Discantare Super Planum Cantum : new approaches to vocal polyphonic improvisation 1300-1470

Berentsen, N.M.T.

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Universiteit Leiden

Author: Berentsen, Niels
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5 REFLECTING ON PEDAGOGY

When Ernst Ferand published his *Die Improvisation in der Musik*—the first systematic modern discussion of historical improvisation—in 1938, his motivation seems to have been largely a pedagogical one. Ferand pointed to the need for a more practical and integrated form of teaching theoretical or secondary subjects in higher musical education, to mend the 'omnipresent misbalance between knowledge and ability, as well as theory and musical practice'.[395] According to Ferand such a 'practical theory education' ('praktischer Theorieunterricht') could be based on historical improvisation techniques, which, he argued, had the potential to establish a middle ground between 'abstract' musical thinking, as required in harmony and counterpoint, and 'purely motoric, thoughtless and ultimately unmusical' execution.[396]

Reading Ferand's introduction, it strikes me how many of its concerns are still valid today, some eighty years later. Much of the contents of a conservatoire 'music theory' curriculum (sight-reading, ear training, counterpoint and harmony) consists of practical skills, which historically belonged to the category of *musica practica*. However, Ferand seems to have been the first modern author fully to realise the potential of historical improvisation to move away from the deadlock of a musical education based solely on the execution and analysis of musical texts. As we have seen, this agenda is now gaining terrain, and historical improvisation has already been used successfully in some conservatoires to develop aural skills and stylistic understanding. This development is likely to gain more momentum with the greater accessibility of historical pedagogical materials, both online and in print, as well as newly devised manuals, instruction books, and even Youtube videos on the subject.[397]

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[395] '(…) allerorten bestehendes Mißverhältnis zwischen Wissen und Können, zwischen Theorie und Praxis der Musik'. Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik. Eine entwicklungsgeschichtliche und psychologische Untersuchung*, p. vii. Translation by the author.

[396] 'rein motorisches, gedankenloses, und letzten Endes unmusikalisches Instrumentalspiel'. Ibid, p. viii, Translation by the author.

[397] Peter Schubert's videos on improvisation can be accessed through <https://www.youtube.com/user/peterschubertmusic> and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTwjL_TQXfJS3KnynTlRpDg> [accessed 16 August 2016].

In this chapter I will reflect on the pedagogical application of historical polyphonic improvisation. First, I will provide an overview of the pedagogical materials on improvised polyphony available to date, reviewing these not primarily for their historical accuracy or scholarly basis, but for their usefulness to learn and teach improvisation. Second, I will discuss some of my own experiences in learning and teaching improvised polyphony. A short account will be given of the way I acquired fluency in these techniques, as well as how I subsequently taught them to friends and colleagues of the ensemble Diskantores, my students at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague, and to participants of occasional workshops. I will conclude with a few thematic reflections on practical aspects of teaching improvisation, hoping to contribute to the continued discussion with my colleagues in the field, that has often been so helpful to me.

5.1 Available Pedagogical Materials

Musicians desirous to learn historical improvisation have a number of roads open to them: one is the hard way—which I have generally undertaken myself— of reading through primary sources and secondary literature before embarking on practical experiments. Another is to seek personal instruction, or—if no teacher is available—to find a manual or instruction book to learn by oneself. My starting point in investigating pedagogical publications is to see what approaches they offer, and whether I have found these useful in learning and teaching improvisation. With some regret I have decided to discuss only materials published in print, primarily due to time constraints. I am aware this entails leaving some interesting approaches unconsidered, as many teachers and musicians do not document or publish their methods, relying on time-honoured practices of oral transmission and Xerox copies instead.[398] A comprehensive history or ethnography of the modern, pedagogical revival of improvised polyphony would be a useful and worthwhile endeavour, but it goes beyond the scope of this chapter; so many talented and dedicated early musicians are teaching and experimenting with improvisation that it would be near impossible to track them all down.

It should be noted that many of the articles and books on improvised polyphony written by modern musicians are much more than pedagogical instructions: some document years of original research as well as experiments with historical improvisation techniques. Authors of practice-oriented publications on improvised polyphony often also engage in a dialogue with 'purely musicological' writing on the subject. [399] Hoping to have given due credit to these authors earlier, I will now confine myself to a discussion of the pedagogical utility of their publications, discussing them in chronological order.

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[398] Teachers who are highly esteemed among their peers, but have not published their approach are for instance Jean-Yves Haymoz (Haute École de Musique de Genève), Adam Gilbert (Thornton School of Music, University of Southern California).
[399] See for instance Ross Duffin's argumentation against Margaret Bent's ideas on *cantare super librum*, in Duffin, p. 69, n. 2.

5.1.1 Timothy McGee, 'Improvisation' (1985)

Timothy McGee includes a chapter on improvisation in his *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performers Guide* (1985), a clearly popularising book aimed at performers with little previous knowledge of these repertoires.[400] Like the book itself, the chapter provides a very broad overview, giving repertoire examples and practical advice on how to practice improvisation. For learning to improvise counterpoint McGee advises a trajectory along the lines of traditional first species counterpoint, providing seven 'rules of two-part counterpoint', but also emphasising the importance of internalising contrapuntal solutions to three- or four-note tenor patterns, before applying them to a whole cantus firmus.[401] The goal of these preparatory exercises, according to McGee, is to learn a 'neutral basic technique which can be expanded later and adapted to a variety of styles.'[402]

Some of the information given by McGee is outdated, such as his statement that 'imitative vocal polyphony (...) in the sixteenth century requires an extensive knowledge of counterpoint'.[403] It is now common knowledge that canons ('stretto fuga') can be improvised according to simple melodic rules.[404] A more serious problem, in my view, is that the chapter covers a rather large period of history, and fails to make a clear distinction between different style periods. One wonders if it is really possible to create a single, 'neutral' kind of counterpoint that could be modified into the variety of styles shown in McGee's examples: an English fifteenth-century carol, a keyboard setting of the *Kyrie cunctipotens* from the Codex Faenza, and a song by Guillaume de Machaut. One can conclude that McGee's chapter suffers from covering too many styles and generalising procedures of counterpoint, as if historical style were only a matter of surface decoration.

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[400] Timothy J. McGee, *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 186–200.
[401] Ibid., pp. 190-196.
[402] Ibid., p. 194.
[403] Ibid., p. 187.
[404] See for instance Janin, pp. 15–24; Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, pp. 156–157.

5.1.2 Margriet Tindemans, 'Improvisation & Accompaniment' (2000)

A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music (2000), edited by Ross Duffin, contains two chapters on improvisation in the 'instrumental usage' section of the book. The first of these is a chapter by the teacher, multi-instrumentalist, and longstanding member of the ensemble Sequentia, Margriet Tindemans (1951-2014).[405] A second chapter, by Rolf Mattes, devoted to improvisation and accompaniment after 1300, will not be addressed here because it focuses primarily on ornamentation and does not give practical advice on polyphonic improvisation. Tindemans begins her contribution by giving some general points of advice, such as to keep one's improvisations simple, to be deliberate and plan ahead, and to not try to be 'overly creative'.[406]

For improvising polyphony, Tindemans advises the reader to start with discant in unisons, fourths, fifths and octaves, using contrary and parallel motion.[407] The example given for this technique somewhat resembles Example 3.6, except in the use of fourths. Tindemans also advocates practicing discant in adjacent consonances centred on a fifth and mirroring each note in an axis. An interesting aspect of Tindemans's teaching is that, except on melodies in equal notes, she also advocates improvising on tenors in rhythmic modes, which creates examples resembling two-voice thirteenth-century motets. A similar technique for improvising Notre Dame-style discant clausulae has also been described by Kenneth Zuckerman (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis).[408]

In sum, Tindemans' chapter provides an excellent introduction to polyphonic improvisation in a thirteenth-century style. It may be used by singers as well, as her examples of polyphony are all based on vocal models. The general guidelines given for practising improvisation are very useful and can apply, in my view, to improvisation in any historical style. My only objection to the chapter's contents lies in its approach to hocket, which is taught by dividing a chant-melody between two different instruments. In fact, it is never the tenor

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[405] Tindemans. For an overview of Tindemans career, see Benjamin Bagby's tribute to her on the website of Sequentia <http://www.sequentia.org/news/tindemans.html> [accessed 16 August 2016].

[406] Ibid., pp. 454-455.

[407] Ibid., p. 462.

