WHAT IS COUNTERPOINT?

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I.

I would like to begin this contribution by taking the reader back to a year in the life of Ludwig van Beethoven. The year is 1792, and in that year, Beethoven was a young man in his early twenties. Although he was not well known outside his native city of Bonn, where he lived and worked, he had already been making a name for himself as an exceptionally talented musician and composer. Yet for a man of his promise a provincial town like Bonn was clearly too confining a place. It lacked the sorts of opportunities he would need to realize his artistic gifts and aspirations. To everybody who knew the young Beethoven, it was obvious that he should go to the musical capital of the world—to Vienna, the city of Mozart and Haydn. It is true that Mozart had died the previous year. Yet the aging Haydn was still there, and was known to give private tuition to paying students.

Few pupils could have seemed more deserving of study with Haydn than Beethoven. Earlier that year, Ludwig had briefly met the older composer, and had shown him some of his recent compositions. To gain an impression of what he was able to show Haydn on that day, I would recommend listening to his Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II of 1790 (WoO 87), an ambitious setting for soloists, orchestra, and choir, altogether lasting about 40 minutes, that richly testifies to the young man's technical assurance as well as to his ability to summon the dramatic power of the Viennese classical language.[1]

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1. Among available recordings of this fine Cantata (of which unfortunately there are not many), I would recommend the one recorded in 1970 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra with BBC Chorus and Choral Society, dir. Sir Colin Davis, featuring Kiri Te Kanawa, soprano; Yvonne Newman, alto; David Barrett, tenor; and Michael Langdon, bass.

If Beethoven was able to write music of such accomplishment around the age of twenty, one might justifiably wonder how much he actually stood learn from Haydn, indeed whether he needed any lessons at all. Yet his friends in Bonn were not concerned about this. They felt that Haydn could give him something vastly more important than compositional skill alone. As one of those friends said on the eve of Beethoven's departure, "With the help of assiduous labor you shall receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands."

It was a beautiful prophecy, but one that would come true only in part—and unfortunately it was not the part about Mozart's spirit, but rather the one about assiduous labor. Within a week of his arrival in Vienna, Beethoven started taking lessons with Haydn. Yet these were not lessons in advanced composition. Haydn was not giving him expert guidance on how to put together a string quartet, or how to write a symphony, or a concerto. Instead, Beethoven received instruction in that most basic and elementary of subjects in music: the theory of counterpoint.[2]

We still have a fair idea of what took place in these early lessons, for Beethoven never discarded his old counterpoint exercises, and they survive today in libraries around the world. It is apparent from these exercises that Haydn followed the pedagogy set forth in the influential textbook *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) of Johann Joseph Fux—a book from which Haydn himself had once learned the art through arduous self-study. Like so many textbooks in this period, *Gradus ad Parnassum* was set up as a dialogue between Joseph, a youthful, eager student, and Aloys, a firm but kindly master:[3]

> ALOYS. Let us settle down to work, then, and make a beginning in the name of Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom.

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2. For this and what follows, see Alfred Mann, "Beethoven's Contrapuntal Studies With Haydn," in: *Musical Quarterly* 56 (1970): 711–26.; see also Ignatius von Seyfried, *Louis van Beethoven's Studies in Thorough-Bass, Counterpoint and the Art of Scientific Composition*, trans. Henry Hugh Pierson, (Leipzig: Schuberth, 1853).
3. Cited after Johann Joseph Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint from Johann Joseph Fux's* Gradus ad Parnassum, trans. Alfred Mann (New York: Morton, 1943), 22.

> Joseph. Before we start on the exercises, revered master, may I still ask what one is to understand by the term *counterpoint*? I have heard this word used not only by musicians but also by laymen.
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> Aloys. Your question is a good one, for this is to be the first subject of our study and work. It is necessary for you to know that in earlier times, instead of our modern notes, dots, or points were used. Thus one used to call a composition in which point was set against, or counter, to point, *counterpoint*; this usage is still followed today, even though the form of the notes has been changed. By the term counterpoint therefore is understood a composition which is written strictly according to technical rules. The study of counterpoint comprises several species which we shall consider in turn. First of all, then, the simplest species.

The simplest species: this was to be the starting point for Beethoven, too. In the first lesson, Haydn played him a tune in whole notes on the piano, told him that it was known as the *cantus firmus*, and then explained how to write a counter-melody, also in whole notes—conceived, literally, as point against point. That, he said, was the first species of counterpoint. This was to be followed, in a rigorous and methodical curriculum, by the second species—writing two notes against one. Finally he gave Beethoven some exercises to complete at home.

If one could play through some of those exercises, which actually still survive, it would be hard to believe one's ears. Did Beethoven really have to travel all the way from Bonn to be given such childishly simple homework? Was this the sort of work that would allow him to make the best of the opportunity to study with Haydn? Even if there had been a genuine deficiency in his musical training, surely there were plenty of musicians back in Bonn who could have taught him stuff like this? And if we recall that early cantata on the death of Emperor Leopold, which showed such considerable accomplishment in the art of composition, was it not rather demeaning for Beethoven to arrive in Vienna only to be sent back, as it were, to grade school?

As it turns out Beethoven was not very happy about Haydn's teaching, and he soon decided that he would make more progress if he took additional lessons from another Viennese composer, Johann Georg Albrechtsberger. Yet it was not the counterpoint

that was the problem. Beethoven must have really valued the lessons, otherwise he would surely not have held on to his exercise books, with all his errors and Haydn's corrections, for the rest of his life. Nor would he have approached Albrechtsberger for additional instruction in counterpoint. The real reason, it seems, is that Haydn and Beethoven did not get along especially well. The older man soon appears to have lost interest in his new pupil, and Beethoven—who had always been laboring under Mozart's shadow—felt injured by the apparent rejection.

So, yes, Beethoven was quite willing, even at age twenty-one, to submit to this tedious course of studies, even under a less than enthusiastic teacher, in order to acquire the art of counterpoint. He did not experience that as demeaning at all. So what was the value he perceived in these lessons? What did counterpoint represent to him? What, in his view, had been lacking in the compositions he had already written before his departure to Vienna? And how did he expect his training in counterpoint to improve them?

When dealing with questions such as these, writers often invoke an analogy with language. That is to say, if the art of composition can be seen as a kind of language, then the rules of counterpoint would be its grammar. The analogy makes a certain kind of sense. We can all learn a language by speaking along with native speakers, and after a while we may even become quite fluent in it—this, of course, is how we learned our mother tongue. Yet without formal training in the grammar and syntax of language, in the underlying structure, we may never feel totally confident that we have truly mastered it. If we were to publish prose compositions in that language, we might always be afraid that sooner or later somebody would spot an embarrassing grammatical error, one that would give away our lack of training. So we might well feel, even at age twenty, that it could be useful to receive a thorough grounding in grammar before moving on, say, to advanced creative writing.

Maybe this is how we could view the case of Beethoven. His lessons in counterpoint may have been mindlessly boring, like exercises in the declension of Latin verbs, yet the pedagogy would also instil in him a certain discipline, would lay a technical foundation that would support his more advanced artistic endeavors.

And yet there is something contradictory in all of this. To judge from his early compositions, Beethoven seems to have been a perfectly competent composer even without training in counterpoint. And if that is true, then how indispensible a foundation was counterpoint really? Was it actually a foundation—in the sense that it must be completed before one can construct the actual building? To return to our analogy with language, is it not true that by the time we are taught the grammar of our native tongue—in my case, in school around the age of eight—we are already fluent speakers, and do not actually need the grammar to make ourselves understood? Is grammar not really an afterthought, a distillation of rules and principles that naturally evolved in living language, well before it occurred to anyone to write them down?

With this last question, we are already touching on the theme I propose to explore in this contribution—the question of improvisation. When it comes to language, we are all improvisers, we literally improvise all day long. In everyday speech, we utter the first words of a sentence even before we know how that sentence is going to end. By the time we have completed the sentence, it always turns out as a perfectly formed syntactic whole, neatly obeying the rules of grammar—even though we have given those rules scarcely any thought while uttering it. The same is true of discourse at large. When we speak, we do not always know what we are going to say a minute from now, or how we are going to say it. All we know is that we will say whatever seems appropriate at that point, and we are not going to worry about it until we get there.

Maybe this is where the analogy between counterpoint and grammar breaks down. While it may be true that the counterpoint lessons gave Beethoven a kind of musical grammar, it certainly was not the grammar of a living language. By the eighteenth century, counterpoint was a dead language, no longer spoken, no longer evolving. It was a set of abstract theory exercises on paper, useful perhaps from a pedagogical point of view, yet for professional musicians it was perfectly possible to get by without formal training in it—as Beethoven's early compositions amply demonstrate.

Once upon a time, of course, it had been different—counterpoint had been a living language.[4] Long before Beethoven's time, mastering counterpoint had meant more, much more, than the ability to write exercises. It had meant being able to sing it on the spot, in exactly the same way that you and I speak language on the spot. It meant to sing music that observed the rules of counterpoint as naturally and self-evidently as our everyday sentences obey the rules of grammar. Doing so may not have been called "improvisation" at the time, but then we do not call our everyday speech "improvisation" either—even though technically it is just that. It was called "to sing counterpoint," or just "to sing," just as we talk about speaking language, or just speaking.

This is the state of affairs as it must have prevailed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. People learned counterpoint by doing it, and many must have acquired it simply by singing along, picking up the idiom just as we are likely to pick up a language if we stay in another country for long enough. So perhaps this is how we might view the question raised earlier. Why did Beethoven still need to learn the grammar of counterpoint in his early twenties? Because for him, counterpoint was a dead language, because he had never had the chance to speak that language in its pure form. For that very reason, it did not really matter that he learned counterpoint so late in life, and in so academic a fashion. After all, he would never be required to speak it as a living language.

In the Renaissance, on the other hand, the situation had been very different. Consider what Johannes Tinctoris wrote in the last chapter of his treatise on counterpoint, the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* of 1477. "I have known not even one man," he says, "who has achieved eminent or noble rank among musicians if he began to compose or to sing *super librum* [that is, to improvise counterpoint] at or above his twentieth year of age."[5] So by

4. For this and what follows, see Rob C. Wegman, "From Maker to Composer: Improvisation and Musical Authorship in the Low Countries, 1450–1500," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996): 409–79.

5. After Johannes Tinctoris, *The Art of Counterpoint* (Liber de arte contrapuncti), trans. Albert Seay, Musicological Studies and Documents 5 (American Institute of Musicology, 1961), 141.

fifteenth-century standards, Beethoven might as well have given up any hope of ever becoming a musician of any competence. A living language—which counterpoint for Tinctoris certainly was—has to be acquired in childhood, otherwise it will be too late. Here the analogy with language works very well indeed. For if a child has not learned to speak any language by the age of about eight, then he or she never will learn to speak, because the brain can only develop the wiring for speech during a circumscribed phase of its early development. After that, the opportunity will be gone forever.

In order to acquire counterpoint as a living language, the kind of curriculum that Beethoven endured in Vienna would have been of little value. It is not through written exercises that we learn to speak a language, but rather by actively speaking it. A fifteenth-century choirboy had to sing and practice counterpoint, day after day, learn from his mistakes, listen to how others were doing it, follow their example, until he had internalized the language, and could handle it as effortlessly as you or I can conduct a conversation on the phone. That may seem like a lot to demand from a child. On the other hand, counterpoint was the only music, apart from plainchant, that anyone was ever likely to hear. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, counterpoint was the world language in music, the musical *lingua franca* spoken everywhere in Western Europe, from England to Denmark, to Poland and Bohemia, to Spain and Italy—and, in the sixteenth century, even in the new world. What was not counterpoint or plainchant had no claim to being music at all.

