SINGING SIMPLE POLYPHONY:
INDIVIDUAL VOCAL PRODUCTION AND
PERCEPTION OF THE ENSEMBLE

by Alessandra Fiori

It is no secret that, in Italian musicology, a hiatus has existed for some time now between the theory of music and its performance. For many years I have been engaged in the genre of sacred music known as „simple polyphony", both as a performer and as a musicologist, but this is the first time that I have been asked to make a synthesis of the two perspectives and to discuss the problems associated with performance.

Written music represents a very small part of all the music that man has created, and yet it has played a determining role, because as far as the past is concerned, it is all we know. The history of ordinary men and women and their music remains for us a mystery: all those people in the past who prayed and sang as part of their everyday life have disappeared without a trace so that only the music „of the few" is accessible to us and has become the only music that we can perform. Simple polyphonies can help us to understand a bit more about the music of the past, especially unwritten music, because they lie in the borderline between oral and written music, or popular and cultured traditions.

These two latter categories, it should be emphasised, need to be used very carefully. The mere fact that a piece has a written form automatically puts it in the sphere of „cultured" music, even if it has intrinsic characteristics more associated with the realm of popular music.

When confronting pieces written in simple polyphony, one often has the impression of a style „in a state of transition", even more so than in cultured polyphony. Many pieces, in fact, can be found in various sources in slightly different versions, as if each version were a record of a specific moment in the evolution of the piece, giving a snapshot of one of its possible forms within the continuous flow of musical development.[1]

Our view today of the changing musical styles over the centuries is still largely influenced by an evolutionary concept based on positivistic doctrines. An imprint such as this tends to document artistic invention only at the moments when it has reached its maximum degree of complexity, and does not do justice to more modest musical traditions which were much more widespread, but which were not taken into account because they were not thought consistent with the development of the rules of harmony and counterpoint.

---

[1] See for example the numerous versions of „Verbum caro factum est" transcribed by Francesco Luisi in his *Laudario Giustinianeo* (Venice 1983), or the various arrangements of pieces such as „In Natale Domini", or „Cum autem venissem" in Elisabeth Diederichs, *Die Anfänge der mehrstimmigen Lauda vom Ende des 14. bis zur Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Tutzing 1986.

In the past, these simpler polyphonic forms have been marginalized by more traditional music historians, but in the last few decades, they have aroused the interest of a number of scholars, especially those from Italy where this style was widespread.

The first of these scholars were Franco Alberto Gallo and Giuseppe Vecchi[2] who became interested in this types of compositions towards the end of the 1960's, giving them the name cantus planus binatim (two-part plainsong). More recently, they were discussed at two important meetings (in Cividale del Friuli and in Venice[3]) and treated in a publication by the Sicilian musicologist Ignazio Macchiarella entitled *Il Falsobordone*.[4] In this work the author examined the „simple" compositional style, starting from printed musical sources (therefore from the sixteenth century onwards) and correlating it with the survival of polyvocal liturgical pieces in the Italian popular tradition. Thus, even though polyphonic forms evolved rapidly, the more primitive styles with only two parts did not disappear completely; on the contrary, they remained virtually intact through the centuries in the Italian liturgies and paraliturgies.

It is necessary to discredit the belief that only monodic music can be transmitted orally. Many musical cultures, including European ones, have polyphonic pieces of 4, 5 or more voices as part of their oral tradition. The main reason for writing polyphonic music down may well have been to aid in the performance of it, but this does not mean that it could not have existed (and could still exist) without being written down, which makes it much more difficult for us to study and evaluate it.

In Italy today the oral tradition of sacred polyvocal music still retains both the styles that have been present at different times since the Middle Ages. In the north the prevalent style is that of two voices singing the melody in parallel. In the south and on the islands the more characteristic style is that of a succession of three or more voices in blocks of chords, as we can see in the examples below (Ex. 1–2).

Once again it was Macchiarella who pointed out the similarities between the falsobordone of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and certain types of traditional polyphonies. Many of these songs are very easily memorised and learned and were probably passed down from written forms to oral ones (or viceversa).

