Contrapunctus simplex et diminutus : polyphonic improvisation for voices in the fifteenth century

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CONTRAPUNCTUS SIMPLEX ET DIMINUTUS: POLYPHONIC IMPROVISATION FOR VOICES IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

by Ross W. Duffin[1]

In spite of historical and theoretical evidence for the practice, doubts are sometimes expressed about the nature and even the existence of polyphonic improvisation for voices in the fifteenth century. Most of those doubts, I believe, stem from underestimation of the musical results achievable using improvisatory techniques. If someone believes that an acceptable polyphonic texture through the use of improvised procedures is doubtful or impossible, then they are likely to discount historical and theoretical evidence for the widespread use of apparently improvised procedures, like „singing *super librum*," as necessarily referring to something other than spontaneously improvised polyphony.[2] There are also some today who maintain that fifteenth-century singers (and instrumentalists too, for that matter) were probably not actually improvising but performing previously worked-out, memorized versions of pieces.[3] I have personally been improvising and teaching polyphonic improvisation for over thirty years now, based on early theoretical directives and written models that

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[1] Thanks are due to Bonnie Blackburn, Rob Wegman, and Adam Gilbert for valuable comments on a draft of this article, and to Adam Gilbert, Crawford Young, Randall Cook, and Ian Harrison for conversations that affected my thinking on the subject.

[2] There have been some extensive and thoughtful arguments published on this issue, which have been of extraordinary benefit in shaping my thinking and refining my own position. The most extensive argument against an historical practice of spontaneous polyphonic improvisation against a cantus firmus is in Margaret Bent, „*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*", *JAMS* 36 (1983), 371–91. That position was countered at length in Bonnie J. Blackburn, „On Compositional Process in the Fifteenth Century", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40 (1987), 210–84 (especially 246–60), and in 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. Yet the argument against improvisation persists: „Counterpoint (noun) is a product of ‚singing on the book' (*cantare super librum*, verb) according to these rules which … required foreknowledge and preparation, not the spontaneous, uncontrolled improvisation (*sortisatio*, ‚sodaine' music) … which would fall outside Tinctoris's understanding of counterpoint." See Margaret Bent, „*Resfacta*", *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001). In fact, „foreknowledge" of the rules and previous experience improvising in certain styles do not preclude spontaneous improvisation, and it is surely not a given that performance needs to be „uncontrolled" to qualify as improvised. On this point, see also Wegman, „From Maker to Composer", p. 443, n. 102. That singers within the options open to them might occasionally conflict and produce something „sodaine and unexpected" is likely, but experience improvising together reduces these to a minimum. This quote and Bent's reference above are to Ernst T. Ferand's study of improvised music in „‚Sodaine and Unexpected' Music in the Renaissance", *Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951), 10–27. Ferand took it from John Dowland's translation (1609) of Andreas Ornithoparcus's *Micrologus* (1517; both repr. New York, 1973).

[3] „With our short memories, we tend to think that medieval musicians who performed without written music must have been improvising when they were just playing from memory." See Reinhard Strohm, *The Rise of European Music* (Cambridge 1993), 358.

seem to fit the descriptions of improvised polyphony, and while that is not historical evidence, the success I and my students have had shows a glimmer, at least, of what must have been possible for experienced, specialist singers in the fifteenth century. Using written „improvisations" based on a constant cantus firmus in a variety of fifteenth-century improvisatory styles, I will attempt to address the doubts by showing what is possible when performers know the style, the rules, and each other's contrapuntal tendencies.

I. The Historical Background

It seems necessary, first of all, to review the kinds of evidence supporting the conclusion that improvisation was an important part of the well-trained singer's art in the early Renaissance. Cambrai Cathedral, especially known for its choir and the training of choral singers in the fifteenth century, provides a useful „snapshot" of that evidence. Cambrai was associated with Guillaume Du Fay, Alexander Agricola, and Jacob Obrecht, among many other composers, and also the composer/theorist Johannes Tinctoris. Archives from Cambrai reveal that the adult choral singers, the *petits vicaires*, were all expected to be skilled in singing *super librum*, and those who could not do so expertly at their arrival were expected to remedy the deficiency immediately.[4] Singing „upon the book" meant polyphonic singing based on a written or memorized melody, normally from the Gregorian chant repertoire.[5]

One documentary reference connecting the *super librum* singing of a specific piece at Cambrai is to *Christe fili dei vivi* – a short responsory – which was to be sung at the office of Prime on all feasts of duplex rank at the cathedral.[6] Similarly, there is a 1535 reference to the importance of the left side of the choir paying attention to the harmony [*concentus*] of the right side in singing the divine service. Since the choice of harmony was the issue, the chant seems to have been performed with improvised polyphony. A similar reference was later used at Cambrai in connection with the sequence *Victimae paschali laudes*.[7]

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[4]   For examples from 1484, 1491, 1493, and later, see Craig Wright, „Performance Practices at the Cathedral of Cambrai, 1475–1550", *Musical Quarterly* 64 (1978), 313–14.

[5]   Though melodies outside of the Gregorian repertory were also used as such a basis as well. The term dates back at least to Elias Salomon in the thirteenth century. See his „Scientia artis musicae" in *Scriptores ecclesiastici de musica sacra potissimum* 3, ed. Martin Gerbert (St. Blasien 1784; repr. Hildesheim, 1963), 58. See also Ernst Ferand *Die Improvisation in der Musik* (Zurich 1939), 136–37.

[6]   See Wright, „Performance Practices", 321. The singing of responsories in apparently improvised polyphony dates back at least to the late twelfth century at Notre Dame in Paris. See Wright, *Music and Ceremony at Notre Dame of Paris, 500–1500* (Cambridge 1989), 239.