[408] Kenneth Zuckerman, 'Improvisation in der Mittelalterlichen Musik- Eine Suche nach Lernmodellen', *Basler Jahrbuch Für Historische Musikpraxis*, 7 (1983), pp. 65–83 (pp. 80–83). On my ideas for extending this idea to the fourteenth-century repertoire see Section 6.2.

that is 'hocketed' in thirteenth-century compositions, but rather the one or two added, organal parts.[409]

5.1.3   Ross Duffin, 'Contrapunctus Simplex et Diminutus' (2007)

The thirty-first edition of the *Basler Jahrbuch* contains a contribution on the subject of fifteenth-century improvised counterpoint by Ross Duffin. He speaks from thirty years of experience teaching improvised counterpoint, and has many insights to offer, some of which are highly practical in nature. Duffin starts out by explaining different types of note-against-note counterpoint in two and three voices, such as discant, different versions of fauxbourdon, and falsobordone, before treating florid types of improvisation. He argues that to progress from simple to florid improvisation it is important to get 'away from the concept of one "main" contrapuntal note moving to another', but rather to 'think of a "grid" of consonant possibilities against each note of the tenor'.[410] Cadence possibilities (tenor clausulae) should 'loom large in the improvisors' minds as places where their function and counterpoint is clearly defined'.[411] For Duffin 'the cadences are what sectionalize florid improvised pieces and give direction and function to the voices.'[412] He also makes the interesting, counterintuitive observation that it can be easier to improvise in four- and five-voice styles than in two- and three-voice ones, 'because the range of each part is more confined and contrapuntal expectations more limited'.[413]

The strength of Duffin's article lies in its inspiring tips and 'tricks of the trade' for florid improvisation. His experiences seem very much in line with Bruno Nettl's description of oral music-making as a progression from one 'point of reference' to the next, shown schematically in Figure 2.2. It is interesting that he does not take the individual note-against-note progressions as reference-points, as some other authors advice, but rather emphasises the role of the cadence to structure an improvisation. Duffin's examples of simple counterpoint

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[409] Tindemans, pp. 465–466. See Ernest H. Sanders, 'Hocket', *Grove Music Online* [accessed 16 August 2016]. The passage quoted by Sanders from the St. Emmeram anonymous also makes it clear that hockets are made 'over a tenor'.
[410] Duffin, p. 81.
[411] Ibid., p. 82.
[412] Ibid., p. 82.
[413] Ibid., p. 88.

are a little monolithic for my taste, however—especially when one compares them with repertoire examples. In general, the article does not offer advice on how to proceed from simple to florid improvisation, such as for instance a species approach, or the gradual introduction of ornaments and suspension dissonances explained in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

5.1.4 Peter Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style* (2007)

The second edition of Peter Schubert's textbook on Renaissance counterpoint contains a number of instructions for improvised exercises.[414] In the introductory note to the instructor, Schubert emphasises the didactic value of improvisation and the importance of training both the 'inner' and 'outer' ear, by singing exercises or playing them at the piano.[415] He advises, for instance, to let students propose a counterpoint to a cantus firmus fragment, have the other students sing back the solution, and evaluate it by ear. More general advice on improvisation follows in the 'introduction to improvisation' at the end of the third chapter of the book.[416] Schubert explains that 'improvising is just very fast composition', and that it is acceptable to prepare exercises mentally before singing. I will return to several other points of practical advice given by Schubert in the thematic reflections at the end of this chapter.

Schubert's book represents a notable advance over earlier counterpoint methods. While the book takes written counterpoint as a starting point, it offers many interesting tips for improvisation, and it has undoubtedly introduced improvisation to many teachers and students of counterpoint. One of Schubert's more interesting contributions is the idea of improvising with the repetition of a motif, referred to as 'contrappunto fugato' in Italian and 'pasos' in Spanish treatises: the improviser 'checks off' as many places in the cantus firmus where the motive can be placed, and improvises freely in between these.[417] The systematic progression in species towards florid counterpoint has certain

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[414] Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*. See pp. 40-43 (introduction and first species), p. 55 (second species), p. 75 (third species), p. 56 (fourth species), p. 101 (mixed values), p. 115 (motivic counterpoint), pp. 156-157 (canon at the fifth), pp. 190-191 (fauxbourdon) and p. 194 (parallel tenth model).
[415] Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii. For my own take using the piano, to which some teachers of early music object for reasons of temperament, see Section 5.3.2.
[416] Ibid., pp. 40-43.
[417] Ibid., p. 115.

advantages, for instance for learning to control dissonance. It is possible, however, that certain users may feel rather constricted in their attempts at improvising by a textbook that provides improvisation exercises after written ones, and gives many 'hard' and 'soft' rules for every type.

The structure of the book also causes certain simple techniques to be explained after much more difficult ones: fauxbourdon and 'stretto fuga' at the fifth, for instance, appear only after the student has presumably already mastered singing and/or writing florid counterpoint. Finally, it is not clear to me why Schubert discourages improvising in the 'parallel sixth model' (a gymel accompanied by a bassus in thirds and fifths), saying that it would be difficult to glean its 'many possible bass lines from long examination of repertoire and/or by trial and error'.[418] This type of bassus is actually very easy to improvise, as has been shown in Chapter 4. An attentive reader would of course observe that the placement of improvisation exercises in *Modal Counterpoint* is such as to make them inform the writing of exercises. This is quite reasonable for a general-use counterpoint textbook, but it comes at a price for the book's usefulness to instructors wishing to teach primarily through improvisation.

5.1.5 Alban Thomas, *Contrepoint à 2 Voix* (2011)

A series of instruction books on improvised polyphony in French is being prepared by Alban Thomas (Conservatoire Gautier d'Épinal), two volumes of which have been published so far. Both books are written in dialogue form, like Renaissance treatises, which allows Thomas to 'converse' with the reader, giving hands-on advice, and making   historical digressions.[419] The second volume, dedicated to *organum duplum*, will not be considered here, as it falls largely outside of the focus of this thesis.[420] In the first volume Thomas covers two-voice counterpoint in a late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century idiom.[421] Thomas stresses that his method presents a personal approach, which is neither definitive nor

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[418] Ibid., p. 192.

[419] The dialogue form of the book also has its disadvantages; it makes it difficult for the reader to glance at first sight what is being taught, having to read a substantial amount of text explaining every new element.

[420] Alban Thomas, *Organum Duplum aux 12ème et 13ème siècles*, Jouer et Chanter sur le Livre 2 (Derbamont: Association 'Musique à la Renaissance', 2014).

[421] Alban Thomas, *Contrepoint à 2 voix*, Jouer et Chanter sur le Livre 1 (Derbamont: Association 'Musique à la Renaissance', 2011).

complete, and which is intended to teach basic improvisation skills without focussing on a specific style.[422]

Similarly to the approach laid out in Chapter 4, Thomas starts his instruction from singing gymel, which is later enriched by with other intervals, and by combining one gymel with another.[423] Special attention is paid to the melodic shape of the cantus firmus, identifying its curves and proposing appropriate contrapuntal responses to them. Thomas promotes a gradual introduction of ornamental formulas rather than a comprehensive training in species counterpoint.[424] He does treat 'two notes per *tactus*' (second species) counterpoint, but explicitly identifies it as a somewhat 'unmusical' training exercise.[425] His examples of such exercises resemble those of Antonius de Leno (see Example 4.8). Towards the end of the book Thomas mentions the possibility of singing on a tenor in ternary rhythm, as well as on mensurally notated chansons.[426]

Besides some minor issues, the biggest disadvantage of Thomas's method is its approach to visualising counterpoint.[427] Instead of Guillelmus Monachus's way of visualising gymels as thirds below or above the cantus firmus (see Examples 4.1 and 4.12), Thomas proposes to read them as if they were unisons.[428] This is of course easy when one sings a part entirely in parallel thirds and sixths, but it becomes problematic when other intervals are introduced; in a gymel in upper thirds, unisons have to be visualised as lower thirds, fifths as upper thirds, and sixths—very confusingly—as fourths.[429] When changing between gymels, Thomas also advises to change visualisation, in what he terms a 'monnayage visuel'.[430] In my view, this method is not a simplification, much less

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[422] Ibid., p. 11 and 109.
[423] Ibid., pp. 41-45.
[424] Ibid., pp. 33-40 and 73-76.
[425] Ibid., pp. 77-79.
[426] Ibid., pp. 93-95 and 103-108.
[427] Thomas for instance introduces the 9-8 suspension, which is very rare in two-voice counterpoint, and perhaps is better not mentioned at all. (Ibid., p. 81). His diagram with ornamental formulas in semiminims on p. 74 could be a useful tool, but it is seems insufficiently tried-out; many of these formulas produce unwanted dissonances and parallels. I would myself refrain from writing semiminims tied to semibreves in duple time (tempus imperfectum), as such a value cannot be written in mensural notation. (Ibid., p. 37).
[428] Thomas duly mentions that this method of visualisation is not based literally on historical sources. Ibid., p. 23.
[429] Ibid., p. 23 and 41.
[430] Ibid., pp. 45-47.

an improvement of historical ways to visualise counterpoint. Finally, the book is not consistent in the kind of readership it addresses. Note-names are given in their ancient form as 'Ffaut' (f) or 'Csolfaut' (c'), but cantus firmi and examples are all given treble clef, to be transposed if necessary.[431] One would think that musicians familiar with hexachordal solmisation would be able to also read c- and F-clefs, or would at least like to see examples in the original tessitura of Renaissance music. In sum, while the book is interesting as a document of Thomas's personal practice improvising and teaching, and some valuable insights can be gained from it, it is very problematic in certain respects.