At some point in its history, then, counterpoint must have died, passed from the living language it had been in the Renaissance, to the dead language that Beethoven was at such considerable pains to learn. The likely cause of death is not hard to guess. The fatal blow to counterpoint probably came around 1600, with the identification of a new musical style. That style that had grown out of counterpoint, and still needed counterpoint for a reference, but at the same time permitted, even encouraged, violations of contrapuntal rules for the sake of rhetorical effect. Once this new style, the *seconda pratica*, was in place, any musical innovation driven by rhetorical concerns

was bound to be introduced only in this style, which as a consequence would undergo dramatic development. The old style, counterpoint proper, was now referred to as the *prima pratica*. Fairly soon, theorists began to insist that the distinction between these two styles be kept neat and tidy, and so they discouraged stylistic experimentation in the older style.[6] It was the job of counterpoint to stay put, and never to develop beyond the specific idiom it had acquired by the late sixteenth century. We can see this as early as 1610, when Claudio Monteverdi published his *Missa In illo tempore*. In this work, an exercise in the *prima pratica*, the art of counterpoint seems to want to dwell forever in a bygone age, oblivious to anything going on in the contemporary worlds of opera, madrigal, and oratorio.

As a relic from an increasingly remote past, the *stile antico* (as counterpoint came to be called in the seventeenth century) would soon acquire an aura of venerable antiquity; indeed it became the very byword of authority and tradition.[7] We like to think of composers like Bach and Beethoven as returning to that tradition in old age, re-engaging with ever more uncompromisingly abstract forms of counterpoint, as if appreciating, like never before, the true depth and value of this ancient art. Undoubtedly it was this aura of antiquity and authority, this promise of hidden riches and depth, that motivated the young Beethoven to keep going with his exercises. He may not have received Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands, but at least he was drinking from the same fountain that had once lavished that spirit. And one day, surely, it would lavish his own.

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6. Cf. Lorenzo Bianconi, *Music in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. David Bryant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47–48: in 1643 Marco Scacchi raised strong objections against the mixing of elements from both the *prima* and *seconda pratica*, especially in works belonging to the former category, that is, old-style vocal counterpoint. The result, Bianconi notes, is that Scacchi's classicism "defines, codifies and consolidates the position of an 'ancient' *a cappella* style of Counter-Reformation polyphony in a way *that sets it apart from all notion of historical change*; it can, indeed, appear alongside – though *not together with* – other more modern styles when required by the text, occasion or destination of the work in question" (my italics).

7. Cf. Christoph Wolff, *Der stile antico in der Music Johann Sebastian Bachs: Studien zu Bachs Spätwerk*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft 6 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1968).

2.

It may be helpful to think of the history of counterpoint as being marked by this major break around 1600. Yet the break is not quite so clear-cut as I have made it sound; there is also a great deal of continuity. While there is no question that counterpoint was the language in which polyphony was improvised during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was of course also the language of composition. The written dimension was there from the very beginning. The difference is that for Beethoven the only access to counterpoint was through writing; had he lived three centuries earlier, he would already have learned it in childhood, by listening and singing no less than by reading and writing.

There are other continuities that are perhaps less obvious, and one of my aims here is to explore what they are. To do this, we are now going to leap back five centuries, from Beethoven's time to the decades around the year 1300—the time in history that counterpoint, so far as we can tell, made its first entry on the European musical scene. My question is going to be a simple one, and it is about continuity: when counterpoint first emerges, what is new and distinctive about the art, and which of those new and distinctive things can still be recognized in the counterpoint that Beethoven learned several centuries later? If we can answer these questions, then perhaps we can also understand why and how this medieval practice could have had such a lasting impact on Western music history, to the point where we are still taking counterpoint lessons today. In this respect counterpoint could be compared to the mechanical clock or the pipe organ, two other inventions from around 1300 that have transformed the course of Western history forever.

Let us quickly review the evidence that has been brought together by other scholars, especially by the world expert on counterpoint, Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, on whose work I rely in what follows.[8] To begin with, one of the really odd things about

8. For this and what follows, see Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, *Der Contrapunctus im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zum Terminus, zur Lehre u. zu den Quellen*, Beiheft zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft 13 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974).

counterpoint is how suddenly it emerges, and how suddenly every writer seems to agree on its central importance. The decade in which it first turns up is the 1330s. There is one music treatise from that decade whose author clearly knows what counterpoint is, and who provides rules on how to make it.[9] In fact it is dated precisely in 1336. The author is a monk in Picardy named Pierre Palmoiseuse or, as he names himself in Latin, Petrus dictus Palma ociosa. He lives in a monastery in the diocese of Amiens, a monastery that belongs to the Cistercian order—not one of the orders that we would ordinarily associate with the cultivation of polyphony, for its guiding principle, if anything, was austerity. But maybe there is a clue in there somehow.

Now Petrus, as soon as he is past the opening preamble of his treatise, begins to talk directly about a kind of polyphony that we have not encountered in any treatise before him. He does not call it counterpoint quite yet, but rather speaks of *simplex discantus*, a term we have not come across before either.

> Unde notandum est, quod omnis **simplex discantus**, qui nihil aliud est quam **punctus contra punctum sive notula naturalibus instrumentis formata contra aliam notulam**, simpliciter potest componi et ordinari ex unisono, semiditono, ditono, diapente, tono cum diapente et diapason.

> It is to be noted that all **plain discant**—which is nothing other than **point against point, or one note produced on natural instruments against another note**—can be put together and arranged simply from unison, minor third, major third, fifth, sixth, and octave.

Let us briefly consider those two words. *Discantus*, at this time, is more or less the catch-all term for polyphony. So what must be distinctive about the particular type he discusses is that it is *simplex*. Now the literal meaning of *simplex* is not "simple" in the sense of "easy to understand," that is, the opposite of complicated, but rather: one-fold, or undivided—a meaning still

9. Only available edition to date: Johannes Wolf, "Ein Beitrag zur Diskantlehre des 14. Jahrhunderts," *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 15 (1913–14): 505-34.

retained in the German word for simple, *einfach*, as opposed to *zweifach*, or *dreifach*. If a Euro coin could be said to be *simplex*, then a ten-cent piece represents part of a Euro that is no longer *simplex*, because it has been broken up in pieces like this. A Euro made up by smaller coins is *multiplex*.

Yet how can discant be *simplex*, one-fold, when it is polyphony and thus by definition consisting of two or more voices? The answer is that Petrus is not talking about the number of voices, but about the quality of the notes. Like those Euro coins, those notes have to be kept whole: Petrus is not going to deal in small change. *Discantus simplex* consists only of whole notes, notes that are not broken up into smaller rhythmic values. And those whole notes are notated in neumes, the plainchant notation in which there is no specification of rhythmic value. What he is saying, in effect, is that this is polyphony without rhythm. It moves only in notes that have no specific durational value, that are whole and unbroken. Apparently not every reader was expected to grasp this immediately, for Petrus went on to spell it out more clearly. *Simplex discantus*, he goes on to say in the passage cited above, "is nothing other than point against point, or one note produced on natural instruments against another note."

This is the first time in the history of music theory that we encounter the fateful concept of *punctus contra punctum*. Or perhaps it is better to put it differently: this is the first time that we encounter the expression. For the concept of singing one note against another is of course as old as Western polyphony itself, and indeed was still being perpetuated around this time in the so-called *Klangschrittlehre*. A new expression, then, for what appears to have been a very old practice. As chance would have it, this same expression turns up in another context not too long before the writing of Petrus de Palma ociosa's treatise. This is a poem by the troubadour Peire de Corbiac, entitled *Trézor*, and written in southern France around the middle of the thirteenth century. In it, the poet boasts

of his many musical skills, and his ability to apply them both in church and in society at large. "Now, Lords" he says,[10]

> Senhors, encar sai ieu molt devinablamenz,
> chantar en sancta glieiza per ponz e per asenz,
> choris *sanctus* et *agnus* tripar contipotens,
> entonar *seculorum* que nol faill us *amens*,
> e far dous chantz et orgues e contrapointamens.
> Ja sai chansons enotas e vers bos e valens,
> pastorelas apres amorozas, plazens,
> retroenchas e dansas, ben e cortesamens.
> De totas res del segle sai aver grazimens,
> de clercs, de cavaliers, de dompnas avinens,
> de borçes, de joglars, d'escudiers, de servens.

> … I know very resourcefully indeed
> How to sing in Holy Church by points and by accents,
> Dance the Sanctus and Agnus and Cunctipotens,
> Intone *seculorum* followed without fail by *amen*,
> And make sweet chants and organa and counterpoints.
> Indeed I know notated songs, and good and worthy verses,
> I have learned *pastorelas*, lovely and pleasing,
> *Retroenchas* and *dansas*, noble and courtly.
> Of all things of the world I know how to have the favor
> Of clerics, knights, and honorable ladies,
> Of burghers, *joglars*, students, and servants.

Contrapointamens: it is the first time that the word "counterpoint" turns up outside the realm of music theory. The particular line of Peire's poem that contains the word is not found in all manuscript copies: the few copies that have it, however, all date from the early fourteenth century, and are thus roughly contemporary with the treatise of Petrus de Palma ociosa. So while the practice of singing note-against-note polyphony was not exactly a novelty, it does seem to have called for a new technical designation by the

10. After Elizabeth Aubrey, "References to Music in Old Occitan Literature," *Acta Musicologica* 61 (1989): 110–49, at 147–48.

early fourteenth century. And it so happens that this designation was to become virtually synonymous with "good music" for centuries to come.

As a music historian I have always been fascinated by the question when, where, and why certain keywords in the understanding or appreciation of music appear or disappear. For such changes are almost invariably indicative of broader shifts in thinking about music. I would argue that this is true even of the word "counterpoint," despite the fact that note-against-note singing in itself was not a novelty at all. The give-away in a new word or concept is usually an implied opposition to something else. You can tell this from my own attempt, a moment ago, to explain the words of Petrus de Palma ociosa. Why does he speak of *cantus simplex*? Answer: because it is not *cantus multiplex*. Instead of the small change of semibreves and minims, which the reader apparently knows already, he wants us to think of whole coins, unbroken and unmeasured. True, we are still talking about the same old practice of note-against-note singing. But *simplex* is the word you use when you need to make it intelligible to somebody whose principal frame of reference is measured polyphony.

The same is true of the expression "one note against another." The implied opposition here, surely, is to "more than one note against one." In other words, it implies an opposition to rhythmic differentiation. What has changed is not the practice as such, therefore, but the frame of reference within which it is understood. It is for similar reasons, for example, that we nowadays describe plainchant as "rhythmless" and "unmeasured," not because these are novel qualities that chant did not have long ago, but because they require explanation within a modern frame of musical reference that is conditioned almost wholly by rhythm and measure. It would be surprising to find similar terms used, say, in the tenth century.