[7]   See Wright, „Performance Practices", 297. My thanks to Alejandro Planchart, Annie Fournier, Rob Wegman, and Leofranc Holford-Stevens for help in obtaining and sorting out the original text of the 1535 document, which reads in full: *Remonstretur succentori chori super maranchia nouissime per ipsum commissa, admoneanturque vicarii sinistri lateris chori ut obseruent et attendant ad concentum cantorum dextri lateris.*

From Tinctoris himself, in his *Liber de Arte Contrapuncti* of 1477, we have references to *contrapunctus* or *cantare super librum* – to be distinguished from *res facta*, which appears to mean a written composition. *Contrapunctus super librum* thus may be described as counterpoint based on a pre-existent melody, and *cantare super librum* as the improvised singing of counterpoint against a pre-existent melody.[8] Tinctoris furthermore makes use of *Victimae paschali laudes* (which he labels *Virginis Marie laudes*) as a tenor for one of his counterpoint examples, suggesting that syllabic chants like sequences, hymns, etc., may have been especially common as subjects for improvisation. Sequences were sung, of course, not only as part of the Proper of the Mass, but also in votive services and in processions where polyphonic music books would not be readily available.

Lastly, there is the very practical issue that polyphonic music manuscripts were costly and could not be held by each member of the choir in a dark chapel on a winter's evening. It was much easier to improvise on chants known to the choir singers from the time they were choirboys: No music book required; no light required.

Most of the references to syllabic chants like sequences are probably to note-against-note contrapuntal singing, or harmonization, just as singers in English-speaking countries spontaneously harmonize a rendition of *Happy Birthday* today. But on what basis do we assume that florid counterpoint was part of the singer's art as well?

Tinctoris, first of all, discusses not only *contrapunctus simplex* – note-against-note counterpoint – but also *contrapunctus diminutus* or *floridus*: diminished, florid, or figured counterpoint. Here is the discussion of *super librum* counterpoint from his 1477 treatise (Book II, chapter xx), separated into numbered points:

1. That counterpoint, both simple and diminished, is made in two ways, that is, in writing or in the mind, and how *res facta* differs from counterpoint.
2. Furthermore, counterpoint, both simple and diminished, is made in two ways, either in writing or in the mind.
3. Counterpoint that is written is commonly called *res facta*.
4. But that which we accomplish mentally we call counterpoint in the absolute [sense], and they who do this are commonly said to sing upon the book.
5. However, *res facta* differs from counterpoint above all in this respect, that all the parts [=voices] of a *res facta*, be they three, or four, or more, should be mutually bound to each other, so that the order and law of concords of any part should be observed with respect to each single and all [parts]....

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[8] According to Tinctoris (*Liber* II.xxi), „all counterpoint [*contrapunctus*] is made upon plainchant or figured music," from which I suggest that the continuous presence of a cantus firmus is the *sine qua non* of counterpoint, whether written or sung: if a cantus firmus is not present, counterpoint cannot be made or sung against it. Any written piece with rests at any point in the tenor – even if it carries a cantus firmus – must therefore be considered *res facta*: the absence of the cantus firmus makes the other parts „mutually obliged."

6. But with two or three, four or more, singing together upon the book, one is not subject to the other.

7. For indeed, it suffices that each of them sound together with the tenor with respect to those [matters] that pertain to the law and ordering of concords.

8. I do not judge it blameworthy but rather very laudable if those singing together should prudently avoid similarity between each other in the choice and ordering of concords.

9. Thus indeed they shall make their singing together much more full and suave.[9]

In addition to this theoretical evidence, within the sacred polyphonic repertoire there survive several pieces related to the improvised polyphonic *basse danse* repertoire as, for example, a setting of the dance tune, *Je suy povere de leesse*, as *Qui latuit* (attr. Du Fay);[10] the famous dance tenor *La Spagna* as a basis for the 5v *Propter peccata* by Josquin;[11] the *Missa la Bassadanza* (also based on *La Spagna*) by Isaac;[12] and a 5v setting of the Dutch song *Tandernaken* by Ludwig Senfl, to the text *Foelices quicunque*.[13] No written piece is likely to be an accurate record of an improvised rendition, but even so, recurring characteristics of tenor organization, contrapuntal approach, and figuration style give a fairly consistent picture and lead us to believe that they represent, perhaps, cleaned-up versions based on the improvised practice.[14] There is also the fact that composers of sacred polyphony – basically up to the time of Josquin and Isaac at the turn of the sixteenth century – were never hired as composers, but as singers.

The practice of polyphonic improvisation certainly lasted beyond 1500, however. Thomas Morley, in 1597, reported:

> 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

[9]   Tinctoris, *Liber* II.xx. The translation is from Blackburn, „On Compositional Process" 248–49.

[10] The piece appears in MS Trent 87 as *Du pist mein Hort* and as *Qui latuit* in Munich MS 14274. It is edited by Guillaume de Van in Du Fay's *Opera Omnia* 1 (1948).

[11] *Propter peccata* is, in fact, the most common form of transmission of Josquin's *La Spagna* setting, appearing in a handful of manuscripts and prints. It is edited by Albert Smijers in Josquin's *Wereldlijke Werken* 5 (1968), though without text.

[12] This appears in several manuscripts and one print. It is edited by Fabio Fano in *Heinrich Isaac Messe* (Archivium Musices Metropolitanum Mediolanense 10, Milan 1962).

[13] This appears in four manuscripts and one print, and is edited by Arnold Geering and Wilhelm Altwegg in Senfl's *Sämtliche Werke* 4 (1962). Though Senfl is a younger composer, he was a pupil of Isaac, and this work is clearly in a more old fashioned style.

