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

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6 CONCLUSION

A research project like mine, born out of a strong personal interest, and intimately connected with my own artistic and pedagogical practice, obviously does not terminate when the last words of a dissertation have been written; it is by definition open-ended, as I will continue deepening my understanding of improvised polyphony. Especially on the subject of fourteenth-century music, I hope to be able to pursue in much more depth the lines set out here. One can think, for instance, of a more profound exploration of *discantus floridus*, improvising in different (regional) styles and genres, as well as applying the techniques developed here to experiments with historical composition. The analytical and practical experiences described in this dissertation can, in my opinion, form a good starting point for these continuous inquiries. The matters discussed here, in other words, warrant drawing some general conclusions, even if it is likely that some of them will still be revised in the future.

In this final chapter, I will return to my initial research questions and hypotheses. After this, I will discuss prospects for further research, as well as possibilities to valorise the results presented here. In closing, I will offer a short 'postlude' from the perspective of the singer, providing some additional comments on my own development as an early music performer and educator, as a result of this research. From these, the reader may observe what improvising polyphony can do for an 'early musician' of the twenty-first century.

6.1 Results and Observation

In this section, I will firstly provide summary answers to my four research questions, based on the findings presented in Chapters 2-5. Secondly, I will revisit my six hypotheses, and ask whether these have been confirmed, or whether, on the contrary, I have had to modify my a priori assumptions during the course of the research project.

6.1.1 Research Questions Revisited

- 1) *What historical information do we possess about the performance of extempore polyphony in the late medieval period?*

As discussed in Chapter 2, archival records and musical treatises have allowed music scholars to draw a relatively detailed picture of late-medieval and Renaissance polyphonic improvisation, concerning its liturgical use, its pedagogy, and the way in which musicians coordinated and conceived of such performances. This data indicates that, contrary to the modern idea of musical improvisation as 'free' and 'spontaneous', extempore polyphony was controlled and regulated by several mechanisms: the hierarchic, well-defined structure of the ensemble, the prior negotiation of 'points of reference' such as cadences, and the rigorous training singers had received as children. The musicians who were the bearers of these traditions are obviously long gone but the material traces they left behind, in the form of scores and treatises can be of considerable help to us in re-imaging these lost practices.

- 2) *Which polyphonic techniques can I identify in fourteenth-century treatises and compositions that can be used to improvise against a plainchant?*

As shown in Chapter 3, a relative wealth of polyphonic techniques, such as *quintare*, discant in adjacent consonances, and the 'fake discant' described in fourteenth-century treatises, can also be identified in the composed repertoire. Furthermore, these techniques can be re-utilised by modern singers to create

fourteenth-century style improvisations. My hypothesis C, which predicted that such techniques must exist as they do for all repertoires of the Western canon, has therefore essentially been confirmed.

3) What can I add to the current understanding of fifteenth-century improvisational techniques?

Though a close reading of Guillelmus Monachus's *De preceptis artis musicae*, I have been able to shed new light on its teaching, especially of two- and three-voice counterpoint. Finally, I could also point to some hitherto unobserved correspondences between compositions, such as the hymns of Guillaume Du Fay and the *Missa Mater Patris* ascribed to Josquin des Prez, and improvisation models described in contemporary treatises. As in Chapter 3, I have described how the models in Chapter 4 can be used to create simple improvisations in an early Renaissance style.

4) How can these and other findings from scholarship and experiments be effectively valorised in musical education?

In Chapter 5, I have presented a wide range of didactic uses of improvisation, ranging from 'historically informed' warming-up exercises, to workshops, ear training lessons, and courses of Renaissance counterpoint. What is most effective pedagogically will depend on the prior knowledge of the students and the time available for teaching them. Teachers, for this reason, need to consider how much of the 'original context' of these historical practices can be presented, and which elements (notation, clefs, solmisation and so on) should be 'translated' into modern equivalents. Polyphonic improvisation can lead to a significant improvement of a student's understanding of historical styles. Moreover, if practised diligently this practice significantly improves musicianship skills useful in any repertoire, such as intonation, relative pitch, aural recognition of intervals, and 'tonal memory' (remembering pitches over time).

