

Singing and Gesture: Considerations on Vocal Aesthetics in the Performance of Sacred Medieval Polyphony

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Abstract

The early music movement is mainly based on the analysis of documentary records from the past (scores, treatises, historical accounts, etc.). However, the gaps caused by the lack of continuity of an oral tradition remain – after all, not all elements of the performance are contained in the scores. To fill these gaps, the performer of today needs to make certain decisions – not always according to the most objective criteria. The article discusses some of the decisions of historically informed musicians regarding the vocal technique used to perform sacred medieval polyphony nowadays and proposes a new hypothesis in this regard with the help of iconography and the popular repertoire of oral tradition.

Keywords: Middle Ages; polyphony; oral tradition; early music; voice.

Introduction

The purity of vocal production of the so-called early music movement, or “historically informed performance”, is often extolled by critics, agents, recording companies, specialized musicians, audiences, and other enthusiasts. To claim that singers of this genre have “pure” and “crystalline” voices has become a cliché, as noted by Melanie Marshall. In fact, this style of vocal production has become so popular that female singers who dedicate themselves to this repertoire are generally expected to sound like Emma Kirkby or members of the Tallis Scholars – an English ensemble that helped spread this kind of sound aesthetic throughout the world through its performances and recordings (MARSHALL, 2015, p. 36).

In the 1980s, Richard Taruskin published several articles questioning the historicist certainties of some of the “historically informed” practitioners. A musicologist but also a practical musician, Taruskin exposed the fragility of the arguments of those who claim to offer accurate historical performances of extinct repertoires. For him, the practice of early music reflects above all else the visions and aspirations of present-day musicians and researchers, making it, therefore, a “modern” practice (TARUSKIN, 1984 and 1988).

In fact, the early music movement is mainly based on the analysis of musical and historical records from the past (scores, treatises, historical accounts, etc.) for their reconstitutions. However, besides being at the mercy of the natural bias of written sources (CARR, 1996), there are still gaps caused by the lack of continuity of an oral (and aural) tradition that is necessary, for example, for the correct deciphering of musical symbols from obsolete notations that have fallen into disuse (HAYNES, 2007, p. 105). Furthermore, not all elements of the performance are contained in the scores (especially the older ones) such as the phrasing, the number and type of performers, and the timbre (HAYNES, 2007, p. 88). To fill these gaps, today's performer needs to make certain decisions according to criteria that, according to Taruskin, will necessarily be modern.

Where, then, did this “pure and crystalline” timbre associated with early music voices come from? And why did it become hegemonic in the interpretation of medieval and Renaissance repertoires?

“Vocal purity” and the “English *a cappella* renaissance”

Donald Greig notes that the history of the efflorescence of English *a cappella* ensembles and the rise of the CD as a new recording format go practically hand in hand. The CD would reflect the particular ideology of sound of the 1980's: “purity and cleanliness, of static-free, interference-reduced, being precisely the ideology that English *a cappella* groups represent” (GREIG, 1995, p. 143).

Melanie Marshall (2015, p. 37) highlights the fact that the first early music singers in Britain were trained in conservative institutions, notably in Anglican cathedral choirs or at Cambridge or Oxford universities – where training includes sight-reading, excellent tuning, the ability to balance and blend in particular ways, and familiarity with pre-18th century repertoires. More than a style, the aesthetic values of English *a cappella* groups would be, according to Christopher Page – one of its main exponents – almost an ideology:

I now wish to propose a theory about the performance of medieval and Renaissance music. [...] Let us call it the ‘English discovery’ theory. It begins from the premiss that English singers performing a cappella are currently able to give exceptional performances of medieval and Renaissance polyphony from England and the Franco-Flemish area because the ability of the best English singers to achieve a purity and precision instilled by the discipline of repeated a cappella singing in the choral institutions is singularly appropriate to the transparency and intricate counterpoint of the music. From that premiss we proceed to the theory that, in certain respects, and especially in matters of tuning and ensemble, these performances represent a particularly convincing postulate about the performing priority of the original singers. (PAGE, 1993, p. 454).

And this theory would be very well defined in terms of national, cultural and religious identity:

I recognize that this theory is a quintessentially Protestant one. To claim that Britain has nurtured something in a matter ultimately pertaining to worship (the choral singing of a cathedral and chapel) which is purified and controlled beyond anything possessed by Catholic Europe, which is purged of excessive artifice and rhetoric (Continental reviewers consistently find English a cappella performances impassive) and whose excellence gives Britain a mission – these are among the ideas that have been the principal source of British identity since the Act of Union in 1707 and were a foundation stone of English identity long before. (PAGE, 1993, p. 454).