5.1.6 Barnabé Janin, *Chanter sur le Livre* (2012)

The most extensive pedagogical publication on the subject of improvised counterpoint to date is the manual *Chanter sur le livre* (2012) by Barnabé Janin.[432] This book, rather like a historical treatise, documents not just the experience of its author, but collective practices developed by the ensembles Le Chant sur le Livre and Obsidienne as well.[433] The manual is attractively laid out, with much use of colour in the text as well as the musical examples. Like Tindemans and Schubert, Janin opens with some general points of advice, including 'improvising with friends or future friends', seeking out favourable acoustics and not interrupting or commenting on the improvisation before it is finished.[434] The contrapuntal models are divided into two-, three-, four- and five-voice techniques, arranged from simple to complex. About a third of the book is taken up with 'melodies to improvise on': chants and vernacular songs, secular and devotional, as well as parts taken from polyphonic compositions, such as the songs of Gilles Binchois and the Cancionero de Palacio.

Because of the sheer size of the book and the numerous styles of improvisation it touches on, I will confine myself to commenting on its presentation of two fifteenth-century techniques. After a first chapter on improvised canons—technically not 'on the book', because improvised without

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[431] Ibid., pp. 13-14.
[432] Janin, *Chanter sur le livre. Manuel pratique d'improvisation polyphonique de la Renaissance*.
[433] Janin includes his own experiences improvising with these groups as 'sources' for the contents of the manual (p. 9). The book also contains an introduction by Jean-Yves Haymoz, leader of Le Chant sur le Livre (pp. 6-7).
[434] Ibid., p. 12

cantus firmus—Janin treats the gymel.[435] He first teaches a part in thirds below the cantus firmus, explaining how they can be turned into sixths above. After introducing several possibilities for passing notes and syncopations, Janin invites the student to improvise on the tenor of an English carol.[436] It is regrettable that the examples in this chapter are based only on late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century tenors, and that—with the exception of the 'Landini cadence'—no early fifteenth-century elements are introduced, making it rather difficult for the student to approach the style of that particular genre.[437]

For three-voice fauxbourdon Janin mentions all the different options of cantus firmus placement, referring somewhat confusingly to Guillelmus's 'modus Anglicorum' as fauxbourdon 'à la française' and to the classical version of the technique with the chant in the superius as 'à l'anglaise'.[438] Janin advises using the latter for singing hymns, taking Du Fay's compositions as an example, as was done also by Peter Schubert and myself.[439] Both Janin and Schubert advocate the addition of cadences when the chant does not finish with a soprano clausula, supplying it after the original close of the phrase. This is a good way to proceed for beginners, although it must be said that for hymns without upward closes, adding a bar to every phrase can rather disturb the rhythmic flow of an improvisation.[440] Two alternatives are shown in Example 5.1: a 'plagal' fourth-leap close in the tenor and a more elegant option, which may be used by more experience improvisers. In this latter option, which can be observed in Du Fay's

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[435] Ibid., pp. 26-34

[436] Ibid., p. 31.

[437] In fact the majority of English carols mix gymel with contrary motion and include some surprising elements such as dissonant appoggiaturas and sustained fourths: see for instance Example 4.3.

[438] The naming of fauxbourdon techniques has a very confusing history. As we have seen in Chapter 4, what Guillelmus Monachus calls the 'way of the English' ('modus Anglicorum') is a technique with cantus firmus in the tenor (see Example 4.12). This use was perpetuated by writers like Bukofzer and Besseler, who referred to it as 'English discant'. English treatises, however, invariably instruct to place the chant in the middle voice in faburden. As I have argued in Chapter 4, Guillelmus's 'English' technique is virtually absent from compositions, and French composers like Du Fay and Binchois only use the technique with the chant in the upper voice.

[439] Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, pp. 190–192; Berentsen, 'From Treatise to Classroom: Teaching Fifteenth-Century Improvised Counterpoint', pp. 234–237. The latter was adapted here as Section 4.2.2.

[440] A good example of such a chant is the *Te lucis* for Christmas-tide, see *Liber Hymnarius*, ed. by Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes (Solesmes, Paris, Tournai: Desclée, 1983), p. 16.

hymns, a cadence is 'squeezed in', whilst the regular rhythm of the hymn is kept intact.[441]

A) Additive cadence   B) Plagal fourth-jump close   C) 'Squeezed-in' cadence

Example 5.1 Different ways of making a close in fauxbourdon.

Janin's manual presents Renaissance-style improvised counterpoint in the form of easily understood 'recipes', somewhat like a cookbook, using visually attractive diagrams and examples,[442] and last but not least he provides a 'starter kit' of melodies to improvise on. The value of such a book for musicians and music students can hardly be overestimated, and it is to be hoped that an English translation will soon become available, making it accessible to an even wider audience. The concerns I have voiced above are connected to a single issue: although the book aims to teach fifteenth- as well as sixteenth-century improvisation, it focuses mainly on the later, 'classical' type of counterpoint. On occasion it tends to modernise techniques and genres of the earlier fifteenth century, such as the English carol or the three-voice Burgundian chanson.[443] The book contains no contrapuntal techniques used before the generation of Du Fay,

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[441] This procedure may for instance be observed in bb. 9-10, 14-15 and 18-19 of Example 4.16.

[442] For instance, Janin's presentation of 'stretto fuga' at the fifth, in the form of a simple diagram, works better than Schubert's description of it. See Janin, p. 20; Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, pp. 156–157.

[443] See my remarks on the English carol above. To improvise a 'chanson bourguignonne' Janin advises the use of a principal duo in gymel, to which a 'mobile contratenor' is added using bassus and fauxbourdon contratenor formulae. See Janin, pp. 88–89. This type of contratenor is shown by Guilelmus Monachus (See Park, p. 68 [transcr. 186]), but is only very rarely found in the songs of Binchois for instance. These show a very complex type of voice leading, with contrary motion between all the parts. See *Die Chansons von Gilles Binchois*, Musikalische Denkmäler 2 (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1957). The notable exception is *Je ne fais toujours* (no. 19, p. 17), in which the upper voices run in sixths in the first two phrases, with a contratenor in thirds and fifths below.

and the earliest treatises cited in its bibliography date from the 1470s.[444] These comments serve to remind us that, as Janin states himself, his book is the 'effort of a musician of the twenty-first century to help other musicians of the twenty-first century',[445] and however well-informed and extensive such efforts may be, they should never be taken as definitive or complete.

5.1.7 Summary

The publications discussed above can all teach us something about learning or teaching improvised polyphony. For a course in Renaissance counterpoint one has the choice between the books of Schubert and Janin, the first focusing primarily on writing, the second almost exclusively on improvisation. Duffin's article, which is of course not a handbook, can be useful to gain ideas for more complex types of singing *super librum* suitable for advanced students. For the earlier fifteenth and fourteenth centuries, no such practical publications exist to date, a lacuna which Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis may help to fill. By contrast, several approaches to teaching *Ars Antiqua*-style improvisation exist, two of which, by Tindemans and Thomas, are also accessible in print.[446] While I hope that this survey will stimulate the reader to discover and experiment with the methods laid out in these publications, I would also like to stress the importance of a continued dialogue with the historical materials themselves. These may perhaps not be as easily accessible and understood as modern articles and textbooks, but, as has been demonstrated in the foregoing chapters, they are veritable treasure-troves that still hold many important insights for us as modern musicians.

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[444] '(…) la tentative d'un musician du 21ème siècle pour aider d'autres musiciens du 21ème siècle (…)', Janin, p. 190.

[445] Ibid., p. 11.

[446] Le Chant sur le Livre have also performed beautiful improvised organa in the style of the Notre-Dame school. One of its members, Raphaël Picazos, gives courses about this as well. See <http://www.cmm-paris.fr/en/stages-et-formations/improvisation-organum-13e-siecle-2015-2016> [accessed 16 August 2016].