Macchiarella's ideas are very convincing and have prompted me to enlarge on them by looking for evidence that might show possible fifteenth-century precedents for the falsobordone and that, more generally, might allow us to trace the evolutionary route of „popular" polyphony in Italy. The phenomenon

[2]   Franco Alberto Gallo, Giuseppe Vecchi (ed.), *I più antichi monumenti sacri italiani*, Bologna 1968.

[3]   Cesare Corsi, Pierluigi Petrobelli (ed.), *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa. Atti del congresso internazionale – Cividale del Friuli, 22–24 agosto 1980*, Rome 1989; Giulio Cattin, Franco Alberto Gallo (ed.), *Un millennio di polifonia tra oralità e scrittura*, Collana I Quaderni di «Musica e Storia» IV, Bologna 1998.

[4]   Ignazio Macchiarella, *Il Falsobordone*, Lucca 1996.

Ex. 1: „Quasi cedrus".[5]

[5]   Ceriana (Imperia); transcription by Mauro Balma, 1985.

Ex. 2: „Miserere".[6]

6   Galtellì (Nuoro); trascription by Ignazio Macchiarella, op. cit., 78–79.

of simple polyphony in sacred music is particularly interesting in the fifteenth century, because it was considered an autochthonous repertoire which co-existed alongside the more documented musical compositions from France and Flanders. The fifteenth-century theoretician Prosdocimo de Beldemandis speaks of the ancient practice of parallel voices, adding that „talem etiam modum cantandi cantum planum binatim habent aliqui moderni."[7] Also, Franchino Gaffurio, a sort of ethnomusicologist ante litteram, documents a similar practice in use in the Ambrosian liturgy and gives an example of the „De profundis" in his *Practica Musicae:*[8]

Ex.3: „De profundis".

[7] *Prosdocimi de Beldemandis Expositiones tractatus pratice cantus mensurabilis magistri Johannis de Muris,* Franco Alberto Gallo (ed.), Antiquae Musicae Italicae Scriptores, III/1, Bologna 1966, 163.

[8] *Practica musice Franchini Gafori Laudensis* , Milano, Ioannes Petrus de Lomatio, 1496 (reprint New York 1979).

It was also in fifteenth-century Italy that the so-called international style became dominant. This style was developed by an elite of musical experts who served in the most important churches of the time and tended to obscure the „popular" forms which were often relegated to the role of adding a bit of extra colour to the middle of pieces of Flemish origin.

In this period too, the use of measures had for some time been the normal practice for writing music for multiple parts, but here and there we can find evidence of compositional models and styles whose promulgation did not require any knowledge of the complex system of notation which had been in use since the middle ages. Thus we can say that if the parts are not written in measures, then this is a clear indication that they are simple polyphonic forms which have survived from an earlier period; we cannot however affirm the opposite, that is, that the use of measures is secure evidence for „modernity". Reinhard Strohm, who coined the term simple polyphony, has already warned scholars about this.[9] Even while admitting the importance of Prosdocimo's cantus planus binatim, Strohm maintained that it is an inexact formulation and limited to encompass all cases. As he pointed out, this compositional style of music is not necessarily binatim, as there can sometimes be 3, 4 or even 5 voices, and is not always planus, as we will see.

While it is true that in most cases simple polyphonic pieces were not written with the same precision as that found in more complex music, they were sometimes written in a similar manner to their more contemporary pieces, that is to say elegantly and with measures and decorated initials. We should therefore not come to any hasty or superficial conclusions: the use of measured notation in polyphony is often just for graphical convenience, and should not be a deciding factor in the argument.

The frequency of simple polyphony in manuscript sources is inversely proportional to that of its contemporary performance. Italian fifteenth century manuscripts are often just miscellaneous compilations with sacred pieces mixed with secular ones, with foreign composers predominating, and with simple polyphonies given without attribution, which is an eloquent indication of their status. Italian manuscripts from the latter part of the century show that more attention was now being paid to other types of composition such as frottole and sacred pieces in simple polyphony, two musical forms that have strong stylistic similarities. In simple polyphony there are two fundamental types. The first one generally has two or three voices, and resembles more the ancient discantus style, with a superposition of different melodic lines and an essentially horizontal construction. The second type reflects instead a more modern treatment of the parts in blocks of chords, with a typically vertical construction. In this type the harmonic progressions are an essential feature and there is a preference for triads in root position (prevalently on the fourth and fifth degrees of the scale, serving the same function as a reciting

---

[9]   Reinhard Strohm, „Polifonie più o meno primitive. Annotazioni alla relazione di base e nuove fonti", in Cesare Corsi, Pierluigi Petrobelli (ed.), op. cit., 83–98.

tone). Another feature is the repeated use of cadences and the movement of voices by step (with the exception of the base part). In this case the presence of cantus firmus is not a determining factor of the composition.

