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

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation documents my research into late medieval and early Renaissance extempore polyphony, through music-historical scholarship as well as practical experiments with students and fellow-singers. The author's aim is to expand current knowledge of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century polyphony, and thereby to develop new music-analytical and -pedagogic tools for approaching this repertoire. An in-depth investigation of the material remains of late medieval musical culture—the extant compositions and theoretical treatises—forms the basis for experiments with vocal polyphonic improvisation above plainchants. These practical experiences, in turn, can shed new light on the historical pieces and texts.

The music-analytical, historical, experimental and didactic approaches of the research are developed in the three central chapters of this dissertation: Chapter 2 offers a general overview of *ex tempore* polyphony as a historical and socio-cultural phenomenon. It is shown that—due to the mental and communicative skills possessed by singers of polyphony—their improvisations would have been anything but ‘unprepared’ and ‘uncoordinated’, even without having been rehearsed.

Knowledge of contrapuntal techniques was an important aspect of the craft of polyphonic singing. In Chapter 3, a number of improvisation models—similar to the ‘schemata’ and ‘Satzmodelle’ of later repertoires—are identified in fourteenth-century treatises and compositions. It is shown how these can be used again by musicians of today to create two- and three-voice improvisations in *Ars Nova* style. Chapter 4 takes its departure from the treatise *De preceptis artis musicae* (ca. 1470) in describing a trajectory for learning to improvise fifteenth-century counterpoint: starting from the two-voice gymel, the student progresses to free counterpoint, and the three- and four-voice techniques described in *De preceptis*. Furthermore, the history of gymel and fauxbourdon offers an opportunity to ponder the long-term evolution of Western music, and that of simple liturgical polyphony in particular.

The opportunities offered by these findings for current pedagogic practice are discussed in Chapter 5. First, an overview is given of the available didactic

materials on improvised polyphony, pointing the reader to the advantages and disadvantages of each. Next, the author discusses his own experiences with polyphonic improvisation through self-learning, improvising with colleagues, and teaching. Finally, topical reflections are provided on important aspects of teaching improvised polyphony, such as the aural and visual imagination of counterpoint, the importance of practicing improvisation vocally, and the utilisation of historical compositions in the classroom. The didactic approach is flexible, and can be adapted to variety of pedagogic situations, from one-time workshops for beginners to multiannual courses in higher musical education.

This dissertation presents a new approach to historical polyphony, resulting from a mutually beneficial interplay between musical analysis, experiments with improvisation, and pedagogic practice. It develops new ways of understanding late medieval and early Renaissance polyphony, which are useful not only for teaching and analysis, but which may form a stimulus for contemporary performance practice of early music as well. This research, therefore, is intended first and foremost as a contribution to the further development of historically informed improvisation today.