5.2   Pedagogical Experiences

In this section I will reflect on my own experiences of learning, experimenting with, and teaching improvised polyphony. This is not to blow my own horn as a teacher or improviser, but because, in terms of the current research, I have—in a sense—become my own 'experimental subject'. It would be deceptive to claim impassive objectivity and complete accuracy in such an autobiographical endeavour. One may remember fondly, for instance, a lesson or session in which everything 'fell into place', giving the participants a kind of 'Eureka' experience, but quickly forget ones that consisted of (seemingly) fruitless hard work. When writing up a pedagogical method one also wants to present a successful approach, fit to be recommended to other practitioners, focusing on what 'worked' rather than what did not. Nevertheless, I will attempt to give a truthful account of the development of my teaching, drawing on documentation where available,[447] and provide the reader with both positive and negative results. The latter can often be as instructive as the former.

My teaching experience dates back to September 2011, when—after completing my Masters degree in composition—I was invited to take over the counterpoint class of my former teacher Cornelis de Bondt at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague. Since this time my teaching activities at the Conservatoire have gradually expanded, and now include a two-year counterpoint course for composition students, a three-year vocal and aural skills course for early music students, and an elective subject on the performance of Franco-Flemish polyphony. These different courses have required a variety of ways of incorporating polyphonic improvisation. I have also had the pleasure of teaching workshops to groups of musicians, teachers and music students, both in the Netherlands and abroad. My account will thus be divided in three parts, focussing, first, on my own learning experiences, second, on my experiences teaching courses in tertiary-level musical education and, third, on shorter, occasional workshops.

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[447] Such documentation includes, but is not limited to emails, calendar books, teaching notes and occasional recordings of improvisation sessions with the ensemble Diskantores.

5.2.1 (Auto)didactic Experiences and Experiments

Along with many music students, my first encounter with Renaissance polyphony came through counterpoint lessons, taught in species, and entirely in writing. Although I doubtlessly learned many skills in these lessons that still serve me well today, they did not inspire the love I would later develop for Renaissance music, through performing it from original notation. My interest in the music of the Middle Ages was first aroused by a series of lectures given by a fellow-student, Sasha Zamler-Carhart, as part of a music aesthetics course in 2007. In the following years, Zamler-Carhart taught a number of medieval music-related subjects at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, which I attended with great pleasure and interest. At this time I also developed an interest in singing and early music performance, taking voice lessons and participating in various projects and master-classes of the early music department of the Conservatoire.[448]

Being a composer, I was interested not only in the performance aspects of early music, but in its compositional and notational components as well. I therefore joined a course called 'Atelier de Contrepoint du XVe siècle', taught by Gérard Geay (em. Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse, Lyon) at the Fondation Royaumont in 2010. This course was an eye-opener for me in many respects, including the importance of improvisation for understanding historical polyphony. I still remember vividly improvising fauxbourdons with my fellow students in the beautiful, reverberant rooms of that thirteenth-century abbey.[449] Inspired by what I had learned in Royaumont, I decided to carry on singing fifteenth-century style improvised polyphony together with two friends and colleagues of the Ascoli Ensemble, Alejandra Wayar Soux (mezzo-soprano) and Oscar Verhaar (countertenor).

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[448] Formative experiences in this area also included master classes given by early music specialists such as Eric Mentzel (Sequentia), Marcel Pérès (Ensemble Organum), Evelyn Tubb (The Consort of Musicke), Corina Marti (La Morra) and Jill Feldman (Mala Punica). A rather special experience during my time as a student at the Royal Conservatoire was a project about *Ars Nova* polyphony in 2009. This project also lead to the foundation of The Ascoli Ensemble, directed by Zamler-Carhart, which remains active to this day.

[449] The Fondation Royaumont continues to offer excellent courses in a number of areas to young artists, but unfortunately no longer offers one in fifteenth-century counterpoint. See <http://www.royaumont.com/fr/les-residences> [accessed 16 August 2016].

After obtaining my Masters degree in 2011, I decided to further pursue my investigations into improvised polyphony in the form of a doctoral research.[450] The practical part of this research has been carried out with a changing group of collaborators, whose latest incarnation is the Ensemble Diskantores.[451] Of course one needs to learn something before being able to teach it to others, and because I had to instruct my fellow singers, I tried to be as well prepared as possible. I did this by trying out techniques on a keyboard instrument, or by singing against a played or pre-recorded cantus firmus. On occasion I also prepared myself by writing short compositions of a type I deemed improvisable, based on historical examples. These autodidactic experiences have been an important component of my learning process, especially for the 'newly discovered' techniques described in Chapter 3. Unfortunately, it is much easier to 'step into' an existing oral tradition, learning from a musician familiar with a type of improvisation, than to establish such a tradition oneself. The feedback from my fellow singers has been vital to me in those cases; not being encumbered with an overload of treatise texts and musical examples, they have grasped the essence of certain techniques much more quickly than I did.

5.2.2   Courses at a Tertiary Level

My teaching activity at the Royal Conservatoire started with a counterpoint course for first- and second-year bachelor students of composition in 2011. The first year of this course was rather memorable, not because the results were exceptional but because of the enthusiasm of the students, many of whom joined from later years of the programme as well as from the early music, vocal, and jazz departments. Another sympathetic aspect of the course was the participation of Cornelis de Bondt, who attended the lessons and gave me some invaluable hands-on advice about teaching. We finished the course with a presentation in a small chapel, in which the students performed chant, simple polyphonic compositions and improvised fauxbourdons. I still find that my

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[450] My master research presentation, titled 'Strategies for Polyphonic Improvisation and the Reconstruction of Polyphonic Fragments', was awarded the Royal Conservatoire's prize for best research presentation in the 2010-2011 academic term.

[451] For an overview of the work of the Diskantores on fourteenth-century discant see the improvisation sections of Chapter 3.

students from the composition department make up for what they lack in vocal, and sometimes aural skills with a genuine interest in how music 'works' and an eagerness to discover new repertoires.[452]

The course has changed considerably over the years, and I tend to take a more rigorous approach now, singing and writing species counterpoint as well as improvising organum and fauxbourdons. Two of the aspects I have dropped are the reading of mensural notation and hexachordal solmisation, which are too time-consuming and too little relevant for 'non-specialists'. What I retain from my original approach is a focus on the 'evolution of musical language', starting from chant and early organum, moving until the early fifteenth century in the first year, and devoting the second year to Renaissance counterpoint. Written exercises take the form of 'cleaned-up' versions of improvisations or 'forgeries', based as closely as possible on historical examples. In the last part of the second year I hand out 'Lückentexte' of sixteenth-century bicinia, in which I erase part of the music, for the student to 'reconstruct' and later compare to the original.[453] I have found this a very fruitful way to let students interact with historical materials, and learn the craft of writing florid, imitative counterpoint directly from the Renaissance masters themselves.

Together with my colleague Isaac Alonso de Molina, I was invited in 2014 to develop a new solfège and aural skills course for the bachelor students of the Conservatoire's early music department. This three-year programme, called Musica Practica, teaches sight-reading, ear-training, and improvisation through a variety of historically informed approaches. For the first year of the course we decided on a 'classical' sixteenth-century approach, teaching *cantus planus* (plainchant), *cantus figuralis* (mensural polyphony) and *contrapunctus.* Alonso de Molina produced a useful guide on sixteenth-century style hexachordal solmisation, including pictures of the Guidonian hand, a step-by-step explanation

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[452] An aspect that invariably catches their attention, for instance, is the contrapuntal function of non-tempered intervals, such as the 'consonant' major seconds (9:8) used in parallel in Guidonian organum, and the 'dissonant' Pythagorean major third, or ditone (81:64) used in fourteenth-century music.