Page (1993, p. 457-458) notes that, not surprisingly, the aesthetics of English *a cappella* groups is promoted almost entirely by graduates of Oxford and Cambridge universities and that many of its leading performers have some sort of connection with these institutions. It also mentions a statement by Ronald Woodley that the sound of English *a cappella* groups is the musical equivalent of Oxford English. It also highlights the fact that specialized British publications such as *Early Music* and *Gramophone* collaborated with musicologists who were active at the universities, which was not the case for similar publications from other European countries at least until the late 1970s. The authority of these critic-scholars would provide academic validation to English interpretations of early music, as the scientific approach they represent “gives primacy to facts, to evidence and to sources”, carefully separates knowledge from speculation, and “tends to marginalize whatever seems fanciful or eccentric”.

By “fanciful” and “eccentric” Page implicitly refers to the practice of some early music groups active in Europe and the United States at the time, who used to mix voices with instruments “reconstructed on the basis of meagre evidence while using musical techniques which draw upon no established tradition of pedagogy and which retain a tinge of 1960s experimentalism and superficial multiculturalism” (PAGE, 1993, p. 466). In fact, the emergence of the so-called “English *a cappella* renaissance” apparently took place in reaction to these groups, generating a controversy that flared up especially in the last decades of the 20th century.

Despite its commercial success, the English early music interpretations are far from unanimous. Page (1993, p. 461-462) mentions some French critics who find in them a lack of passion, coldness, and “*voix droites comme la justice*”. According to Olivier Opdebeeck, critic for *Diapason* magazine:

[The] critic despairs at the uniformity of these interpretations based solely on the beautiful sound, whatever the repertoire, composer or genre approached. Lack of commitment (we know that the English work as fast... as well)? Lack of personality on the part of the conductor? The reflection of a general and musical education where the expression of any personal feeling is considered in bad taste? (PAGE, 1993, p. 463, our translation).¹

¹ “[!]Je critique se désespère devant l’uniformité de ces interprétations uniquement fondées sur le beau son, quel que soit le répertoire, le compositeur et le genre abordés. Manque de travail (on sait que les Anglais travaillent

According to Melanie Marshall, “purity” is a discursive construction used to reject some singers and the approaches to early music they represent; it implicitly classifies those who do not belong as unclean and sees a lack of purity as undesirable² (MARSHALL, 2015, p. 36). As an example, she compares the trajectory of two pioneer singers of early music: Jantina Noorman and Emma Kirkby. Both stood out as soloists of the genre thanks to unconventional vocal techniques at a time when operatic singing was still the unavoidable norm for any “classical” Western repertoire.

Jantina Noorman was a singer who specialized in Dutch folk repertoire as well as in early music. A vocalist of the *Musica Reservata* group directed by Michael Morrow, Noorman used to vary her technique according to the instrument that accompanied her by introducing changes in timbre and volume³. But her innovative, folklore-influenced techniques were not always well received, especially from the 1980s onwards. According to Marshall, the American musicologist Howard Mayer Brown nicknamed her the “Reservata holler” in reference to a type of vocal timbre that Victorian culture sought to eradicate. Marshall also cites John Potter, for whom Noorman’s vocal experiments strayed too far from “the comforting warmth of the choral scholar sound” (MARSHALL, 2015, p. 40).

Dame Emma Kirkby, on the other hand, is a well-loved figure of the British early music movement and, like most of its main characters, Oxford features in her past. Eric van Tassel’s review for the *Taverner Choir and Players* recording of *Dido and Aeneas* extols the “crystalline purity” of her singing. In Noorman, however, he finds “a kind of ‘chest voice’ that seems to owe far more to folk music and the bazaars of the Near East than to the bel canto tradition”. Another revealing review appears in 1975’s *Gramophone* magazine in which Emma Kirkby’s “white tone” (*voce bianca*) is directly associated with the purity of the sound of English choir boys. *Voce bianca* is an Italian term for children’s voices, whose technique consists of maximizing the use of the resonance chambers in the head. The comparison aligns the singer with the vocal aesthetics of the choirs of Anglican cathedrals in which female voices are historically absent. In this way, sounds influenced by folklore from experiments in early music from the 1950s to the 1970s were classified as strange and impure, while sounds familiar to the Anglican cult, such as those of countertenors and choristers from English cathedrals or colleges (and “white” female voices), have become the rule (MARSHALL, 2015, p. 41-43).

aussi vite... que bien)? Manque de personnalité de la part du chef? Relents d’une éducation générale et musicale où l’expression de tout sentiment personnel frise le mauvais goût?”

² Marshall also cites Dana Berthold, for whom this type of discourse helps to promote ideologies of white European superiority by identifying it with ideals of physical and moral purity. (BERTHOLD, 2010, p. 6).

³ “[Michael Morrow] told me that the voice should sound like the instruments that accompany the singer. He played the bagpipes himself; so when I sang with him my voice had to be loud. However, when I sang with a crumhorn, for instance, that required a different way of singing” (MARSHALL, 2015, p. 39).

