

PRIMITIVE POLYPHONY? SIMPLE POLYPHONY  
OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM OF THE  
MUSIC HISTORY NARRATIVE

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis addresses the relatively narrow understanding of simple polyphony in music history. Using three examples, I provide a survey, mostly of secondary literature available in English, and offer an overview of the use of simple polyphony in three different places and time periods in Western Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. More specifically, I examine the music of the *Devotio Moderna* in the Low Countries and Northern Germany during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the *Llibre Vermell* and Iberian pilgrim culture in the fourteenth century, and the laude and processional genres in Northern Italy during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. My purpose is to bring the topic of simple polyphony—significant despite its simplicity—back to the center of the music history narrative.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When working in the field of music history, scholars consciously or unconsciously tend to follow an established chronological and development-minded narrative. That narrative consists of the evolution of composed polyphony with fully developed independent lines from rule-derived and improvised streams of polyphony, such as what one can see captured in the notation of the Winchester Troper. Types of polyphony preserved in notation that fit the label of ‘innovative’ tend to be emphasized to the exclusion of oral traditions and of simple polyphonies. Moreover, students of music history can fall into the trap of thinking of polyphonic techniques as technology: composers discover a new tool to craft music and replace the old, outdated technology. Simple polyphony is a tool humans developed, but it was not discarded as outdated when the polyphony of Notre-Dame or other sophisticated polyphonies were created.

Simple polyphony is sometimes referred to as ‘peripheral polyphony,’ reflecting both the idea of being outside the mainstream of Western musical culture, and the fact that surviving records of it tend to be from the outskirts of Europe or provincial areas. However, these neglected traditions are important; evidence points to the performance of this music enduring much beyond the earliest surviving examples of the early Middle Ages. Considering the neglect of simple polyphony and its place in music history or medieval and early modern Europe, I will discuss evidence of several instances of this music from different times and places, as well as argue that scholars may also want look outside the narrative of the evolution of European polyphony, and recognize other traditions occurring alongside the more ‘progressive’ forms.

Musicologists have downplayed the significance of simple polyphony outside the mainstream narrative of Western music, referring to this music as primitive polyphony, simple polyphony, peripheral polyphony, or *cantus planus binatim*—all limiting (in some cases, even derogatory) terms. As such, there is very little in the way of a study of multiple examples of simple or improvised traditions in polyphony.

In addition, the performance of simple polyphony was largely part of oral tradition in many cultures, and thus notated examples are the exception rather than the norm. Only recently have music scholars begun to focus on orally transmitted music, but traditions with notated sources still dominate mainstream musicology. Peter Jeffery points out that the reluctance of musicologists to utilize the psychology of music and ethnomusicology—especially in application to the study of contemporary musical cultures—hinders research in historical oral musical traditions.<sup>1</sup> He mentions that even such a prestigious pioneer in the study of oral transmission in medieval music as Leo Treitler proposed that repetitiveness and ‘flatness’ could be characteristics of such music.<sup>2</sup> While possibly true, the way this view is presented appears negatively biased, perhaps contributing to the still somewhat lesser status of oral traditions in musicology.

Intentionally or not, it is unfortunate that simple polyphony has been so neglected, as in many regions these techniques were likely the most common type of polyphony used by the common people during much of the medieval and Renaissance periods, and lasting in some areas at least as late as the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> This was the music of

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery, Peter, *Re-Envisioning Past Musical Cultures: Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant*, 1991, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 53-54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> Strohm, Reinhard, *The Rise of European Music, 1380-1500*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 334.

ordinary monasteries, churches, and urban devotion. At this point there is a great need for scholars to examine what few sources have survived and incorporate the polyphonic techniques illustrated by them in order to get a more complete and nuanced sense of the polyphonic traditions in the European Middle Ages and early modern period.

Although a considerable amount of research has been published about simple polyphony, what is missing is a study that serves as an English-language survey of the subject. The closest such available publications are collections of articles by different authors, each focused on a different instance or aspect of simple polyphony. While my study will discuss three distinct examples, I hope that it can serve as an introduction to the topic and provide an English language resource for students.

Of the many questions regarding simple polyphony, I will address the following: what are the common terms for these polyphonic techniques and why do they prove limiting? What are some examples of rule-based, improvised tradition of simple polyphony that survive in notation? What is the time of origin and provenance of these examples? How do they compare to one another in performance and context? To address these questions and provide a culturally diverse study of simple polyphony, I will focus on a few instances from different regions and time periods and adopt the following research methods: I will evaluate secondary sources directly or indirectly related to the topic; examine primary sources of simple polyphony such as manuscripts, writings contemporary with the music, and musical transcriptions; and compare and contrast the contents and context of various instances of simple polyphony.

## Review of Literature – *Status Quaestionis*

In the late twentieth century, scholars began to acknowledge the importance of improvised forms of music, as well as some of the array of genres and styles outside the canon of the educated and wealthy. It may seem odd then that the most well-known notated example of simple polyphony, that which is contained in the Winchester Troper, is very likely an exception to the fact that much of the music of this style was the music of the common people, not the music of a (musically) educated elite.

The organa of the Winchester Troper are the point of departure for most scholars who address simple polyphony in practice. Alongside practical examples, musicologists have also considered the early treatises describing organum. In “Winchester Polyphony: The Early Theory and Practice,” Susan Rankin states that *Musica Enchiriadis* and other early treatises tend to be prescriptive and contain a number of theoretical rules or suggestions for an improvising singer to use in performance.<sup>4</sup> When looking at the recorded Winchester organa, Rankin suggests that in practice, the musicians seem to have had some creative freedom.

In studying the Winchester repertory, we must also consider evidence from the continent. In his essay relating to this topic, Wulf Arlt examines polyphony contained in the eleventh-century Chartres fragments.<sup>5</sup> The organa from these manuscripts are less well organized and less systematically notated than the organa contained in the

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<sup>4</sup> Rankin, Susan, “Winchester Polyphony: The Early Theory and Practice of Organum,” in *Music in the Medieval English Liturgy: Plainsong & Medieval Music Society Centennial Essays*, edited by Susan Rankin and David Hiley. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993: 59-99.

<sup>5</sup> Arlt, Wulf, “Stylistic Layers in Eleventh-Century Polyphony: How can the Continental Sources contribute to our Understanding of the Winchester Organum?” in *Music in the Medieval English Liturgy: Plainsong & Medieval Music Society Centennial Essays*, edited by Susan Rankin and David Hiley, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993: 101-141.

Winchester Troper. Arlt believes that the latter was an unusual case, whereas the haphazard construction of the former suggests that continental singers were more familiar with organum as an improvised practice and did not need notated music. Additionally, the variety of techniques preserved in eleventh- and twelfth-century sources of the continent points to the fact that a variety of ‘old’ techniques of organum coexisted with ‘newer’ polyphonic techniques.

David Hiley argues in “Observations on the Derivation of Two Early Repertoires of Polyphony” that since the monophonic music contained in the Winchester Troper seems to be derived from the music of Northern France, the polyphony in the manuscript is likely related to the practices of that area as well.<sup>6</sup> The strong influence of the continent does not mean that there was no native influence in these works. In “Relations between Liturgical and Vernacular Music in Medieval England” John Caldwell compares the text, line, and structure of liturgical and vernacular music and concludes that there seems to have been a connection between medieval English vernacular music and medieval English liturgical music.<sup>7</sup> This likely had some effect on music in the Winchester Troper.

Written remnants of simple polyphony in its more usual place as a technique of monasteries and churches outside the cultural mainstream is drawn from Northern Italian music of the fifteenth century. However, much of this evidence is indirect and scholars have had to be creative to find it. For instance, in “Experimental Polyphony, ‘According to the Latins’ in Late Byzantine Psalmody,” Dimitri Conomos examines some music

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<sup>6</sup> Hiley, David, “Observations on the Derivation of Two Early Repertoires of Polyphony,” in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Rome: Torre d’Orfeo, 1989: 377-391.

<sup>7</sup> Caldwell, John, “Relations between Liturgical and Vernacular Music in Medieval England,” in *Music in the Medieval English Liturgy: Plainsong & Mediaeval Music Society Centennial Essays*, edited by Susan Rankin and David Hiley. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993: 285-299.

from Byzantine Greece in the late fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup> During this period, northern Italy and what was left of the Byzantine Empire were linked culturally and politically.

Conomos believes that Greeks who sympathized with Italy experimented with Western styles of composition, specifically the un-notated, improvised, and everyday tradition of *cantus planus binatim* singing they might have heard in Northern Italy.

A region and time far-flung from eleventh-century England that offers other sources of notated simple polyphony is thirteenth- through seventeenth-century Dalmatia. Hana Breko Kustura looks at some of this music in her article.<sup>9</sup> Kustura writes that the examples from Dalmatia tend to either fall into the *cantus fractus* category<sup>10</sup> and are primarily from the seventeenth century, or earlier polyphonic forms from the thirteenth through the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Simple polyphony in Croatia appears primarily in association with monasteries or mendicant communities, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans. In addition to showing itself in similar contexts as that in medieval Italy, the music itself seems to have been culturally connected to northern Italy, in particular, Venice.

The above instances and more suggest that simple polyphony was more significant and enduring than previously thought. Many scholars now accept the fact that techniques including simple note-against-note polyphony continued to be used in liturgical music long after the eleventh-century Winchester examples. John Caldwell

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<sup>8</sup> Conomos, Dimitri, "Experimental Polyphony, 'According to the Latins' in Late Byzantine Psalmody," *Early Music History*, vol. 2 (1982): 1-16.

<sup>9</sup> Kustura, Hana Breko, "Examples of Liturgical Polyphony from Dalmatia," in *Cantus Planus: Papers read at the 15th meeting, Vienna Austria 2011*, edited by Robert Klugseder with the members of the CANTUS PLANUS Advisory Board, Vienna: Verlagsbuchhandlung Brüder Hollinek, 2011: 66-71.

<sup>10</sup> *Cantus fractus* is chant with rhythmic notation; it first appears in the fifteenth century.

argues that polyphonic improvisation remained an important skill for church musicians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in his essay, “Plainsong and Polyphony 1250-1550.”<sup>11</sup> He writes that as far as performance in the liturgical context is concerned, polyphony was used in alternation with plainsong; these techniques thus complemented one another in performance. However, during the late Middle Ages a harmonic approach to polyphony began to eclipse unmeasured polyphony dominated by parallel motion. Both English *faburden* and continental *fauxbourdon* are examples of polyphony of a more ‘tonal’ nature. However, these techniques are still related to earlier forms of simple polyphony.

In addition to this overview, I will examine several instances of simple polyphony from widely different periods, areas, and cultural contexts. Simple polyphony persisted well into the period of the musical Renaissance; evidence of its later use appears especially in association with certain groups outside the musical mainstream of the period. In the twenty-first century, there has been an increase in scholarship on the music of the *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>12</sup> However, the movement is still relatively neglected due to the fact that the movement, and its simple, even reactionary culture can be considered peripheral to the traditional historical narrative.

Despite the centrality of the Low Countries to the mainstream culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, several Dutch sources from the sixteenth century

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<sup>11</sup> Caldwell, John, “Plainsong and polyphony 1250-1550,” in *Plainsong in the Age of Polyphony*, edited by Thomas Forrest Kelly, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992: 6-31.

<sup>12</sup> The *Devotio Moderna* was a pre-Reformation reform movement founded by Geert Grote in the second half of the fourteenth century. The *Devotio Moderna* lasted through the sixteenth century, reaching its height in the fifteenth century. Some of its precepts can be seen in the later Reformation, but there are some important differences. Members of the *Devotio Moderna* considered themselves still part of the Church, and their way of life and culture were different from other Reform groups.



primarily associated with the *Devotio Moderna* contain some music with similar features to early organum. Alexander Blachly introduces this genre and its characteristics in his article, “Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance.”<sup>13</sup> Much of the repertoire has to do with Christmas, a joyful and significant holiday. Although measured, the two-part polyphonic pieces of the *Devotio Moderna* tend to privilege the parallel motion of fifths, octaves, and unisons. Blachly refers to this style as archaic polyphony, and argues that those who notated it must have been exposed to something like it in their day-to-day life.