6.1.2 Research Hypotheses Revisited

A) Like a dead language (e.g. Latin), a historical musical idiom can be 'spoken again', as long as there is enough material left to work from.

The simile between music and language is a popular metaphor among musicologists and musicians alike. It seems appropriate to think of certain features of music as 'pronunciation', 'vocabulary', 'syntax' and 'style', mirroring those of verbal languages. What can be revived of a historical musical idiom, like an extinct language, are those elements which have come down to us through texts. Those elements can be studied, and, as I have demonstrated, even re-used to 'speak' such music again. The one element of medieval music that is irretrievably lost to us, is its 'pronunciation': musical execution. In this sense, improvising medieval-style polyphony is actually more like speaking Ancient Egyptian than Latin: while a lot is known about the vocabulary, syntax and grammar of the language of Ancient Egypt, its phonology remains the subject of debate, and the pronunciation used by modern Egyptologists is largely speculative and artificial.⁴⁸⁸

B) In order to learn how to extemporise, it is more useful to study the 'tricks' and colloquialisms of a style than the 'official' rules given by theorists.

Revisiting this statement, I feel that it rests on a somewhat false opposition between the 'theory' and 'practice' of polyphony in the Middle Ages. Many of the polyphonic 'tricks' described in Chapters 3 and 4 are based as much on what the theorists have to tell us as what is shown in compositions. It is true, however, that one needs to read these treatises in a particular way, in a sense less as 'music theory' than as practical documents. Significantly, the *regulae generales* or *praecepta* given in fifteenth-century treatises do not appear as principles or

⁴⁸⁸ Karl-Theodor Zauzich and Ann Macy Roth, *Discovering Egyptian Hieroglyphs: A Practical Guide* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 7. 'The pronunciation that results from these conventions is, naturally, totally artificial. It is probably so far from the true pronunciation that an ancient Egyptian who heard a modern Egyptologist speaking "Egyptian" would find it impossible to understand, despite the fact that the two could communicate effortlessly in writing.'

axioms at the start of the text, but as a kind of afterthought or summary at the very end. Fourteenth-century authors, moreover, struggle with the question how exactly the ‘rules of counterpoint’ control florid and multi-part polyphony. It would appear that medieval musicians could—rather sophisticatedly—interpret these rules one way or the other, to ‘defend’ a particular musical result.⁴⁸⁹ The best way to deal with them, in other words, seems to be as guidelines (with exceptions) that are only useful once one already knows some musical techniques and repertoire.

C) Such loci communes must exist for fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century music, as they exist for all other repertoires of the Western canon.

See previous section, research question 2.

D) Practical experiments with improvisation can assist scholarship on historical polyphony to ask the ‘right’ questions of the sources.

I have experienced the back-and-forth between musical analysis and practical experiments as one of the most productive aspects of my research methodology. I initially observed the principle of adjacent consonances (discussed in Chapter 3) when analysing pieces of simple polyphony, after which I found it very useful for improvising discant against plainchant melodies. Having formulated my own concept of it, I was then able to identify it also in the historical treatises, shedding light on a topos of fourteenth-century discant instruction which had not previously been sufficiently understood.

⁴⁸⁹ Example 3.14, for example, could be considered strictly to obey the rules, as its counterpoint in breves is entirely orthodox (see Example 3.15). Inversely, one could argue that it constantly violates these rules because of the parallels and dissonances created in between these structural notes. The opposite could be posited of the exercises by Antonius de Leno (Examples 4.8-10) that contain perfect parallels in note-against-note counterpoint, which are ‘saved’ by the intervening notes.

E) To truly 'know' a musical idiom means to be able to extemporise in it: Being able to recite Schiller is not the same as speaking German.