All this is borne out by Petrus's musical example of *simplex discantus* (Example 1). The lowest voice-part here is labeled Tenor, exactly as it would have been labeled in regular discant. The tenor turns out to be based on a plainchant: it is *Kyrie fons bonitatis*. The other two voices both carry the label "contrapunctum," a clear indication that Petrus knew and used the word as a technical

term. Once again, however, he seeks to make the musical realities intelligible within the framework of measured polyphony. The first of the two upper voices, he writes, is a counterpoint *quasi in loco tripli*, "as though in the place of a triplum," that is, the top part in a three-voice motet. And the second, he adds, is *loco moteti*, "in the place of the *motetus*," that is, the middle part in a three-voice motet.

Contrapunctum quasi in loco tripli.

Contrapunctum loco moteti.

Tenor utriusque.

Example 1. Petrus dictus Palma ociosa, Compendium de discantu mensurabili (c.1336): musical example of "contrapunctum." After Johannes Wolf, "Ein Beitrag zur Diskantlehre des 14. Jahrhunderts," Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft 15 (1913–14): 505-34

From the example it is quite apparent that Petrus takes note-against-note singing to be unfamiliar to at least some of his readers. Those readers had to have the practice explained to them in terms of something they were evidently more familiar with—namely, the motet, and measured music in general. What Petrus seems to say here is this: just think of what you would do if you sang a motet. Now do the same, but forget everything about rhythm, and sing only whole notes, moving point against point. If you do that, it will sound like this (Example 2):

Example 2. Petrus dictus Palma ociosa, Compendium de discantu mensurabili *(c.1336): musical example of "contrapunctum," transcribed in modern notation*

Perhaps the contrast is not quite as dramatic, but still, to hear or play this example is to be reminded of Beethoven moving from Bonn to Vienna. Why would anyone in the early fourteenth century wish to sing whole-note counterpoints if what he was used to doing, or hearing, was motet-style polyphony? One answer could be, perhaps, that Petrus was a Cistercian monk; he had taken monastic vows, and among the things of this world that he had renounced, conceivably, was the kind of singing you did in motets.

But no, that is almost certainly not the answer. Petrus's treatise consists of three sections. Thus far we have only seen the first, which is wholly devoted to *simplex discantus*, note-against-note singing. The second is about *musica falsa*, the sorts of sharps we have just seen in his three-part counterpoint, and how and when you can introduce them. Then, in the third and final section, he turns to a new topic, which he calls "the flowers of measured music," that is, rhythmicized music. Let us read how he introduces this final topic (my italics):

> Sicut videmus arborem tempore aestatis adornatam et decoratam floribus et animam sanctam hominis virtutibus necnon etiam beatissimam virginem Mariam de incarnatione filii sui unigeniti sine corruptione, sic omnis discantus de floribus musicae mensurabilis adornatur et etiam decoratur. Dicunt enim flores musicae mensurabilis, quando plures voces seu notulae, quod idem est, diversimode figuratae secundum uniuscuiusque qualitatem ad unam vocem seu notulam simplicem tantum quantitatem illarum vocum continentem iusta proportione reducuntur.

> Just as we see the tree in summertime being adorned and decorated by blossoms, and the holy soul of a man by virtues, and indeed the most blessed Virgin by the incarnation without defilement of her only begotten Son, thus, in like manner, is all discant adorned and decorated by flowers of mensural music. Flowers of mensural music are so called *when several sounds or little notes* (which is the same thing), that are shaped differently each according to their quality, *are related in a just proportion to only one sound or plain note* that contains the quantity of those sounds.

What Petrus means is a kind of polyphony in which one voice still moves in whole notes, but the other one, the one on top, is broken up into small rhythmic values. He gives us no fewer than twelve examples of this practice, and it may be useful to consider just the first of these (Example 3). Interestingly, those "flowers of measured music" can be immediately recognized as a style of polyphony known and widely practiced for at least a century and a half: it is closely related to *organum purum*, the two-part organum in which one voice moves in long unmeasured notes, and the other in irregularly measured rhythms. How very odd: Petrus describes music of

Example 3. Petrus dictus Palma ociosa, Compendium de discantu mensurabili *(c.1336): "the first mode of measured discant adorned with flowerets," and note-against-note reduction of the same*

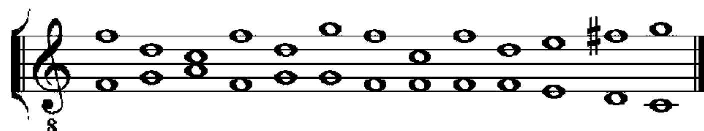
this kind as though it were something entirely new, even though this style, or some approximation of it, had existed long before. Something is not adding up here. If note-against-note counterpoint, *simplex discantus*, is something you might sing *in place of* a motet (which is what Petrus quite literally implied about his earlier example), and if we are to believe that *simplex discantus* is something that would have been suitable for Cistercian monks to practice, then why should he now go to the trouble of explaining how to turn it into elaborately rhythmicized discants? If it is alright to sing such music after all, then why not sing motets in the first place, instead of taking this elaborate and apparently redundant detour into note-against-note singing?

Petrus provides an answer to that question, yet one has to read between the lines to find it, for it is easy to miss. Example 3 may look like *organum purum*, but that's not actually what it is. If we take Petrus at his word, then it is an ornamented version of something else. To invoke his own analogies, when a tree is covered with cherry blossoms, it may be a greater pleasure for us to behold, and we may not be able to see the branches anymore, but it is still a tree. When the soul of a holy man is ornamented with virtues, he may resemble a heavenly being and seem like an angel, yet he is still a human. When the blessed Virgin gave birth to Jesus without defilement, she may have become the Mother of God, yet she was still a woman. And when discant is ornamented with flowers of measured music, it may sound like a motet, but it is still—well, what is it? What is it that still resides underneath all those ornaments? What would we be left with if we took them away?

The answer comes in a third important passage from Petrus's treatise. It turns out that *simplex discantus* had not, after all, been a useless diversion. After giving his twelve examples, of which we have just seen the first, Petrus emphasizes that all of them "are arranged from the same musical intervals from which *discantus simplex* is put together and arranged, and in the same manner" (my italics):

> Quod siquidem XII modi sive maneries ex eisdem speciebus musicalibus, a quibus simplex discantus componitur et ordinatur, et isti similiter ordinati sunt, et nihilominus iste discantus claris, ut dictum est, floribus adornatus una cum speciebus musicalibus ante dictis quandoque descendit et ascendit vicissim per dissonantias, videlicet per semitonium, tonum, diatessaron, tritonum, semiditonum cum diapente, et ditonum cum diapente …
>
> The twelve modes or manners are *arranged from the same musical intervals from which plain discant is put together and arranged, and in the same manner*, yet nonetheless this discantus (being, as said before, adorned with bright flowers) falls and rises not just by the aforesaid musical intervals, but sometimes in turn by dissonances, that is, with the semitone, whole tone, fourth, augmented fourth, minor seventh, and major seventh …

So if we took away the flowers, we should end up with *discantus simplex*, or counterpoint. And as a matter of fact we do (Example 4). The bottom part once again turns out to be a plainchant, the Sanctus from *Liber Usualis* Mass VIII, and the top voice accompanies it with fifths, octaves, sixths, and thirds. Apart from the octave parallels right there in the middle, which go back to measures 5 and 6, this is genuine first-species counterpoint. True, the top voice does leap about a lot, but then that is what it did also in Example 1, of which Petrus expressly said it was *discantus simplex*.



Example 4. Note-against-note reduction of Example 3

So here is what our Cistercian monk seems to be saying. When you are in church, and are about to sing the Kyrie or Sanctus, you may quite understandably wish to sing a motet, perhaps because you have done so throughout your life. But now suppose that for some reason you cannot sing a motet, perhaps because somebody has said you cannot. In that case it may still be fine to sing

note-against-note polyphony, provided you follow the rules of counterpoint as they are laid out in this treatise. If, and only if, you follow those rules, then it may also be alright to add some flowers of measured music. But there are no shortcuts: do *not* skip the note-against-note stage.

If this is indeed what Petrus is implying, then one is bound to wonder: what could possibly be wrong or undesirable about singing a motet, and why would those flowers of measured music be any less wrong or undesirable? What is the difference anyway? That, unfortunately, is a question Petrus does not answer. Nor, in the next decades, do other theorists, even though they seem to be implying something very similar. Here, for example, is a passage from the slightly later *Ars contrapuncti* (c.1340–50) ascribed to Johannes de Muris. He gives the same definition of counterpoint as Petrus, and then he insists that this, *and only this*, is the true foundation of all polyphony (emphasis added):[11]

> Contrapunctus non est nisi punctum contra punctum ponere vel notam contra notam ponere vel facere, et est fundamentum discantus. Et quia sicut quis non potest edificare, nisi prius faciat fundamentum, sic aliquis non potest discantare, nisi prius faciat contrapunctum.
>
> *Counterpoint* is nothing but the setting of point against point, or the setting or making of note against note, and it *is the foundation of discant.* For just as someone cannot build unless he first lays a foundation, so *someone cannot sing discant unless he first makes counterpoint.*

Here is another author, the second Berkeley anonymous, who puts it yet another way (emphasis added):[12]

> Prius tamen notet unusquisque magistraliter discantare cupiens, regulas de contrapunctu supradictas debet super omnia observare. Nam licet communiter dicatur quod in verbulando, seu voces dividendo, bene possunt fieri due quinte, vel due duple, vel plures una post aliam, quia

11. After Edmond de Coussemaker, ed., *Scriptorum de musica medii aevi nova series a Gerbertina altera*, 4 vols. (Paris: Durand, 1864–1876), 3: 59.
12. After Oliver B. Ellsworth, ed. and trans., *The Berkeley Manuscript*, Greek and Latin Music Theory 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 130–31.

> dicitur ibi fieri media. Ego tamen dico quod hoc faciens non magistraliter procedit.
>
> First, however, *anyone who desires to sing discant in masterful manner must mark that he observe the aforesaid rules of counterpoint above all.* For although it is commonly said that in verbulating, or dividing up of notes, there can well be two fifths, or two octaves, or more, after one another, since it is said that there will be ones in between. I, on the other hand, say that someone doing this does not proceed masterfully.

Indirectly, this is a slap on the wrist of our first author, Petrus de Palma ociosa. When there are parallel octaves in your original counterpoint, some might defend them on the grounds that if you divide up the notes, or add flowers of measured music, there is going to be a long melisma between them anyway. So who would still be hearing those octaves? Would we have heard them in Example 3? Surely not. But no, says the Berkeley anonymous, you are not supposed to do that. Someone who moves in parallel octaves, like Petrus did in his two-voice example, mm. 5-6, is *not proceeding masterfully.*

All this adds up to a coherent picture, albeit a confusing one. Note-against-note singing seems to have received a reappreciation in the 1330s, and within two decades, theorists agreed that the new rules governing music on this level, the rules of counterpoint, were binding for all polyphony. Otherwise, you would not have laid a proper foundation, you would not be proceeding masterfully.