Ulrike Hascher-Burger and Hermina Joldersma have authored a number of studies on the *Devotio Moderna* and its music. Their jointly written introduction to a series of articles provides a useful overview of this topic.<sup>14</sup> The focus is on the culture of the movement and its use of meditational practices as a means of spiritual expression, in which music played an important role. Notwithstanding Hascher-Burger and Joldersma’s own contributions, they emphasize the need for further research and more editions of sources, given that the *Devotio Moderna* provides a good example of music in a medieval and Renaissance religious context.

Christoph Burger wrote his article, “Late Medieval Piety expressed in Song Manuscripts of the *Devotio Moderna*,” with the purpose of finding the manner of religious feeling among the members of the *Devotio Moderna* via their song texts.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Blachly, Alexander, “Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance,” *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, vol. 53, no. 1/2 (2003): 183-227.

<sup>14</sup> Hascher-Burger, Ulrike and Hermina Joldersma, “Introduction: Music and the *Devotio Moderna*,” *Church History and Religious Culture*, vol. 88, no. 3 (2008): 313-328.

<sup>15</sup> Burger, Christoph, “Late Medieval Piety Expressed in Song Manuscripts of the *Devotio Moderna*,” *Church History and Religious Culture*, vol. 88, no. 3 (2008): 329 -345.

Copying and reading from manuscripts were an important part of the culture of the movement, and their contents expressed the movement's concern with life after death, as well as a preoccupation with the Passion.

Koen Goudriaan's "Empowerment through reading, writing, and example: the *Devotio Moderna*," does not address music directly, but is focused on the importance of literacy to the members of the *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>16</sup> Copying manuscripts was a common labor of men in the movement; women more often used texts for recitation, listening, and, presumably, singing. Liturgical, paraliturgical, and meditational songs all played a role in the cultural life of the *Devotio Moderna*.

A very different focus in my study will be the music of the pilgrims to Montserrat in medieval Iberia. The *Llibre Vermell* is an invaluable resource of medieval pilgrim culture, but there are very few studies in English of this manuscript. Maria Carmen Gomez i Muntane has written accompanying studies to several publications of facsimiles. The monograph *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat* includes facsimiles and musical transcriptions, as well as an explanatory text that introduces the manuscript and describes the music it contains.<sup>17</sup> This book is an excellent companion to the *Llibre Vermell*. Gomez i Muntane also addresses the problem of dance, arguing that at least some of the pieces are linked to dancing, specifically circular dances. This is in line with the fact that dance was performed in a sacred context—even inside the church itself—during the Middle Ages.

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<sup>16</sup> Goudriaan, Koen, "Empowerment through reading, writing, and example: the *Devotio Moderna*," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, edited by Miri Rubin and Walter Simons, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, 405-419.

<sup>17</sup> Gomez i Muntane, Ma. Carmen, *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat*, Barcelona: Els llibres de la Frontera, 2000.

In stark contrast to the Iberian examples, simple polyphony in Italy has drawn both the earliest and largest quantity of explicit scholarly study. With his writing, “The Practice of *Cantus Planus Binatim* in Italy from the Beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> to the Beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century,” F. Alberto Gallo sets out what was one of the first specific studies of simple polyphony.<sup>18</sup> He contrasts *cantus planus binatim* to *musica mensurabilis* and lists manuscript sources of the former with their respective century and provenance. Gallo draws several significant conclusions from these sources. First, that there was a continuing tradition of *cantus planus binatim* from the beginning of the fourteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century; second, that most sources are from the northern part of Italy, equally distributed from the eastern and western parts of the region. Finally, *cantus planus binatim* appears linked to either the mendicant orders or the secular clergy of small towns.

In “The Definition of Simple Polyphony, Some Questions,” Margaret Bent argues that *cantus planus binatim*, as presented by Gallo in the aforementioned article is too limiting a term for simple polyphony.<sup>19</sup> Bent believes that many pieces are unduly excluded when operating with the idea that simple polyphony must be unmeasured. Rhythm is a controversial subject in the study of medieval music especially, and we cannot say that a piece was performed in free rhythm just because there is no notated indication of it. Furthermore, we cannot even say with certainty how unmeasured

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<sup>18</sup> Gallo, F. Alberto. “The Practice of Cantus Planus Binatim in Italy from the Beginning of the 14th to the Beginning of the 16th Century,” in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Rome: Torre d’Orfeo, 1989: 13-30.

<sup>19</sup> Bent, Margaret, “The Definition of Simple Polyphony, Some Questions,” in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Rome: Torre d’Orfeo, 1989: 33-42.

plainsong on which the simple polyphony is built was performed. For these reasons, it is unwise to exclude works in mensural notation from the basic definition of simple polyphony.

Leo Treitler also writes in response to Gallo's article: in "*Cantus Planus Binatim* in Italy and the Question of Oral and Written Tradition in General," he argues that the surviving notations of simple polyphony are not necessarily fixed variants of the same idea, but rather examples that can be realized by a performer in a variety of ways.<sup>20</sup> This is consistent with Treitler's view of most music until at least the sixteenth century<sup>21</sup>; he believes that oral and written transmission are parts of the same medieval musical culture, rather than two disconnected traditions. That some attention is now given to oral tradition is an improvement on the earlier preoccupation with notated music, but Treitler believes that separating the two is imprudent. Simple polyphony is a good example of the bond between the oral and the written in music. The notation could simply have been an example of how performers might interpret a melody in counterpoint.

"The Sacred Polyphony of the Italian *Trecento*" by Kurt von Fischer mentions *cantus planus binatim* (as coined in the earlier work of Gallo) as one of the stylistic categories of fourteenth-century Italian sacred music.<sup>22</sup> The five pieces included in the *cantus planus binatim* category are said to have been originally improvised, and feature mostly contrary motion with many parallel thirds. The notation is mensural or partly

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<sup>20</sup> "Cantus Planus Binatim in Italy and the Question of Oral and Written Tradition in General," in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Rome: Torre d'Orfeo, 1989: 145-161.

<sup>21</sup> See Treitler's "The 'Unwritten' and 'Written Transmission' of Medieval Chant and the Start-Up of Musical Notation." *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1992): 131-191.

<sup>22</sup> Fischer, Kurt von. "The Sacred Polyphony of the Italian Trecento." *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 100: 143-157.

mensural, which puts von Fischer's category at odds with Gallo's original definition. Besides von Fischer's category of *cantus planus binatim* proper, another of his categories, that containing seventy polyphonic pieces written in square notation, can also be said to use techniques of simple polyphony. These have a quite different sonority: voice crossing is more the rule here, and there is more parallel motion, especially in fifths. The dates of the pieces in the square notation category span from 1300 to the fifteenth century, while those from the *cantus planus binatim* category are mostly from the early fifteenth century. Classified together or not, from this music it is apparent that different techniques of simple polyphony lasted throughout the medieval period.

In his "The Musical Institutions of the Veronese Clergy," James Borders discusses a particular context in which simple polyphony has been found.<sup>23</sup> Verona was a medieval center of education, including music education. However, it is not just revolutionary and difficult-to-perform music that survives from this area, as one might imagine. Borders posits that changes in ecclesiastical social organization explain the appearance of simple polyphony there. Absenteeism was common at the Verona cathedral in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and thus sacred polyphony more often ended up in the hands of minor-order clerics and students. This conclusion of Borders' is in opposition to the commonly held view that simple polyphony was a technique of the peripheral areas of Europe, but at the same time it is congruous with the idea that this music was the domain of the less educated commoners.

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<sup>23</sup> Borders, James, "The Musical Institutions of the Veronese Clergy," in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Rome: Torre d'Orfeo, 1989: 229-246.

Jane Disley focuses on the use of simple polyphony in a particular manuscript in her article, “The Dominican Processional Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Lyell 72 (GB – OL720),” she discusses the connection between simple polyphony and the Dominicans.<sup>24</sup> The processional was likely put together in Lombardy during the first half of the fourteenth century; a manuscript belonging to a mendicant order in northern Italy is a common context in which to find notations of simple polyphony. Here it is liturgical music, but medieval and Renaissance paraliturgical music was also a place where we see this technique notated.

Simple polyphony is commonly found notated in the devotional song tradition of the late medieval and Renaissance eras. There are a number of sources of direct evidence of simple polyphony from Italy. Examples have their origin in Venice, Milan, and Florence. In “The Polyphonic *Laude* of Innocentius Dammonis,” Jonathan Glixon discusses a repertoire of polyphonic songs, their use, and their relationship with different areas of Italy.<sup>25</sup> Along with more ‘complex’ songs, there are a number of simple polyphonic works in this manuscript. The author believes untrained singers and people taking part in procession might have sung them.

Polyphonic *laude* singing was a tradition that survived into the fifteenth century with the more erudite *Trecento* compositions. Furthermore, it does not seem limited to the areas controlled by Venice. Fabio Carboni and Agostino Ziino describe music contained in a Franciscan manuscript in their article, “Polyphonic Laude and Hymns in a

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<sup>24</sup> Disley, Jane. “The Dominican Processional Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Lyell 72 (GB – OL720),” in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, Rome: Torre d’Orfeo, 1989: 217-227.

<sup>25</sup> Glixon, Jonathan, “The Polyphonic Laude of Innocentius Dammonis,” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 19-53.

Franciscan Codex from the End of the Fifteenth Century.”<sup>26</sup> Many of the two- to four-voice pieces contained in this manuscript can be considered examples of simple polyphony. The authors believe that some of these are notated examples of an improvised practice that was part of devotional and monastic tradition of northern Italy, with these particular pieces originating most likely from Milan and the surrounding area.

Simple polyphony is a highly important topic in medieval and Renaissance music, but has received less attention than is warranted. The technique held great value to the common man in a variety of cultural settings, including houses of religious movements, pilgrim sites, and processions. The music shows variety in appearance, sound, and function, while at the same time it has some commonalities, made apparent through these examples. In the following chapter, I will next move to a discussion of the *Devotio Moderna* and its use of simple polyphony.

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<sup>26</sup> Carboni, Fabio and Agostino Ziino, “Polyphonic Laude and Hymns in a Franciscan Codex from the end of the Fifteenth Century,” *Early Music History*, vol. 31 (January 2012): 87-151.

## CHAPTER II

### MUSIC FOR THE *DEVOTIO MODERNA*

Some of the best examples of notated simple polyphony come from the *Devotio Moderna*, a religious movement in the Netherlands and Northern Germany during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Given the stark and conservative nature of the *Devotio Moderna*'s cultural output, its music has been neglected in general surveys. However, studying this movement's treatment of simple polyphony reveals some exemplary characteristics and functions of this type of technique.

In this chapter I will discuss the *Devotio Moderna* and its use of simple polyphony as an unassuming but effective means for two or more members of the community to express their piety. I will introduce geographic, social, and cultural contexts of the *Devotio Moderna*, along with some important protagonists of the movement, and then I will examine instances of notated simple polyphony and contrast them to some of the polyphonic works intended for the elite from approximately the same time and geographic area. In this way, I intend to show that simple polyphony played an important part in the spiritual life of members of the *Devotio Moderna*.

#### **Definitions – Personalities and Contexts – Geography – Society and Culture**

An examination of the writings of members of the *Devotio Moderna* illustrates the musical ideals of the movement. Geert Grote of Deventer (died 1384) wrote specifically about musical aesthetics, among other matters. In his writings, *Letters, Sayings and Resolutions and Intentions, but Not Vows*, he argues for a return to practices of the Early



Christian church.<sup>27</sup> Although orphaned, Geert Grote was from a noble family, earned a master's degree in arts, and was well on his way to becoming a cleric. However, in the midst of his higher education, he began to see a lack of morality in the highly erudite way of life.<sup>28</sup> It is unknown exactly what brought about his conversion, but around 1374 Grote decided to dissociate himself from patrons and benefices, as well as from his scholarly endeavors. He came to believe in the importance of purity and simplicity in the inner life, as opposed to the complexity and worldliness of everyday life. However, in order for the inner person to flourish, the outer could not be starved: indeed, Grote was not an advocate of asceticism. He and the *Devotio Moderna* movement believed that one could nourish inner life through literature and music.