Like hypothesis A, this statement is predicated on the idea that music functions like a language and that a user's competence can best be assessed through their ability to extemporise. Historically, this was certainly the case; as we have seen in Chapter 2, extemporising, performing, and composing polyphony were intimately connected skills in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. I also believe that today musicians can still benefit considerably from learning to improvise in these styles. However, I have come to perceive the acquisition of improvisatory skills less and less as being in opposition to 'interpreting' written music. After all, the main reason to study, perform, or improvise medieval and Renaissance music is an interest in compositions from these periods. In other words, while I believe that knowledge of contemporary improvisation techniques is needed to properly understand historical repertoires, a working knowledge of this repertoire – best gained through performance – is also a prerequisite for improvising in that particular musical idiom.

F) Vocal polyphonic improvisation is useful not only for acquiring stylistic knowledge but also for improving musicianship skills.

See previous section, research question 4.

6.2 Further Possibilities for Research and Valorisation

The techniques described in Chapter 3 are the most novel contribution of my research and, as such, I expect them to provide the most opportunities for future research. The first aspect I will further pursue is the improvisation of fourteenth-century florid discant, creating a repertory of different techniques and strategies, as well a collection of ornamental formulas (*flores musicae mensurabilis*). Hockets could be used to enliven melismatic passages, and I have already begun to explore the use of tenors with a (modal) rhythmic pattern. Used together with the three-voice, homophonic technique described in Section 3.2.5, this produces results similar to the ‘Franconian’ parts of the Tournai Mass (*Kyrie*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*).⁴⁹⁰ Sung in a slower tempo, such tenors could be used to extemporise simple two- or three-voice isorhythmic motets or liturgical pieces.⁴⁹¹ Finally, an aspect which has not been treated here is the phenomenon of the fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century contratenor, which, judging from the manuscript record, was at times an ‘inessential’ voice, added by musicians to a pre-existing composition, not necessarily their own.⁴⁹² It seems probable that such contratenors would have been extemporised as well as written down.

To see how far one could ultimately go in this direction, I would like to invite the reader to join me in a thought experiment: would it be possible to improvise a complex four-part isorhythmic piece, like the *Kyrie* of Machaut’s *Messe de Nostre Dame*? Example 6.1 shows a hypothetical improvisation based on *taleae* I-III (bars 1-11) of this piece.⁴⁹³ Machaut’s tenor is the *Kyrie IV* of the Gradual, sung in the pattern of the so-called third rhythmic mode. A contratenor could be improvised according to the principle of the adjacent consonances, which Machaut’s contratenor also uses occasionally, providing a stereotypical

⁴⁹⁰ For a transcription see Philippe Mercier, ‘Une nouvelle transcription de la Messe de Tournai’, in: *La Messe de Tournai. Une messe polyphonique en l’honneur de Notre-Dame à la cathédrale de Tournai au XIV^e siècle*, Tornacum 4, ed. by Jean Dumoulin and others (Tournai, Louvain la Neuve: Tournai, Art et Histoire, 1988), pp. 66–77, 96–100 and 100–103.

⁴⁹¹ This would not only strengthen Anna Maria Busse Berger’s thesis that such pieces could be sung from memory, but indicate that similar musical edifices could be created also by musicians singing *super librum*. See Busse Berger, pp. 210–251.

⁴⁹² Some fourteenth-century songs appear with different contratenors from one manuscript to another, while the cantus and tenor remain basically identical. A good example is the song *Esperance qui en mon cuer*, which appears with no less than four different contratenors. See Cuthbert, pp. 314–316.

⁴⁹³ After Schrade, *La Messe de Nostre Dame, Double Hoquet, Remède de Fortune*, p. 1.

'bridge' pattern at the end of every *talea* when the tenor is silent. Such a tenor-contratenor duet, in other words, can be predicted by the triplum and motetus, who can improvise their parts on top, harmonising with the dyads of the lower voices. An occasional 'bifocal collision' between the upper parts would be consistent with Machaut's style, and would certainly not disturb the overall musical result.

Example 6.1 Hypothetical improvisation based on Guillaume de Machaut, *Messe de Nostre Dame, Kyrie I* (bb. 1-11), adaptations marked red.