Another author who analyses Page's "purifying" discourse is Helen Dell. According to her, his views suggest that the English had a moral duty to maintain a specifically English and Protestant identity in early music, purifying it of all the excess characteristic of the Catholic cultures of the European continent. This meant the exclusion of impurities and foreign and undesirable bodies, for instance: instrumental accompaniment of any kind for some repertoires; too many instrumental colors in others; too wide a variety of instruments; the extension of short pieces with instrumental improvisation; vocal vibrato; and "over-interpretation" (DELL, 2019, p. 447). For Page, English authenticity would imply obedience to a legitimate authority within a stable and functional hierarchy, in contrast to the irresponsible, indiscriminate and unauthorized experimentation associated with European groups (DELL, 2019, p. 448).

The "Arab hypothesis" and other "others"

At the end of his article on the English *a cappella* renaissance, Page (1993, p. 469) lists some elements that English critic-scholars tend to reject regarding the performance of medieval vocal music. Among them is what he called the "Arab hypothesis", which consists of the use of styles considered non-Western (but not necessarily of Arab origin) to evoke the distant sounds of the Middle Ages.

The "Arab hypothesis" seems to have many opponents among Western musicologists and music critics. Considering the academic authority of English critics as a guarantee of "authenticity", Alejandro Planchart endorses Page's stance by suggesting that the lack of dialogue between performers and musicologists in certain European countries is the factor responsible for, among other things, "the most absurd 'arabization' of all kinds of medieval repertoire" promoted by groups that imitate the aesthetics of the *Studio der frühen Musik* (PLANCHART, 1982, p. 25).

For Margaret Bent, all of *Minnesänger's* songs would fit on a single record if they were recorded in a monophonic, "clinically pure", and unadorned way. Instead, Thomas Binkley preferred to record just three songs long extended by ornamentation and interpolated by "quasi-oriental improvisational embellishments" (BENT, 2001, p. 42). Bent also criticizes the habits of some groups that:

[...] frame medieval monophony with moorish roulades (*Studio der frühen Musik*), to persuade genteel ladies to emulate the vocal techniques of Genoese fishermen (*Musica Reservata*, or more recently the Corsican ones of *Ensemble Organum*). (BENT, 2001, p. 43).

Despite praising Binkley's innovative ideas, John Haines believes that his use of the music of Al-Andaluz (a musical tradition from ancient Muslim Andalusia that survives in some southern Mediterranean countries) is more a pretext to revive an orientalism in music than a

well-founded scientific hypothesis or an authentic effort to approach the medieval sound universe (HAINES, 2001, p. 375). Describing the aesthetics of the *Ensemble Organum* directed by Marcel Pérès, when interpreting the Old Roman Chant – an ancestor of Gregorian Chant – Haines warns that:

The uninitiated customer browsing for recent recordings of medieval monophonic music may be surprised by an eruption of Arabic sounds: antiphons and responsories undulating in a manner more reminiscent of Koranic recitation than the sober tones of conventional interpretations. (HAINES, 2001, p. 369).

Kirsten Yri also notes that the sound of the *Ensemble Organum* is not always appreciated by critics. In comparison, the *Taverner Consort* has an aesthetic more in line with the “clear, vibrato-free” sound characteristic of other early music British groups, a sound she calls more “normative” and from which the *Ensemble Organum* seem to distance itself. Some aspects of this “distancing” would be the use of “microtonal inflections” and “vibratory ornaments” which the listeners do not associate with the genre (YRI, 2012, p. 352-353).

Nonetheless, Pérès denies any Arabic influence, saying his style of ornamentation “constituted the very basis of the art of chant. And that has nothing to do with any Eastern or Arabic influences. The ornamentation we use is situated in the French tradition of the Gothic era.” (Marcel Pérès, *apud* YRI, 2012, p. 353). In fact, Pérès simply made use of a living vocal tradition (Corsican Catholicism) and applied it to the extinct repertoire – just as the English did with their choral traditions. But the choice was not random or ideological: Pérès claimed to have found in traditional Corsican chant an ornamental practice very close to the descriptions of certain Italian treatises from the 16th and 17th centuries, as well as a characteristic way of singing polyphony in a way that is very reminiscent of the fauxbourdon post-Tridentine. (LACAVALERIE; PÉRÈS, 2002, p. 55).