Grote stated that chant, “as you know from experience, helps our carnal nature toward devotion.”<sup>29</sup> This sentiment is similar to Augustine's thoughts in his *Confessions*.<sup>30</sup> Grote believed that devotees must keep the liturgical service in the forefront of their minds. In singing, just as in talking, one must hear and speak with the mind as well as the ears and mouth, otherwise one is “as a clanging symbol or a sounding

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<sup>27</sup> Saint Augustine and Jerome were exemplary figures. Jerome translated the Bible into Vulgar Latin so that it was more accessible, and respected the spiritual potential of women in addition to men.

<sup>28</sup> Grote would eventually discourage the acquisition of advanced degrees in his movement. Theology degrees were especially counterproductive, as they would draw people away from the “salvation of your neighbor,” or evangelism helpfulness of one's fellow man. This area of study could also serve as a distraction from prayer, purity, simplicity, and contemplation—important values of Grote's movement.

<sup>29</sup> Geert Grote, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, trans. John van Engen (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>30</sup> “...I am inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion.” Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1980), 239.

brass.”<sup>31</sup> Just as love must be the source of one’s actions, love must underline one’s words. Moreover, true devotion must be the source of the veneration of God. It was important that the whole person be involved in worship, and that one could understand the meaning of what one was saying, or singing.

Another thinker of the *Devotio Moderna* nearly contemporary to Geert Grote was Gerhard Zerbolt of Zutphen, who wrote in the late fourteenth century. Zerbolt emphasized the meditative quality of music, citing the idea that music could help initiate religious feeling, especially in the hearts of those with weaker minds.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Zerbolt was nervous about music inciting religious dedication that was short-lived and shallow, rather than pure and deeply-held devotion. Ideally, music should support long-lasting devotion, as well as purity of mind and simplicity of living. Like Geert Grote, Zerbolt had a mixed opinion of music, believing that uncomplicated melodies and textures combined with meaningful texts could be useful, while more complex and distracting music could be dangerous.

The *Imitation of Christ* was the most influential book associated with the *Devotio Moderna*. To its author Thomas à Kempis,<sup>33</sup> music was for the communication of devotion, and was best if kept simple and effective for the individual who was singing it. For instance, he believed that “[i]f you cannot sing like the nightingale and the lark, then

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<sup>31</sup> Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, 72. Grote drew this metaphor from Corinthians 13:1. “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.”

<sup>32</sup> Hermina Joldersma, “‘Alternate Spiritual Exercises for Weaker Minds?’ Vernacular Religious Doing in the Lives of Women of the *Devotio Moderna*,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 88, no. 3 (2008): 374-5.

<sup>33</sup> Although it is generally accepted that à Kempis is the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, there is some debate. For a discussion of the authorship of this book, see the introduction to B.J.H. Biggs’ edition of *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xviv – lxxix.

sing like the crows and the frog, which sing as God meant them to.”<sup>34</sup> All the devout ought to sing praises, but not worry about trying to perform something elaborate and out of their reach; much better would be to remain humble and sing simply. Also pertinent is what à Kempis wrote about music in his *Vallis liliorum*: “The voice of the simple at heart is close to God in heaven, whereas the voice of the unsteady at heart and of the dissolute singer belong among wicked men and on the streets of the city.”<sup>35</sup> Simplicity and sincerity were what was important to à Kempis not only in music, but in speech and in other forms of expression, as well. Heartfelt singing would be pleasing to God, whereas meaningless and ostentatious performing would distance the singer and listener from God.

Following Grote, Zerbolt, à Kempis, and in the vein of Augustine,<sup>36</sup> the *Devotio Moderna* tended to perceive music as having the capacity to be either negative or positive. The movement was uneasy about the power of music to entrance people and distract them from the sacred texts,<sup>37</sup> so instruments, polyphony, and elaborate music was seen as dangerous. The singing voice itself was less important than the verbal message it was imparting. Good music was never to be created for a pleasing and sensual end, but rather to expedite the individual and communal spiritual experience.

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<sup>34</sup> Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 314.

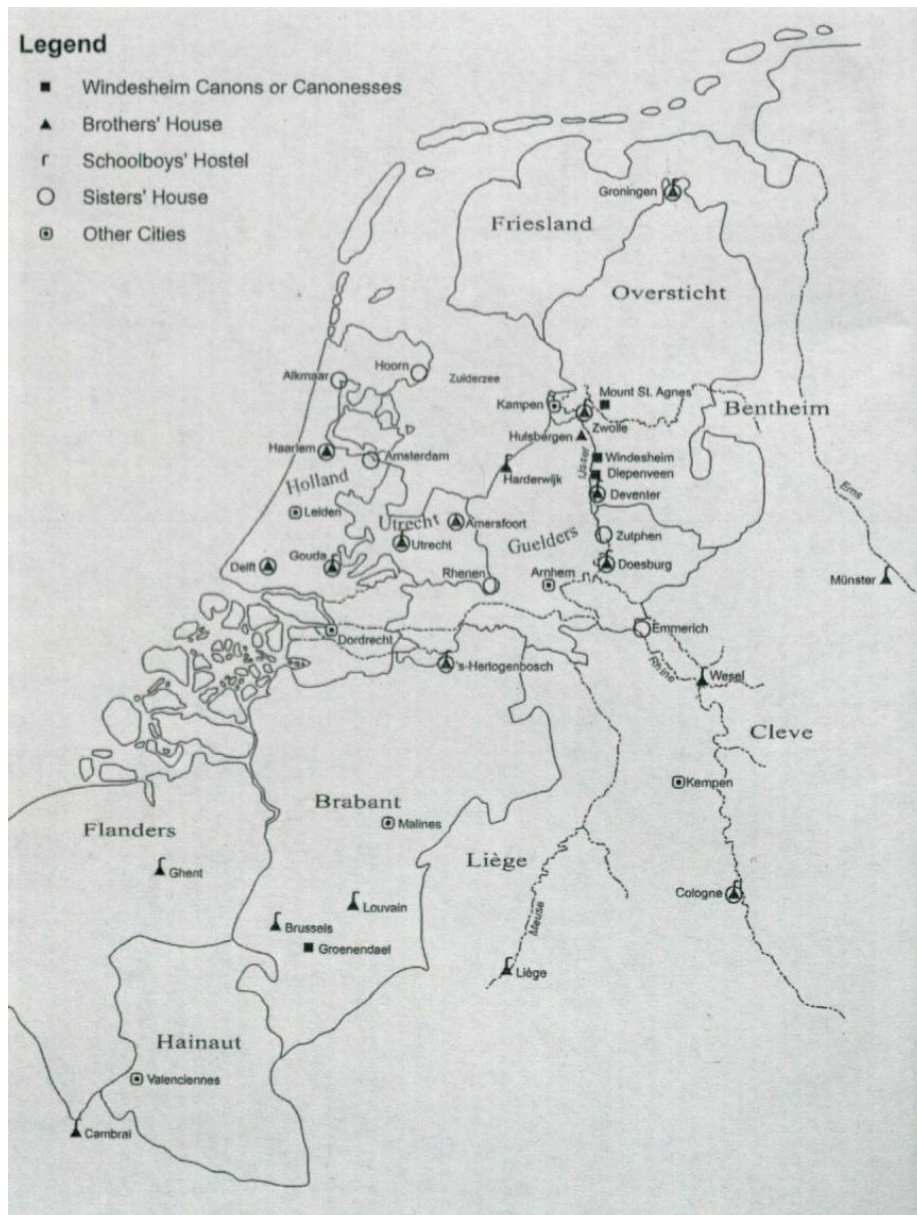
<sup>35</sup> Alexander Blachly, “Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance,” *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, 53 (2003): 184.

<sup>36</sup> “So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing.” Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and introduction by Pine-Coffin, R. S., 239.

<sup>37</sup> Joldersma, ““Alternate Spiritual Exercises for Weaker Minds?”” 374.

*Devotio Moderna* members perceived themselves as being philosophically, culturally, and geographically at a distance from the elite, high culture, courts and universities. *Devotio Moderna* houses tended to be located far from the major centers of culture, such as Paris or Rome. Figure 2.1 shows the geographic range of the movement in the fifteenth century. The *Devotio Moderna* as a group was aware of the cosmopolitanism of the time, but local and vernacular religions were becoming more influential. Local religious movements that nurtured the laity were particularly common between the late fourteenth century and the middle of the fifteenth century.

In addition to war and plague, religious infighting was a fact of life during the fourteenth century. Factions among the cardinals at Rome even led to the creation of a second papal court in Avignon. In 1378, the College of Cardinals elected two popes, one in Rome backed by England and the Holy Roman Empire, and the other in Avignon backed by France, Spain, and northern Italy. Flanders went the way of Rome, and the rest of the (northern) Low Countries went with Avignon. This schism over the papacy occurred in 1378, technically lasting until the end of the Council of Constance in 1418, but with grumblings continuing until the middle of the fifteenth century. Immediately preceding and in the midst of these events, the Catholic Church had become increasingly powerful and owned much land, making it wealthier. The papal court at Avignon was an extravagant, even decadent, center of culture, where local clerics often lived like secular lords.



**Figure 2.1.** The Low Countries circa 1400-1500<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> John van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 50.

In the shadow of the Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, and all the riches and cultural magnificence of the late fourteenth century, many clerics became skeptical of the rule of the Church. A variety of responses ensued, including those of John Wycliffe and the English Lollards, and of the Bohemian Jan Hus, whose Hussite followers would eventually rebel against the Catholic Church later in fifteenth century. Although the *Devotio Moderna* was a movement advocating a return to the ways the early church originally functioned, it sought—unlike others that were more extreme—to remain part of the Church.

This movement also chose the middle ground between the lives of the ordered and the laity, and between evangelical outreach and inner meditation. Similarly to the laity, members continued to go to churches and strove to avoid poverty; they had the freedom to join and leave a house at their own discretion, and they continued to interact with non-members and the outside world. Just as the regular monks and nuns, members of the *Devotio Moderna* valued and set about practical work: it was considered a spiritual exercise that also served the support the self-sufficiency of the house. To this end, the male members usually copied manuscripts, often in service of local churches and monasteries, while the women worked with textiles. Despite their exposure to the outside world, devotees were also expected to live in purity, abstaining from sexual relations and avoiding indulging in the sensual, spending much of their time in prayer and contemplation. But unlike regular monks and nuns, members of the *Devotio Moderna* were encouraged to go out into the world and help bring others closer to Christ; in this way they were more similar to mendicants.

Also similar to the mendicant orders, the people of the *Devotio Moderna* worked in the vernacular, not just in Latin. This was in accord with the growth in vernacular literacy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially in the Low Countries and in Germany. As the middle classes of tradesmen and craftsmen grew during the late Middle Ages, so did literacy—not only for men, but also for women. Thus, literature was no longer the sole province of the elite, clerics, and students. This created a new ‘market’ for books, and there was a demand for devotional material for people outside the church. Translators (including Geert Grote) created Middle Dutch and German versions of Books of Hours, among others.<sup>39</sup> Reading was important to such religious movements as the *Devotio Moderna*; most of its members seemed to have had at least basic literacy.

Just as copying books was one of the occupations of the men (and occasionally women) of the *Devotio Moderna*, so was the copying of music. However, based on the evidence we have, the copyists were not familiar with musical notation beyond that used for plainchant. They used a four-line staff with square notation (see Figure 2.2) or a kind of notation called *hoefnagel-* or *Hufnagelschrift*, both of which were typical of the notated plainchant at the time, but not normally used for contemporary polyphonic music. A drawback to using this notation was that it could not indicate rhythm or meter on its own. The scribes devised different methods of notating rhythm, often by mixing aspects of white notation or mensural notation. In the process, the copyists seemed to have

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<sup>39</sup> Anne S. Korteweg, “Books of Hours from the Northern Netherlands Reconsidered: The Uses of Utrecht and Windesheim and Geert Grote’s Role as Translator,” *Books of Hours Reconsidered*, ed. Sandra Hindman and James H. Marrow (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013), 235.