In addition to its benefits for improvisation, an improved understanding of fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century polyphony can be of tremendous help in 'restoring' incomplete compositions from this period. As many sources of *Ars Nova* polyphony are damaged and a substantial number of them survive only as fragments used in bookbindings, many of the compositions known to us are also fragmentary.⁴⁹⁴ I have already been able to use some of my findings on late medieval counterpoint in producing reconstructions for the CD *Veneto 1440* by the Ascoli Ensemble.⁴⁹⁵ An upcoming program of the Ensemble Diskantores with fourteenth-century polyphony from the northern Netherlands, developed in collaboration with musicologist Eliane Fankhauser, will also contain reconstructions of fragmentary pieces from the so-called Utrecht and Leiden

⁴⁹⁴ We already encountered this problem in Chapter 3, Examples 3.25 and 3.26.

⁴⁹⁵ *Veneto 1440. Music from a new Veneto manuscript c. 1440*. The Ascoli Ensemble, dir. by Sasha Zamler-Carhart (CD, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, OEAW PHA CD 36, 2014). My reconstructions can be heard on tracks 10, Antonius de Feltró's *Credo*, and 11, the section *Contra vos arguitur* of Du Fay *Iuvenis qui puellam* [02:00-02:47].

fragments.⁴⁹⁶ Like the English repertoire, the Dutch corpus of fourteenth-century music can benefit greatly from such reconstructions, rendering a much larger portion of it fit for performance.

Concerning fifteenth-century music, I intend to pursue my investigations of the 'fauxbourdon hybrids' discussed in Section 4.2.6. in a future publication, shedding more light on the relation between three- and four-voice fauxbourdon.

A practical application of my findings, which I have not discussed so far, is the use of improvised polyphony in public performances. The original 'biotope' of *discantare super planum cantum* was of course the Latin liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, with its corresponding chant repertory. However, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), these are no longer in general use.⁴⁹⁷ When performances take the approach of a 'liturgical reconstruction', singing a polyphonic mass ordinary together with propers in plainchant, one can use improvisation to provide polyphony also for the *proprium missae*. Especially for lengthy, repetitive chants, like sequences and hymns, it can be refreshing to use polyphony in some of the verses.⁴⁹⁸ Besides literally improvising in concert, experience with improvisation can be useful to devise performances in which one deals in a less 'literal' way with compositions, for instance adding or subtracting ornaments from one's part, giving the impression of a more 'improvisatory' execution, or 'deconstructing' a song by presenting it in different voice-combinations in different verses. These and similar ideas may be helpful to early musicians in developing performance approaches which present the early repertoires in ways that stress their rootedness in oral traditions.

⁴⁹⁶ Fankhauser, who is preparing a dissertation on the subject of the Utrecht fragments, has published some of her findings in Eliane Fankhauser, 'A Collection of Collections: New Insights into the Origins and Making of the Utrecht Fragments, NL-Uu 37.1', *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, 64.1/2 (2014), pp. 3-29. The premiere of our programme will take place on 26/1/2017 in The Hague, The Netherlands. See <<http://musantica.nl/concerten/56>> [accessed 16 August 2016].

⁴⁹⁷ Since 2007, the old Tridentine Mass can again be used as a *forma extraordinaria* of the Roman rite. The reason I have not explored the option of performing in such masses is that they are part of a right-wing, conservative movement within the Roman Catholic church, with which—for political and moral reasons—I do not wish to ally myself.

⁴⁹⁸ I have done this, for instance, with the *Dies Irae* sequence of the Requiem in a performance of the *Missa pro fidelibus defunctis* by Antoine de Févin. This concert of the Renaissance Ensemble of the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague, lead by Isaac Alonso de Molina and myself, took place on 27/11/2015 in Voorschoten, The Netherlands. See <<http://www.koncon.nl/en/news-and-concerts/concert-diary/?item=591>> [accessed 16 August 2016].