It is interesting to note, by the way, that there is a slightly authoritarian tone creeping in these discussions, an element even of intolerance. Once upon a time, a troubadour might reckon himself an accomplished musician if he was able to sing in every available style in church, even organum and counterpoint. Now, it is as if theorists are saying: forget about the other practices, we want you to sing only counterpoint. Their tone is not one of gentle persuasion, but rather of assertion. Yet in doing so they leave many questions unanswered—questions that we are evidently not supposed to ask. Why should counterpoint all of a sudden have to be the foundation of all polyphony? Says who? What is not masterful about parallel octaves when they are separated by

Example 5. Philippe de Vitry, isorhythmic motet Firmissime fidem/Adesto/ Alleluya (1310s), mm. 1–12, with reduction of sonorities per mensural unit

an elaborate melisma? Why is it alright to ornament *discantus simplex* with flowers of measured music, but not alright to sing an old-style motet? They never tell us. But from now on, clearly, this is how it's going to be.

Whatever the motives behind all this, composers do seem to have obeyed the theorists, or rather, perhaps, conspired with them. We can tell this from Example 5. It is a motet by Philippe de Vitry, dating probably from the early 1310s. The piece is highly ornate rhythmically, and so it might be tempting to compare it with the "flowers of measured music" that Petrus de Palma ociosa would be writing about two decades later. In the example, I have given not only the three voices of the motet, but also a reduction, in which the most ornate decorations have been removed. It will be obvious that what is left is not counterpoint, even if we set aside the fact that there are rhythms in all voices. The music moves firmly and unabashedly in parallel fifths and octaves—exactly the sort of thing that would no longer be considered masterful by the Berkeley anonymous. Even if Vitry had known counterpoint as an oral musical tradition at this early date, he does not seem to have accorded it any relevance to his written music.

Now jump ahead three decades, to 1342, the year in which the same Vitry composed his motet *Petre clemens*. Unfortunately I lack the space to print the whole piece, which is quite long, but Example 6 shows a reduction similar to the one I made earlier for Petrus de Palma ociosa and his flowers of measured music. That is to say, for every note in the cantus firmus, I took the first note that was sung over it in the other voices, no matter whether it was consonant or not, or whether it would be left with parallel fifths and octaves or not. Glancing over the end result, you will see that there are plenty of spots where this is clearly not proper counterpoint, where there are dissonances, parallels, or movement in unison. Yet the parallel fifth-octave sounds that made up the substance of the earlier motet have completely disappeared. We are a lot closer to the kind of three-part unmeasured counterpoint that we find in the treatise of Petrus de Palma ociosa.

Example 6. Philippe de Vitry, Petre clemens / Lugentium siccentur / [Tenor] (1342), note-against-tenor note reduction, excluding sections in hocket

Partly because of this, I am no longer sure that by the 1340s, Vitry would never have heard of counterpoint, or would have doubted its relevance to written music. Certainly it would be very easy to reduce Vitry's motet in a way that would prove it to have an almost flawless contrapuntal foundation. But that would probably be a circular exercise, in that we would assume what is yet to be demonstrated. The reduction in Example 6 is not conclusive proof, but it is consistent enough with the theoretical record to suggest that something decisive really had taken place.

Let us now go back to the question with which we started the second section of this contribution: when counterpoint first emerges, I asked, what is new and distinctive about the art, and

which of those new and distinctive things can still be recognized in the counterpoint that Beethoven learned several centuries later? Paradoxically, and despite the major break that I mentioned earlier—the one occurring around 1600—everything that was new and distinctive about counterpoint when it first emerged can still be recognized in Beethoven's lessons.

First of all, counterpoint moves in whole notes, exactly like the first-species counterpoint Beethoven learned from Haydn. The only difference is that medieval counterpoint was notated in unmeasured plainchant neumes, and Beethoven's counterpoint in whole notes.

Second, the basic note-against-note progressions were said to be the foundation, the starting point, for all other polyphony, no matter how complex in conception it might be. In the same way, Beethoven was not allowed to move on to the second species until he had mastered the first.

Finally, and not least important, there is the slightly authoritarian element in the curriculum. The theorists not only declare, as if by decree, that all polyphony must now be based on counterpoint, but they add that the only proper way to acquire it is by proceeding as they say you must, that is, by rigorous training in note-against-note singing, before you are even allowed to do anything else. It is they who set the curriculum, it is they who tell you what is valid and not valid, what is legitimate and not legitimate, and ultimately, what is music and is not music. Even Beethoven, for all the mastery in composition he so clearly possessed, had to go back to school and submit to this doctrinaire regime—in a curriculum so laughably simple that it seemed designed more to ritualize his unquestioning obedience than to foster meaningful compositional skills. The less sense it made to do the exercises, and the more arbitrary they seemed, the more effectively they brought home the unquestionable authority of the tradition.

Small wonder, then, that counterpoint, in the fourteenth century, rapidly became the world language in music, despite the many other dialects and idioms of medieval polyphony that we know once existed. We know of *quintizare* or fifthing, we know of melismatic organum, and discant, there are still reports, in the late thirteenth century, of singing in parallel octaves and fifths,

and in Milan we even hear of a longstanding tradition of accompanying plainchants in fourths and seconds.[13] None of these traditions made bold claims to exclusive validity and authority, none of them aspired to universality, and all of them eventually disappeared. Counterpoint did not arrive on the scene simply as the latest flavor in polyphony, as something you were free to take or leave. It was there to become the gospel, the new dispensation, of all music other than plainchant. It was there to become an instrument of control, a tool with which to enforce uniformity and discipline in musical life, a tool with which to take offenders to task, and to keep newcomers in line.

So yes, there is continuity, even across the nearly five centuries that separate Beethoven from Vitry. And paradoxically, the elements that remain constant are precisely the ones that seem to point away from improvisation. Where, after all, is the living practice in all of this? Where is the idea of picking up an idiom like you would pick up a language? Why, even at this early date, did the cart of grammar come before the horse of living language? How do we reconcile all this with what I said before, that counterpoint had been a living practice throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and became a dead language only later?

3.

There is a document that may help to resolve these questions. It is a text that that had been drafted and promulgated some eleven years before the treatise of Petrus de Palma ociosa, around 1325. We are still familiar with it, as what music historians have liked to describe as one of the most ineffective decrees ever issued in the history of the papacy. I am referring, of course, to *Docta sanctorum patrum*, the bull in which Pope John XXII at Avignon sought to curb musical practices in church that he and his college

13. See Rob C. Wegman, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Medieval Music: The Case of False Counterpoint," in *Vom Preis des Fortschritts: Gewinn und Verlust in der Musikgeschichte*, ed. Andreas Dorschel and Andreas Haug, Studien zur Wertungsforschung 49 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008), 142–60, and the literature cited there.

of cardinals deemed unacceptable.[14] How and why could this text be relevant to the story of counterpoint?

First of all, it is important to remember that the bull was not an attack on church polyphony per se, and did not seek to ban it altogether. But anyone who wanted to observe its rulings—and the Pope threatened severe penalties for those who did not—would have to sing polyphony of a very different kind than he had been used to, or than could be practiced in society. The attack was really against rhythm. More specifically, it was targeted against any and all attempts to introduce rhythms in plainchant, or to notate chants in rhythmic values. Here is how the Pope himself puts it:

> Sed nonnulli novellae scholae discipuli, dum temporibus mensurandis invigilant, novis notis intendunt, fingere suas, quam antiquas cantare malunt, in semibreves et minimas ecclesiastica cantantur, notulis percutiuntur.
>
> But some disciples of a new school, occupying themselves with the measuring of time units, [now] signify with new notes, and prefer to make up their own rather than sing the old ones. The ecclesiastical [chants] are sung in semibreves and minims, and beaten with little notes.

That is the decree in a nutshell. What the Pope is saying is this: allow the plainchant to retain its dignity and gravity, by singing

14. For this and what follows, see Emil Friedberg, ed., *Corpus juris canonici*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879–81), 1: 18. Cf. Robert F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislation and Sacred Music, 95 A.D. to 1977 A.D.* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1979), 20–21. See also Franz Körndle, "Die Bulle 'Docta sanctorum patrum': Überlieferung, Textgestalt und Wirkung," *Musikforschung* 63 (2010): 147–65; id., "Liturgieverständnis an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit: Die Bulle 'Docta sanctorum patrum' Papst Johannes' XXI. und ihre Anwendung," in Klaus Pietschmann, ed., *Papsttum und Kirchenmusik vom Mittelalter bis zu Benedikt XVI.: Positionen, Entwicklungen, Kontexte* (Kassel and New York: Bärenreiter, 2012), 67–80; id., "Michael Praetorius und die Tradition der katholischen Kirchenmusik," in Susanne Rode-Breymann and Arne Spohr, ed., *Michael Praetorius – Vermittler europäischer Musiktraditionen um 1600*, Ligaturen: Musikwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch der Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover (Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: Olms, 2011), 67–83.

it in the old neumes, the notes that are unmeasured. At first sight this does not sound like a principled attack against polyphony per se. If you promise to keep the plainchant unmeasured, there is still a lot you can do in the second voice-part. For example, Pope John might well have approved of the old *organum purum*, the style of polyphony in which the plainchant notes were not only kept unmeasured, but notated in their original neumes. Still, this did not give singers a license to do as they pleased. For here is how the Pope went on:

> Nam melodias hoquetis intersecant, discantibus lubricant, triplis et motetis vulgaribus nonnumquam inculcant adeo, ut interdum antiphonarii et gradualis fundamenta despiciant, ignorent, super quo aedificant, tonos nesciant, quos non discernunt, immo confundunt, quum ex earum multitudine notarum adscensiones pudicae, descensionesque temperatae, plani cantus, quibus toni ipsi secernuntur ad invicem, obfuscentur.
>
> For they cut the melodies with hockets, make them slippery with discants, and sometimes add vernacular *tripla* and *moteti*, to such a degree that at times they spurn or disregard the very foundations of the Antiphonal and Gradual on which they build, [that they] are unaware of the church modes, which they do not distinguish but rather confuse, because the modest ascents and measured descents of the plainchant, by which those modes are distinguished from one another, are obscured by the multitude of those notes.

So polyphony can be problematic, even when the plainchant is kept unmeasured. There is a problem, for example, when the original plainchant ends up being smothered with such rhythmic busywork in the other voices that you cannot tell anymore what mode it is in. Although the Pope does not expressly forbid rhythms in the other voices, it is clear that the degree of rhythmic elaboration will have to be reduced significantly. And he is quite categorical about the adding of voices such as *motetus* and *triplum*, which carry texts in vernacular languages. This is unacceptable—no ifs and buts. Since these are the typical voice-parts in motets, it follows that the motet has no place in church. It is banned, as per the decree of the Holy Father.

Against the background of this Papal decree, some of the things in the treatise of Petrus de Palma ociosa begin to make apparent sense. For example, when Petrus implies, in the passage cited earlier, that you can sing counterpoints, literally, "in the place of a *triplum*," or "in the place of a *motetus*," he seems to be addressing musicians who are used to singing *tripla* and *moteti*, and who for some reason are looking for an alternative. The only problem, of course, is that Petrus offers an alternative in note-against-note counterpoint, without rhythm in any voice. And so far, we have not heard the Pope say that this is the only acceptable way of singing polyphony in church.