[453] I was inspired to this approach by Olivier Trachier's edition of 'Lückentexte' of Lassus's bicinia. See Olivier Trachier, *Lassus Cantiones Duûm Vocum: Textes Pédagogiques* (Paris: Éditions Durand, 1999).

of the different mutations, and many exercises.[454] My contribution to our materials consisted of a collection of simple mensural melodies to sight-read and improvise on, as well as a short beginner's guide to Renaissance counterpoint and improvisation, including canons, four-part fauxbourdons, as well as first- and second-species counterpoint.[455]

The course was something of a mixed success in the first year, and we decided on a more rigorous approach, focussing on interval training, solmisation and singing plainchant. This led to a considerable improvement in the students performance, enabling them to grasp better the rudiments of both counterpoint and mensural notation. Furthermore, we decided to split the course into a first semester on Renaissance and a second on Baroque music, to harmonise better with the rest of the students' curriculum. Materials we used included the instruction on seven-note, 'moveable do' solfa from Michel Pignolet de Monteclair's *Principes de musique* (1736) and the first part of the collection *Les Solfèges d'Italie* (1778). This part of the course was probably as instructive for me as for the students, for I had to prepare myself to teach a repertoire I had only been superficially acquainted with before, going directly to the sources.[456] On the other hand, the musicianship skills I taught were very similar to those of my lessons on music before 1600: reading from C-clefs, developing relative pitch, intonation, basic vocal technique and ensemble singing. The third year of the course, to be implemented in the 2016-2017 academic term, will be devoted primarily to medieval music, and I hope to be able to put to practical use the techniques and examples discussed in Chapter 3.

Finally, I have been instrumental in creating the elective subject Franco-Flemish Polyphony from Original Sources, which is organised as a collaboration between the Royal Conservatoire and the Alamire Foundation (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) and taught by Stratton Bull (Alamire Foundation, Cappella

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[454] Isaac Alonso de Molina, *Basic Solmisation* (Unpublished, 2014).

[455] Niels Berentsen, *Renaissance Counterpoint and Improvisation* (Unpublished, 2015).

[456] Of particular interest to me were Monteclair's instruction to sing 'agréments' on the same solmisation syllable as the main note, which obliges the singer to differentiate between 'essential' and ornamental notes (see Monteclair, *Principes de Musique*, p. 6). For the singing of the accompanied *solfèges*, I had to brush up on my continuo-playing and transposition skills, as these exercises are usually written for sopranos, and much too high for most of my students.

Pratensis), Isaac Alonso de Molina, and myself.[457] The primary focus of the course is the performance of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century a capella polyphony from original notation. Besides instruction in reading mensural notation and ensemble coaching, we have, on occasion, introduced improvisation exercises as well. I have found that such exercises can help performers to listen better to other parts while singing their own. The compositions we studied often contained contrapuntal techniques that students could learn to recognise by ear (as I have argued for Example 4.34 as well). Some aspects of my counterpoint teaching could even be used as warming-up exercises, such as for instance the 'consonance drill' exercise shown in Example 2, which is very useful for training to sing intervals in just intonation, or by singing a canon after one of the teachers.

Table 5.1 Rehearsal of the Franco-Flemish Polyphony course, 25/5/2016 (photo by Maria Bayley).

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[457] <http://alamirefoundation.org/en/activities/petrus-alamire-and-his-musical-universe> [accessed 16 August 2016].

5.2.3   Workshops

My first experience teaching improvised counterpoint in the form of a workshop was a remarkable one. I was invited, through the intervention of Gérard Geay, to speak and lead a workshop at the Russian Gnessin's Academy of Music (Moscow) in October 2012, within the framework of a conference called 'Musical Education in the Context of Culture'. On the first day of the conference, I delivered a short lecture, in French, with Prof. Zoya Ivanovna Glyadechkina, who invited me to the Gnessin's Academy, providing a Russian translation.[458] After attending some of the other lectures, of which I understood very little, I was introduced to the choral conducting students who had been selected for my workshop about fauxbourdon. A few of the students, who came from all over the Russian Federation, understood English, and with their help I managed to demonstrate the rudiments of singing fauxbourdon. My choice of cantus firmus proved slightly unfortunate, as the students—accustomed to 'fixed do' solfa— mistook Phrygian for e-minor. Apart from this, I was very impressed, not only with the level of aural control and the quality of singing, which— perhaps surprisingly—was very 'straight', but also by the enthusiasm of the students for a repertoire that was entirely new to them. Prof. Glyadechkina's fear that they would not be able to sing without a written-out score proved quite unfounded, and in the end she was very happy with the result.[459]

Further workshops to music students were given in 2013, at the Israel Conservatory of Music (Tel-Aviv) and at the Conservatory of Amsterdam in 2014. I also have happy memories of the workshops on improvisation I taught at the Kodály Institute of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music (Kecskemét, Hungary) in 2015. The students of the Institute come from all over the world, most of them specifically to learn the 'Kodály method' and train as music educators. In a sense, this made them ideal recipients of this kind of teaching, and they were very

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[458] The French text of the lecture can be accessed through <https://www.academia.edu/3698301/Enseigner_le_Fauxbourdon> [accessed 16 August 2016]. The Russian translation was published as Н. Берентсен, 'Обучение Фобурдону', in *Музыкальное Образование В Контексте Культуры: Вопросы Теории, Истории И Методологии* (Moscow: Российская академия музыки имени Гнесиных, 2013), pp. 56–61.
[459] I was saddened to learn that Prof. Glyadechkina, a tireless researcher and devoted instructor, passed away in 2014. Some of her writings on French Baroque music and a short biography, in French and Russian, are available in З Глядешкина / Zoïa Gliadechkina, *Теоретические Проблемы Музыки Французского Барокко / Problèmes Théoriques de la Musique Baroque Française.* (Moscow: ЛитРес, 2013).

enthusiastic about trying out the techniques I presented. The teachers of the Institute also enjoyed participating in these workshops, immediately integrating elements of their own pedagogy, such as the Curwen hand signs, into the exercises. As at the Gnessin's Academy, I very much enjoyed sitting in on the lessons at the Kodály Institute, which gave me valuable ideas to enrich my own pedagogical practice.

A bit closer to home, I have been involved in the project 'Connect II – Inner voicing distant touch' organised by Musica, a Flemish organisation dedicated to musical education. The project aims to introduce music teachers to different approaches to polyphony, including improvisation, creating new teaching methods for primary musical education.[460]   So far, I have taught two workshops as part of 'Connect II', a first at the House of Polyphony (Leuven) in 2014 and a second at the Stedelijke Academie Borgerhout (Antwerpen) in 2016. I focussed on simple techniques in these workshops (discant in adjacent consonances, gymel and three- and four-voice fauxbourdon) and the participants felt sufficiently secure to further experiment with these without my assistance. What I enjoyed especially in these encounters were discussions with the participants about the pedagogical utility of improvisation and the importance of singing in early musical development.

5.2.4   Summary

The courses described here have been concerned not with teaching 'knowing that' but rather 'knowing how'. I have found it essential, therefore, to acquire a certain level of fluency in improvisation myself before being able to teach even the basics to others. I have also encountered a great variety of pedagogical situations: in some cases I would teach a group of students weekly over two or three years, in others I only had an afternoon to introduce them to my ideas. Improvised polyphony can be successfully used both in workshops and long-term courses, but these do require a very different kind of approach. Whereas in the former one may wish to focus on a few easily understood techniques, in the latter one can venture into more skilled and difficult procedures as well.

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[460] For more information on this project (in Dutch), see <http://www.musica.be/nl/connect-ii-inner-voicing-distant-touch> [accessed 16 August 2016]. A publication in English and Dutch, documenting the approach of Connect II, will be published at a later date.

Furthermore, I found that I need different ways of teaching future early music and 'other' students. The 'specialists' can be introduced to improvised polyphony embedded in its original 'biotope' of chant, hexachordal solmisation and mensural notation. Improvising polyphony can also be beneficial and interesting for 'non-specialists', but for those one has to remove certain obstacles.

5.3 Thematic Reflections

This section will be devoted to five specific, practical issues concerning the teaching of polyphonic improvisation; the structuring of a curriculum for improvisation; the issue of singing versus using instruments; the role of visualisation and the cantus firmus; the use of solmisation, vocalisation and text; and finally, the approach to historical style in the classroom. The aim here is not to attempt a definitive answer to these issues, which would be presumptuous as well as impossible. Rather, I will show how I have dealt with them in different contexts, and compare my own approach with those of the publications discussed before. These are topics intimately connected with the personal artistry of the teacher, and, as we will see, different authors advocate different approaches to them.

5.3.1   Structuring a Curriculum

The first considerations in designing a course-curriculum should be the type of student the course is directed at, what one needs to achieve, and how much time one has available. For improvised polyphony it is particularly important to estimate the level of the students' aural and vocal skills and how much time there is for concentrated practice in small groups. It is also important to consider the relation between improvisation and the other elements in a course. In a performance course on Renaissance or medieval music, improvisation can be used to contextualise the repertoire, but should not detract from the lesson's main aim. For such a course, I recommend short, focussed exercises, featuring a technique that can be immediately recognised in a piece being studied. In a counterpoint course, one has to consider whether the ultimate goal is for the student to gain fluency in improvising or whether improvisations are intended to inform the writing of exercises. In the latter case, one should obviously devote more time to writing, and more to singing in the former.