[14] One chant-based tradition, with the cantus firmus in square notation and the other parts in mensural notation, is discussed in Christian Meyer, „*Sortisatio*: De l'improvisation collective dans les pays germaniques vers 1500", *Polyphonies de tradition orale: histoire et traditions vivantes*, eds. Michel Huglo and Marcel Pérès (Paris: Éditions Créaphis, 1993), 183–200. I am grateful to Rob Wegman for directing my attention to this study.

men acquainted with musicke, can delight to hear 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.[15]

Obviously, a tradition of improvising „upon a plainsong" did not persist in London in the late sixteenth century, though to hear it described as „the greatest part of the usual music" sung in churches elsewhere (and formerly in England) is a striking revelation in spite of Morley's incredulity. How long the practice lasted is not clear. In the late-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Italian theorists were still talking about *contrappunto alla mente* – recalling Tinctoris's phrase *contrapunctus scripto vel mente*.[16] Moreover, writing in Nuremberg in the mid-sixteenth century, Adrian Petit Coclico said that „the highest rank in the hierarchy of musicians is occupied by those who not only know the theory of music and are good composers but are also able to sing extempore to any plainchant melody" [*vere sciunt cantilenas ornare*].[17] The connection to the fifteenth century is that Coclico claimed to have been a pupil of Josquin and ranked him at the top of his list of *musices*, so it is clear that he viewed Josquin as part of that tradition. In fact, he later expounded on Josquin's teaching method:

> My teacher Josquin ... never gave a lecture on music or wrote a theoretical work, and yet he was able in a short time to form complete musicians, because he did not keep back his pupils with long and useless instructions but taught them the rules in a few words, through practical application in the course of singing.
> And as soon as he saw that his pupils were well grounded in singing, had a good enunciation and knew how to embellish melodies and fit the text to the music, then he taught them the perfect and imperfect intervals and the different methods of singing counterpoint against plainsong.

[15] Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musick* (London, 1597), *The Annotations Vpon the second Part*, regarding p. 70.

[16] On the later history of extempore counterpoint, see Ernst T. Ferand, „Improvised Vocal Counterpoint in the Late Renaissance and Early Baroque", *Annales Musicologiques* 4 (1956), 129–74.

[17] Adrian Petit Coclico, *Compendium Musices* (1552), B 4r. The translation is from Ferand, „Improvised Vocal Counterpoint", 138. It would be possible to interpret „ornare" as meaning „embellish," as Coclico clearly uses it below, but Ferand's interpretation of it here as meaning improvisation seems to come from theoretical definitions of *sortisatio* that use „ornare/ ordinare," such as the following: „Est enim sortisare ... cantum nonnullum diuersis melodijs improuise ordinare," from Nicholas Wollick, *Opus Aureum* (Cologne, 1501), fol. H I v.; and „Unde sortisare, est planum cantum, certis consonantijs, ex improuiso ordinare," from Ornithoparcus, *Micrologus*, Lib. iv, cap. 1. The earliest definition in this tradition comes from the 1476 manuscript treatise, *Natura Delectabilissimum* (Regensburg, Bischöfliche Ordinariatsbibl., MS 98 th. 4°, p. 355): „Sortisare est aliquem cantum diversis melodiis inprovise ornare." On this last source, see Klaus-Jürgen Sachs, „Sortisatio," *Riemann Musik-Lexikon* (Mainz, 1967), Sachteil, p. 887, Bent, „*Resfacta* and *Cantare Super Librum*", 376, and Meyer, „*Sortisatio*", 86–87. By this definition, improvised polyphony is seen as an ornamentation of the chant.

> If he discovered ... pupils with an ingenious mind and promising disposition, then he would teach these in a few words the rules of three-part and later of four-, five-, six-part, etc. writing.[18]

In other words, Josquin would only teach composition to those who had proved themselves adept at singing *super librum*. As Coclico further noted, the first and most important characteristic of a good composer, in fact, „is that he can sing counterpoint extemporaneously" [*contrapunctum ex tempore canere sciat*].[19] So, those composers trained by Josquin and perhaps other fifteenth-century masters would all have been familiar with improvised counterpoint before they began composition studies.[20]

There is little doubt, then, that well-trained singers in the fifteenth century were versed in improvisatory techniques, where all voices in a polyphonic texture were sung against a single pre-existent melody. What follows is a sampling of such techniques prevalent in the fifteenth century, derived from theoretical sources, from analyzing existing compositions that seem to be in an improvisatory style, and from practical experimentation. The styles vary by place and by time, with increasing numbers of voices seen toward the end of the fifteenth century. The tenor melody, or cantus firmus, is a simple chant-like phrase, newly composed by me to serve for all of the different examples.

II. Improvisatory Styles in Practice

A. *Simplex* – Note-against-Note Styles

Despite the beauty and sophistication of the figured styles, *simplex* counterpoint was probably heard more than any other type, as a way of making the service music more beautiful and solemn, using the chant as it was being sung ordinarily and not adding any time to the services. As Tinctoris says: „Moreover, in many churches this plainsong is sung without measure, and upon it skilled singers add the sweetest sort of harmony."[21]

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[18] „Item Praeceptor meus Iosquinus de Pratis nullam unquam praelegit aut scripsit Musicam, breui tamen tempore absolutos Musicos fecit, quia suos discipulos non in longis & friuolis praeceptionibus detinebat, sed simul canendo praecepta per exercitium & practicam paucis uerbis docebat. Cum autem uideret suos utcunque in canendo firmos, belle pronunciare, ornatè canere, & textum suo loco applicare, docuit eos species perfectas et imperfectas, modumque canendi contra punctum super Choralem, cum his speciebus. Quos autem animaduertit acuti ingenij esse & animi laeti his tradidit paucis uerbis regulam componendi trium uocum, postea quatuor, quinque, sex &c." Coclico, *Compendium*, F 2v. The translation is from Gustave Reese and Jeremy Noble, „Josquin Desprez" from *The New Grove High Renaissance Masters* (New York, 1984), p. 20.

[19] See Coclico, *Compendium*, L 2v. The translation is from Blackburn, „On Compositional Process", p. 259, n. 95.

[20] This echoes Tinctoris's remark: „I have known not even one man who has achieved eminent or noble rank among musicians, if he began to compose or sing *super librum* at or above his twentieth year of age." (*Liber* III.ix). The translation is from Wegman, „From Maker to Composer", p. 423, n. 35.

[21] *Liber* II.xxi. The translation is from Wright, „Performance Practices", 315.

2v Procedures

One voice above: Discant

Discant, or note-against-note counterpoint[22] is the foundation of all poly-phonic improvised procedures based on a pre-existing melody. Note-against-note polyphony is documented as early as the *Enchiriadis* treatises of the ninth century,[23] though it was not until later that discant appeared as a more „contrary motion" procedure.[24] By the fifteenth century, simple discant with one part against a tenor looked something like the first example below. It is important to note that when more than two voices are present in a polyphonic texture, one part must carry the function of the discant, making cadences to the octave (or unison) with the tenor.[25] It is thus a hierarchical system, though not necessarily successive as sometimes described.