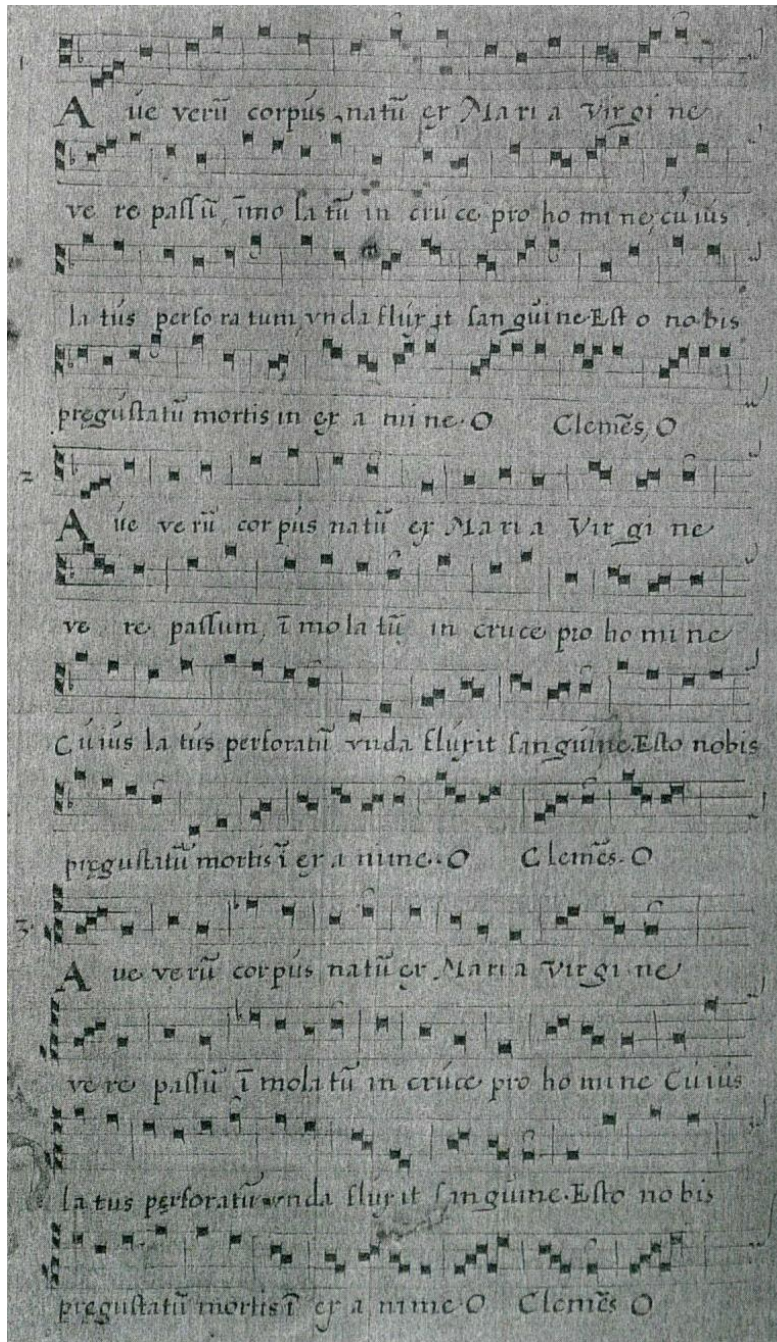


Figure 2.2. *Ave verum corpus* from B LVugbib – 3049H<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> “The Mechelen *Ave verum corpus*: Simple Polyphony for the Devotio Moderna,” in *Beguinae in cantu instructae: Musical Patrimony from Flemish Beguinages (Middle Ages — Late 18th C.)*, edited by Pieter Mannaerts, Turnhout: Brepols, 2009, 100.



made a fair amount of errors.<sup>41</sup> Not only do these practices suggest that music was mostly orally transmitted,<sup>42</sup> but they also indicate a lower level of musical literacy, especially concerning the musical world outside of plainchant. This is in accord with the *Devotio Moderna*'s outlook on education in general: acquiring just enough to be functional and serve a spiritual end. Among members of the *Devotio Moderna*, Latin literacy was encouraged, but not required. Vernacular languages saw more common usage among the women than among the men, as it was rare for a woman outside the upper classes to be educated in Latin, although members of the house often had women who could teach their sisters. Male members of the *Devotio Moderna* were more likely to use Latin texts. This reflects the fact that, as a general rule, brothers tended to be more clerical: they were more likely to have had some higher education.

The *Devotio Moderna* was in many ways a local movement reflecting the culture of its time and geographic origin, and it was a child of the late medieval Middle Dutch-Low German cultural continuum. The boundaries between the Dutch and German languages were blurred in this region. The environment of the town and city, already a characteristic of this geographic area in contrast to others in Western Europe, became increasingly influential in the Germanic- and Dutch-speaking lands of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Religion was a part of the popular culture there, but now more people were actively taking part in it. The emphasis on individual devotion and approaching God via the vernacular foreshadowed the later Protestant Reformation. The *Devotio Moderna*

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<sup>41</sup>Alexander Blachly, "The Mechelen *Ave verum corpus*: Simple Polyphony for the *Devotio Moderna*," in *Beguinae in cantu instructae*, 101.

<sup>42</sup> Blachly, "Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance": 189-191.

was one such pre-Reformation movement that involved people from a variety of backgrounds living communally.

The *Devotio Moderna* was primarily a movement of the larger towns, though members could come from smaller settlements and villages. The number of members in a house could range from twelve to a hundred. Given the nature of the houses, which allowed the coming and going of members, the number could vary at any time. The buildings themselves were just what the term says: houses. Different rooms were assigned different purposes, such as a refectory or communal eating place, a library for copying and storing manuscripts, and a dormitory. Men usually had individual cells for sleeping, while women tended to share a sleeping room, but with each having her own bed and personal space. Thus a house of the *Devotio Moderna* served both the community of devotees and the individual members, each with the goal of becoming closer to God.

Geert Grote started a House for some of his female followers, one of the most influential of whom was Kathryn of Arkel (died 1421). She came from a well-to-do family, but set about to work with the pigs as her first vocation at the House. Women from wealthier backgrounds performing the more menial tasks was a common pattern, as if they had to prove their humility and demureness. But different members would often move on to jobs better suiting them, and Kathryn was literate and a skilled speaker. She became a successful recruiter of female members for the *Devotio Moderna*. Kathryn went out into the world, staying at private homes and reading to her hosts and other people

whom she encountered. Despite her success, she emphasized her simplicity, even calling herself a peasant<sup>43</sup>: thus, she exemplified the ideal of a *Devotio Moderna* house member.

Following in the footsteps of Kathryn, women would continuously outnumber men in the movement. Women's houses were more common and tended to be larger. A varied mix of classes were represented in the membership of the Sisters, but at least one usually had the means to set up a household; otherwise, the house needed another sponsor, as did the original women's houses started by Grote himself. As in other *beguinages*,<sup>44</sup> the house was led by one woman, often the founder or a relative of the original founder of the house.<sup>45</sup> In larger houses, this woman was often assisted by a committee of others in the house.<sup>46</sup> Many of the women living in these houses were from the urban elite and bourgeois classes, which meant that there were a good number of women who were literate in the vernacular, and some even in Latin.

At its origins, the *Devotio Moderna* was a movement featuring a life style straddling the monastic and mendicant.<sup>47</sup> Later in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was a movement towards the former in some places. Informal houses developed into enclosed spaces following the Augustinian Rule.<sup>48</sup> In some areas, the lives of

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<sup>43</sup> John van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> A *beguinage* was a house of *beguines*, who were laywomen living semi-monastic lives; this category included women of the *Devotio Moderna*.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Simons, "Beguines, Liturgy and Music in the Middle Ages: An Exploration," in *Beguinae in cantu instructae* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> The *Devotio Moderna* had some ties to the mendicant orders. Some houses followed the rule of the Third Order of the Franciscans. See Ulrike Hascher-Burger, "Introduction: Music and the *Devotio Moderna*," *Church History and Religious Culture* 88, no. 3 (2008): 316.

<sup>48</sup> Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 14.

brothers and sisters became more strictly regulated and moved closer to following the lives of monks and nuns. Occasionally there would be some members of the laity in addition to the ‘regulars’, and they would live much in the way of the early *Devotio Moderna*. These adjunct members could do work outside the house to help support the brothers and sisters enclosed inside, but these laypeople were less influential in the religious life of the house. In this almost monastic context, the place of music remained significant. Here, there might have been less time for individual meditation and reading, but the Divine Office became increasingly important. Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline took up much of the day. The daily mass would be performed in addition to the Office. Thus, there were still many opportunities for singing. This music would not be intended as a flamboyant art for the elite, but for the spiritual communication of the *Devotio Moderna* members.

### **Characteristics of Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Burgundian Music**

Both historically and musically, the *Devotio Moderna* offers an example of a group that does not fit well into our current historiography.<sup>49</sup> Difficulties arise from the group’s straddling of medieval and Renaissance periods and its conservative, even reactionary, forms of expression. Throughout its history, the *Devotio Moderna* was a movement that desired to reach back to the early church, but at the same time to remain within the orbit of the current centralized Church. Musically, we associate the geographic area to which the *Devotio Moderna* belonged with the Franco-Flemish or rather

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<sup>49</sup> See *Renaissance Music in Western Europe*, Atlas, Allan W.; *Music in the Age of the Renaissance*, Perkins, Leeman L.; *Medieval Music*, Hoppin, Richard H.; *Music in the Renaissance*, Reese, Gustave; etc. for lack of discussion of the *Devotio Moderna*.

Burgundian School. Each generation of this ‘school’ is associated with the use of complex polyphony, with its accompanying obscured text and perceived richness. The appearance of *Devotio Moderna* music is very different.

Geert Grote began his work in the late fourteenth century, but the influences of the *Devotio Moderna* lasted through about the middle of the sixteenth century. This was the era of the composers and musicians of the Burgundian School, and their complex musical works that took advantage of the possibilities of the new approaches to musical notation. Examining some of the work by composers for the elite in the Low Countries during this period will help underscore how different that music was from the style of the *Devotio Moderna*.

For example, Johannes Ciconia’s *Ut te per omnes/Igens alumnus Padue* (Figure 2.3) is a motet from approximately the beginning of the fifteenth century. The piece was written for Francesco Zabarella of Padua. Ciconia was from Liège, but spent much of his career in Padua working for Zabarella, his patron. Ciconia demonstrated the movement of composers and musicians of the Low Countries to courts in other areas of Europe, and he also foreshadowed the beginning of the cosmopolitan Burgundian School. In *Ut te per omnes/Igens alumnus Padue*, Ciconia uses the technique of isorhythm, which consists of patterns of repeating rhythms (*taleae*) and repeating pitches (*colores*). There is some imitation, most obviously between the two upper voices at measures twenty through twenty-four, and between measures twenty-six and twenty-seven. The parts are independent, save for the countertenor voice, which is similar to the tenor. In performance, the words are usually obscured. Besides the fact that the lyrics praise a patron and his patron saint, the composition of this work indicates its place in the world

of the elite: the vocal parts require well-trained singers, and the composer was erudite and knowledgeable of contemporary techniques, as isorhythm was a complex technique and still in vogue during the early fifteenth century. This was not the sort of music a townsman would grow up hearing.

Johannes Ockeghem's *Missa Fors seusement: Kyrie* (Figure 2.4) is based on a French-language secular chanson by the composer himself, and dates from the last third of the fifteenth century. It is a piece for five voices, all of which have independent parts. The two bass voice parts are particularly challenging to sing because of their low tessitura. Imitation, characteristic of Burgundian works, is even more exaggerated in this piece than in earlier ones in this intricate style. The *Missa Fors seusement* and other masses by Ockeghem were significant in that they exemplified the growing trend of including the cantus firmus in multiple voices. This piece was technically demanding and pioneering in a variety of ways.