6.3 Postlude: The Singer's Perspective

A short treatise from ca. 1400, the *Tractatulus de differentiis et gradibus cantorum* by Arnulf de St. Ghislain, provides us with an intriguing description of skills and talents — or lack thereof — attributable to different types of singers in the later Middle Ages.⁴⁹⁹ Arnulf's first category is the Guidonian stereotype of a *cantor* who is ignorant of the art of music but nonetheless berates his expert colleagues and 'always produces dissonance with those who are concordant.'⁵⁰⁰ The second category consists of singers lacking in the *ars* of music but strongly drawn to its *dulcedo* ('sweetness'), who make up for their lack in knowledge and skill through diligent practise.⁵⁰¹ Arnulf's third category consists of 'practising theorists', who have a bad voice but are nonetheless able to teach others what they cannot themselves perform. Instead of becoming 'musical sophists', these musicians prefer teaching 'real music'.⁵⁰² The fourth and final category consists of those 'perfect musicians', 'nightingales' possessing a sweet voice and a natural ability to learn music. If taught by musicians of the third category, they are able to perform music with a great variety of 'mode, mensuration, number and color'.⁵⁰³

Like most medieval categorisations, Arnulf's divisions should probably be taken with a grain of salt, especially his 'bestial' first category. Nonetheless, it may be revealing to see that at the turn of the fifteenth century, as now, singers were not all supermen. Talents and abilities must have been distributed among them in different ways. Essential, to my mind, is that the 'perfect musicians' of Arnulf's final category combine the virtues of his less-than-ideal second- and third-grade musicians. I have found, in practice, that collective improvisation works best with an ensemble consisting not only of 'nightingales' but of 'hard-working singers' and 'practising theorists' as well. In terms of my own

⁴⁹⁹ Christopher Page, 'A Treatise on Musicians from ? c. 1400: The *Tractatulus de Differentiis et Gradibus Cantorum* by Arnulf de St Ghislain', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 117.1 (1992), pp. 1-21.

⁵⁰⁰ '(...) semper cum consonantibus nicholominus dissonantes (...)'. Ibid., p. 15 (rr. 1-21 [transl. pp. 17-18]).

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., p. 15 (rr. 24-40 [transl. pp. 18-19]).

⁵⁰² 'Tales non sophisticantur in musica sed realem musicam profitentur.' Ibid., p. 15-16 (rr. 41-55 [transl. pp. 19]).

⁵⁰³ '(...) in quibus nobilis acquisitio artis cantorie organum natural dirigit regularit in modo, mensura, numero et colore (...)'. Ibid., p. 16 (rr. 65-92 [transl. pp. 19-20]).

development, improvising has also allowed me to combine my analytical and 'productive' musical skills (developed as a composer) and my vocal and aural skills (learned as a singer) into a kind of 'polyphonic consciousness', active in improvising as well as sight-reading and performing polyphony.

Creating new practices of improvised polyphony together with the Ensemble Diskantores, my students, and others, I have also had to reflect on what it means to be the 'carrier' of a tradition. Scholar of English literature John Niles has stressed the importance of the role of gifted storytellers in living traditions of oral poetry: 'If we (...) liken tradition to a machine—one that may stall from time to time—then the strong tradition-bearer is its engine. Strong tradition-bearers constitute the force that keeps the process of oral literature in movement through the impact of their personal character and style.'⁵⁰⁴ He explains how such a 'strong tradition-bearer', the Scottish storyteller Duncan Williamson (1927-2007), developed a highly critical consciousness of his repertory, enabling him to 'acquire fresh materials as long as he live[d], inventing some new songs as well as partially refashioning the ones that he ha[d] heard.'⁵⁰⁵

Undeniably, the modern revival of improvised polyphony is a somewhat artificial construct, not entirely comparable to a living oral tradition such as Williamson's. Nevertheless, it also depends on creative and dedicated individuals to be 'kept in movement'. Through this dissertation, but mostly through my pedagogical practice, I hope to have contributed to this continuing development by branching out into new styles and genres. I will, somewhat like Williamson, continue gathering techniques, formulas, tunes and forms, integrating them into my repertory and 'polyphonic consciousness'. And I hope that my colleagues and students will, like Arnulf's 'nightingales', build yet further on these experiences and ideas, taking the 'young' tradition of extempore polyphony in still other directions.

⁵⁰⁴ Niles, p. 173.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 192-193.