Despite this, Yri insists on the “distancing” thesis, this time commenting on the use of vocal timbres “that are typically outside the early music performance realm”:

Whether described as Corsican, Greek, or Arabic, Pérès’ emphasis on what is often described as a ‘nasal’ vocality recalls the unusual vocal timbres of singers Jantina Noorman in *Musica Reservata* and Mara Kiek of *Sinfonye* who perform with similar nods to other vocal traditions. *Ensemble Organum*’s choice to adopt vocal practices that lie outside the realm of Western Classical music suggests [...] ‘an act of strange-making, a defamiliarizing of musical practice’. Such practices distance us from the Middle Ages, and promote ‘the very image of a remote and unattainable music that recalls an equally remote past’. (YRI, 2012, p. 353-354)

These examples prove the resistance that a large part of the milieu of specialists in early music still demonstrate in the face of sounds that are different from those already consecrated by English ensembles (and widely disseminated via CD) – even though these “other” sounds, such as those used by Marcel Pérès, have their origin in European and Christian traditions.

Medieval liturgical chant specialist Andrew Hughes, however, appears to be an exception. In a study of the origins of Gregorian Chant, he states that the idea of the influence of the Middle East on Western European cultures is undeniable, despite the controversies. And, with regard to the first centuries of European Christian music, literature, and liturgy, he prefers to affirm that the Middle East has not only exerted its influence, but that the very roots of these manifestations can be found there (HUGHES, 2002, p. 1075).

Analyzing certain aspects of medieval iconography (thanks to a set of images gathered by Page himself), we find indications that 14th century motets may have been interpreted using a type of vocal emission that differs from the Oxbridge aesthetic.

The performance of motets in 14th century iconography

Medievalists called the “*Cantate* genre” the collection of images created by manuscript illustrators from the mid-12th to the late 15th centuries to decorate the initial letter “C” of Psalm 97 (*Cantate Domino canticum novum*⁴) depicting monks singing in front of a lectern on which a book or sheet music is placed. Isabelle Marchesin considers that these images “leave no doubts about the kind of characters they represent” and, on that basis, formulates hypotheses about what kind of musical information these representations of church singers (*chantres*) can provide. Regarding the “gradual or antiphony” that is found in front of the singers, she deduces that “the image probably testifies to the evolution of the format of liturgical singing books” (MARCHESIN, 2000, p. 23, our translation)⁵. Analysing another image, where seven priests arranged in a circle sing in chorus under the direction of a bishop who holds an open book, she concludes that “the bishop’s thumb, folded over the palm, is characteristic of medieval chironomic direction”. (MARCHESIN, 2000, p. 24, our translation)⁶.

Despite declaring that he does not expect “realism”, Page also analyzes the images of the singing monks as containing pictorial attributes that may be useful in elucidating certain aspects of the musical performance of 14th century motets - especially because two of these images show three monks singing in front of a scroll which contains text and music from a three-voice motet that actually exists: *Zelo cui languet/Reor nescia* (PAGE, 1997, p. 7). The fact that these illuminations show the monks in luxurious robes, and scrolls instead of books, suggests, according to Page, occasions where the musical repertoire portrayed was not the one contained in the antiphonaries of the daily rite (*ordinarium*) but specific songs for certain festive days (*proprium*).

⁴ “Sing to the Lord a new song”.

⁵ “L’image témoigne probablement de l’évolution du format des livres de chant liturgique.”

⁶ “Le pouce de l’évêque, replié sur la paume, est caractéristique de la direction chironomique médiévale”

The two illuminations in which the motet *Zelo cui languo/Reor nescia* was represented may have been created by the same artist. One is found in the Howard Psalter (Fig. 1). In it, the seven words of text are the same as at the beginning of the *triplum* part of the original motet but the music does not correspond to the known versions of *Zelo cui languo/Reor nescia* (Page, 1997, p. 7). This image is also used in the book *Performance Practice: A Dictionary-Guide for Musicians* (JACKSON, 2005, p. 252) as evidence that 14th century motets were performed by solo singers.



Figure 1 – Howard Psalter, Ms. Arundel 83 I, f. 63v. (British Library).

It was Michael A. Michael (1981, p. 81) who noticed the very close similarity of this image to one found in the Harnhulle Psalter (Fig. 2). In it, the part of the *triplum* of *Zelo cui languo/Reor nescia* can also be found in front of the three singing monks (who are standing in a very similar way to those of the Howard Psalter). Here, however, not only is the text the same but the scroll also reproduces a musical motif very similar to the first voice of the surviving versions of the motet in question – suggesting that in order to create this image the artist must

have consulted a musical manuscript very similar to the versions of the motet that have survived to the present day.



Figure 2 – Harnhulle Psalter, Ms. 26533, f 158r. (Downside Abbey Library).

Looking at the initial “C” at the beginning of Psalm 97 in other manuscripts found in British libraries, Page discovered other images of singing monks with the depiction of mensural musical notation, although the piece has not been identified as in the Gorleston Psalter (Fig. 3). Page points out the gesture of the monk in the middle of this image, who is raising his hand to his cheek “as if in surprise” (PAGE, 1997, p. 12), accepting James McKinnon’s interpretation that this gesture evokes the alarm of the shepherds when the angel appears to them.