It is hard to know if that is in fact what John XXII meant to enforce with his decree. Yet the Pope comes very close to it in the final paragraph of his bull, where he specifies the sort of polyphony that may still be sung without penalty. Now his words give the impression that he had almost been ready to banish every kind of polyphony, but decided, seemingly as an afterthought, to retreat from this position of excessive severity. For we see him making a number of concessions which, if taken literally, would curtail church polyphony to something very basic and primitive indeed. Here is how he puts it:

> Per hoc autem non intendimus prohibere, quin interdum diebus festis praecipue, sive solennibus in missis et praefatis divinis officiis aliquae consonantiae, quae melodiam sapiunt, puta octavae, quintae, quartae et huiusmodi supra cantum ecclesiasticum simplicem proferantur, sic tamen, ut ipsius cantus integritas illibata permaneat, et nihil ex hoc de bene morata musica immutetur, maxime quum huiusmodi consonantiae auditum demulceant, devotionem provocent, et psallentium Deo animos torpere non sinant.

> With all this, however, we do not intend to prohibit that once in a while, especially on feastdays and holidays, during Mass or in the aforesaid Holy Offices, some consonances that have the savor of melodious sound, such as octave, fifth, fourth, and others of this kind, be sung over the simple ecclesiastical chant—provided, however, that the integrity of the chant shall remain unimpaired, and that nothing of this well-ordered music be changed in any way. This above all because consonances of this kind soothe the hearing, stir devotion, and do not allow the minds of those who are singing to God to become torpid.

Does this amount to a prohibition of all rhythm in polyphony? It is hard to be sure. What is definitely being prohibited, without any ambiguity or qualification, is dissonance. And in a way that comes down to the same thing. At this time, the only known styles of polyphony that made use exclusively of consonance, without any admixture of dissonance, were parallel organum in fourths, fifths and octaves, and note-against-note counterpoint.

So there is a mixed message. On the one hand, the Pope is calling for radical change in those churches where motets, hockets, and other new-fangled rhythmic trash could be heard on a regular basis. All of that will have to go. On the other hand, he positively encourages singing in consonances, provided that the plainchant remains unmeasured, and is not drowned in a lavish profusion of small notes, or stained with dissonances. There seems to be a little wiggle room here, but not a great deal. The precise interpretation of the rulings would have been up to bishops, who were charged with enforcing the Pope's decree in their respective dioceses, and with handing out punishments where appropriate. In those dioceses where note-against-note singing was practiced in preference to measured polyphony, it is not hard to imagine a bishop translating the decree in practical terms that clerics could immediately understand, by saying that this was the only thing that would still be safe to practice. That would not have been an unreasonable interpretation of the bull. And those clerics who were unfamiliar with note-against-note singing either had to find others who could teach it to them, or get somebody to write up the rules.

This scenario would explain a number of things. It would explain, first of all, why a practice that had existed, up to then, only as an oral tradition, namely, singing "contrapontamens," became one whose rules needed to be codified in writing. It would also explain one of the curious paradoxes about counterpoint. On the one hand, the rules are so childishly simple that you would imagine the curriculum was intended really for beginning choirboys. On the other hand, those same rules were written up in Latin treatises, a medium aimed at clerics rather than six-year-old boys. The typical counterpoint treatise, at least in the fourteenth century, seems to answer to the needs of those who had to undergo reschooling, or of those who had to teach them.

What I am suggesting, in other words, is that basic note-against-note counterpoint came to be privileged, in the Catholic Church, as the safe alternative to the polyphonic practices that the Pope had firmly prohibited. There is in fact some evidence that seems to bear out this hypothesis. A few decades ago, Giulio Cattin drew attention to a medieval tradition of basic note-against-note polyphony that he referred to as *cantus planus binatim*—which can be translated roughly as "plainchant doubled."[15] The idea is that the plainchant is accompanied by a second voice which behaves exactly like plainchant, in unmeasured notes, written in neumes—like the *discantus simplex* discussed by Petrus de Palma ociosa. These kinds of primitive two-part singing are found almost exclusively in liturgical manuscripts, books that are wholly devoted to plainchant proper. Occasionally in these books, you will find a chant in which every neume is accompanied by another neume above it in the same staff, usually at a distance of a fourth, fifth, or octave. And this practice was widespread: it is found everywhere in Europe, in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Italy, and elsewhere. Once again, it turns out, note-against-note singing is not a pointless diversion: it was actually practiced in the everyday liturgy, especially (judging from the provenance of the sources) in monasteries.

Cantus planus binatim is usually said to have emerged some time around the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. It would be rash on my part to claim that it emerged only towards the end of this timespan, in direct response to the papal bull of 1325. On the other hand, the bull has often been described as ineffective, but if we are to determine its real impact, surely the sources for this kind of polyphony could be among the most pertinent evidence we have.

I have emphasized that Pope John XXII did not specifically say that counterpoint would henceforth be the only acceptable kind of polyphony—only that this would have been a reasonable interpretation of the document on the part of contemporary bishops. And

15. Gallo, F Alberto: "'Cantus Planus Binatim': Polifonia Primitiva in Fonti Tardive: Firenze, BN, II XI 18; Washington, LC, ML 171 J 6; Firenze, BN, Pai. 472," *Quadrivium* 7 (1966): 79–89.

it would not surprise me if that interpretation had been enforced in many dioceses, at least in France. On the other hand, this hard-line stance must soon have given way to compromise. It is easy to imagine the protests among clerics after a few years of singing the liturgy in this way. Is it really not alright to sing rhythms in voices other than the plainchant? Did the Pope actually say that in so many words? Well, it's not so clear—we have just seen that the bull is lacking in precision on precisely this point. So it is easy to imagine a bishop saying, maybe already within the first decade: alright, you can add flowers of measured music, *provided* you make absolutely sure the starting point is still note-against-note singing in consonances. I do not want to hear any motets.

This might help to explain the odd circumspection with which Petrus de Palma ociosa introduced the topic of those flowers. Why would he liken his rhythmicized organum-style elaborations to, respectively, a tree in bloom, a holy man adorned with virtues, and indeed even with the Virgin Mary—when all we hear is something very similar to the top voice in a motet? The answer lies precisely in that deceptive similarity. Because the flowers so much resemble the kind of music that Pope John XXII had outlawed, they now need an elaborate justification of their own. And the justification, for Petrus, is that you're still, in a way, singing *simplex discantus*, except that it has been made even prettier than it already was. More importantly, we have seen him emphasizing, in the third quote, that the examples "are arranged from the same musical intervals from which *discantus simplex* is arranged, and in the same manner."

Why is that so important? Well, remember what Pope John XXII had said: "we do not intend to prohibit that once in a while ... a few consonances ... such as octave, fifth, fourth, and others of this kind, are sung over the ecclesiastical plainchant." Petrus is at pains, it seems, to observe the letter of the decree. Of course, his reasoning here is clumsy and awkward, and frankly unconvincing, which is exactly why the poetic similes he invokes are so completely over the top. Do we really need to compare his flowers of measured music to the Virgin Mary in order to be persuaded that they have merit? Well, if you lived in the 1330s, then quite possibly you did. After all, *Docta sanctorum patrum*

did promise an eight-day suspension for those clerics who failed to heed its rulings.

Let us take stock before moving on. In Section Two of this contribution, I have identified a number of traits that were new and distinctive about counterpoint when it first emerged in the 1330s, and that can still be recognized in Beethoven's time. First of all, counterpoint has no rhythm, it moves only in whole notes. Second, the note-against-note singing that results from this is said to be the foundation of all polyphony, and must be the first thing that any student of counterpoint learns before moving on to other things. Finally, there is the slightly authoritarian element, the claim to exclusive validity, and the rejection of other kinds of polyphony.

In Section Three I have argued that counterpoint became the privileged musical language in church after the bull *Docta sanctorum patrum* of 1325, and that this event could ultimately explain those three traits, as well as a number of other things—the fact that counterpoint became the world language in music, the fact that its rules were codified in Latin treatises, and the emergence of *cantus planus binatim*.

Still, there is an important question that remains unanswered. For I have also noted that these very traits seem to be pointing away from improvisation, from the idea of picking up counterpoint like you pick up a language. Theorists seem to have agreed, throughout history, from the 1330s to the present day, that "picking up the language" is *not* the way to learn counterpoint at all. You cannot just sing along: you have to take lessons, you have to learn the grammar before you are allowed to speak. How do we reconcile this with what I argued in Section One—that counterpoint had been a living language before 1600? It is this question to which I will turn in the next section.

4.

The decree *Docta sanctorum patrum*, issued by Pope John XXII in 1325, was obviously ineffective, certainly in the long run. As early as the middle of the fourteenth century, we find Mass movements composed entirely in the manner of isorhythmic motets—the

very thing that Pope John seems to have condemned in the most specific terms. Among the best-known examples, of course, are the isorhythmic movements in the *Messe de Nostre Dame* of Guillaume de Machaut, composed around 1370.

So at best, at least in the interpretation I have offered here, the papal decree had ensured that all church polyphony—both written and improvised, simple and complex—would henceforth take its basis, its foundation, in the simple note-against-note polyphony that the Pope had positively endorsed. Or at least in one particular idiom of such polyphony, counterpoint. Machaut's Mass is once again a good example. Margaret Bent has convincingly demonstrated that the various movements of this cycle observe the rules of counterpoint almost to the letter.[16] So if my reading of *Docta sanctorum patrum* is correct—and I should emphasize that it is, of course, only a hypothesis—then the papal bull does seem to have been effective in at least this regard.

On the other hand, when Medieval and Renaissance music theorists had occasion to look back upon that old decree, and reflected upon its stern warnings against the rhythmic excesses of contemporary church music, it was obvious to them that Pope's rulings had had no effect on musical practice at all. And it was equally obvious that his decree would be far too drastic and too crippling a measure to implement belatedly, at least within the Catholic Church.

Yet there are exceptions. There are theorists who give us fresh or arresting perspectives on the Papal bull. One of these is a German music theorist by the name of Seth Calvisius. In the year 1600 he published at Leipzig a compendium of basic music theory entitled *Exercitationes musicae duae*. The final section of this treatise offered a review of the history of music theory, based on any and all sources he was able to lay his hands on. One of those sources happens to be *Docta sanctorum patrum*. Calvisius was fascinated by the text, which he treated, interestingly, as a historical rather than ecclesio-political document. He knew next to nothing about the musical world of the early fourteenth century, and

16. Margaret Bent, "The 'Harmony' of the Machaut Mass," in Elizabeth Eva Leach, ed., *Machaut's Music New Interpretations*, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 75–94.

so he was all the more intrigued to learn from the pope's bull that people had already been using such notes as semibreves and minims at this early date. At the same time he concluded that those notes must have been recent inventions, since Pope John ascribed their creation to "the disciples of a new school." Calvisius did not think that church music around 1325 could have been very interesting. After all, what sort of music can you write when all you have is semibreves and minims, without the semiminims, fusae, semifusae, and even smaller values that were available in his time? Nor was Calvisius much encouraged by the Pope's complaints about the ridiculous antics of singers, their blatant disregard of the church modes, and their evident unconcern with the rhetorical powers of music. Good thing that Pope John had put a stop to all that.

There was also something else Calvisius was interested to learn from the bull. It has to do with the passage in which Pope John XXII seemed to be stepping back from a position of excessive severity, and allowed, even encouraged, the singing of consonances along with the plainchant notes, provided that those notes be kept integral and unrhythmicized. Here is that passage once again:

> With all this, however, we do not intend to prohibit that once in a while, especially on feastdays and holidays, during Mass or in the aforesaid Holy Offices, some consonances that have the savor of melodious sound, such as octave, fifth, fourth, and others of this kind, be sung over the simple ecclesiastical chant—provided, however, that the integrity of the chant shall remain unimpaired, and that nothing of this well-ordered music be changed in any way. This above all because consonances of this kind soothe the hearing, stir devotion, and do not allow the minds of those who are singing to God to become torpid.