Contrapuntal guidelines and comments on the individual voices are given as bullet-points throughout the following discussion.

Cantus

- centered a 6th to an 8ve above the tenor.
- begins and ends on perfect consonances, normally the 8ve, as here.
- contrary motion against the tenor as much as possible.
- occasional parallel motion of 3rds, 6ths, or 10ths.
- consecutive 5ths and 8ves forbidden (except over repeated tenor notes).
- cadences typically major 6th to 8ve, or minor 3rd to unison, although 5th to 8ve is possible.

A more formulaic variant of this would be one that uses an 8ve at the beginning and the end, but entirely parallel 6ths in between, and this approach was prob-ably an intermediate step in the development of Faburden, discussed below.[26]

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[22] The origin of „counterpoint" is from *punctus contra punctum*, meaning one note (or *punctus*) [sung] against another. It was shortened to *contrapunctum* and rendered in the nominative as *contrapunctus*. Tinctoris uses *nota contra notam* for *simplex* usage, and *contrapunctus* as a more general term including both *simplex* and *diminutus* styles.

[23] See Raymond Erickson and Claude V. Palisca, eds., *Musica enchiriadis and Scolica enchiri-adis* (Yale, 1995).

[24] On the origins of free organum and discant, see Richard L. Crocker, „Discant, Counterpoint, and Harmony", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 15 (1962), 1–21.

[25] This is embodied in Margaret Bent's theory of „dyadic counterpoint." See „The Grammar of Early Music: Preconditions for Analysis" in Cristle Collins Judd, ed. *Tonal Structures in Early Music* (New York and London, 1998), 15-59.

[26] This could be related to the English technique known as Gymel. The late-fifteenth-century theorist Guilielmus Monachus describes Gymel as 2v counterpoint using parallel imperfect intervals, such as 3rds, 6ths, or 10ths, though the example he provides shows only parallel 3rds below the cantus firmus. See Eulmee Park, „*De Praeceptis Artis Musicae* of Guilielmus Monachus: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1993), 160, 325–26. However, this is the same octave configuration Monachus uses in the previous example to represent the top part in Faburden, discussed below, so he could mean parallel 6ths above, rather than parallel 3rds below. See also G. Monachus, *De Praeceptis Artis Musicae*, ed. Albert Seay (Corpus Scriptorum de Musica 11, 1965), 29–30.
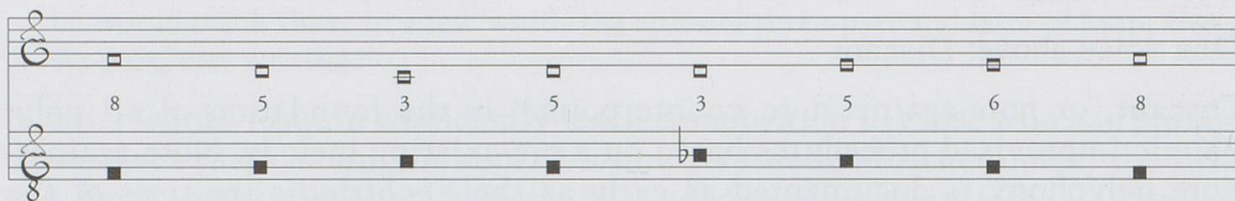
This style, with only one improvising voice, is the easiest type of polyphonic improvisation because there is no possibility of conflicting intervals – only incorrect ones. Adding voices to this two-part framework complicates the rules, however, as will be seen below.

3v Procedures

Faburden places a pre-existent melody in the bottom voice, or alternatively, in the middle voice, and has two other voices improvise against it.[27]

1. Two mostly parallel voices above: Faburden 1

Cantus
- takes an 8ve above the tenor at the beginning and ends of phrases but otherwise parallels the melody at the 6th above, which can be accomplished by imagining unisons at the beginning and end (while singing an 8ve above), and imagining 3rds below in between. This technique works especially well where the tenor descends into the end of the phrase, as the top part moves from the 6th to the 8ve, making a cadence.

Contra
- takes a 5th above the tenor at the beginning and ends of phrases but otherwise parallels the tenor at the 3rd above. Where the tenor descends into the end of the phrase, the motion is therefore from the 3rd to the 5th above, creating a double leading-note cadence with the top part.

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[27] There are numerous studies on the subject of Faburden and Fauxbourdon, which include Heinrich Besseler's *Bourdon und Fauxbourdon* (Leipzig, 1950), Brian Trowell, „Faburden and Fauxbourdon", *Musica Disciplina* 13 (1959), 43–78, and Ernest Trumble, *Fauxbourdon: an Historical Survey* (Brooklyn, 1959). Among both fifteenth-century theorists and modern writers, however, there is linguistic and technical confusion over the terms. For example, English theorists tend to describe Faburden as having the cantus firmus in the middle part (Faburden 2 in this discussion), but Guilielmus Monachus first describes it as having the cantus firmus on the bottom (Faburden 1), except that he uses the term „faulxbordon" to describe it. See Park, „De praeceptis", 159–60, 323–24. Whatever the terminology, the techniques described here were in use at various times and places in the fifteenth century, and I make no claims for the chronological primacy of one over the other.

8   6   6   6   6   6   6   8

5   3   3   3   3   3   3   5

2. One parallel voice above and one mostly parallel below: Faburden 2

Cantus

- or „counter" takes a 4th above the tenor throughout.

Contra

- takes a 3rd or a 5th below the tenor by starting on a 5th below and „sighting" the tenor as if singing in unison, then imagining singing in unison or a 3rd above the tenor.