Figure 3 – Gorleston Psalter, Ms. 49622, f. 126r. (British Library)

In Fig. 3 above, the representation of the three singing monks is another image (separated by a frame) where an angel appears to two men while a third figure plays a wind instrument. Three sheep appear on the left, as if to identify the individuals as shepherds. According to McKinnon (1982, p. 83), this is because the images of singing monks in the initials of Psalm 97 in manuscripts from the 14th century would have been the heirs of the images to be found in older missals in which an angel appears before the shepherds. As evidence he compares two images (Fig. 4): the oldest shows a shepherd with a crook in his hand, facing an angel who appears before him; the most recent is the classic image of the three clerics singing in front of a book, while the figure on the left (who is raising his hand to his head) seems to be leaning on an object similar to the shepherd's crook in the first image. However, of the various images of the “*Cantate* genre” that we saw previously, this is the only one where a “shepherd's crook” appears while almost all (including this one) present the gesture of “surprise”.



Figura 4 – Left: *Cantate Domino's* initial from the Oxford Psalter, All Souls College, Ms. 7, f. 89. Right, *Cantate Domino's* initial from the Amesbury Psalter, All Souls College, Ms. 6, f. 112. (McKINNON, 1982, p. 84-85).

McKinnon mentions a lecture by Werner Bachmann (BACHMANN, 1981, p. 825-827), in which he exhibited a large amount of medieval iconographic material related to music, much of which came from the “*Cantate* genre” in which the singing monks presented similar hand gestures. Invoking familiarity with the “*Cantate* genre”, McKinnon argues that:

One familiar with the genre will suspect immediately that these gestures, rather than conveying subtle musical meaning, are simply carried over from the excited shepherds who hearken to the angelic song in the same way that the shepherd's crook was carried over. The artist, after all, must do something with the singers' hands, and what could be more in keeping with the production of medieval illuminated books than to copy the hands of shepherds from previous illustrations of Psalm 97? (McKINNON, 1982, p. 83-84).

McKinnon does not explain why the images of the shepherds and the angel were replaced by singing monks in the capital letters of Psalm 97. Page, however, does suggest a reason for this: the fact that polyvocal music in the 14th century was generally perceived with a mixture of strangeness and novelty (justifying the *canticum novum*). To this end, he cites sermons by John Wycliffite (c. 1331-1384) who refers to the *motetis* as *newe song*, while describing the vanity of “three or four singers” who interpret them - which would confirm the fact that vocal polyphony of that time was sung by soloists. Guillaume de Machaut would also have expressed a similar opinion when describing the character of a new polyvocal composition as *moult estranges* and *moult noviaus* (PAGE, 1997, p. 9).

The gesture of raising a hand to the ear or cheek, which often appears in *Cantate's* initials, seemed to intrigue Page. Referring to the image of the Harnhulle Psalter (Fig. 2):

The singer in the starred dalmatic raises his hand to his ear, but perhaps he is supporting his head with his hand, a gesture often associated in medieval art with

sloth or despair – and, indeed, often shown in Cantate initials, even the most rudimentary. Perhaps we are to assume that the singer in the dalmatic is inattentive, or despairs of executing his part correctly. (PAGE, 1997, p. 21).

Page invokes specialist Kathleen Scott to his aid, who, on analysing the images contained in a 14th century manuscript (*Piers Plowman*), identifies the gesture of the hand raised to the face with the medieval clichés of “drowsiness”, “sloth”, or “despair” (PEARSALL; SCOTT, 1992, p. lxxvii). However, the attitude of the desperate or lazy characters portrayed in the book seems quite different from that of the singing monks:



Figure 5 – “Despair” in *Piers Plowman*, Ms. H 137, f. 63r. (The Huntington Library).



Figure 6 – “Sloth” in *Piers Plowman*, Ms. H 137, f. 44r. (The Huntington Library).

It is therefore as difficult to mechanically apply the clichés of sloth, despair, surprise, or drowsiness to the images of the “*Cantate* genre”, as it is to accept Page’s speculation that the monk’s gesture in the Harnhulle Psalter (Fig. 2) could be a reaction of despair or anxiety towards his performance of singing the motet. Besides, Page forgets about its “twin” image present in the Howard Psalter (Fig. 1) in which two of the monks put their hands on their faces.

In fact, the insistence with which the “*Cantate* genre” portrays the gesture of the hand on the head, on the face, or over or behind the ear is undeniable. In addition to the four images already reproduced here, the gesture is also found in the Vaux Psalter (Fig. 7, also reproduced

by Page, 1997, p. 10), in the Ellesmere Psalter (Fig. 8), in the Breviary of Chertsey Abbey (Fig. 9), and in the Grandisson Psalter (Fig. 10) – and our research is far from exhaustive.