One of the questions I have asked myself, particularly for teaching Renaissance counterpoint, is whether to use species counterpoint or to teach according to 'recipes' such as gymel, fauxbourdon and canons, which are easy enough to learn and give immediate satisfaction. My early training in species

counterpoint left me with a slight distaste for this method, especially because in its traditional form it is so much concerned with what one is not allowed to do rather than what one might or could do. A closer look at the early, pre-Fuxian history of species counterpoint has convinced me, however, that it can also be used to train quick thinking and navigating the 'network' of contrapuntal possibilities.

I begin such exercises not with note-against-note progressions, but with a 'consonance drill' exercise, inspired by the consonance tables discussed in Section 2.2.2. This exercise involves singing and memorising consonances within a defined range—an octave or a hexachord—above a held tenor-note ('drone'). As shown in Example 5.2, the student(s) doing the exercise can sing a scale, holding notes consonant with the tenor slightly longer, and treating the dissonances as passing notes. (The latter can be eliminated at a later stage to practice oblique motion). Once students can 'rattle off' this exercise quickly and automatically, I progress to the first species exercises recommended by Peter Schubert.[461] In this way, it is also clear to students that these are training-exercises aimed at creating florid counterpoint, and do not constitute an end in themselves.
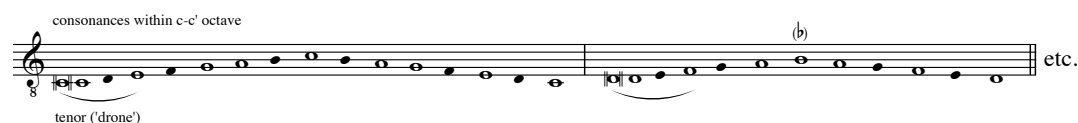
Example 5.2 'Consonance drill' exercise.

My improvisation teaching, however, remains very much connected to improvisation models, because with these one can provide clear, positive instructions as well as examples to imitate. For Renaissance counterpoint, I combine the techniques discussed in Chapter 4 and 'stretto fuga', with exercises in first and second species. If students show enough proficiency in these, we proceed to more sophisticated types of improvisation, as discussed by Duffin and

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[461] See Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, pp. 28–29 and 45–47.

Janin, such as florid counterpoint or canons above a cantus firmus.[462] The balance between 'recipes' and 'training exercises' needs to be assessed in every particular context, but it is my experience that for short workshops, or when working with students with limited aural and vocal skills, it is better to focus on simple, clearly defined techniques, which may motivate them to continue improvising instead of frustrating them.

5.3.2 Singing and Playing

As we have seen, pedagogical publications propose different ways of practising polyphonic improvisation, either vocally, instrumentally, or both. Tindemans and McGee clearly write for instrumentalists, while Schubert and Janin present vocal approaches. Schubert stresses the importance of singing, primarily for its benefits to ear training, and advises students to practice their counterpoint exercises playing one part on an instrument while singing the other.[463] Another option for practicing alone, mentioned by McGee, is the playing (or presumably singing) of exercises above pre-recorded cantus firmi.[464] Janin's manual focuses entirely on communal singing.[465] He does invite the reader to adapt the vocal models presented in the book to instrumental improvisation, but clearly has either ensemble-playing or improvisation on a polyphonic instrument in mind.[466]

I tend to agree with Schubert and Janin that a vocal approach is the best starting point for improvisation, even if one is teaching instrumentalists. Vocal performance ensures that the melodies and intervals produces are 'heard' in the mind before they are executed. (Reliance to the 'inner ear' is the reason why sight-reading is traditionally taught by singing as well.) On the other hand, I do agree with Schubert that the linking of musical imagination to the 'physical referent' of an instrument, if perhaps not the instrument itself, can be very

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[462] See Duffin, p. 82–89. For instruction on canons above and below a cantus firmus see Janin, pp. 62–66. In fact, as Duffin also argues, such techniques may also feel like 'tricks' to an experienced improviser, and nothing separates them from the simpler improvisation models in principle.
[463] Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, pp. xii and xvii.
[464] McGee, *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide*, p. 194.
[465] Janin, p. 6.
[466] Ibid., p. 11.

helpful for students.[467] (I still catch myself 'playing the piano' to imagine a complex polyphonic result, for instance). Apart from such personal 'crutches', I have found it helpful to let students use the Guidonian hand. Schubert is correct in stating that 'there is no "place" in the throat where a *D* is', but I am certain the Guidonian hand would have given historical singers a sense of 'place' for every note very similar to an instrument. Some of my students have become so adept at using the Guidonian hand in singing solmisation exercises and chant that they continue using it for sight-reading 'solfeggi' and improvising counterpoint.

An obvious disadvantage of a purely vocal approach to improvising polyphony is that one always needs someone to sing with. In our individualised society this is sometimes difficult to organise, and playing a cantus firmus on an instrument or an audio device can offer reasonable alternatives to practise at home. The use of recorded cantus firmi, however, has severe disadvantages: it is very difficult to 'sing together' with a recording of long, held notes without the presence of a clear pulse, and it can be difficult to start anywhere else but at the beginning of the recording.[468] Singing while playing the cantus firmus on an instrument works much better in these respects. [469] One disadvantage, however, is that one will often have to transpose cantus firmi, and some students will find it difficult to play in one key and imagine counterpoint in another. Another issue is of practising with an instrument is of course that of temperament, especially in the case of the piano. Practicing with an instrument in equal temperament is preferable to not practicing at all, but one needs to be aware of the difference between pure and tempered intervals, and refrain from 'checking' the notes of the counterpoint on the instrument.

Ultimately, playing and singing cannot be a substitute for collective vocal practice: there is no way to simulate the subtle mutual adjustments of intonation, interpersonal communication, and the pleasure of improvising together. While I encourage students practice with an instrument at home, in class I always insist

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[467] Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, p. 41.
[468] One can of course use a metronome or click-track in the recording, but I have found this very distracting and unmusical myself, and would not recommend it.
[469] Best, in my experience, are instruments that can produce a sustained pitch and which do not hinder the singing, such as an (electronic or digital) organ, a piano, or a string instrument played seated, such as a cello or a viola da gamba. Plucked string instruments like the lute or guitar, eminently suited to accompany oneself, may require playing repeated notes —for instance twice every *tactus*—due to their limited sustain.

on vocal practice. This work can not be separated from teaching (basic) vocal technique and ensemble singing as well. One of my pedagogical maxims is that a confidently sung wrong note is preferable to a badly executed 'right' one, because one may not even be able to say of the latter whether it is correct or not. This is why I tend start my lessons with some kind of vocal warm-up, singing scales the 'consonance drill' exercise, as well as practicing the *cantus prius factus* before improvising against it. I also stress that the cantus firmus should not degenerate into a 'cantus infirmus', and that it is the responsibility of the singer(s) of the tenor to give the improviser a solid point of reference, both in pitch and in rhythm. As such, breathing properly, singing stably, healthily and in reasonably tune, all are an integral part of my approach.

5.3.3   Visualisation and the Cantus Firmus

Most types of medieval and Renaissance improvised polyphony are based on written cantus firmi, which provide an important visual 'support' for improvisation, from where the expression *cantare super librum*. As has been explained in the preceding chapters, an added part can actually be 'read into' the staff of the cantus firmus.[470] This raises the question whether these methods can be useful to modern students of improvised polyphony and whether we perforce need to use cantus firmi in their original notation. Could they work also on melodies notated in our usual 'modern' clefs? One may also ask if these historical ways of visualising cannot simply be substituted by skills we already possess as modern musicians.

As I have explained in Chapters 3 and 4, visualisation forms an important element of the way I practice and teach improvised polyphony. I have not used the complete system of the English 'sights', but only the 'treble sight'. In contrast to mental transpositions in fifths and fourths, an octave transposition allows one to visualise the correct intervals, as long as one takes into account the inversion of fifths and fourths.[471] This method works especially well for players of melodic instruments and singers who are not used to imagine widely spaced intervals, either in a score or on their instrument. For keyboard players the mental map of

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[470] This process is referred to in the historical treatises as 'sighting' or *contrapunctus visus*. See Section 4.1.1.
[471] See Example 3.20.

the keyboard often suffices, but I also encourage them to 'abbreviate' to intervals within the staff, especially when non-standard clefs are being used.