Certain pieces written in simple polyphony belong to the repertory of Holy Week. In the Italy of the sixteenth and seventeenth century there was often a rule that falsobordone was the only polyphonic music that could be sung on triduum days.[10] This ruling gives us an indication of what the simple style meant in a religious context. It was evidently a type of multipart singing which was tolerated even for very solemn occasions or mourning when almost any kind of music was considered inappropriate. Even in traditional sacred Italian chants the most substantial traces of simple polyphony are found in music written especially for Easter.

Upon examination it is evident that many of these pieces lay in the border zone between cultured and popular music, and combined the artistic wisdom of the 15th century with new requirements of sobriety and clarity that were demanded in this period. Polyphony was always regarded with suspicion by the clergy. Certainly its beauty gave decoration to the rituals, but it could also be a source of distraction. Then there was the fact that the counterpoint and the long vocalisations made the words almost incomprehensible, which would have been another reason for disapproval. Often in the history of the Church attempts at reform included opposition (even if more in words than in action) to polyphony in favour of monody or less elaborate polyvocal styles. They wanted a style of singing that maintained the original transparency and force of the Gregorian chant, transparency in the sense that each individual part could be distinguished whilst maintaining the overall integrity of the piece, and force in the sense that the pronunciation and meaning of the words were faithfully adhered to.

The compositions considered here are probably those resulting from this type of requirement – pieces conceived in a cultured (or semi-cultured) environment, but inspired by ideals of clarity and spontaneity that characterised a broader climate of religious reform in that period. From a purely semantic point of view, they incorporated two important criteria, and thereby formed a kind of compromise – respect for the word (or rather, the Word), which was guaranteed by a clear enunciation of each syllable, and the need for a suitable style which polyphony was thought to provide.

I would now like to summarise the results of some recent research I carried out on a number of fifteenth-century sources, which led me to formulate a possible reason for the continuing use of simple polyphony.

Going back to the fourteenth century very little of Italian sacred music of that time is available to us. There are a few examples of polyphonic intonations of hymns and some music for the Ordinary of the mass, in particular pairs of Gloria and Credo, but no psalms. One of the first examples of music

---

[10] Craig A. Monson, *Disembodied voices. Music and culture in an early modern Italian convent*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1995, 37–38.

related to the Office from Italian sources, is a Magnificat which can be found in mss. 2216 in the University Library of Bologna. This piece, which is most unusual for the period, has a closed form, with homophonic voice parts and modular design. Thus the verses are meant to be sung polyphonically alternatim with sections in Gregorian chant. This polyphonic adaptation has two different melodic-rhythmic patterns, with corresponding changes of tempus and prolatio; thus the melody we can call A is invariably in tempus imperfectum and prolatio perfecta (versicles 1, 2, 3, 11), while the so-called melody B is instead in tempus perfectum and prolatio perfecta (versicles 7, 9).

I now turn to four sources which date from the end of the fifteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth centuries and which have some interesting similarities. The first three are manuscripts and the fourth is printed.

- Montecassino, Biblioteca Abbaziale, mss. 871;
- Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, mss. K.I.2;
- Cape Town, The South African Library, mss. Grey 3.b.12;
- *Lamentationum Jeremie prophete. Liber primus*; *Lamentationum liber Secundus*, Venezia: O. Petrucci, 1506.

The first one chronologically is Montecassino 871[11] which is a Neapolitan manuscript associated with the Aragonese court. The repertory in it is both sacred and secular and there is a strong prevalence of Franco-Flemish composers. Among the pieces there are lamentations and a number of psalms in fauxbourdon, both with a modular structure: fauxbourdon and falsobordone are not quite the same from a compositional point of view but are conceptually very similar.