Figure 7 – Vaux Psalter, Ms. 233, f 145v. (Lambeth Palace Library).



Figure 8 – Ellesmere Psalter, Ms. EL 9 H 17, f. 129v. (The Huntington Library).



Figure 9 – Breviary of Chertsey Abbey, Ms. Lat. Lit. d. 42, f. 25r. (Bodleian Library).



Figure 10 – Grandisson Psalter, Ms. 21926, f. 132v. (British Library).

Perhaps if he had looked outside the realm of European classical music, Page might have identified the gesture of the “desperate” or “surprised” monk with a gesture very common among oral polyphony practitioners. These popular traditions, many of them linked to the

religious and parareligious practices of the rural world, practically disappeared from northern Europe but survived in some regions of southern Italy and on Mediterranean islands such as Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily. Popular ensembles of a *cappella* polyphony such as the Corsican *I Muvrini* (Fig. 11) and *A Filetta*⁷ traditionally use this gesture during performances.



Figure 11 – Corsican ensemble *I Muvrini* in concert on August 6, 2011 at the *Festival du bout du Monde*, 2011 (Source: Commons).

The gesture is also common in the practice of a *cappella* polyphonic singing in non-European traditions, such as the *Aznash* ensemble from Georgia (Fig. 12). Created in the 1990s, this ensemble is formed by women from the Kist community – Muslims of Chechen origin who occupied the Pankisi Valley in northern Georgia about two centuries ago. Its repertoire consists of religious chants of the Sufi tradition performed regularly in local mosques and at religious feasts or funerals.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmrDOn7aVbo> (Accessed June 13, 2022).



Figure 12 – Ensemble *Aznash* (Manana Alkhanashvili, Nato Mutoshvili, Darejan Margoshvili and Rusudan Pareulidze), Pakinsi, Georgia. Photo: Nona Giunashvili.

There is no name for this gesture and it is not restricted to oral polyphony practitioners. Singers of all genres around the world use it, consciously or unconsciously. During the recording of the aria *Qual guerriero in campo armato* (Farinelli's *aria da baule* composed by his brother Riccardo Broschi, and inserted into the opera *Bajazet* by Vivaldi, here directed by Fabio Biondi) the mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux puts her hand to her ear in order to hear herself better against the volume of the orchestra⁸. Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees also frequently performed the same gesture⁹.

Apparently, its function is to help the singer hear him/herself better, allowing him/her to control his/her own voice within a sonic context whose volume tends to cover it. It is very different from the blending practices of English vocal ensembles' which requires an attentive listening to colleagues in order to maintain the volume balance between the voices so that none stands out or is covered up¹⁰.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTpIRFiKTqo> (Accessed on: 14 June 2022).

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrp1FScBjK0> (Accessed on: 14 June 2022).

¹⁰ “[...] for if a singer wanders high then he will be loud unless, in deference to contemporary taste or to musical context, he ‘covers’ the sound in order to become less conspicuous or to soften the contrast between the lower and the higher regions of his voice” (PAGE, 1988, p. 154). Oral polyphony groups also have their own blending practice which is achieved by positioning the singers in circle: “Dans les groupes de polyphonie vocale, la disposition des personnes est, elle aussi, fonction de la bonne réussite du chant. Souvent, elles se disposent en cercle, pour mieux

The vocalicity of oral tradition polyphonies: a key to the reconstitution of a historical timbre?

Practitioners of traditional *a cappella* polyphony have a very different type of vocal emission from what is now enshrined in early music practice. Their voices are generally much stronger, more metallic and nasalized compared to the Oxbridge standards. Placing a hand over the ear, therefore, helps the singer to better orient him/herself within the sound mass generated by his/her colleagues. In fact, for many of the singers in these groups this gesture is inseparable from the act of singing.

Western critics, who often describe English voices as “crystalline”, “angelic”, and “pure”, reserve adjectives such as “earthy” or “rough-hewn” for these “other” voices, as in Allan Kozinn’s review of the recording of the *Messe de Notre Dame* by the *Ensemble Organum* (with the participation of traditional Corsican singers):

Current thinking in Machaut performance, or at least one school of it, is that vocal production during the composer’s time was notably earthier and more rough-hewn than the current finely polished norm. A superb example of that approach can be heard in a recording of the ‘Messe de Notre Dame’ by Marcel Pérès and Ensemble Organum on Harmonia Mundi France. (KOZINN, 2004, p. AR38).