In the early sixteenth century, the *Kyrie* of Josquin des Prez's *Missa Pange lingua* (Figure 2.5) illustrates a very different, but still pioneering and learned style of music. Josquin is considered to be a composer of the third generation of the Burgundian School. At the time Josquin composed his *Missa Pange lingua*, he was most likely working at the extravagant church at Condé-sur-l'Escaut, where he spent the last twenty or so years of his life. The piece features four completely independent voices with extensive imitation. Despite the fact that the text of this part of the mass is simple and straightforward, it can be difficult to understand it in this setting. Both the wide range asked of the vocal group as a whole (from a low G in the bass to an E in the soprano) and the independence of the

20  
 - dos lu - mi - na, Fran - ci - sce, no - stros spi - ri -  
 Fran - ci - scus al - mi sup - pli - cat

25  
 - tus. Tu qui pe - ren - nis glo - ri - e se - des tu -  
 Fran - ci - sci a - do - rans nu - mi - na. Sis tu - tor ex - cel - sis

30  
 - e - re om - ni - pa - tris, qui cun - cta nu - tu con - cu - tit, per -  
 fa - vens ser - vo pre - can - ti te tu - o, quem

35 40  
 - ver - sa no - bis e - ru - e.  
 to - tus or - bis pre - di - cat in - si - gni - bus, pre - co - ni -

Figure 2.3. *Ut te per omnes/Igens alumnus Padue*<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Allan W. Atlas, editor, *Anthology of Renaissance Music*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, 15.

Superius Ky - - - ri - e e - lei - - - -

Contratenor Ky - - - ri - e e - lei - - - -

Tenor

Bassus [I] Ky - - - ri - e e - lei - - - -

Bassus [II]

9 son, e - lei - - - - son, e - lei - - -

son, Ky - - - ri - e e - lei - - - son, e - lei -

Ky - - - ri - e e - - - - lei - - - -

son, e - lei - - - -

Ky - - - ri - e e - lei - - - -

16 son, Ky - - - ri - e e - lei - - -

son, Ky -

son, e - lei - - - -

son, e - lei - - - -

son, e - lei - - - - son,

Figure 2.4. *Missa Fors seulement: Kyrie*<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Allan W. Atlas, *Anthology of Renaissance Music*, 127.



parts required trained singers. And as a collegiate church comparable to the cathedral of Cambrai, Condé-sur-l'Escaut had such performing forces at its disposal.

However, in northern Germany and the Low countries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we also find sources of simple polyphony, quite different from the pieces of the Burgundian School, written in notation derived from that used for plainchant. Parallel movement, un-notated rhythm, syllabic texture, and intervals of the fifth and octave abound in this mostly note-against-note musical repertoire. Many of these songs are found in books that were associated with male and female houses of the *Devotio Moderna* movement. What were these people doing with these two-voice songs that sound so different from the music contemporary to them right in the middle of what is considered the European musical Renaissance?

The people of the *Devotio Moderna* would have largely been unaware of the contents of medieval musical treatises and the latest techniques used by the Renaissance composers. Both would have been the provenance of the elite and highly educated. The upper echelon of the *Devotio Moderna* harbored a distrust for too much learning and too much artifice, and many members were less educated and from the middle and lower classes. It is most likely that they drew their musical inspiration from the conservative practices of music that surrounded them; that is, monophony and simple polyphony. As illustrated by the substantial number of notated polyphonic pieces, some dating from as late as 1571, the techniques of two-part parallel organum and note-against-note simple discant still had widespread practice among the common people in the Low Countries

The image displays a musical score for the Kyrie section of a Mass. It consists of four systems of staves. Each system includes a vocal line (likely Soprano or Alto) and a basso continuo line. The lyrics are: "Ky-ri-e e-lei-son, Ky-ri-e e-lei-son, Ky-ri-e e-lei-son, Ky-ri-e e-lei-son." The score is marked with measure numbers 5, 10, and 15. The music is in a simple, homophonic style characteristic of the Renaissance period.

Figure 2.5. *Missa Pange lingua: Kyrie*<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Allan W. Atlas, *Anthology of Renaissance Music*, 127

and Germanic lands during an era that scholars of music history associate with composed counterpoint with as many as six contrapuntal lines. Books of easy-to-perform music that communicated devotion and spiritual feeling without being showy would have been ideal for the purposes of the *Devotio Moderna*.

### **Characteristics of *Devotio Moderna* Music**

Fortunately, the *Devotio Moderna* left behind notated evidence of its music, including some examples of simple polyphony. The geographic origins of the examples of this style include fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Utrecht, the IJssel Valley, Leiden, Zwolle, and Ghent. In contrast with compositions of the Burgundian School, *Devotio Moderna* compositions present simple polyphony usually containing two voices, or, much more rarely, three, and are overwhelmingly note-against-note and syllabic. Although contrary motion is characteristic of sections in many of the pieces, parallelism is quite common. This gives the music a sonic flavor distinct from what is more commonly associated with the musical Renaissance. It sounds much more akin to what we consider to be early medieval music, leading some to label it ‘archaic polyphony.’<sup>53</sup>

Some of the pieces have notated rhythm that is similar to metrical poetry, while others have no notated rhythm at all. While there is the possibility that the music was performed with a free rhythm, the lack of the indication of rhythm does not preclude a performance practice that includes regular meter and measured rhythm. In contrast to a piece containing polyphony with more complex, independent lines, a composition of multiple voices moving at the same time does not necessarily require written rhythm. As

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<sup>53</sup> Blachly, “Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance.”

in many pieces of music from the medieval and Renaissance periods, the question of rhythm in simple polyphony can be problematic,<sup>54</sup> and this is one dimension that must be further explored in the future. I would argue that singing with a straightforward rhythm that supports the text would be the ideal way of performing the music of the *Devotio Moderna*, as understanding and meditating on the text was paramount.

A fascinating aspect of the simple polyphony of the *Devotio Moderna* is that many of the written examples come from music for Christmas,<sup>55</sup> mirroring the fact that early notated organum was associated with the high holidays.<sup>56</sup> The idea that special occasions such as Christmas warranted relatively more elaborate musical settings was common between the two; however, the functions of the music have some dissimilarities. Winchester organum, for instance, appears to elaborate the chant that would have been witnessed by the largest number of people from outside the medieval church: Christmas Day, Easter, various processions, and public ceremonies.<sup>57</sup> The music of the *Devotio Moderna* was more personal in nature—most likely intended for individuals, small groups, and the community contained within the particular house in which it belonged.<sup>58</sup>

An important point to remember is that just because the notations of polyphony in both repertoires are found in association with Christmas, Easter, etc., it does not mean

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<sup>54</sup> The performance of rhythm is also problematic in unmeasured monophony of the Middle Ages. See John Haines' 2001 article, "The Footnote Quarrels of the Modal Theory: A Remarkable Episode in the Reception of Medieval Music," *Early Music History* 20 (September 2008): 87-120.

<sup>55</sup> Blachly, "Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance": 183.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Rankin, *The Winchester Troper: Facsimile Edition and Introduction* (London: Stainer and Bell LTD, 2007), 65.

<sup>57</sup> Rankin, *The Winchester Troper*, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Burger, Christoph, "Late Medieval Piety Expressed in Song Manuscripts of the *Devotio Moderna*" *Church History and Religious Culture* 88, no. 3 (2008): 330.

that polyphony was limited to these occasions. Rather, the notated music could have been illustrative of the technique in general, or examples of the technique held up as ideal for the high holidays. I would argue that it is likely that simple polyphony was used at other parts of the year, as well. It is important to remember that simple polyphony was often based on oral tradition, so notation was atypical; perhaps exceptional holidays called for the exceptional practice of notating examples of simple polyphony.

The contrast between the practices of “singing with the mouth” and “singing with the heart” is an idea that appears again and again in *Devotio Moderna* writings on music. One common interpretation defines “singing with the mouth” as performing with others in singing audibly, while “singing with the heart” would be singing alone inaudibly. Both could assist in connecting with the divine, but the latter was privileged as purer and more effective.<sup>59</sup> In reality, there could be some overlap between the two. As cited by Hascher-Burger, a vernacular prayer for the Hallelujah of the Easter Mass from a Medingen prayer book reads, “...therefore I sing with heart and mouth at this joyful hour...”<sup>60</sup> Simple song offered devotees the opportunity to sing with the heart without being needlessly distracted by the singing of the mouth. Simple polyphony, with its low skill requirement and lack of ostentation in practice, could serve a similar function for two or more people simultaneously.

What then was the function of music in the *Devotio Moderna*? Music was an expression of devotion, as well as a vehicle for spiritual meditation. The imagination,

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<sup>59</sup> Ulrike Hascher-Burger, “Religious Song and Devotional Culture in Northern Germany,” in *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages, Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 277.

<sup>60</sup>“... dar vmme singhe ik mit herten vnde mit munde in desser stunde ...,” in Hascher-Burger, “Religious Song and Devotional Culture in northern Germany,” 283.

driven by art, was one tool that could be used to facilitate meditation.<sup>61</sup> Music also had a strong association with the liturgy, still a part of the religious life of the members of the movement. Finally, music moved the affections; the weaker-minded in particular benefitted from music that stirred one to religious feeling.

Simple vernacular songs were especially appropriate for women. Women, seen as more emotionally unstable and less intellectually sophisticated than men, benefited from simple devotional songs in the vernacular.<sup>62</sup> These would bring them closer to God, while taking advantage of women's inherent modesty and sentimentality. In addition, vernacular songs were more approachable in the practical sense, as women were less likely to be fully literate in Latin. And thus just as one would imagine, vernacular music appears more often in association with women's houses than with those of men.

The sort of ensemble that would have participated in singing is a performance practice issue of the music of the *Devotio Moderna*. Musical instruments probably did not play much of a part in the *Devotio Moderna*, as they were strongly disapproved of by influential devotees such as à Kempis, who places musical instruments in the same category as gems, tapestries, and games.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the lyrics were an important part of the music of the *Devotio Moderna*, and anything that could obscure the text was discouraged. But the question remains: could this music be sung by a vocal ensemble? There is some evidence that it was. Introductions with prescriptions were provided in

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<sup>61</sup> Koen Goudriaan, "Empowerment through reading, writing, and example: the *Devotio Moderna*," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), 421.

<sup>62</sup> Joldersma, "Alternate Spiritual Exercises for Weaker Minds?," 346.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *Sermons to the Novices Regular*, trans. Dom Vincent Scully, C.R.L. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber & Co., Ltd., 1907), 123.

Brussels Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, ms. II 2631. Some of the introductions address a group of people. Some of the instructions even contain the direction to sing in discant,<sup>64</sup> implying an improvised second line for some of the compositions that do not even include notated polyphony. But similar to other inquiries of performance practice in medieval and Renaissance music, definitive answers to the above questions are not available.

### **Examples of the Music of the *Devotio Moderna***

To demonstrate the different functions and appearance of simple polyphony in the *Devotio Moderna*, I will present three examples: *Lectio Tertia* from The Hague Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 10 B 26, *Dies est leticie in ortu* from the Vilnius Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Department of Manuscripts, F 22-95, *Dies est leticie in ortu* from Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS. 16 H 34, OLM B 113, and *Ave verum corpus* from the Mechelen breviaries. Through these examples, we can see that the music is syllabic and the text easily understood. The counterpoint is straightforward, even formulaic. Parallel motion is present but not usually dominating, as is the case in some types of simple polyphony. This convenient, modest music would have been ideal for the members of the *Devotio Moderna* to sing and hear.

The Christmas lessons contained in The Hague 10 B 26, notated in the second half of the fifteenth century, provide us with an illustration of a local interpretation of the widespread tradition of simple polyphony. In general, the music in the *Lectio Tertia* is formulaic, unmeasured, and straightforward; these characteristics make it ideal for

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<sup>64</sup> Joldersma, “Alternate Spiritual Exercises for Weaker Minds?” 382.

reciting the lesson texts without much distraction. The interval of the fifth dominates the vertical texture. Most of the texts contained in the lessons are intoned in parallel fifths. The beginning and ending of each phrase appear slightly melismatic and include contrary motion; however, even in the more melismatic sections of phrases, the favored intervals are fifths, with a few unisons and thirds. In Figure 2.6 below, we can see these characteristics.