Note how different this sounds harmonically, even though it is also faburden on the same cantus firmus.[28]

4   4   4   4   4   4   4   4

5   3   3   3   3   3   3   5

3. Two mostly parallel voices below the cantus firmus: Fauxbourdon

a) as a *si placet* procedure

The earliest use of the term fauxbourdon is in works from the 1420s written in two voices – tenor and cantus – with the written designation „fauxbourdon" calling for the creation of a middle voice in parallel 4ths below the cantus. A 5th between cantus and tenor would create a dissonance between the fauxbourdon voice and the tenor, so this technique works with any tenor-cantus duo that uses 6ths and 8ves between the written voices, and some pieces,

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[28] The use of so many flatted notes in the bassus, especially, looks unusual for the period, but they are the result of the application of the interval formulas to the melody as given. It is not clear that performers would have been thinking about the flats in any case, rather than just making intervals against the cantus firmus and avoiding melodic tritones.

starting around 1425, were composed expressly for this purpose of creating a formulaic third voice.[29]

b) as an improvised procedure

Cantus
  • carries the pre-existent melody, with two improvising voices below it.

Contra
  • moves in parallel 4ths below the written top part.

Tenor
  • begins and ends each phrase on the 8ve below and uses parallel 6ths in between.

One question is what to do with phrase endings, since chant melodies often descend into phrase endings, and top parts are expected to ascend at cadences. In written fauxbourdon pieces (like Du Fay hymn settings, for example), the melody in the top is ornamented to descend to a leading note before resolving upward to the final (such an extension is shown here in the void notes at the end).

4. One free voice above and one in the tenor's range:
   Discant-Contra Improvisation

Places a pre-existent melody in the middle (tenor) voice and has one part improvising free discant above (cantus) and another improvising free counterpoint, roughly in the same range as the tenor, but moving both above and below it.

Cantus
  • As parts are added below, the cantus moves upward, ranging mostly from a 3rd to a 10th above the tenor, with the center of its range being the 6th to the 8ve where it is required to be for cadences.
  • Important difference from 2v counterpoint is that while 3rds and 5ths are consonant with the tenor in 2v super librum singing, they are often in

[29] Though not always successfully. On the early history of written fauxbourdon pieces, see Andrew Kirkman, „Some Early Fifteenth-Century Fauxbourdons by Dufay and his Contemporaries: a Study in Liturgically-Motivated Musical Style", *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 40 (1990), 3–35.

conflict with the contra (see below) so they must be avoided except where the contra is known or anticipated to be on a unison or 8ve, or possibly a 3rd below the tenor.
- conjunct motion is preferred along with contrary motion against the tenor, except that a few consecutive 6ths are common.
- cadential obligation is major 6th to 8ve above the tenor.

Contra
- ranges from an 8ve below to a 3rd or even a 5th above the tenor, mostly going higher when the tenor is low, and lower when the tenor is high, so the overall range need not be that great, as in the 9th shown in this example
- 5th below is common for the contra, but is in conflict with the cantus a 3rd or 5th above, so that is why the cantus must avoid those intervals. Similarly, a 3rd below is in conflict with a 5th above. Often alternation of 3rds, 5ths, and 8ves below in contrary motion against the tenor seems to work.
- consecutive 5ths with the tenor are forbidden, of course, but even consecutive 3rds below should be avoided because they often result in parallel 8ves with the cantus.
- cadential obligation is either 8ve-leap (5th below to 5th above) or double leading-note (3rd above to 5th above), as in faburden.
- at Phrygian cadences, double leading-note, or 3rd below to 5th (or less often, 3rd) below is used. The contra thus spends a lot of its time contriving to be on the proper note as cadences approach.

4v Procedures

1. Two voices above and one below: Falsobordone

Falsobordone places a pre-existent melody in either the tenor or the cantus voice, having them move in parallel motion, and has two other voices improvise against that 2v framework.[30]

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[30] See Murray C. Bradshaw: *The Falsobordone: a Study in Renaissance and Baroque Music*, (Musicological Studies and Documents 34, 1978), and Trumble, *Fauxbourdon*, 46–67. The technique described here is also identical to the Monachus description of 4v composition. See Park, „De praeceptis", 188–89 and Monachus, *De praeceptis*, 41, including Ex. 59.

Tenor & Cantus
- very formulaic, like faburden: with the exception of 8ves at the opening and at cadences, the top part and the tenor part are in parallel 6ths virtually the entire time, so Falsobordone can work with the chant either in the tenor or the cantus.

Contra Bassus
- mostly alternates 3rds and 5ths below the tenor, contriving to be a 5th below on the penultimate note of a cadence and resolving to the unison or 8ve below.
- in Phrygian cadences, the bassus (as in the 3v style) takes a 3rd below the tenor to a 5th (or 3rd) below on the resolution.
- because parallel 5ths with the tenor are forbidden and parallel 3rds make parallel 8ves with the cantus, the bass inserts occasional unisons or 8ves below to avoid such parallels and to set up for cadences.

Contra Altus
- mostly alternates between the 3rd and 4th above the tenor. 4ths are crucial because they are consonant with both of the main bassus notes below (3rd and 5th) whereas the 3rd above makes a 7th with the 5th below.
- at regular cadences, the altus moves from the 4th above the tenor to the 5th above (i.e., stays on the same note), and in Phrygian cadences, it moves from a 3rd above the tenor to the 4th above (again, staying on the same note). Falsobordone altus parts thus begin to look much like alto parts from later eras.

2. Two free voices above and one below: Free Simplex Improvisation a4

This style sounds a lot like falsobordone, but the pre-existent melody is placed in the tenor and the other three parts improvise freely against it.

Cantus
- essentially the same as in 3v Discant-Contra improvisation, except that the presence of a contra altus means that the cantus range is more limited at the lower end.

- cadences from the 6th to the 8ve above the tenor, so again, the center of its range is the 6th above, where it often moves in parallel and is ready for a cadence at any moment.

Contra Altus
- ranges from a 3rd below to a 6th above with the center of its range being the 4th above, as in falsobordone.
- at Phrygian cadences, the altus moves from a 3rd above the tenor to 4th above (the same note). The altus must listen carefully to the direction of the contra bassus and try to choose notes that are consonant with them.

Contra Bassus
- uses primarily unisons, 3rds, 5ths, and 8ves below, avoiding 6ths, as in the 3v style, and avoiding parallels in general. Even parallel 3rds are likely to create parallel 8ves with the cantus
- regular and Phrygian cadential obligations are as in Falsobordone, except that the contra bassus can also make „deceptive" cadences by moving from the 5th below the tenor to the 3rd below on the resolution. An instance of this occurs in a later example.