Given that Western music researchers (including those who specialise in popular or traditional music) come mainly from the academic milieu or from the study of classical music in a conservatory, it is to be expected that they define the vocalicity of popular/folkloric traditions by comparing it to the type of vocal aesthetics to which they are accustomed. Roberto Leydi, for example, defines a vocal emission with a “closed throat and a strong, high-pitched teared voice” (LEYDI, 1973, p. 15, our translation)¹¹ as a general characteristic of the popular Mediterranean vocal tradition:

This definition by Leydi was reproduced in many other studies, such as the one by Pierluigi Gallo, when describing the timbre of the singers of Sessa Aurunca (GALLO, 1988, p. 74). Giovanna Marini testified that in the type of vocal emission of the popular traditions she attended:

The voice is always forced (*spinta*). It has no obvious resonances in the head (among the best singers one can perceive a technique that allows them to use the head voice, but camouflaging it and mixing it with that of the cheekbones, as if they were just facial resonances). (MARINI, 2015, p. 626, our translation).¹²

parvenir à la fusion parfaite des voix, dite, en dialecte acciòrdù (accord) quand, comme le disent les chanteurs, on n’entend qu’une seule voix” (RICCI, 1993, p. 2).

¹¹ “[...] *emissione a gola chiusa e voce forte, alta, ‘lacerata’.*”

¹² “*La voce è sempre spinta. Non ha risonanze evidenti in testa (fra i cantori più bravi si sente una tecnica che permette loro di usare la risonanza in testa, ma camuffandola e mischiandola con quella dei zigomi, come fosse risonanza solamente facciale.)*”

In his work on polyphony of oral tradition of Calabria, Antonello Ricci lists the characteristics of the type of vocal emission he studied:

[...] emission of ‘closed throat’, as if the throat muscles tended to contract and block as the melody rises in pitch; the limited opening of the mouth, which has the consequence of requesting certain points of resonance from the nasal and oral cavities. Combined, these components produce a heightened sense of tension in the voice, a timbre as guttural as it is nasal [...] These vocal characteristics are not unique to Calabria but belong to the entire cultural area of central and southern Italy” [...] “Often [the singer] puts his hand close to his mouth to better direct the singing or correct the intonation of the voice. (RICCI, 1993, p. 2, our translation).¹³

When discussing the type of vocal emission used in 14th century motets, Page (1988, p. 154) draws attention to the number of 13th century literary sources gathered by Yvonne Rokseth (ROKSETH, 1939, p. 46-48) where singers are praised for the *haut* or *alta* quality of their voices – leading her to conclude that the most appreciated range for 13th century polyphony was “as high as possible”. He notes, however, that in the Gothic period, the words *haut* (Old French) and *alta* (Latin) meant both “high” and “loud”. Page then mentions a sermon by Armand de Belvezér from around 1340, where the ambiguous term *alta* appears as a positive quality of the voice:

*consuevit dici quando aliquis frater habens vocem sic altam sic pulchram quod eo cantante non est in ecclesia angulus quem non faciat resonare*¹⁴

“Loud” or “high”, the greatest quality stressed by Belvezér, seems to be the ability of the voice to resonate throughout the church. Another passage by the same author suggests that a singer has a high voice when he can sing “five points” (*v. punctis*¹⁵) above his peers, which would confirm the ambiguity of the term.

However, one of the testimonies invoked by Rokseth are the praise of Salimbene de Adam (or Salimbene de Parma) in his chronicle referring to the year 1247 regarding Henri de Pisa’s singing qualities, especially for his voice *altissimam et acutam*. In this context, *altissimam* undoubtedly means “loud”, as opposed to *acutam*. In the transcript of the complete quote in a footnote, other qualities of Henri de Pisa’s voice can be read, including the fact of

¹³ “[...] l’émission à ‘gorge serrée’, comme si les muscles de la gorge tendent à se contracter et à se bloquer lorsque la mélodie monte vers l’aigu; l’ouverture limitée de la bouche qui a pour conséquence de solliciter certains points de résonance des cavités nasale et bucale. Combinées entre elles, ces composantes produisent une sensation accentuée de tension de la voix, un timbre tantôt guttural tantôt nasal [...] Ces caractéristiques vocales ne sont pas exclusives à la Calabre, mais elles appartiennent à toute l’aire culturelle centrale et méridionale italienne” [...]. Souvent [il chanteur] met sa main à côté de sa bouche pour mieux diriger le chant ou corriger l’intonation de la voix.”

¹⁴ “[...] when a brother has a voice so alta and so beautiful, it is customary to say that when he sings there is not a corner of the church which he cannot make resound” (PAGE, 1988, p. 154).

¹⁵ Page interprets this expression as “five notes” or “a fifth”. (PAGE, 1988, 154).

his having *vocem grossam et sonoram* (ROKSETH, 1939, p. 47). Andrew Hughes states, for his part, that, with regard to the musical vocabulary of that period the words “high” and “low”, or their equivalents *altus*, *haut* and *bassus*, *bas*, refer mainly to the intensity of the sound (“loud”, “soft”), instead of pitch (“high”, “low”) (HUGHES, 2002, p. 1074).