Another example of simple polyphony associated with women of the *Devotio Moderna* is found in a hymnal and processional and hymnal, Vilnius F22-95 (Figure 2.7) and (Figure 2.8). This book, probably dating from approximately 1556, was originally from the Convent Marienpoel. The music contained within shows an interesting mix of parallel and contrary motion. The Christmas song, *Dies est leticie in ortu*, displays this well: the privileging of octaves and fifths in the vertical texture is obvious, but there are also thirds and even sixths, especially when coming toward the end of a phrase. The notation consists of an altered form of *Hufnagelschrift*, the notation used for the plainchant in Vilnius F22-95. A transcription of this music can be found in Figure 2.9. *Dies est leticie in ortu* is also found in Utrecht 16 H 34 (Figure 2.10) and Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 190, manuscripts that are both from around 1500. The version found in the former manuscript is transcribed in Figure 2.11. The latter manuscript was intended for a number of Brothers' houses, while the former was probably for the St. Agnes Cloister at Utrecht. Polyphony makes up a significant portion (25%) of Utrecht 16 H 34. The straightforward legibility, lack of decoration, and *ad hoc* musical notation seem to indicate that this manuscript was created for utilitarian purposes.



*Lectio Tertia*

fol. 108<sup>r</sup>

JV - be do - mi - ne be - ne - di - ce = re Con - sur - ge con -  
*lectio tertia*  
 sur - ge in - du - e - re for - ti - tu = / di - ne tu - a sy - on in - du - e - re  
*lectio tertia*  
 sur - ge in - du - e - re for - ti - tu = / di - ne tu - a sy - on in - du - e - re  
 ves - ti - men - tis glo - ri - e tu - e ihe - ru - sa - lem ci - ui - tas sanc - ta /  
 ves - ti - men - tis glo - ri - e tu - e ihe - ru - sa - lem ci - ui - tas sanc - ta /  
 qui - a non ad - ij - ci - et ul - tra ut per - trans - e - at per te in cir -  
 qui - a non ad - ij - ci - et ul - tra ut per - trans - e - at per te in cir -  
 cum - ci - sus et im - mun - dus. Ex - [Ex -] cu - te - re de pul - ue - re  
 cum - ci - sus et im - mun - dus. / Ex = cu - te - re de pul - ue - re  
 con - sur - ge se - de ihe - ru - sa - lem sol - ue vin - cu - la col - li / tu - i tu - i  
 con - sur - ge se - de ihe - ru - sa - lem sol - ue vin - cu - la / col - li tu - i

**Figure 2.6.** *Lectio Tertia*; 108v<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Hascher-Burger, Ulrike, "Neue Aspekte Mehrstimmiger Lesungen des Späten Mittelalters. Die Lektionen der Handschrift Den Haag, Museum van het Boek/Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, ms. 10 B 26," *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, vol. 48, no. 2 (1998): 110.

There are multiple types of musical notation used in Utrecht 16 H 34, but *Dies est leticie in ortu* is copied in a type derived from white mensural notation. However, the particular form in this piece has no filled-in notes and no signs of mensuration, indicating the copyists' lack of familiarity with the practical use of white mensural notation, or at least their lack of care for this technology's potential. The Utrecht example of *Dies est leticie in ortu* contains almost the same sonorities as the one from Vilnius, only a whole step higher. A remarkable component of the Utrecht 16 H 34 manuscript is that it includes a section of prose to facilitate meditation.<sup>66</sup>

One example of simple polyphony belonging to female members of a *Devotio Moderna* house is the setting of the Eucharistic hymn, *Ave verum corpus*, included in a compilation of two breviaries. The book was printed in 1571-72 and belonged to a beguine house in Mechelen (Mechlin). The particular notation (black square notation) and the conservative musical style suggest that this setting of *Ave verum corpus* was a product of the *Devotio Moderna* movement.<sup>67</sup> Members of the *Devotio Moderna* were usually not trained in writing polyphonic or measured music, and thus copied their simple polyphony in plainchant notation, using either black square neumes or *Hufnagelschrift*.<sup>68</sup> Some of the women in the house must have been able to read music; the book is large enough to have been read by several people simultaneously and the pages containing *Ave*

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<sup>66</sup> Ulrike Hascher-Burger, "Introduction," in *Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Hs. 16 H 34* (Ottawa: The Institution of Mediaeval Music, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Blachly, Alexander, "The Mechelen *Ave verum corpus*," 99.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

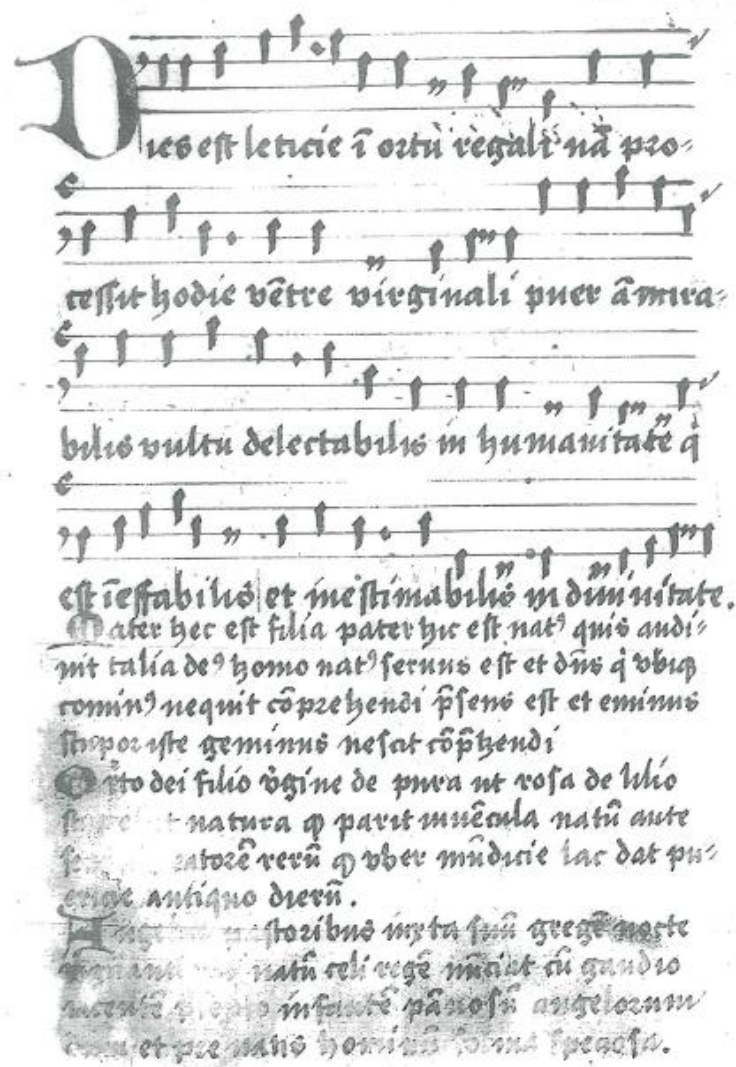


Figure 2.7. Vilnius, F22-95; 106v<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Ike de Loos and Viktoriia Goncharova, Vilnius, *Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Department of Manuscripts, F22-95*, (Ottawa: The Institution of Mediaeval Music, 2003).

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**D**ies est leticie in ortu regali nā pro:  
cessit hodie ventre vginali puer amica:  
bilis vultu delectabilis i humanitate q̄  
est ineffabilis et iestabilis in diuinitate.  
Et vtrū nō leditur solo penetrare. sic ille:  
sa creditur vgo post et ante. felix est puer pe:  
ra cui clausa viscera deū portauerūt et bea:  
ta vbera in etate tenera deū lactauerūt.  
An ob scuro nascit' illustrator solis stabu:  
lo reponit' pūceps terre molis fasto:  
tera q̄ affixit sydera dū celos ascendit.  
pat vagitibz q̄ tonat i nubibz dū celos  
q̄ vbi dū describit' virgo p̄c̄t' s̄ibat be:  
lee q̄o nascatur puer q̄ nos i. Mox  
ria q̄ canebat gloriā noue i. stans de  
i sublimibz. det parē ho b̄ bene volū

Figure 2.8. Vilnius, F22-95; 107r<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Ike de Loos and Viktoriia Goncharova, Vilnius, Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Department of Manuscripts, F22-95.

Strophe 1

Di - es est le - ti - ci - e in or - tu ce - ga - ti  
 Di - es est le - ti - ci - e in or - tu ce - ga - ti  
 nam pro - ces - sit ho - di - e ven - tre vir - gi - na - li  
 nam pro - ces - sit ho - di - e ven - tre vir - gi - na - li  
 pu - er am - mi - ra - bi - lis vul - tu de - le - cta - bi - lis  
 pu - er am - mi - ra - bi - lis vul - tu de - le - cta - bi - lis  
 in hu - ma - ni - ta - te, qui est in - ef - fa - bi - lis  
 in hu - ma - ni - ta - te, qui est in - ef - fa - bi - lis  
 et in - es - ti - ma - bi - lis in di - vi - ni - ta - te.  
 et in - es - ti - ma - bi - lis in di - vi - ni - ta - te.

Figure 2.9. Transcription of *Vilnius*, F22-95; 106v and 107r<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Blachly, Alexander, "Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance," 216.

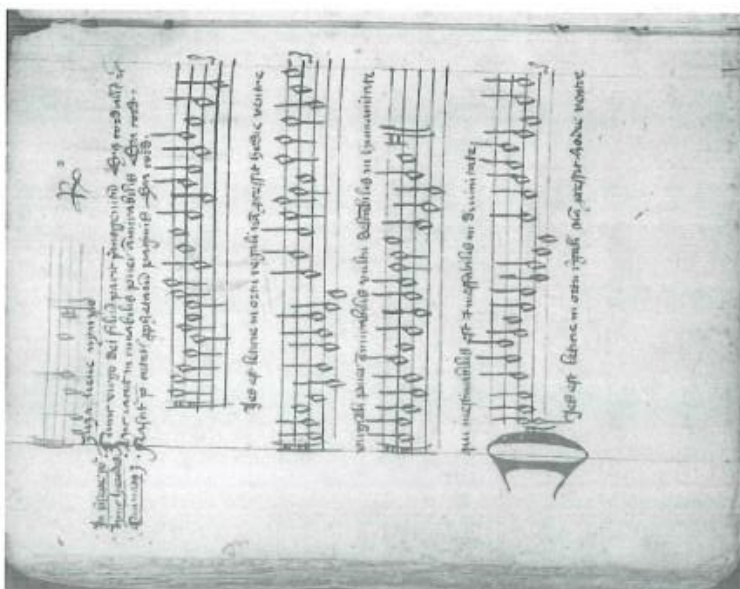
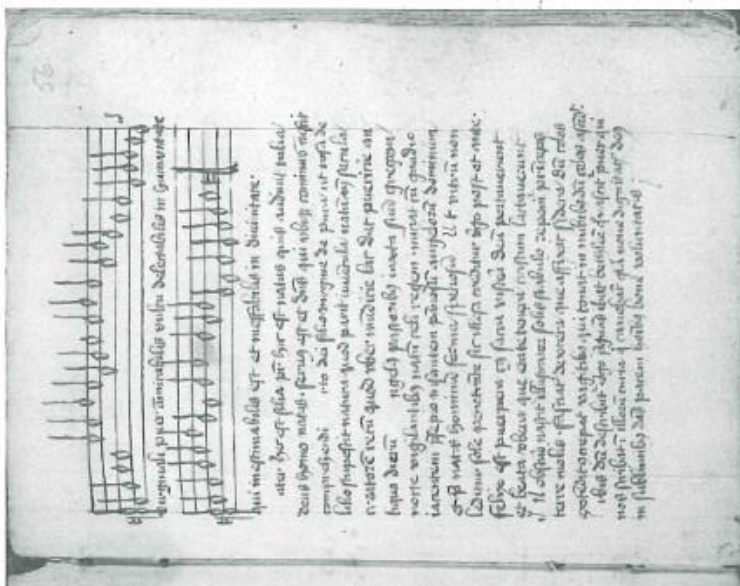


Figure 2.10. Utrecht, Hs. 16 H 34; 55v-56r<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ulrike Hascher-Burger, *Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Hs. 16 H 34*.