The most alike of them all are the two other manuscripts, Sienese one and the other one which is probably Venetian. The Siena manuscript K.I.2 from the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati,[12] contains purely sacred music, and is an amalgamation of two earlier books which were separate at least until 1486. One is dedicated to music for the Holy Office, and the other to music for the Mass. The section reserved for the Holy Office contains more than 20 psalms in simple polyphony (or rather, in falsobordone), as well as several hymns and intonations of the Magnificat by Franco-Flemish composers.

The manuscript Cape Town, The South African Library, Grey 3.b.12[13] – another manuscript comprised entirely of sacred music – is presumed to be from the convent of S. Giustina in Padua (or in circles quite close to those of the convent), and is a corpus of sacred music called *Liber Quadragesimalis*. It also contains psalms in simple polyphony similar to those found in the Siena

[11] Modern edition Isabel Pope, Masakata Kanazawa (ed.), *The musical manuscript Montecassino 871*, Oxford 1978.
[12] Facsimile by Frank A. D'Accone, (Renaissance music in facsimile: sources central to the music of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, vol. 17 / general editors, Howard Mayer Brown, Frank A D'Accone and Jessie Ann Owens, New York 1986).
[13] Transcribed in Giulio Cattin, *Italian laude and Latin unica in ms Capetown, Grey 3.b.12*, Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae, vol. 76, Neuhausen-Stuttgart 1977.

manuscript, with the difference that only the first verse is set to music, and not the entire text (as found in the Siena ms., but also in Montecassino), and, in addition there are no sections in Gregorian chant.

Of the four sources cited above, the final, the printed one, consists of two books of Lamentationes, comprising an anthology of pieces the majority of which have not yet been found in manuscript form. The first book has not only lamentations, but also other pieces associated with the rites of Holy Week.

A comparison of these printed Lamentationes with the psalms in the Siena or Cape Town manuscripts, shows that there are strong stylistic similarities (even the more complex ones almost always have within them more or less extended examples of simple polyphony: for example the lamentations of Agricola). Even the lamentations in the Montecassino manuscript, when pruned of their exuberant ornamentation, show an essentially simple structure.

In my opinion these are extreme examples which illustrate that in the fifteenth century (and probably even earlier) simple polyphony was used for the singing of psalms, and, by analogy, the lamentations, and that the pieces, although documented in a few sources, were primarily memorised and passed on in this manner without being written down.

The lack of the versicles following the first in the Cape Town ms. thus presented no problem for the performers, who could have merely adapted the successive parts of the text to the melody notated in the liturgical book, in this manner (see Ex. 4)

With a bit of practice, other more complex pieces could also be treated in the same way as in Example 5.

Such a practice developed with the intention of solemnising, through a hasty polyphonic treatment, long pieces such as the psalms which had not yet achieved the status of a formal genre of polyphonic music. Likewise, in the celebrations for Holy Week, these forms were used to give special significance to the Word of God in a style that was decorative and festive, yet not too exuberant, so that the music was at the same time appropriately solemn and meditative.

After having given this very short stylistic and historical picture of simple polyphony, we come to the question of its performance. We can agree with Carl Dahlhaus that a concert is almost always an arbitrary construction of pieces grouped together in a way that most likely was never intended, and in a context which is extraneous to that of the musical content. This, however, is not always true for sacred music. The religious ceremony itself can guide us to a reliable selection of a specific sacred repertory and nowadays this is the route taken by a vast majority of performers.

In any reconstruction of the liturgy which would have been performed in Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century for Holy Week or for Vespers, it is necessary to keep in mind that two musical styles in all likelihood coexisted: hymns in cultured polyphony, on the one hand, and psalms, and sometimes the Magnificat, in simple polyphony, on the other. However this music might have been written down, the first problem from the point of view of perform-

Ex. 4: Cape Town hypothesis, versicle „Virgam virtutis"