B. *Diminutus* – Florid Styles

The biggest difficulty for performers in moving from simple to florid improvisation is getting away from the concept of one „main" contrapuntal note moving to another „main" contrapuntal note. In this way, the problem is analogous to ground bass improvisors mistakenly treating the bass as a melody to be ornamented, rather than a source for the harmonic texture to be used. There is a critical moment at the change of tenor note, where the motion of the improvising voice needs to avoid forbidden parallels, etc., but it is better to think of a „grid" of consonant possibilities against each note of the tenor. Any one of them might work, along with passing motion between the consonant notes, especially using the kinds of syncopated figuration found in written cantus firmus-based counterpoint from this period. This kind of florid polyphonic improvisation is thus akin to jazz improvisation in the twentieth century,

except that jazz is based on chord progressions, whereas fifteenth-century improvisation is based on a single melody, typically placed in the tenor.

Common to all styles in this category is the stretching out of each tenor note to last a full measure, or even two measures. Many surviving pieces show a simple triple meter (which maybe a result of the popularity of the *basse danse* as an instrumental improvised genre), and that is what I chose to do for these examples, writing the parts successively, but trying to think of them as a singer might in hearing the other parts unfold. It is important to note that as the number of improvising parts increases, the range and role of each part becomes more narrowly prescribed. Range and function, in fact, are what make simultaneous multi-voice improvisation possible. The choice of an equal-note melodic fragment as a cantus firmus, furthermore, should not be taken as limiting the procedures to such a basis. Indeed, patterned rhythms – long-short-long, for example – or associated rhythms like augmented versions of chanson tenors (*cantus figuratus* in Tinctoris's terminology) can serve just as well,[31] and there are ornamental possibilities for the tenor voice that are not discussed here.

Lastly, it must be noted that the cadences (or potential cadences) of any stepwise descent in the tenor loom large in the improvisors' minds as places where their function and counterpoint is clearly defined, thus making the sections in between seem less daunting than an entire „seamless" piece of free florid improvisation. The cadences are what sectionalize florid improvised pieces and give direction and function to the voices.

2v Procedures

1. One Florid Part above the Tenor

This is the kind of style used most frequently by fifteenth-century performers improvising today, and is exemplified by written pieces like *Falla con misuras*,[32] a 2v setting of *La Spagna* where one part ranges widely and floridly above a slow-moving tenor. Among surviving works specifically for voices in this style, it should be noted that Bonnie Blackburn now views „all the two-part examples in Tinctoris's treatise as examples of singing *super librum*,"[33] but *Gaudeamus omnes* by Alexander Agricola is a written work in improvisatory style (with an equal-note tenor) that seems to have been composed for voices since it starts with a chant intonation.[34]

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[31] On patterned tenors, see *Liber* II.xxi, and on the use of tenors from figured song, see *Liber* II.xxii.

[32] Edited by W. Thomas Marrocco and Nicholas Sandon in *Medieval Music* (Oxford, 1977).

[33] See the „Addenda et Corrigenda" to her „On Compositional Process" article in *Composition Printing and Performance: Studies in Renaissance Music* (Variorum Collected Studies Series CS687) (Aldershot, 2000), after p. 108. I would only suggest that Tinctoris' written examples qualify as *contrapunctus super librum*, rather than „singing *super librum*," but agree that the contrapuntal style was probably indistinguishable from the improvised variety.

[34] Segovia Codex (ca.1501–3), fol. CCr. The work is reconstructed and edited by Edward Lerner in Agricola's *Opera Omnia* 5 (1970).

Cantus
- typically begins and ends phrases on the unison or 8ve above the tenor, ranging in between from about a 5th below to a 13th above the tenor
- cadences from the major 6th to the 8ve or minor 3rd to unison.
- because there is no danger of *conflict* with another improvising voice, any interval consonant with the tenor may be chosen at any time.
- figuration involves passing stepwise among the various consonant notes over each note of the tenor, sometimes using the syncopations characteristic of the written pieces, and sometimes leaping to another consonant note to begin figuration from there.

3v Procedures

1. Two Florid Parts above the Tenor

This is the kind of style found in such written pieces as Du Fay's *Qui latuit* (also known as *Du pist mein Hort / Je suy povere de léesse*),[35] as well as *Auxce bon youre delabonestren* and *Tandernaken* from Codex Trent 87,[36] where a cantus and high contra both improvise mostly above a tenor. It was probably standard until around 1430, common to around 1450, and used occasionally thereafter in the fifteenth century, though it was giving way to a style with a more wide-ranging contra (discussed below). The most famous later example of the style is the second Agnus from Isaac's *Missa la Bassadanza* [*La Spagna*].[37]

Cantus
- typically begins and ends phrases on the 8ve above the tenor, centering in between on the 6th above, and making cadences from the major 6th to the 8ve.
- because the other improvising voice is also above the tenor, the cantus may include the 5th among its acceptable intervals, along with the 3rd, 6th, 8ve, and 10th.

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[35] See footnote 10.
[36] Both pieces are edited in Frederick Crane, *Materials for the Study of the Fifteenth-Century Basse Danse* (Brooklyn, 1968). The *Tandernaken* setting is also in London Pro Musica, Early Music Library EML 155 (1989).
[37] See footnote 12.

Contra

- uses basically the same overall range as the tenor, though it centers primarily on the unison to the 3rd above and can venture as much as a 5th below.
- defining feature of this style is that the contra cadences from the major 3rd to a 5th above the tenor in both regular and Phrygian forms. Unlike in the 4v style, the contra here must avoid all 4ths against the tenor because they make second inversion triads. This is, thus, a non-quartal style. Figuration includes syncopation with passing and neighboring tones.

