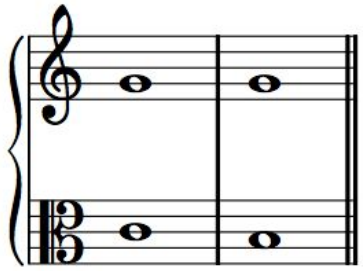
Eamonn Bell - Fundamentals of Music S002 F'16

Contrapuntal motion describes the behavior of two musical lines (voices, parts) considered together. The word contrapuntal is derived from "counterpoint" which refers to the literal setting of notes against (on top of) other notes.

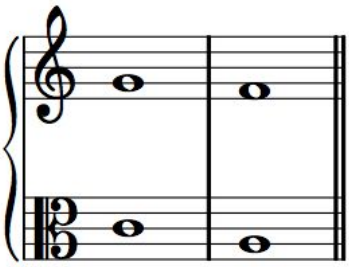
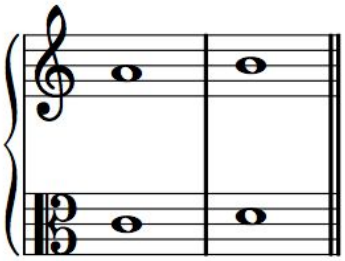
The different kinds of contrapuntal motion depend on the direction of each line from note to note, when two pairs of simultaneous notes are considered at a time.

The direction of each line is found by looking at the melodic interval from the first to the second note of each line.

If the interval is an ascending interval, then the line is said to ascend. Likewise, if the interval is a descending interval, then the line is said to descend. If there is no interval between the first and the second note - as in, the note stays the same - then the line is said to be static.

Kind of contrapuntal motion	*One example (of many)*[1]	*Definition*
contrary		Both lines move in opposite directions (top line ascends lower line descends; **or, vice versa**)
oblique		One line (either top or bottom) is static, the other moves (in any direction).

[1] Examples taken from http://openmusictheory.com/motionTypes.html

similar		Both lines move in the same direction.
parallel		Parallel motion can be considered a special case of similar motion where the <u>size of the harmonic interval</u> formed between the lines stays the same. In this case, a harmonic M6 is followed by another M6. If the B were B flat this would still be parallel motion, because the resulting harmonic intervals are of the same size (M6 followed by m6). This comes about when both lines move by the same melodic interval **size**.

Chromatic/enharmonic cases

The notion of kinds of contrapuntal motion derives from the study of counterpoint in which (almost) all notes in the lines are diatonic - they are found in the major or minor scale without chromatic alteration.

When chromatic notes (and, by extension, enharmonics) get involved, it might seem the notion of kinds of contrapuntal motion loses some of its intuitive characteristics. **You will not go astray if you consider the lines as written, rather than as sounded.**

Consider the first sequence below. Does the first line "ascend" or not? Well, what is the interval between B sharp and C? You know how to figure out the answer to this question, despite the fact that B sharp major isn't a key many people are accustomed to thinking in. B-C is a second, but what is its quality?. The B sharp major scale has to have a C double sharp in it (think). So C natural is C double sharp taken down, not one (that would be a minor second above B sharp) but twice (diminished second).

So the melodic interval is an ascending diminished second. The lower part is a descending diminished second. And the voices "move" in contrary motion. What matters isn't the sound but the notation. Convince yourself that the other two kinds of contrapuntal motion depicted below are similar (not parallel!) and parallel. You won't encounter these edge cases very often, certainly not on a quiz or exam or possibly even in the theory sequence here (if you go on to Music Theory I-IV). But still good to know.h