Strophe I

Di - es est le - ti - ci - e in or - tu re - ga - li  
Di - es est le - ti - ci - e in or - tu re - ga - li

nam pro - ces - sit ho - di - e ven - tre vir - gi - na - li  
nam pro - ces - sit ho - di - e ven - tre vir - gi - na - li

pu - er am - mi - ra - bi - lis vul - tu de - le - cta - bi - lis  
pu - er am - mi - ra - bi - lis vul - tu de - le - cta - bi - lis

in hu - ma - ni - ta - te, qui est in - ef - fa - bi - lis  
in hu - ma - ni - ta - te, qui est in - ef - fa - bi - lis

et in - es - ti - ma - bi - lis in di - vi - ni - ta - te.  
et in - es - ti - ma - bi - lis in di - vi - ni - ta - te.

Figure 2.11. Transcription of Utrecht 16 H 34; 55v<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Blachly, Alexander, “Archaic Polyphony in Dutch Sources of the Renaissance”: 217.

*verum corpus* are clear and easy to read, suggesting that the notation of this piece was utilitarian in nature and for the use of the female performers.<sup>74</sup>

*Ave verum corpus* is a three-part setting; therefore, the piece would not be included in the strictest definition of *cantus planus binatim*. But it is based on the *Ave verum corpus* chant melody, and the notated parts resemble improvised singing. Blachly considers the piece to be simple polyphony,<sup>75</sup> and I agree with him that it is. The music is distinguished by much parallel movement in fifths and unisons in addition to contrary motion, similar to earlier simple polyphony of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There seems to be some privileging of parallel perfect intervals, unlike some of the later examples of simple polyphony—such as many of those fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian pieces I will discuss later in this study.

This example reflects the conservatism of the music with which the members of the *Devotio Moderna* were familiar, and it could also be a conscious effort to distance the movement from contemporary styles so dominated by thirds, sixths, contrary motion and multiple independent lines. The simplicity of the music would make it appropriate for the *beguine* women of the house to which the book belongs, who most likely lacked much of a musical education. Finally, as mentioned before, this piece shows that the simple polyphony of the *Devotio Moderna* was not limited to Christmas compositions; apparent just from the surviving evidence, these textures could be used at other parts of the year, as well.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 102.



## Conclusion

The *Devotio Moderna* is remarkable but sadly neglected in the study of music history, its impact overshadowed by the Protestant Reformation. Members were unusual in that they had lives straddling that of the clergy and the laity, and the movement stressed both spiritual contemplation and evangelization. The music and literature of the *Devotio Moderna* was straightforward and unassuming, often quite dissimilar from that of the movement's contemporaries in the courts and in the mainstream of the Church. There were varying levels of literacy, but learning was at least important enough that the members as a group utilized written documents in Latin and the vernacular, and the men (and occasionally women) found employment as copyists. Musical literacy also seemed to have been present, as music of the *Devotio Moderna* survives in notated form among utilitarian manuscripts. Simple polyphony regularly makes an appearance. In fact, the *Devotio Moderna* provides us with some of the best extant examples of simple polyphony in notation.

Looking at the *Devotio Moderna's* treatment of simple polyphony brings a number of facets of this music to the fore. These characteristics include that notated simple polyphony was often (but not always) associated with liturgical events of special significance and solemnity, such as Christmas and Easter; the use of simple polyphony as a reaction to more extravagant music styles; and simple polyphony as the province of the semi-educated. Most importantly, these sources are evidence of the widespread use of simple polyphony. For the *Devotio Moderna*, this was functional music. Thomas à Kempis wrote in this context:

Sing in such a manner that you interiorly experience what your voice expresses. In this way you will please your brethren and at the same time not be displeasing

to God and His holy angels. God pays more attention to the sentiments of the heart than to the loudness of the voice...<sup>76</sup>

Simple polyphony allowed the members to create new textures together that did not obscure the text, while expressing inner devotion clearly in a communal manner without ostentation. Thus, this music satisfied the goals of the *Devotio Moderna* and music for their Christmas services exemplifies this fact

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *Bountiful Goodness*, trans. Joseph N. Tylenda, S. J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 110.

## CHAPTER III

### MUSIC OF THE MONTSERRAT PILGRIM COMMUNITY

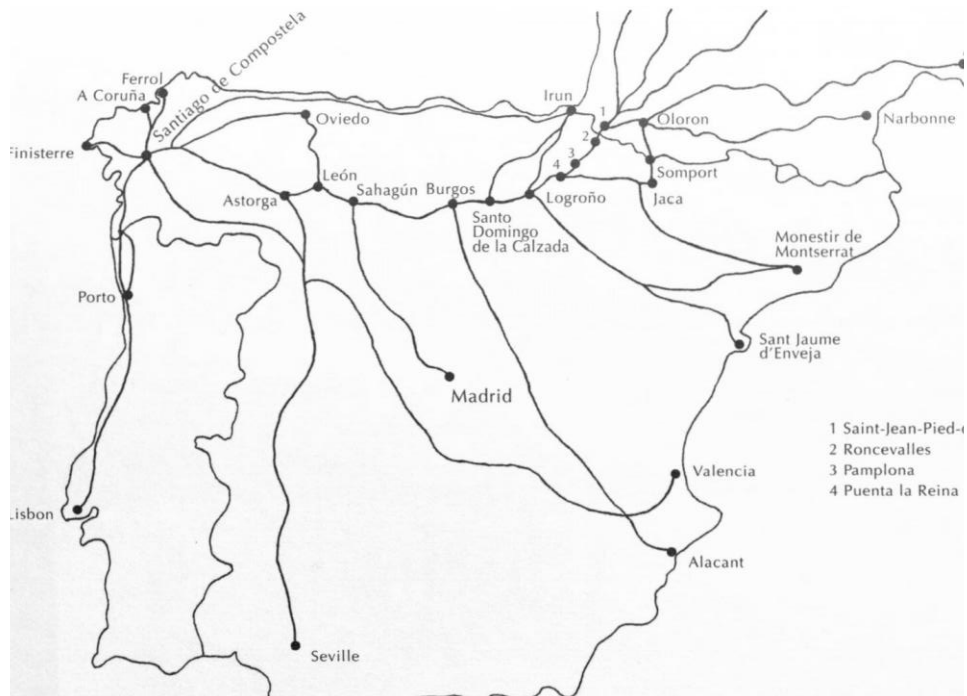
In this chapter I will focus on the *Llibre Vermell* and the instances of simple polyphony that appear in this book, discussing geographic, social, and cultural contexts of the medieval pilgrimage to Montserrat. I will investigate the notated simple polyphony in the *Llibre Vermell* and contrast it with some of the polyphonic works in the *Codex Calixtinus*, a complex volume with music, probably intended in part to guide and to impress pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. My aim is to establish that simple polyphony was highly significant to the common pilgrim to Montserrat.

I would argue that the *Llibre Vermell* exemplifies how simple polyphony was used to satisfy a specific musical function for the community of the fourteenth-century pilgrims to Montserrat, an important pilgrimage venue in Catalonia. Similar to the situation of the *Devotio Moderna*, documentation concerning the music intended for these pilgrims is scarce. The *Llibre Vermell* is the only direct primary source we have of the music of the pilgrims to Montserrat. However, it is an important source and it contains notated music that still speaks to performers and listeners today. The appeal of this music mirrors its original purpose: to engage the common people who came to Montserrat as pilgrims.

#### **Contexts – Geography – Society and Culture**

There are two places of pilgrimage in the Iberian Peninsula that are particularly significant to medieval music history: Santiago de Compostela and Montserrat (Figure 3.1). Both venues have produced manuscripts with notated music that survive. The Codex

Calixtinus comes from Santiago de Compostela, which was third in importance only to Jerusalem and Rome. For hundreds of years, pilgrims made their way to the site in Northwest Spain, which is said to have been built over the tomb of St. James. In the Middle Ages it was a truly cosmopolitan place, since pilgrims came from all over Europe and from all social classes. As a result of this multiethnic gathering at Santiago de Compostela, the *Codex Calixtinus* contains music that reflects this cosmopolitanism: it was notated in east-central French neumes and contains Aquitanian polyphonic organum in addition to monophonic pieces.<sup>77</sup>



**Figure 3.1.** Pilgrim Sites of Medieval Iberia<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Stanley Boorman, et al, "Sources, MS," Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 16, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/50158pg4>.

<sup>78</sup> Larissa J. Taylor et al., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, Boston: Brill, 2010, lix.

The other important pilgrimage venue is Santa Maria de Montserrat, a Benedictine monastery located on the mountain of Montserrat, about thirty miles northwest of Barcelona. It is a distinctive and impressive landmark, several miles long of crags, needles, and other strange shapes of sedimentary stone. Montserrat was the site of a Roman temple to Venus in Catalonia's pre-Christian era,<sup>79</sup> and later became home to hermitages and a monastery. The monastery of Santa Maria was established in c.1025 and has housed a black-colored wooden statue of the Virgin Mary since at least the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, the monastery has suffered damage and abandonment through the years, particularly during the French War of the early nineteenth century, so it no longer has the appearance it had in the Middle Ages.

Because Santa Maria de Montserrat was not as renowned and important as Santiago de Compostela, it likely drew in pilgrims primarily from nearby areas, though—like Compostela—these pilgrims were from all social classes. This suggests that the music contained in the *Llibre Vermell* of Montserrat may have had a more local flavor, an idea supported by texts in Latin, Occitan, and Catalan that support this statement.

Pilgrimage was a devotional activity of all classes during the Middle Ages. However, the most well-documented pilgrims were obviously royalty and members of the elite, since sources never mention the common man. For example, the king of Catalonia-

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<sup>79</sup> Barcelona.de Tourist Info, "Montserrat Monastery," Discover Barcelona, <http://www.barcelona.de/en/barcelona-excursions-monastery-montserrat.html> (accessed Feb. 22, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Gomez i Muntane, Ma. Carmen, *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat*, (Barcelona: Els llibres de la Frontera), 2000, 132.

Aragon, Pere III (1336-1387), thus describes one of his visits to Montserrat in his

*Chronicle*<sup>81</sup>:

On Thursday morning, the twenty-ninth of April, we set out, riding until we reached the foot of the hill of Montserrat. There we dismounted and sent the animals to go on the flat road to Monistrol and wait for us there. With our company we climbed the hill on foot, and on the crest we found a church called St. Miguel. Within sight of the monastery of Montserrat the prior of Montserrat met us and received us reverently and invited us that day and together we went to do reverence to Our Lady Santa Maria, and, that done, went in to dine. After we had eaten, together with the prior we went to present the Virgin a [model] galley with all its rigging of silver, in gratitude for the victory that was given us the day we landed in Majorca. We had the galley taken there two days before we arrived. Having presented this galley, we made the hermits come to us, whom the prior had had come down to the monastery from their hermitages. We told them and begged them that they should draw up a special prayer – which they would say at certain hours of the day and of the night – for us and our companies, for the reason mentioned above. Then we left and went down the stairs of Montserrat and went to sup and sleep at Monistrol, where the prior had also invited us.<sup>8283</sup>

From this excerpt, we can see the types of events a pilgrimage would entail for a member of the upper classes. Some of these events would provide similar experiences also to the common man. Commoners too would have offered prayers and gifts to the Virgin Mary at Montserrat, but the king was able to also meet with the prior, have special prayers said on his behalf by the hermits of Montserrat, and could share meals and stay the night in the town of Monistrol.