Reading this very passage nearly three hundred years later, Calvisius had not the slightest doubt as to what it meant. "Here," he said,[17]

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17. Seth Calvisius, *Exercitationes musicae duae. Qvarvm prior est, de modis mvsicis, qvos vulgò Tonos vocant, rectè cognoscendis, et dijudicandis. Posterior, de initio et progressv Mvsices, alijsque rebus eo spectantibus* (Leipzig: Iacobus Apelius, 1600), 132–33.

> ...Pontifex, choralem cantum fundamentum facit consonantiarum addendarum, unde procul dubio non alia Harmonia exorietur, quam contrapunctus extemporaneus, ut vocant, sive Harmonia, quae posset dici αυτοσχεδιασική, quando videlicet, qui graviorem sonum proferre possunt, choralem cantum simpliciter canunt. Reliqui vero, qui voce acutiores sunt, consonantias, octavas, quintas et quartas, pro libitu, non praemeditati addunt, quod apud concentores aulicos quosdam in capellis, ut vocant, et in quibusdam coenobijs apud Pontificios hodie in usu est. Quanquam hi de quibus Pontifex loquitur, fortassis ex praescripto, ut minus exercitati consonantias miscuerunt.

> ...the Pope established plainchant as the foundation of the consonances that are to be added. From which, without any doubt, no other kind of music could be born than extemporized counterpoint, or that harmony which is called "autoschediastic" [improvised]. That is to say, when those who have deeper voices sing the plainchant *simpliciter* [that is to say, in whole notes, unbroken, *simplex*], yet the others, who have higher voices, add consonances, octaves, fifths, and fourths, at will, without forethought—just as is the custom today among certain court singers in chapels and in certain monasteries, and among Papal singers. Still, the singers of whom Pope [John] speaks, being less well trained, mingled their consonances perhaps from notation.

What a curious interpretation. Calvisius comes close to suggesting that Pope John XXII, by issuing his bull *Docta sanctorum patrum*, had single-handedly instituted the art of improvised counterpoint—a tradition, he notes, that wais still widely in use in the late sixteenth century, in court chapels, monasteries, even at the papal court. Calvisius concedes that the tradition may not have been very sophisticated when it began, and that the earliest singers may well have needed notation to help them along. But the point about the tradition, for him, is that it is one of improvisation: our music theorist sees precisely that point, improvisation, as the necessary consequence of the papal decree. If he is right, then *Docta sanctorum patrum* may have been far more effective than we could have imagined even earlier on.

But is he right? Why should Seth Calvisius, writing in 1600, be an especially informative guide to a papal bull that had been

issued nearly three centuries before him? He may have been closer to it in time than we are, but greater chronological proximity does not necessarily confer special interpretive authority on his reading. On the other hand, sometimes we do need an early commentator—and especially one who was still familiar with counterpoint as a living tradition—to suggest a possibility that might not otherwise have occurred to us.[18] Consider just this. I concluded Section Three by noting an apparent contradiction: that counterpoint seems to have been a bookish art from the very beginning, that it was marked, already in the 1330s, by a note-against-note pedagogy so basic and restrictive that it seemed designed to stifle the freedom to improvise rather than to foster it. And this pedagogy was set up as the narrow gate through which every singer of polyphony had to pass—even if he wanted to add flowers of measured music, as Petrus de Palma ociosa said, or if he wanted to sing complex discant, as in the Muris and Berkeley texts. In order to pass through that gate, it seems, you must unlearn everything you ever did, and like Beethoven, start with the basics. And yet, counterpoint was a living practice throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. How do we reconcile all this?

Taking our cue from Calvisius, however, there may also be another way of looking at it. Let us take a few steps back. It is true that note-against-note counterpoint, or *discantus simplex*, does not necessarily have to be improvised: it can also exist as a written tradition. In Section Three I mentioned the example of *cantus planus binatim*, the simple polyphony written up in liturgical manuscripts, which may have been notated for those

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18. On the other hand, it is worth noting that he is not the only contemporary witness to offer this interpretation of the decree. See, for example, Michael J. Noone, *Music and Musicians in the Escorial Liturgy under the Habsburgs, 1563-1700* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 94–100, concerning the discussion of fabordón in Martín de la Vera, *Instrucion de eclesiasticos* (Madrid: Emprenta Real, 1630), 195–96. See also Sébastien de Brossard, *Dictionaire de Musique, Contenant une Explication Des Termes Grecs, Latins, Italiens et François les plus usitez dans la Musique* (3rd ed.; Amsterdam: Estienne Roger, 1708), 318: "SUR LE LIVRE; CHANTER SUR LE LIVRE. ... Je croy que l'origine en vient pour les Eglises, d'une Decretale du Pape Jean XXII. qui commence Docta Sanctorum Patrum decrevit authoritas et cetera."

monks who could not handle the rules of counterpoint effortlessly. On the other hand, note-against-note is not really the kind of polyphony of which a trained singer would be inclined to write down many specimens, or of which you might want to collect a canon of classics.

So it should not surprise us that counterpoint seems to have originated as a wholly oral tradition. It never needed to be anything other than point-against-point: if you wanted to do something more adventurous, there were other idioms of polyphony around. But now imagine that all those other idioms are suddenly outlawed, at least in the church, and that counterpoint is declared to be the only proper way of singing church polyphony. Now if you want to do something more adventurous, there no longer is any other style to turn to. If you still want to do it, then of necessity you will have to claim that what you are doing is somehow still counterpoint—except that something decorative has been added to it, like cherry blossoms decorating a tree. That is why the "flowers of measured music" of which Petrus de Palma ociosa spoke in 1336 are emphatically not old-style motets or organa, however similar they may sound as far as their rhythms are concerned. And they differ also in another respect. Unlike motets, which are a *written* genre by definition, you would never need to write down those flowers, for they really were decorative, cosmetic, and inessential outside of performance. The only exception is when you were writing a treatise, and you needed to give an example of how to do it. That is precisely what Petrus de Palma ociosa says about his own twelve examples, the first of which was printed above. Petrus immediately admits that there are too many possibilities to write them all down—which is another good reason why it would be pointless to compose anything in this style. As as he puts it:[19]

> Quamvis autem nonnulli dicant et affirment flores scientiae musicalis fore innumerabiles secundum diversos modos discantus, et de innumerabilibus non valet haberi certitudo, nolentes ob hanc causam de floribus huiusmodi aliquam artem componere. Tamen ne iuvenes

19. Op. cit., 517.

> et alii cupientes in dicta scientia proficere aliquam artem de eadem non habentes ob hoc fiant tepidi et remissi istam scilicet addiscendo, idcirco ego circa capacitatem ingenioli mei XII modos seu maneries de discantu mensurabili floribus adornato compilavi.
>
> Now although some will say and affirm that the flowers of the discipline of music are innumerable according to the different modes of discant, and certainty cannot be had from things that are innumerable, and are for that reason unwilling to put together a treatise about flowers of this kind, still, in order that youths and others who desire to become proficient in the said discipline, yet who do not have access to some treatise about it, might not become sluggish and lazy when learning it, I have put together, within the limits of my little wit, twelve modes or manners of measurable discant adorned with flowers.

Now who would those young people, and others eager for the said knowledge, be? Certainly they must be singers who can already produce note-against-note counterpoint, for that is the necessary foundation for the art of adding flowers. So they must be clerics, and their eagerness to play around with the basic note-against-note progressions must stem precisely from the musical limitations of those progressions. They wanted something more—and in truth one cannot blame them. So there is one thing we can fairly sure of: the treatise of Petrus de Palma ociosa, which is the earliest counterpoint text we have, is not addressed to composers, it is addressed to singers. It teaches an art of contrapuntal improvisation.

The only problem for these clerics, and for theorists as well, was a semantic one. Counterpoint means literally: point against point. That is its distinctive feature, and that is the reason why it may have been privileged in the wake of *Docta sanctorum patrum*. The minute you start adding flowers of measured music, you no longer have counterpoint, at least not in the literal sense. Petrus de Palma ociosa is aware of that, but he prefers not to be too literal-minded about this. At bottom, he says, his twelve examples still are counterpoint, or *discantus simplex*, and that is how you should sing them. You could call it a form of creative denial, and it is not hard to imagine where this will lead. If you can safely

add flowers of measured music to the basic counterpoints you're singing every day, then musically gifted clerics will soon seek to excel in the very art of doing so, and push the practice to unprecedented heights of musical sophistication—though never in writing, always in improvisation. In some churches, undoubtedly, the original note-against-note style would soon have been left behind, even if it remained a key part of the pedagogy, as the necessary foundation and legitimation of all polyphony. Now as this development goes on, it is only natural for the word counterpoint to be used in a looser sense, and for it to comprise, eventually, every form of polyphony that can claim to be rooted in that foundation. This is the sense in which we use the word still today, and why we need a pleonasm like note-against-note counterpoint. And most of that counterpoint will have developed, at least initially, in the realm of improvisation rather than composition.

So this is the insight we owe to Seth Calvisius and his reading, in 1600, of *Docta sanctorum patrum*. Pope John XXII, by effectively banning all church polyphony that was written in new-fangled note-values, only caused those same rhythmic styles of singing to re-enter through the back door—the door of improvised note-against-note singing, which as a result grew into a massive gateway. One could probably say that in doing so, he gave a decisive impulse to the art of contrapuntal improvisation in church, and indirectly caused it to become the widely-practiced living musical language that it would remain for the next several centuries. It was an art that would always remain faithful to its origin and its foundation: the pedagogy of note-against-note singing. But on that foundation, it erected an elaborate structure that remained intricately connected with the world of improvised singing, even when composed music would eventually branch off and develop into a separate art. And if that is indeed how we can see it, then we have answered the question with which I ended my Section Three. Counterpoint, from the very beginning, was *both* bookish and improvised, both theory and practice.

5.

Unfortunately, what we have inherited from the Middle Ages and Renaissance is only the written tradition, and the pedagogy of the dead language that counterpoint has become. The oral tradition has died out, even though *chant sur le livre* is reported to have been practiced in French churches as late as the nineteenth century. As a consequence, music historians find themselves in a paradoxical situation. If they wish to come to an understanding of that lost oral tradition, they must of necessity turn to written traces. And that seems like a hopeless undertaking. Imagine trying to recover and relive the world of Bebop if all we had was the few transcriptions that some contemporaries might have committed to paper. Transcriptions can never substitute for the live experience. They give us traces of what was heard, yet they distort those traces at the same time.

Let me give an example to illustrate some of the problems we're dealing with. Figure 1 shows the preface and first page of a set of partbooks printed in Venice in 1574. It is a collection of liturgical music, and it is extremely rare—as far as I know the only surviving copy in the world is kept in the Royal Library in Brussels. The print is devoted to polyphonic Introits for several major feasts in the liturgical calendar, in settings ranging from four to six parts. The author—if that is the right word—is Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, choirmaster at the Duomo of Udine, and a direct contemporary of Palestrina. In the preface, Chamaterò explains that the settings that follow are essentially records, transcriptions, of an improvised practice that could be heard in the Duomo under his direction, and which reportedly provoked considerable admiration amongst those who heard them.[20]

20. Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, *Li introiti fondati sopra il canto fermo del basso* (Venice: l'herede di Girolamo Scotto, 1574), Bassus Partbook, 2–3.