It is understandable that loud and sonorous voices were preferable in the acoustic context of vast cathedrals. In this regard Marcel Pérès declares that:

[I]n churches, even in Europe, they [now] use microphones for the liturgy. That means we have lost a quality of hearing and of voice production. (SHERMAN, 1997, p. 41).

Final considerations

In view of the above, we suggest that the type of vocal emission used by the singers of motets of the 14th century was closer to the sound of these traditional polyphonic vocal practices than the diaphanous and delicate sound of English ensembles (which, however, thanks to the disseminating action of the recording industry eventually became the “official timbre” of early music). Although we accept that the images of medieval illuminations can be conceived from symbolic principles and are not necessarily literal representations of reality, it does not seem unthinkable that the artist witnessed the performance of motets in the church by the monks and as he recorded their clothes, the lectern, the music (even reproducing an existing motet, *Zelo cui languet/Reor nescia*), he could also have recorded the gestures they made when singing.

Furthermore, we agree with Christian Meyer when he states that the sources of polyphonic music from the Middle Ages and, even more so its modern editions, often lead us to apprehend medieval polyphony from the angle of a work that is “finished and completed” - *opus consummatum et effectum* - destined to survive the composer in all its perfection as an *opus perfectum et absolutum*, to use the expressions of the German theorist Listenius (1537). This notion of a work of art introduced in Western thought by German humanism also influenced the historiography of music to some extent. And this heritage did not fail to affect musicology as an academic discipline, since it evolved from the dissociation that took place during the 19th century between a music subject to history on one hand and the musical practices perpetuated in the oral tradition on the other.

The persistence until the 17th century of polyphonic practices whose first recorded evidence dates back to the end of the 11th century suggests the presence of a musical culture throughout the Middle Ages in which collective improvisation occupied a fundamental place. Each of the documents that have been passed down to us probably reveals only one of the multiple possible realizations of a structure transmitted by oral tradition – and not a composition (MEYER, 1996, p. 1).

Coming from a culture where orality has always played a fundamental role, Lycourgos Angelopoulos gives us a dimension of what has been lost in the musical West in terms of oral tradition:

In the West, the oral tradition was completely lost; religious chant was influenced by the standards of opera singing which leveled the intervals, removed the ornaments, and changed the placement of the voice. Incidentally, we know of a similar situation in Byzantine music but fortunately on a less sensitive level, when the piano started to be used in teaching during the 20th century and served as an accompaniment for singing. (LACAVALERIE; PÉRÈS, 2002, p. 80, our translation).¹⁶

One of the consequences is that recent attempts to approach the sounds of the past are still too committed to contemporary ideals of vocal production, of equal tempered scales and other conditionings that, consciously or unconsciously, prevent us from looking outside our classical Western music environment. Following the conventions of classical musicology (of German and, above all, English tradition), early music scholarship focuses on the study of ancient treatises, scores, and other archival documents, trying to extract the truth from them. In this sense, the “crystalline”, “clear”, and “clinically pure” musical performances derived from the aesthetics of Anglican choirs are ideal for performing “exactly what was written”. But, as we have seen, this practice far from represents the real musical parameters of the medieval realm. According to Curt Sachs, “[a]ll history that relies on written sources alone is incomplete and of necessity misleading” (SACHS, 1960, p. 49).

Meanwhile, an entire musical universe of oral tradition that still persists in southern Europe continues to be the almost exclusive object of the study of the disciplines of ethnomusicology and anthropology of music. If one cannot guarantee that these traditions provide us with direct information about medieval or Renaissance practice, one can at least find in them certain dynamics that are more like the musical practices of the past than our contemporary urban ones. In this context, Marcel Pérès’ statement makes sense:

[...] it is necessary to decompartmentalise the different disciplines of musicology. Only a global approach, combining the different fields of palaeography, of semiology, and of the history of musical theory with certain elements drawn from oral traditions, can allow us to approach the vocal restitution of these polyphonies. (PÉRÈS, 1988, p. 175, our translation).¹⁷

¹⁶ “[E]n Occident, la tradition orale a été complètement perdue; le chant religieux a été influencé par le modèle du chant lyrique qui a nivelé les intervalles, supprimé les ornements et modifié le placement de la voix. Entre parenthèses, nous avons connu une situation similaire dans la musique byzantine, mais à un niveau heureusement moins sensible, quand le piano est entré dans l’enseignement au cours du XX^e siècle et a servi pour l’accompagnement pour le chant.”

¹⁷ “[...] il est nécessaire de décloisonner les différentes disciplines de la musicologie. Seule une approche globale, conjugant les différents domaines de la paléographie, de la sémiologie de l’histoire de la théorie musicale avec certains éléments tirés des traditions orales, peut nous permettre d’aborder la restitution vocale de ces polyphonies.”

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