2. One Florid Part Above – One Mostly Below

This style is best represented, among written untexted works, at least, by Francisco de la Torre's *Alta* (*La Spagna* a3) and by Henry VIII's setting of *Taunder naken*,[38] with one part making a florid cantus above the tenor while the other, often in the same range as the tenor (though slightly extended at the bottom), ranges widely both above and below the tenor.[39]

Cantus

- resembles the previous style, and in fact, that part has simply been reused here, with a few melodic adjustments to represent the slightly later style.
- while 3rds and 5ths are consonant when both improvising voices are above the tenor, they are often in conflict with a contra below, so they should mostly be avoided except where the contra is known or anticipated to be

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[38] Torre's *Alta*, from the Cancionero del Palacio is edited by Higini Anglès in *La Música en la Corte de los Reyes Católicos* (*Monumentos de la Musica Española* 10, 1941) and in London Pro Musica EML 120 (1987). *Taunder naken* is edited by John Stevens in *Music from the Court of Henry VIII* (Musica Britannica 18, 1962), and in London Pro Musica EML 155 (1989).

[39] A subcategory of this type uses what Gafurius referred to as the „famous procedure," where two voices move in parallel 10th figuration against a cantus firmus. See *Practica Musice* 3.12, fol. f.ee2r, ed. Clement A. Miller (Musicological Studies and Documents 20), 144. See also Adam K. Gilbert, „The Improvising *Alta capella*, ca. 1500: Paradigms and Procedures", *BJHMP* 29 (2005), 120–22; and Bonnie Blackburn, „Obrecht's 'Missa Je ne demande' and Busnoys's Chanson: An Essay in Reconstructing Lost Canons", *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 45 (1995), 18–32. The technique is also possible in 3rds or 6ths with both voices above the cantus firmus, as found in Erasmus Lapicida's setting of *Tander naken*, edited in *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich* 72 (1960).

on a unison or 8ve (cf. the cadence resolution in the middle of the line, on G).

Contra

- ranges from about a 10th below to about a 5th above the tenor, mostly going higher when the tenor is low, and lower when the tenor is high, so the overall range, again, is not huge. A 5th below is common for the contra, but is in conflict with the cantus a 3rd or 5th above, so that is why the cantus must avoid those intervals. Similarly, a 3rd below is in conflict with a 5th above.
- 6ths below the tenor are avoided except when followed by an 8ve, but even then, they often result in second inversion or diminished triads. Stepwise ascent in the tenor may occasion an exception to this, however. At the end of the second measure below, for example, the bass could actually use a passing B-natural between the C and the A.
- Cadential obligation is typically 8ve-leap (5th below to 5th above), or a proto-bassus cadence (5th below to unison or 8ve below), although double leading-note (3rd above to 5th above) may still occur.
- For Phrygian cadences, a 3rd below to 5th (or less often, 3rd) below is standard, with double leading-note (3rd above to 5th above) being possible. The contra thus spends a lot of its time contriving to be on the proper note as cadences approach.
- again, this style is non-quartal. No 4ths are allowed above or below the tenor—except in passing—in either of the improvising voices.

4v Procedures

1. Three Florid Parts above the Tenor

This style seems not to have been very common – if the written record is any gauge – but may be exemplified by *Vos Christi* from Isaac's *Choralis Constantinus*.[40]

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[40] This is from the *Commune Martyrum*, Prosa 2, and is edited by Louise Cuyler in *Heinrich Isaac's Choralis Constantinus, Book III* (Ann Arbor, 1950), 139–40. A slightly less obvious but still valid example is *Pangat canora*, from a Prosa for St. Michael Archangel. See Cuyler, p. 440.

All Parts
- outline root position triads over the each cantus firmus note in the bottom part.
- the one exception to this occurs at the very end of a measure where the tenor descends stepwise, and one part moves to a 6th in order to make a cadence. This may be seen wherever the tenor descends in this example.
- unlike many improvised styles, the 6th above is not a frequent interval, and instead there is a predominance of 3rds, 5ths, 8ves, and their octave multiples.
- this is a non-quartal style, since the lack of a part below the cantus firmus precludes the use of that interval, except in passing, either above or below the sustained melody.

This style sounds quite different from the others harmonically since it has almost no 6ths above the tenor–an essential component of most other improvised styles from this period.

2. Two Florid Parts above, One below the Tenor

This style places a long-note cantus firmus in the tenor part, with two parts improvising above and one below. Experience has shown that the presence of this new bassus part fundamentally changes the manner of improvising for the upper parts: their choices are now driven not only by the tenor, but by hearing what the bassus singer is doing, and their deductions of what he seems likely to do against the coming notes of the tenor. Thus, while the tenor's role is fixed in singing the cantus firmus, the bassus singer, through his contrapuntal choices, now controls the direction of the overall counterpoint and the harmonic choices within the texture.[41]

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[41] This view is somewhat at odds with the hypothesized hierarchy within an improvising ensemble put forward by Rob Wegman, who argued that „tenorist" was essential to performance and highly valued as a singer, and therefore pre-eminent in the ensemble. See Wegman, „From Maker to Composer", 444–49. It is true that without a cantus firmus there is no improvisation, but for the multi-voice styles, I would argue that the bassus controls the counterpoint during an improvised performance.

Cantus
- essentially the same as in the 3v style, though sometimes with a smaller range.

Bassus
- basic alternation of 3rds and 5ths below – sometimes alternating under the same tenor note (in order to avoid forbidden parallels) – is a good basic strategy.
- cadential obligation is standard bassus cadence (5th below to unison or 8ve below).
- cadences may also resolve deceptively (5th below to 3rd below) as below the notes A-G towards the end of the tenor in this example.
- with Phrygian cadence obligations like the lower contra (typically 3rd to 5th below, as shown below the Bb-A in the tenor), the bassus spends a lot of his improvising time contriving to be on the proper note as cadences approach.

Altus
- occupies a very similar overall range to the tenor itself, venturing from a 5th below to an 8ve above, but with the center of its range being the 3rd or 4th above.
- as in the *simplex Falsobordone* style, 4th above is, an important note for the altus since it is consonant with both the 3rd and 5th below the tenor in the bassus part.

Because of the use of the 4th against the tenor, this 4v style differs markedly from the 3v style and is definitely *not* non-quartal.