This brings me to the issue of the notation of the *cantus prius factus* itself.[472] As with all the issues presented in this chapter, the choice of notation for cantus firmi should be based on the students' prior reading skills and the overall curriculum of the course. If one includes an introduction to mensural notation or the practice of chant, it is worthwhile to use melodies in original notation, either from facsimile or in diplomatic transcription. As I have argued in Section 4.1.1. such melodies have the advantage of fitting neatly within the staff, which makes visualisation ('sighting') easy. If one wants to teach improvisation in a 'general' solfège or ear training class, it may be wise to use melodies in treble and bass clefs in spite of this, because the unfamiliar c-clefs may cancel out this advantage. I generally abstain from using the *Graduale Triplex*, because the Laon and St. Gall neumes, which are not useful for my purposes, clog up the staff and make visualisation difficult. As an alternative, I use either home-made transcriptions in whatever format I find useful, or eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chant editions.[473] Producing my own transcriptions with notation software enables me to convert melodies into different formats, using different clefs or levels of reduction suitable for different types of courses.

As mentioned previously, I find it most productive to let singers improvise on plainchants they already know. Because there is less risk of failure, they are able to make more variations, explore different routes, make cadences in different places, etc. Having singers sing counterpoint to one verse of a strophic song or chant each creates a very helpful process of mutual imitation and emulation. The group Le Chant sur le Livre has shown that with experience one can learn to sing counterpoint even on unknown cantus firmi. However, I think it is rather unlikely that Renaissance or medieval musicians would ever have sung counterpoint to hitherto unknown chants, because of their daily and

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[472] The pedagogical publications discussed in this chapter take different approaches in this regard: McGee and Thomas exclusively use the usual, 'modern' clefs (G2 and F4), whereas Janin and Schubert occasionally use C-clefs as well. From these publications, *Chanter sur le Livre* is the only one to present plainchants notated in square notation. See Janin, pp. 128-140.
[473] Such editions, many of which can be found online, tend to use only one or two shapes for notes, and ligatures can be read from left to right, which is quite useful when visualising a counterpoint. Students sometimes find the *Graduale Triplex*'s notation confusing, also in this respect, forgetting which note of a *podatus* to sing first, for instance.

life-long practice of chant. Using an unknown or newly composed cantus firmus may show an 'unbelieving' audience that the music is in fact created on the spot, but I do not think it is useful in a pedagogical setting.

5.3.4   Lyrics, Solmisation and Vocalisation

An issue I have struggled with slightly is whether to have students improvise vocalising, using solmisation, or singing on text. My ultimate goal is always to have students sing with the words, because whether one is using a secular song or a plainchant as *cantus prius factus*, understanding the syntactic structure of the text are indispensible for creating a second voice. When improvising on hymns, for instance, it is vital that students understand the prosody and form of the poetry, in order to perform the rhythm correctly and to produce cadences in the right places. Once students have figured out the first verse of a song or strophic chant, it becomes much easier to perform the other verses, which is quite rewarding. It is often profitable to provide a translation or summary of the lyrics sung, and to briefly explain their cultural-historical background, be it courtly or religious.[474] This tends to help students to store the tunes in memory, and to situate the repertoire under discussion historically and literarily as well as musically.[475]

Even though singing on text is my final aim, I have found that most students will require solmised or vocalised training exercises and 'trial-runs' before being able to sing with lyrics. Some students prefer vocalising on a vowel to singing on solfa, relying on the type of physical reflexes discussed previously, or simply because it is not their 'native' way to sight-read. This may be allowed, provided that the singing is solid and secure. However, for students who have not acquired enough fluency in sight-reading, or have trouble pitching melodic and harmonic intervals, solmisation should—in my opinion—remain part of the practice. On the other hand, I have also found that vocalisation can be a good way to get students to sing in tune and produce a homogenous sound as an

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[474] One may even pay attention to this aspect in the selection of cantus firmi. For instance, I use a lot of communions, not only because they are short, but because they often contain biblical quotations, such as the sayings of Christ, that some students are already familiar with.

[475] For the fifteenth century, one may sing for instance songs related to the Hundred Years' War, such as *L'homme armé*, the Agincourt Carol (*Deo gracias Anglia*) or *Le roy engloys* from the Bayeux Manuscript.

ensemble.[476] (This is especially helpful in three- and four-voice textures). Typically, after singing a piece or an improvisation on solmisation syllables, I have it sung again, all on the same vowel, before introducing the text.

This brings me to the issue of solmisation syllables, and which kind of solmisation—historical or modern—is most suitable for learning to improvise polyphonically. After all, it is clear that our medieval and Renaissance counterparts thought, created and experienced polyphony through the *voces musicales*, even long after their training in sight-reading would have been completed.[477] The version of hexachordal solmisation most practiced today is a slightly simplified, sixteenth-century system, found in treatises such as Adam Gumpelzhaimer's *Compendium musicae* (1591) and promoted in Anne Smith's *The Performance of 16th-Century Music* (2011).[478] I have found this system easy to use and pedagogically beneficial for teaching how to sight-read Renaissance music, but—strictly speaking—it is anachronistic to any music written before ca. 1520. One can of course try to be as 'historically informed' as possible and use a type of solmisation coeval to the music one is studying. This has certain benefits, but for improvisation, which, even more than sight-reading, relies on quick reflexes, it may not be the right approach. I have found in practice that, unless a student is well versed in hexachordal solmisation already, it does not actually help to use it while improvising.[479]

What are the advantages and disadvantages the more current solfa systems in use today for singing modal music? As noted by Peter Schubert, a version of 'moveable do' in which the *finalis* of every mode is called 'do', would

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[476] Especially so-called close vowels, such as [i], [u] and [y], are very suitable for this purpose, because they are sonorous and overtone-rich, and produce an advantageous position of the tongue for singing.

[477] Several types of improvised polyphony were intrinsically linked to hexachordal solmisation: the Vatican Organum Treatise specifies its tenor movements in solmisation syllables. Syllables are also used in teaching, especially in the tradition of the Italian *regola del grado*. In Renaissance counterpoint, the improvisation of a canon at the fourth or fifth, sung with the same *voces*, or the transposition and permutation of repeated motives, such as the famous 'la sol fa re mi' theme.

[478] Anne Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music: Learning from the Theorists* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 20–54. In this system mutations are sung only with 're' and 'la', while earlier authors, such as Franchinus Gaffurius, give mutations with all the other *voces* as well. Also unlike the late sixteenth-century theorists, Gaffurius teaches mutations between the *hexachordum durum* and *molle*. See Young, pp. 25–36.

[479] It is noteworthy that, with the exception of Thomas, none of the authors of the pedagogical publications discussed in this chapter promote the use of hexachordal solmisation for improvisation.

be utterly nonsensical.[480] I would also argue against the method, sometimes used in 'moveable do' solfège, of singing the modes as inflected versions of major and minor, with all *finales* being called either 'do' or 'la'.[481] This is not only historically deceptive, but it fails to make use of the normal diatonic half-steps, and turns certain modal degrees into 'accidentals'. However, unlike Schubert, I am of the opinion that that 'fixed do' solfa also has disadvantages: students using it, for instance, tend to lose the automatism of singing a half-step between 'mi' and 'fa'. 'Fixed-do' solfa also reinforces a defined pitch standard, and its users may not develop sufficient relative hearing to be able to transpose cantus firmi or adapt to the usual pitch-shifts of a capella singing.

If one uses solfa to teach improvisation, one should use a system that is clear and easy to use for all the participants. If it is necessary to use seven-note solfa, I would advocate an approach that—like medieval and Renaissance solmisations—stresses intervallic relations rather than absolute or fixed pitches. (This is as helpful for learning to pitch melodic intervals correctly as it is for singing them in polyphony). Such a system would come down to a kind of 'fixed but moveable do', in which syllables do not represent an absolute pitch, but in which one does use a different syllable for every modal final (e.g. 're' for Dorian and 'mi' for Phrygian).[482] In this way, one can even use some of the historical 'solmisation tricks'. As shown in Example 5.3, one can sing the contratenor and a superius of a fauxbourdon, or the *dux* and *comes* of a canon at the fifth or fourth, on the same solfa, and even imagine them on the same pitch. Finally, the Guidonian hand, even though it has historically always been combined with hexachordal solmisation, can in fact just as easily be used while vocalising, singing on text, or using seven-note solfa.[483]

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[480] Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, p. 42. This approach would expand the idea of 'do-based minor', using – for instance – 'sol' for every fifth degree. I fail to see the usefulness of this kind of solfa even for tonal music.

[481] See for instance Mícheál Houlahan and Philip Tacka, Kodály Today: A Cognitive Approach to Elementary Music Education (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 69–71.