Figure 1. Ippolito Chamaterò di Negri, Hippolito Chamaterò di Negri, Li introiti fondati sopra il canto fermo del basso *(Venice: l'herede di Girolamo Scotto, 1574), BassusPartbook, 2–3*

> ... quando era al seruitio del suo honorato Domo, non poco si delettauano della Musica dell' introiti, & che gioiuano à veder li miei scholari in choro nel far contraponti all' improuiso l'vn l'altro auanciarsi.
>
> ... when I was formerly in the service of the honored Duomo, people took no small delight in the music of the Introits, and rejoiced in seeing my choirboys rival with one another in the making of counterpoints *all'improviso.*

If we are to take Chamaterò at his word, then, his collection should give us a reliable idea of improvised polyphony as it could typically be heard in Italy in the late sixteenth century. After all, his print is dedicated to the canons of the Duomo of Udine, so if those canons were to believe him, the settings should bear more than a passing resemblance to what those same canons had heard in live performances in their own church. So let us consider an example from the collection, the Introit for Easter Sunday, *Resurrexi* (Appendix 1).

If we could take a time machine, and visit the Duomo of Udine on Easter Sunday 1574, is this a fair approximation of what we would have heard? It sounds almost too good to be true. The counterpoint is flawless, there are no awkward dissonances, there are no parallel fifths and octaves that stand out conspicuously, and, as if all that were not enough, the polyphony is marvelously rich in imitative gestures, picked up from voice to voice. It strains credibility that even the most thoroughly trained singers and choirboys in the sixteenth century would have been able to produce something of such contrapuntal polish and perfection, and that not from these partbooks, but fresh, spontaneous, on the spot. Surely, in everyday life there would have been clashes, parallels, wrongly timed imitations. True, Chamaterò could not be expected to provide an accurate reflection of such errors in a print that was meant be useful to others. Yet notwithstanding his disclaimer, we may have to insist that his print is likely, at best, to contain heavily edited versions of the real thing.

If this is indeed our response, then certainly we are not alone. There are writers from this very period, the late sixteenth century, who report similar responses. And just as in our own case, interestingly, these are responses from people for whom the tradition is no longer alive, who have no direct acquaintance with it. They try

to imagine what improvised counterpoint would probably sound like, and they cannot bring themselves to believe that the music would not have been painful to listen to. The first author is Adrian Petit Coclico, the notorious self-declared student of Josquin des Prez, writing in 1552. For a man living in Germany, he considers himself a musician of the old school, for he still knows how to extemporize counterpoint, in fact he considers it an absolutely essential skill for any self-respecting musician. But alas, things are no longer what they used to be: the art has declined, and by now, in the middle of the sixteenth century, no-one in Germany believes that it is even worth trying to learn it, since it could not possibly result in anything the ears could bear. Here is how he puts it:[21]

> Modus canendi contrapunctum in Germania rarus est, haud dubie non aliam ob causam, quàm cum pulcherrima haec ars, diuturno usu, ac labore maximo perdiscatur, nec praemia eam callentibus con-stituta sint: perpauci ad hanc discendam animum applicent, solide se in Musica doctos existimantes, si uariorum signorum, prolationum, definitionum et caetera noticiam habuerint. Aut si cantilenam in anni spatio componant, quam uix canere possint. Ac si quis contrapuncti mentionem faciat, ac in perfecto Musico requirat, hunc odio plusquam canino lacerant, impudenter affirmantes, in contrapuncto multas prauas et corruptas species occurrere, quae aures offendant, et in compositionibus locum non habent.

> The manner of singing counterpoint is rare in Germany, undoubtedly because this most beautiful art can only be acquired through daily practice, and with the greatest effort, and because there are no rewards for those skilled in it. The very few who devote themselves to its study reckon that they are wholly learned in music if they know something about the various signs, prolations, definitions, etc., or if they take a year to compose a song that they could scarcely even sing. And if someone were to mention counterpoint, or expects it in the accomplished musician, they scorn him with more contempt than they would a dog, asserting shamelessly that there are many faulty and improper intervals occurring in counterpoint which offend the ears, and which have no place in composition.

21. Adrianus Petit Coclico, *Compendium musices* (Nuremberg: Berg and Neuber, 1552), f.Iiiijr.

And here, a few decades later, is Thomas Morley, in his famous *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*, of 1597. Morley is aware that it was once the custom in England to improvise counterpoint, and that it is still the custom elsewhere. But he is unable to believe that such music will not sound chaotic for most of the time, and he writes,[22]

> As for singing vppon a plainsong, it hath byn in times past in England (as euery man knoweth) and is at this day in other places, the greatest part of the vsuall musicke which in any churches is sung. Which indeed causeth me to maruel how men acquainted with musicke, can delight to heare such confusion as of force must bee amongste so many singing extempore. But some haue stood in an opinion which to me seemeth not very probable, that is, that men accustomed to descanting will sing together vpon a plainsong, without singing eyther false chords or forbidden descant one to another, which til I see I will euer think vnpossible.

Now, it may be reassuring to learn that we may not be alone in thinking this, and that there were people who already thought like this even in the sixteenth century, but actually it is also somewhat disconcerting. This response, the response of incredulity, clearly is typical of those who are not, or no longer, familiar with the tradition of contrapuntal improvisation, and so it probably says more about them—and us—than about the tradition as such. Other sixteenth-century writers who *are* familiar with the tradition, such as for example Zarlino, will sometimes complain about bad singers, or bad practices in contrapuntal improvisation—like singing the same motive incessantly, regardless of what other voices are doing. But they do not doubt for a second that counterpoint can and should sound magnificent when it is improvised properly. If they could have seen the music printed in Chamaterò's collection of Introits, maybe they would not have been incredulous at all. Perhaps it really is our fault, our limitation, and we should be willing to entertain the possibility, however counter-intuitive it might seem.

22. Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (London: Peter Short, 1597), fol. (:.) 1r.

Let us for a moment imagine that the music printed in the Appendix really is a close approximation of improvised polyphony. Is there anything that might confirm that this is indeed plausible, anything that makes the music recognizable as typically improvised, rather than composed? I believe there are several such features, and the most important of these is in the bass. It sings the plainchant for the Introit *Resurrexi*, and it does so consistently in half notes, which is my transcription for what were originally values corresponding to the semibreve. Except for two passages, beginning in measures 59 and 94, respectively, it does not move in any other rhythmic values. So this is a genuine cantus firmus, totally unornamented, and consistently rhythmicized in semibreves. Also, and no less significant, it has no rests. This in fact is critical in a piece that purports to reflect the practice of improvisation. The minute there is no cantus firmus, there is no anchor point against which to improvise consonances, and for someone singing in this style, that must be like the floor dropping out from under your feet.

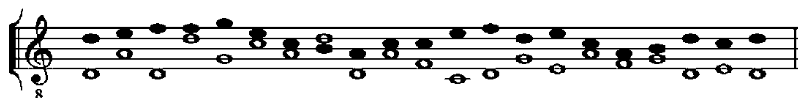
Now all these features in the cantus firmus, in the voice labelled bassus, result from an interesting notational peculiarity. If we take another look at Figure 1, which shows the first opening of the bassus part book, we can see that the notes on the right-hand page are actually the ones that were sung in the setting in Appendix 1. They are not semibreves, however, but plainchant neumes. So for the bassus, the music looks exactly as it would have looked if he had been singing from the original plainchant manuscript, and if his colleagues had been inventing counterpoint on the spot. Their partbooks, on the other hand, are written in regular mensural notation, with semibreves, minims, and semiminims. So the idea is really that the plainchant is sung just the way it is, in unmeasured neumes, but that it is enveloped in rhythmicized counterpoints which, purely for their own reference, sing against each plainchant note as though it were a semibreve.

Why would Chamaterò have gone to the trouble of printing this notational peculiarity, when he might just as well have printed the bass voice in semibreves? In light of the historical background sketched here, it is tempting to suppose that he had perhaps obtained a copy of *Docta sanctorum patrum*, the papal bull from

1325, and chose to take its recommendations absolutely literally. That is to say, whatever singers were allowed to do in the other voices, one could not mess with the plainchant. It has to be kept in its original neumes. Its dignity and gravity must be maintained.

If Chamaterò's print were the only evidence we had, that would certainly have been quite a leap for us to jump. But there is in fact other evidence, not only from the sixteenth century but also from the fifteenth, and it shows that the notational peculiarity was not peculiar to Chamaterò alone, far from it. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Liber de arte contrapuncti* of Johannes Tinctoris, written in 1477. In this passage, Tinctoris gives a recommendation for what you should do if the cantus firmus is wildly leaping up and down—something that would rarely happen in plainchant, though his first example is actually written in plainchant neumes. If you are ever dealing with a cantus firmus like that, he says, then in your own counterpoint you should still aim to proceed in stepwise motion as much as possible. So in the first musical example, the cantus firmus, in void notes, leaps up and down like a deranged madman, but the counterpoint keeps its cool, and makes no leaps wider than the third. Here is how Tinctoris himself puts it.[23]

> Quarta regula est quod quam proximus et quam ordinatissimus poterit contrapunctus fieri debebit, etiam licet coniunctionibus longorum intervallorum tenor sic e converso formatus, ut hic patet:
>
> The fourth rule is that counterpoint must be fashioned as closely and as orderly as possible, even if the tenor, by contrast, is formed out of intervals of great size, as is shown here:



> Sed ab hac regula eximuntur, qui magis contrapuncto dulciori ac venustiori student quam propinquiori. Quique pluribus super librum

23. Johannes Tinctoris, *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477), III. iv. After Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, ed. Albert Seay, 2 vols., Corpus scriptorum de musica 22 (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1975–78), 2: 149.

canentibus ut contrapunctum diversificent, eum cum moderatione instar quodammodo compositorum longinquum efficiunt, ut hic patet:

Yet from this rule are exempted those who pursue a sweeter and more delightful counterpoint rather than a closer one, and who, with several singing on the book, introduce this wide leap in moderation, somewhat in the manner of composed songs, in order that they may diversify the counterpoint, as is shown here:

It is apparent from what Tinctoris says that the second example illustrates what you can hear when several musicians are singing upon the book, that is, improvising counterpoint upon a plainchant. And indeed, the lowest voice-part in the example moves in notes of equal value, as though this singer were also reading off the plainchant manuscript. The only difference is that Tinctoris does not notate that voice in the original neumes, but writes semibreves instead. Yet the implication is the same: when you are singing on the book, the plainchant is sung in notes of equal duration, and the other voices sing against the plainchant as though it were moving in semibreves.

So although Tinctoris and Chamaterò are almost a hundred years apart, there does seem to be some continuity between them. And this is indirectly confirmed in another passage of the same treatise by Tinctoris, when he discusses how you can sing counterpoint over a plainchant. Here, he gives us yet another example

of *cantare super librum*, or *chanter sur le livre*, and it looks exactly as you might expect. Here is the passage.[24]

> Denique omnis contrapunctus aut super cantum planum aut figuratum fit. Super cantum planum quidem contrapunctum fieri contingit, quando ad voluntatem canentium quaelibet ipsius plani cantus nota una semibrevis minoris prolationis aut maioris tenetur, ut hic probatur:
>
> Lastly, all counterpoint is made either upon plainsong or figured song. It is indeed possible for counterpoint to be made upon a plainsong when those who are singing decide that every note of that plainsong be taken as one semibreve of major or minor prolation, as demonstrated here:

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24. Tinctoris, *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477), II. xxi; after Tinctoris, *Opera theoretica*, 2: 110.