Procedures for 5 or more voices

Tinctoris writes of „four or more" singers improvising over a cantus firmus,[42] which means that textures of five or more polyphonic voices in improvisation must have been heard, at least occasionally. The problem is that, to a large

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[42] See No. 6 in the numbered list, above.

extent, improvising voices are defined by their function at cadences, and once those standard contrapuntal possibilities have been exhausted, it is more difficult for additional voices to participate without making forbidden parallels with other improvising voices. However, extra parts in the tenor range can move 2-3 at cadences instead of 2-1; extra altus parts can alternatively move 4-3 (dropping to the 3rd above the cadence tone), or stay on the same note, from 4-5; extra bassus parts can move alternatively up or down to the cadence tone; superius parts can drop from 6-5 (descending from the leading note to the 5th above the cadence tone) or double the altus 4-5 an 8ve higher (same-note parallels being acceptable). With a „choir" of improvisors, it may have been expected that incidental parallels would occur between voices, although multi-voice written works, including *Propter peccata* (*La Spagna* a5) by Josquin, and *Foelices quicunque* (*Tandernaken* a5) by Senfl, also show that in notating cantus-firmus based works in an „improvisatory style," composers often simply inserted rests at crucial moments (i.e., cadences) to avoid offense. A similar impulse may have been developed by improvisors as well, though it seems very unlikely that parallel unisons in a multi-voice improvisatory texture would actually have been perceived by listeners as a violation of contrapuntal rules. Another effect of the larger number of voices, as seen in written settings, is that each part seems to occupy a smaller range, at least within each phrase. That is only to be expected, since it can also be observed in expanding from 2v to 3v, and 3v to 4v improvisation, but it means that this style is, in some respects, easier for singers because the range of each part is more confined and contrapuntal expectations more limited.

1. Two Florid Parts above and two below the Tenor

This style places a long-note cantus firmus in the tenor part, with two parts improvising above and two below.

Cantus
  • basically the same as in the 4v style, though centered slightly higher.

Altus
  • basically the same as in the 4v style.
  • at regular cadences, needs to drop to the third as a rule (instead of staying on the same note) in order to avoid potential clashes with deceptive cadences in the bassus parts.

Bassus II
  • basically the same as in the 4v style, acting as if it is the *only* bass part.

Bassus I
  • the bassus or baritone part has a primary range within the 8ve below the tenor, though extending above when the tenor is low.
  • besides the expected 3rd and 5th below, the 6th and even the 4th below is possible whenever the bassus II descends an 8ve below the tenor.

- at cadences, it sometimes avoids parallels with the bassus by resting, either immediately before or on the resolution, or it replaces the resting bassus II.
- alternatively at cadences, it may move from a 5th below to some other consonant note, like the 3rd above or below, or the 4th below (staying on the same note) if the bassus II takes the 8ve below at the resolution.

The grandeur of this sort of texture in improvisation is impressive to a modern audience, and yet improvising singers are sometimes slightly embarrassed by it as being easier than other styles. In a way, this is characteristic of all experienced and expert improvisors: they become so accustomed to creating „something out of nothing," whether a keyboard fugue, ground bass variations, or a cantus firmus-based improvisation, that they feel in a way that they are „cheating" the audience with „tricks and things," as an expert organ improvisor once confided to me. They are not. They have simply internalized the rules and practiced enough that decisions that appear almost supernatural or impossible to the listeners, are to them a logical and straightforward realization of the musical raw material in the chosen style.

Finally, a comment about „preparation," since disagreement about that is at the core of the writings about improvised polyphony. Margaret Bent considers that singing *super librum* „requires careful, successive preparation" which disqualifies it from being described as improvisation.[43] Bonnie Blackburn says „there are some who think singing *super librum* should be completely spontaneous, a kind of musical brinksmanship and absolute improvisation. But if the singers do not agree beforehand on different compatible counterpoints, they might all end up singing the same countermelody, at least in some passages,

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[43] Bent, „*Resfacta* and *Cantare super librum*", 380. See also her *New Grove* quote from n. 1 above, and the introduction to her *Counterpoint, Composition, and Musica Ficta* (New York & London, 2002), pp. 50–51.

and the concentus would not be „full and suave.“[44] And Rob Wegman believes that „improvisation, if it was to lead to contrapuntally acceptable results, would necessarily have required such coordination and prior planning as we would associate with the compositional process.“[45] I maintain that no prior consultation on the details of the counterpoint was necessary for experienced *super librum* singers. The only thing necessary, and indeed, the only thing Tinctoris actually calls for when two or more people sing together upon the book, is to „prudently avoid similarity between each other in the choice and ordering of concords“ – by which I believe he means to decide ahead of time who is going to take what voice function and in what range – in order to avoid duplication and „make their singing together much more full and suave.“[46] Then, they spontaneously and simultaneously improvise polyphony against the cantus firmus. No other preparation is required. Similarly, like jazz players, musicians in fifteenth-century styles have no need to memorize compositions. They might fall into patterns of improvising, and perform familiar pieces in ways that they like and that work well, but they are still capable of improvising spontaneously on raw material that is new to them.

The purpose of this discussion and these examples has been to demonstrate fifteenth-century contrapuntal improvisation techniques based on theoretical descriptions, on written works that seem to follow those descriptions, and on experiments with actual improvisation. The essential point is that a reconstruction of these procedures is entirely possible for modern performers, as was demonstrated by a group of Schola Cantorum singers[47] at the Improvisation Symposium concert in Basel on 28 February, 2008. If those admittedly talented musicians could manage to demonstrate a variety of improvisatory styles so successfully in such a public forum after only a few days of intensive experimentation, modern doubts about spontaneous polyphonic improvisation by composer/singers like Josquin need to be discarded at long last. It is, indeed, time for these improvisatory procedures to become part of the training of all musicians involved in the performance of fifteenth-century music.

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[44] Blackburn, „On Compositional Process“, 256.
[45] Wegman, „From Maker to Composer“, 442.
[46] This echoes Blackburn's essential point, though she sees contrapuntal coordination as necessary to achieve it. See Tinctoris's numbered points 6 through 8 above, from *Liber* II.xx.
[47] Eve Kopli, Caroline Ritchie, Nicola Cumer and Nathaniel Wood.