[482] For singing B-flat and *musica ficta*, one may either use the 'normal' note-names, as in 'fixed do', or use the Kodály method's modification of the syllables (e.g. 'fi' for *F*-sharp and 'ta' for *B*-flat). The latter has the advantage of producing the 'feel' of 'mi' and 'fa' on other scale degrees, which is similar to what some historical treatises describe, and in which one clearly has to identify what accidentals one is using. See for instance Houlahan and Tacka, p. 286.

[483] As opposed to the Curwen hand signs, the Guidonian hand is octave-specific, which is important for improvising counterpoint, as 're-la' (d-a), for instance, is consonant, but 'la-re' (A-d) dissonant.

Example 5.3 The use of seven-note solfa in fauxbourdon and canons.

5.3.5 Improvisation and Musical Style

The final topic of these reflections is the notion of musical style, and what role stylistic considerations should play in teaching improvised polyphony. The pedagogical publications discussed earlier take a variety of approaches on this issue: both McGee and Thomas start from the notion of a 'neutral' basic counterpoint, which can be adapted to different styles once one has mastered it.[484] Somewhat similarly, Schubert advises the student to concentrate on not breaking the rules first, and 'to worry about being stylish' only once one gets fast and proficient.[485] A different approach is taken by Janin, who, for instance, introduces ornaments already in the most simple techniques illustrated in his manual.[486] This brings me to the following questions: how 'stylish' can or should one be at every stage of the learning process? In other words, should 'good music' be the aim of every exercise, or only of the final stage of learning? And what, in this connection, is the most profitable way to work with repertoire examples in the classroom?

Such questions are intrinsically bound-up with the structuring and final goal of the learning process. As I have argued before, learning to improvise florid polyphony will usually require doing 'training-exercises' in species counterpoint. Such exercises are not meant primarily to produce beautiful contrapuntal

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[484] McGee, *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide*, p. 194; Thomas, *Contrepoint à 2 voix*, p. 11.

[485] Schubert, *Modal Counterpoint Renaissance Style. Second Edition*, p. 41.

[486] Janin, pp. 15-16.

melodies, but rather to gain fluency and exercise quick thinking.[487] I would argue, however, that even here one can focus on the beauty of well-intoned intervals, and on occasion point out more 'graceful' alternatives for a counterpoint. Such suggestions do not always have to be formulated as clear-cut rules, as talented students are also able to learn the aesthetic of a certain style by assimilation.

It is my conviction that beautiful and 'tasteful' music can be produced at every level, and at every stage of the learning process. Very simple techniques can be used to create beautiful improvisations, simply by adding a small ornament, a suspension or a carefully planned flourish. In a fifteenth-century style, the types of gymel and fauxbourdon described in Chapter 4 are eminently suited for this. As I have argued there, students can come very close to improvising music of a kind that was actually written down by composers like Du Fay. For fourteenth-century music, one could emulate most of the examples in Chapter 3 in improvisations as well. This means one can continually be in touch with the historical materials, and create something artful, albeit on a modest scale.

The choice of examples to be sung and studied in class is always an important part of my preparations, as I believe it is essential for students to get to know repertoire examples first-hand. One way to introduce examples is of course to sing them through and discuss them, pointing out interesting contrapuntal features that can later be used in improvisation exercises. Another way, which can be very stimulating for students, is to let them 'improvise towards' a historical composition. I do this by giving the students a chant or tenor used in one of the examples, and let them use the same contrapuntal technique (gymel, fauxbourdon or discant in adjacent consonances). After we have 'finished' our performance by introducing a few ornaments, strategically planned suspensions and cadential formulas, I show them the historical example. Not only will they have gained a profound understanding of how that particular piece works and the choices the composer has made, they will have learned to listen in a more 'interactive' way to similar music.

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[487] See Section 3.1.3

5.3.6 Summary

When structuring a course curriculum one needs carefully to balance improvisation with the other elements. Improvisation should, at least in the initial stages, be taught vocally, in order to stimulate and develop the inner ear. Instruments can be used to play a cantus firmus, when practicing at home, or at a later stage to 'transpose' the vocal techniques into instrumental practice. The visual plays an essential role in this kind of improvisation, and visualising a counterpoint on the staff ('sighting') is helpful for most musicians. As the music under discussion is primarily vocal and text-based, singing on lyrics should always be the ultimate goal. It may however be necessary to use solmisation or vocalisation for preparatory exercises, especially when working with beginners. Finally, I would argue that, in every lesson, students should see, hear and sing a real historical composition. The direct encounter with the past is always a stimulating one, and this may also encourage an interest in the repertoire beyond the confines of the classroom.

5.4   Conclusion

'Lifelong learning' has become something of a tired cliché in educational circles, but so far it has certainly held true for my experiences teaching improvised polyphony. I have found teaching a very fruitful way to distil my scholarly ideas, formulating them as precisely and concisely as possible. The continuous input, questions, and suggestions of students have also stimulated me to keep an open mind in my look at the sources and to question my practical application of them. Even if after some five years the initial novelty of teaching this material has worn off, I still delight in trying different ways of presenting it, as well as finding and analysing different historical examples to bring to class.

As may be clear from the reflections above, a lot depends on the entry level with which students come to a course of improvised polyphony. More than knowledge of repertoire or music theory, their success will depend on their prior training in sight-reading and aural skills. These are abilities best acquired young, as I can attest from personal experience. Unfortunately, much of the primary musical training in my own country, the Netherlands, tends to focus too much and too early on instrumental playing, resulting at times in an alarming deficiency in aural and vocal skills in conservatoire applicants. Strong performance is usually shown by students who are accustomed to singing in choirs, be it professionally or recreationally. In an international environment like my own conservatoire, one cannot count on students having acquired the same skill-set, or at least not in the same way. Students from Britain and North America, for instance, can be good sight-readers while never having used solfa, while others, principally from 'fixed do' countries, may not be able to do without. I have also noticed a marked difference in how self-reliant and disciplined students from diverse educational backgrounds are, especially when it comes to practicing at home.

Taking this into account, I have presented here not so much a method for teaching improvised polyphony, but rather a framework with variable parameters, adaptable to a range of didactic situations. On one side of the spectrum I would place my own learning experience, which was essentially autodidactic and based on historical materials, including all the 'obstacles' these

present to a modern musician: Greek and Latin musical terminology, cantus firmi in C-clefs, and examples in mensural notation. At the other extreme, I am now able to teach some of the same material in workshops, removing most of these difficulties by presenting a technique in the form of simple diagram and providing cantus firmi and repertoire examples in modern notation. I do not claim this as a better or more efficient way to learn, because going directly to the sources has taught me a great deal, but it is only reasonable to assume that most musicians simply do not have the time or patience to undertake such a process. A key question in every pedagogical situation, therefore, is how far one should go in 'translating' historical materials and techniques, and which 'obstacles' one should leave for students to overcome by themselves. Removing too many may prevent students from taking an active and prolonged interested in the materials presented, while removing too few can also quickly lead to a loss of motivation and interest as well.

This brings me back to the issue of 'research and development', the preparation of the lesson and course materials. Even though a relative wealth of pedagogical publications on improvised polyphony has become available in the last decade(s), it is important that educators continue developing their own materials in dialogue with the sources as well as other musicological and practical approaches. At the very least, one has to try out a method of improvisation found in one of these publications, and identify a few repertoire examples before bringing it to class. A more prolonged study of compositions and treatise descriptions can bring other, more original ideas, many of which will actually help to solve problems encountered in the classroom.

In many cases it is not possible to 'inflict' historical teaching methods directly on modern students, who after all have a very different mental make-up and life than their historical counterparts. On the other hand these methods have produced skills that most of us—myself included —can only dream of; in other words, 'they' must have been doing something right. I would say therefore, that, even though pragmatism is essential for teaching, we should not be too quick to dismiss historical methods as arcane and irrelevant. Over the course of this research I have changed my mind significantly about the utility of certain aspects

of historical pedagogy, such as species counterpoint and consonance tables, for instance.

Obviously, in the end it is the teacher who teaches, and not the method, whether historical or newly devised. This means that whatever one teaches has to 'pass through' oneself and be internalised at least to a degree. While it is rewarding to be surprised sometimes by what one's students come up with while improvising, one should master the techniques enough to be able to 'think with' an improvisation as it is going on, and make suggestions immediately afterwards. In the beginning this will require preparing every improvisation exercise one gives to students, finding different solutions to every problem, and observing which options are taken by them. Over time, one's experience and attentive listening come to suffice, and preparation can be drastically reduced. In this way, techniques of improvised polyphony can be used to enrich any course in 'practical music theory', to borrow Ferand's term, and to inform other activities such as composition, analysis as performance as well.