Tinctoris is being very circumspect here. He does not say that the plainchant is notated in semibreves, or even sung in semibreves, but that the other voices decide that its notes are to be taken as semibreves. The neumes are respected, the dignity and gravity of the plainchant is kept intact—even though, once again, the cantus firmus is notated in semibreves rather than neumes. Tinctoris also mentions other possibilities, like singing against the plainchant notes as though they were breves, or other note values. And he also mentions the most difficult of all possibilities, a plainchant that is genuinely unmeasured, in that no note need be of precisely the same duration as the next. Here is how he continues:

> ... In pluribus etiam ecclesiis cantus ipse planus absque mensura canitur, super quem suavissimus concentus ab eruditis efficitur. Et in hoc auris bona concinentibus necessaria est ut attentissime cursum tenoristarum animadvertant ne istis unam notam canentibus illi super aliam concinant.
>
> ... And in many churches this plainsong is sung without measure, upon which a most sweet concord is fashioned by expert singers. In this, it is necessary for the singers to have a good ear, in order that they may follow most attentively how the tenorists are progressing, lest, while these are singing one note, they are concording with another.

Of this kind of counterpoint, alas, he provides no example, though had he done so, he clearly would have been forced to notate the cantus firmus in plainchant neumes.

So there does appear to be a great deal of consistency here. When you sing *contraponto all'improvviso*, or when you are singing upon the book, it seems to be a well-established custom to sing the plainchant in notes of equal duration, notes that the other singers will typically interpret as semibreves. It is true that Tinctoris does not notate the cantus firmus in plainchant neumes. But just this notational peculiarity, polyphony with one voice written in neumes, is one that we find in choirbooks throughout Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, usually in anonymous liturgical polyphony, usually in four voices, and usually in a fairly unassuming contrapuntal style. In my own research I am most familiar with it in German and Central European sources,

like the Trent manuscripts, or the codex Specialnik, or Munich 3154 and Berlin 40021. Typically you see four voice-parts written out separately, of which three are in white mensural notation, and the fourth in plainchant notes. But it was certainly not an exclusively German or Italian tradition. In Appendix 2 I have printed a transcription of an anonymous four-part setting in the Gyffard Partbooks, copied in England in the 1550s. You will immediately recognize the same pattern: the cantus firmus moves in semibreves, which is the editor's interpretation of what were originally plainchant neumes. So here is an anonymous composer, certainly not familiar with anything happening in Italy, who writes down his composition in exactly the same way as Chamaterò, with the cantus firmus in plainchant notation. The setting itself, interestingly, is an Introit, for the Mass of Ascension Day, just like the settings of Chamaterò. So far as we know, the anonymous composer did not write it down in order to make a theoretical point about improvisation, or to present it to somebody as an illustration of what he and his fellow-singers were capable of doing. But it looks as if this might be a relic of the very tradition of contrapuntal improvisation that had died out four decades later, when Thomas Morley wrote his *Plaine and Easie Introduction*, and was no longer able to imagine that counterpoint could be sung this way.

It would be easy to spend the rest of this contribution giving other examples of this practice, which has no name, and which I have chosen to call, purely for my own reference, *cantus planus* settings, collected from all over Europe, in manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There are hundreds and hundreds of such settings, most of them not even available in modern editions, and the tradition as such is as yet completely unstudied. But apparently it was a universal tradition, and for a long time, even after the Reformation, it continued to be practiced in Catholic countries.

Against this background it is easier to understand why Seth Calvisius, that German music theorist who was so interested in the Papal bull *Docta sanctorum patrum*, should have credited Pope

John XXII with having established the tradition of improvised counterpoint. Let us listen once again to how Calvisius put it:

> [Here] the Pope makes plainchant the foundation of the consonances that are to be added. Whence, without any doubt, no other kind of music would be born than extemporized counterpoint, or that harmony which is called "autoschediastic." That is to say, when those who have deeper voices sing the plainchant *simpliciter*, yet the others, who have higher voices, add consonances, octaves, fifths, and fourths, at will, without forethought—just as is the custom today among certain court singers in chapels and in certain monasteries, and among Papal singers. Still, the singers of whom Pope [John] speaks, being less well trained, mingled their consonances perhaps from notation.

For Calvisius, then, the distinctive feature of improvised counterpoint is that the plainchant is sung *simpliciter*, that the neumes remain *simplex*, that is, unbroken and unrhythmicized. The examples we have seen earlier bear that out. And it is precisely this distinctive feature whose origin Calvisius ascribes to the papal bull of John XXII. Of course, we know that the feature may be older than that. I have emphasized earlier that the old *organum purum* from the twelfth century also had a plainchant notated in the original neumes. But *organum purum* was barely practiced anymore by the early fourteenth century, and it alone cannot account for the efflorescence of improvised counterpoint in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. On this point, I do think Seth Calvisius may be an especially authoritative witness, precisely because he knows the tradition of improvised counterpoint like we no longer do, and because he knows how essential is the principle of keeping the plainchant notes *simplex*.

6.

So, whether we can bring ourselves to believe it or not, improvised counterpoint really did sound like the examples we have seen in this contribution. Or perhaps we should put it a little more carefully. To those who were familiar with the tradition, improvised counterpoint did sound like the examples printed above. That is why they transcribed them the way they did. To us it need not necessarily have sounded that way, too. Nor would we necessarily have transcribed it the way they did.

There is one major divide that separates us from the tradition of improvised counterpoint, and it is a divide that has more to do with how we listen and think than with the objective reality of the music itself. Since we are no longer familiar with the tradition, our principal frame of reference is composed music. So when we deal with improvisation, we have no choice but to define it in terms of composition. Question: what is improvisation? Answer: it is everything that composition is not. The problem with this answer is not just that it is symptomatic of the divide I just mentioned, but that it sets us up to expect improvisation to be a certain kind of music. Then when we hear an improvisation, or something claimed to be an improvisation, like the examples printed in this essay, it is not quite what we expect, or are capable of believing.

Let me give an example. If we lived in a culture in which everyday communication was done only in sign language, and in which we reserved the organ of speech exclusively for the recitation of works of high literary merit, we would probably lose the ability to speak spontaneously. Whatever we might try to say in a verbal utterance would inevitably be measured against the standards of the literary works we were accustomed to recite. And it would fall hopelessly short. If we then came in contact with another culture where people actually spoke spontaneously, we would probably need a word for what was special about their way of speaking. What we would say, conceivably, is: their speaking is improvised. Of course that would have seemed quite incredible to us, because we had only one stylistic register with which to hear and appreciate speech, namely a bookish one, and it was

the wrong register with which to hear improvisation. The critical register we needed, and that we did not have, was "colloquial" rather than "bookish." Evaluating speech, in large part, is a matter of recognizing which register is being used, and on this point we have an almost implausibly keen sensibility. There is the stylistic register, not only of colloquial English, but of the scholarly article, of the sleeve notes, of talking with my brother back in Holland, of addressing a police officer, of making light conversation over a drink, and we shift registers effortlessly.

Yet we cannot make a similar shift in register when listening to improvised counterpoint, and as a consequence, that implausibly keen sensibility is heightened unreasonably. We may well be far less inclined to be tolerant of errors in improvised counterpoint than we would be in the performance of composed music. When you hear, for example, a motet by Palestrina sung in church and some singer gets it wrong at one point, we still know what he was supposed to sing, and we know that he will get it right the next time. We might still think it was overall a good performance. But the same sort or error in an improvisation would not be entitled to such leniency. It would trigger the very tripwire we had set up in advance: is it actually possible to improvise counterpoint? It would confirm what we had assumed to begin with—that you cannot improvise without violating the rules of counterpoint again and again. And so the error would distract us, to a greater degree than the same error might have done in a performance of a Dufay motet. That motet we could actually hear as music.

The same could be argued about transcriptions of improvisation. To return to our earlier analogy, if we were equipped only to recite literary English, and if someone claimed he could improvise speech without planning or premeditation, all we would be listening for was the sorts of errors you would never see in a literary text. We would not be equipped with the register for colloquial English, in which you barely hear those errors, or even not at all—not because the errors are not there, but because you automatically correct them, because you know what the speaker meant to say, or how he meant to say it. If we transcribed colloquial English, we would certainly not write down those errors exactly as they had been made, but would correct

them without realizing that we were doing so. For an error has no place on paper. That is why we occasionally need the word *sic* to confirm that we actually intend to leave an error uncorrected, or to stop others from correcting it. We do not think it is cheating to render a spoken, improvised text in immaculate English, to edit out all the errors, and to tidy it up with punctuation. For in a sense, we really do hear colloquial English as we would transcribe it. And that, undoubtedly, is how Chamaterò transcribed the improvisations that had been sung under his direction: he transcribed not just what was being sung, but also how a proper listener would have heard it. This is what we would have heard if we had been familiar with the tradition.

In a way it makes perfect sense to shift attention away from the musical notation, per se, to the way it is heard. Because hearing and listening are also a living practice, an oral tradition, you might say, and one that has been lost, too. It is true that we have no choice but to re-encounter the tradition through its written traces, but those traces cannot tell us the whole story. In a way they are meant to leave us incredulous, to make us feel that music could not possibly have been improvised this way. For it is that gap, that divide, that reminds us what we have lost, and by whose disappearance we may one day be able to tell if we have truly regained it.

APPENDIX I.

Introit *Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum*, from the Mass for Easter Sunday, with *contraponti all'improuiso* as printed in Chamaterò di Negri, *Li introiti* (1574).

CANTVS
ALTVS
QVINTVS
TENOR
BASSVS

Et ad - huc te - cum sum. Al -

8

le - lu - ia. Po - su-

15

- i - sti su - per me ma-

22

- num tu - am. Al - le - lu -

29

ia. Mi - ra - bi - lis fa - cta

37

est sci - en - ti - a

45

tu - a. Al - le - lu -

52

ia. Al le lu ia.

59

Al - le - lu - ia.

66

Tu co - gno - ui - sti ses - sio - nem me - am et re - sur-

74

- re - ctio - nem me - am.

82

Si - cut e - rat in prin - ci - pi - o et

88

nunce et sem - per et in se - cu - la se - cu - lo-

94

- rum. A - men.

APPENDIX 2.

Anonymous, *Viri Galilei*, LonBL Add. 17802–5 (Gyffard Partbooks), 65. After David Mateer, ed., *The Gyffard Partbooks*, Early English Church Music, 48 (London: Stainer and Bell, 2007), 1: 261–266.

Triplex
Medius
Contratenor
Bassus

Quid ad - mi - ra - mi - ni

8
as - pi - ci - en - tes in ce -

16
lum. Al - le -

24
lu - ya. Quem - ad - mo - dum vi -

32

dis - tis e - um as - cen - den -

41

tem in ce- - - - lum - i - ta ve-

50

- ni - et. Al - le - lu - ya, al - le - lu -

58

ya. al - le - lu - ya.