Om - nis _ ter - ra a - do - ret _____ te

Om - nis _ ter - ra a - do - ret _____ te

Om - nis ter - ra a - do - ret _____ te

Om - nis ter - ra a - do - ret _____ te

et psal - tat ti - bi

et psal - tat ti - bi

et psal - tat ti - bi

et psal - tat ti - bi

psal - mum di - cat no - mi - ni _____ tu - o Do - mi - - - ne

psal - mum di - cat no - mi - ni _____ tu - o Do - mi - - - ne

psal - mum di - cat _ no - mi - ni _____ tu - o Do - mi - - - ne

psal - mum di - cat _ no - mi - ni _____ tu - o Do - mi - - - ne

Ex. 5: „Adoramus te"; hypothesis. I would like to thank Prof. Jeffrey Dean for the transcription in ancient notation.

ance is to decide what was the rhythm of these pieces. The impression is that it was matched to the words and that the singing was shaped according to a *forma mentis* that approached, or at least tried to approach, the practice of *cantus planus*. And, as we have seen, this declamatory style of polyphony has something in common with Gregorian chant: for example the insistence on a triad which acts as a reciting tone;[14] a melodic ascent and descent and a change in the chord or a prolongation of the sounds as a function of tonic accents. Each voice sings together with all the others, but independently, as if reciting a prayer.

We have seen that in the Siena and Montecassino manuscripts the psalms have a musical accompaniment for their entire length whereas in the Cape Town one only the first verse appears, a sign that the others were intoned by using the first verse as a basis and then applying the rules of Latin prosody. Many of these four-part pieces in simple polyphony leave the declamation unadorned in strict homophony and instead decorate the cadences according to the contrapuntal rules of formal polyphony. These two sections are quite independent of each other, both ending with a separate ornamentation which is in no way connected with what came before. This creates a kind of musical bilingualism such that each singer sometimes stands out as an individual performer, and sometimes is integrated into a contrapuntal game with the other voices. In the latter each part has a particular role assigned to it by the grammar of complex polyphony, whereas before it had contributed with almost equal weight. In Italian popular multipart music the voices do not respect any kind of hierarchy, nor any particular combination, but rather seem to compete against each other in order to impose their own particular melodic line. When a voice establishes itself in the texture in a way most conducive for that voice, then it seems to establish almost a predominance over the others. I don't want to enter into a discussion here regarding the use of chest voice or head voice but, for example, in using chest voice, in the true binatim style, the dynamics may be the natural result of an exchange of timbres, with a variation of intensity which is purely physiological.

Another curious performance indication which merits consideration comes from archival sources. We learn there that quite often in small parishes, polyphony was executed with whichever voices were available at the time, and that often the missing parts were replaced by an instrument, preferably a wind instrument (such as the trombone). I think we would find the results today rather perplexing.[15]

---

[14] The theoretical fundamentals of the compositional method applied to psalms in fauxbourdon and in falsobordone is illustrated in Konrad Ruhland, *Der mehrstimmige Psalmvortrag im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert. Studien zur Psalmodie auf der Grundlage von Faburdon, Fauxbourdon und Falsobordone*, Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophischen Fakultät, München, Ludwig-Maximilian Universität, 1975. I would like to thank Dr. Thomas Drescher for bringing this to my attention.

[15] A propos of this, see the research conducted in Venice by Elena Quaranta, *Oltre San Marco. Organizzazione e prassi della musica nelle chiese di Venezia nel Rinascimento*, Firenze 1998.

But by far the most useful lesson to be learned for the performance of these pieces is that as much as possible they should be memorised, so that the performance is more cohesive, as well as more flowing and credible. In memorizing the music, it would be desirable to be able to read only the text of the psalm and modify the melodic line on the basis of the Latin prosody, as occurs in the case of Gregorian psalmody.

Whatever may be the moving force (or forces) behind the use of simple polyphony, I do not believe that we should consider it as a downgrading of some specific polyphonic language. The simultaneous appearance of both simple and cultured polyphony in the manuscript sources that we have considered here, demonstrates the fact that both forms were sung by the same singers.

Indeed, there seems to have been an attempt to give greater solemnity also to pieces which were never intended to be performed polyphonically, thus marrying the splendour of many voices with the transparency of Gregorian declamation.

I have tried here to provide my own explanation to the phenomenon of simple polyphony as well as make some suggestions concerning its performance. I am, however, aware that musicology can only give partial answers to the many doubts surrounding performance practice, and can do no more than present to the performer as many solutions to these problems as possible.

(Translated from the Italian by Elisabeth Marseglia)