As it was the case for other pilgrimage sites, many ordinary pilgrims probably ended up spending their nights at the church, rather than at the accommodations in the

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<sup>81</sup> The exact year of the Chronicle's composition is unknown. Parts of it were completed by 1375, but the rest was written later. Redactions date from 1383 and 1385.

<sup>82</sup> There were a number of hermitages on the mountain of Montserrat, the remains of which can be seen today.

<sup>83</sup> The original Catalan document and the translation used here both use the royal plural pronoun. I have changed it here to facilitate easier reading.

monastery or the surrounding town.<sup>84</sup> That would surely have been an interesting experience, but in some ways it was not the ideal situation. Pilgrims sought to entertain themselves when resting from their travels. Among the means of entertainment for the pilgrims, there was making music, listening, and dancing. This could be disruptive to other people at the site who may have been holding vigil, and in any case idle merriment was inappropriate for such a sacred site. This sort of situation was actually addressed in the *Llibre Vermell* itself: a viable solution was music intended especially for pilgrims.

Because sometimes the pilgrims holding night vigil in the church of Santa Maria of Montserrat wish to sing and dance, and also by day in the plaza, and only decent and devout songs are allowed there. The songs above and below are written. And these must be used decently and sparingly,<sup>85</sup> not disturbing those who continue in their prayers and devout contemplations.

The songs contained in the *Llibre Vermell* were intended to satisfy the need for the pilgrims to celebrate, while at the same time they were appropriate for the sacred site of Montserrat.

### **Characteristics of the Music of Iberian Pilgrimages**

Considering the small number of notated pieces the *Llibre Vermell* contains, the music exhibits much variety. The *Llibre Vermell* contains several different genres of music, ranging from simple rounds and polyphony reminiscent of *Ars Nova* to monophonic *virelais*. Five pieces can be considered to be *virelais* and two of these

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<sup>84</sup> Gomez i Muntane, Ma. Carmen, *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat*, 136.

<sup>85</sup> From Gomez, *Llibre Vermell*, 19: “Quia interdum peregrine quando vigilant in ecclesia Beate Marie de Monte Serrato volunt cantare et trepidare, et etiam in platea de die, et ibi non debeant nisi honestas ac devotas cantilenas cantare, idcirco superius et inferius alique sunt scripte. Et de hoc uti debent honeste et parce, ne perturbent perseverantes in orationibus et devotis contemplationibus in quibus omnes vigilantes insistere debent partire et devote vacare.” Folio 22r.

contain notated polyphony. The virelai form is rare in Latin sacred music<sup>86</sup>; rather, it was a secular genre, possibly originally borrowed from popular music. Three pieces are canons for two or three voices, and the remaining works consist of a monophonic ballad and a polyphonic chanson.

The texts are in Latin, in Occitan (one of only two fourteenth-century polyphonic examples in the language), and Catalan. As would be expected from a pilgrim site dedicated to the Virgin Mary, nine of the texts have Marian themes. The only one that does not is *Ad mortem festinamus*, the Dance of Death. Dances of death were an enduring medieval tradition, and some are still performed in Catalonia today.<sup>87</sup> At the very least, pilgrims danced to *Ad mortem festinamus* and *Stella splendens*,<sup>88</sup> but most likely, they accompanied the other pieces with dance as well.

I argue that the canons in the *Llibre Vermell* are a type of simple polyphony: although there are multiple words sung at the same time, these pieces are homorhythmic. Moreover, the voice leading is similar to the more archetypal simple polyphony, and I consider a distinguishing feature of simple polyphony to be its texture. A primarily homorhythmic embellishment of the melody it offers a truly lush sound; when the different voices contain the same text, the words are easy to understand, but when the lines each have a separate text or the same text in canon, the result is that the words are blurred, and the sonority is similar to simple polyphony of the more traditional definition.

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<sup>86</sup> Kreitner, Kenneth, *The Church Music of Fifteenth-Century Spain*, Rochester, NY: Boydell Press (2006), 24.

<sup>87</sup> Eade, Michael, *Catalonia: A Cultural History*, New York: Oxford University Press (2008), 154.

<sup>88</sup> Cattin, Giulio, Francesco Facchin, ed., assisted by Maria del Carmen Gomez, *French Sacred Music*, Monaco: Editions de l'Oiseau-Lyre, 1991, 500.



By contrast, the *Codex Calixtinus* dating from the twelfth century contains unmeasured florid polyphony—very similar to Aquitanian polyphony of approximately the same period. Thus, despite the fact that it was copied almost two hundred years earlier, the *Codex Calixtinus* actually contains music that can be considered more progressive than that in the *Llibre Vermell* (Figure 3.2).

As can be seen in the figure, the text is obscured by the lengthening of the original chant in the *vox principalis* and augmented by the extreme melismatic setting created by the *vox organalis*. The upper voice was possibly originally improvised. Improvised or not, the music of the *Codex Calixtinus* required capable singers. This example of Aquitanian polyphony puts the *Codex Calixtinus* at least somewhat into the mainstream music history narrative. Taking into account the need for specialized singers and the compositional style, we can conclude that the primary function of this music was probably to impress, entertain, and inspire devotion in the elite pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela.

### **Examples of the Music of the *Llibre Vermell***

The *Llibre Vermell* contains three canons; the first is *O Virgo splendens*, a canon for either two or three voices. The notation is the most archaic of the songs in the *Llibre Vermell*, resembling the square notation of monophonic chant, and the text setting is melismatic. This, combined with the fact that it is canonic, makes the text particularly difficult to hear. However, the parts appear to be homorhythmic: each phrase has the same number of notes, which creates a distinctive sonority. *O Virgo splendens* would have been more difficult to perform than most simple polyphonies, but the resulting

fo. 190'

The image displays a musical score for 'Benedicamus Domino I' on folio 190'. It consists of five systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and a lute accompaniment line (treble clef). The lyrics are: 'Be - ne - di - ca - mus Do - mi - no'. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and various rests. There are double bar lines with repeat signs (//) in the third system. The lute part includes a 'no.' marking at the beginning of the fifth system.

**Figure 3.2.** *Benedicamus Domino I*<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Theodore Karp, *The Polyphony of Saint Martial and Santiago de Compostela: Volume 2*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 230.

sound was probably similar, especially when one contrasts the piece with something like *Mariam Matrem Virginem*, the most progressive and difficult to perform of the pieces in the *Llibre Vermell*.

*Laudemus Virginem* (Figure 3.3) is another canon for two or three voices, the text setting of which is now entirely syllabic. The melody is straightforward, catchy, and easy to perform, and the intervals between the voices are almost all fifths and unisons, with thirds used as a kind of passing sonority. *Laudemus Virginem* is simple to the point of being almost monotonous to our ears, but the piece must have functioned well enough for the medieval pilgrims to Montserrat, resulting in its preservation in the *Llibre Vermell*. *Splendens Ceptigera*, another round from the book similar to *Laudemus Virginem*, has a vertical sonority that is somewhat more varied, with some parallel fifths as well as the use of the interval of a fourth. Overall, *Splendens Ceptigera* would have functioned as simple polyphony for the pilgrims in the form of a round that could be sung (and probably danced to) as a group.

In addition to simple rounds, there are examples of more complicated polyphonic pieces in the *Llibre Vermell*: *Inperayritz / Verges ses par* and *Mariam matrem Virginem* are closer to the elite musical mainstream of the late fourteenth century, the French *Ars nova*. *Inperayritz / Verges ses par* is one of the virelais of the *Llibre Vermell*. This piece is bi-textual, possibly making it more difficult for the ordinary pilgrim to perform: despite the multiple texts, the parts mostly move together, with slightly more activity in the top part. The notated rhythms are fairly straightforward, and, along with the form of the piece, give *Inperayritz / Verges ses par* a dance-like feel. The voice leading and much of

The image shows a musical score for a three-part setting of the Credo. It is labeled 'E-MO 1' and is in 2/4 time. The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 10, and the second system contains measures 11 through 25. Each system has three staves. The lyrics are written below the staves, with some words split across lines. The music features a simple, homophonic texture with a clear melodic line in the upper voice and supporting parts in the lower voices.

**Figure 3.3.** *Laudemus Virginem*<sup>90</sup>

the resulting texture are reminiscent of the more traditional definition of simple polyphony such as that in music of the *Devotio Moderna*.

*Mariam matrem Virginem* (Figure 3.4) is an even more complex example of a virelai than *Inperayritz / Verges ses par*. It features three independent parts, the two lower voices moving more slowly than the top part. This texture, along with the syncopated rhythms in the top voice and the musical notation itself, evokes the style of the *Ars Nova*.<sup>91</sup> *Mariam matrem* simply appears more cutting-edge than the rest of the music of the *Llibre Vermell*. This piece would most likely have been performed by more skilled singers. This raises the question: why was *Mariam matrem Virginem* included in the *Llibre Vermell* with the rest of the pilgrim songs? Perhaps members of the choir at Montserrat sang it for the pilgrims who could have danced to this song. It could also be

<sup>90</sup> Fischer, Kurt von and Ian Bent, editors, *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century: French Sacred Music*, 383.

<sup>91</sup> Gomez i Muntane, Ma. Carmen, *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat*, 155.

The image shows a page of a musical score for a piece titled "E-MO 1". It features three vocal parts: Contralto (Cu), Tenor (T), and Soprano (C). The lyrics are in Latin and are distributed across the vocal lines. Measure numbers are indicated at the top of the vocal staves: 5, 10, 14-15, 20, 25, 30, 35, and 40. The piano accompaniment is shown in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) below the vocal parts. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

**Figure 3.4.** *Mariam matrem Virginem*<sup>92</sup>

the case that *Mariam matrem Virginem* was intended for the wealthier and higher-ranked visitors to Santa Maria de Montserrat—we must recall that medieval pilgrims could be of any class, and even kings visited the site.

As for so many other notated examples of medieval music, the mode of the performance of pieces in the *Llibre Vermell* remains a mystery. Although possibly discouraged by the monks of Montserrat, it is plausible that instruments played a role in

<sup>92</sup> Fischer, Kurt von and Ian Bent, editors. *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century*, Monaco: Editions de l’Oiseau-Lyre, 1991, 386.

its performances.<sup>93</sup> Having one part sung while the other was performed with an instrument could have been a performance option, with an end result fairly close to what we would call simple polyphony, however with mixing of instrument and voice. Another performance option could have been the addition of simple polyphony to the monophonic tunes in the *Llibre Vermell*.<sup>94</sup> This practice could even have been used to further elaborate on two-part pieces, such as *Stella splendens*, *Los set gotxs recomptarem*, or *Ad mortem festimus*.

### Historiography

In medieval and Renaissance music surveys, Spain has been sidelined because of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century political situation.<sup>95</sup> This lack of recognition is beginning to be rectified by scholars such as Rebecca Maloy,<sup>96</sup> but this region is still mostly treated as a side note. It is easy to look at Spanish music this way, as it does not fit into the traditional music history narrative. Some scholars (especially in the past) have even questioned whether medieval Spain should be included as part of the wider European axis of the time. This downplays the cultural exchange that occurred during the Middle Ages, especially

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<sup>93</sup> Performers of most modern recordings of the pieces of the *Llibre Vermell* have made the decision to use instruments. See *Black Madonna pilgrim songs from the monastery of Montserrat* by Ensemble Unicorn, *Llibre Vermell Pilgrim Songs & Dances* by New London Consort, *Llibre vermell de Montserrat* by Hespèrion XX, and others.

<sup>94</sup> Viret, Jacques, *Le Llibre Vermell de Montserrat (XIVe siècle): édition pour voix a cappella*, (Saint-Etienne: 2004), 35-36. See the same for notations of possible polyphonic elaborations of pieces in the *Llibre Vermell*.

<sup>95</sup> *Renaissance Music in Western Europe*, Atlas, Allan W.; *Music in the Age of the Renaissance*, Perkins, Leeman L.; *Medieval Music*, Hoppin, Richard H.; *Music in the Renaissance*, Reese, Gustave; etc. for lack of discussion of the *Devotio Moderna*. Grout and Palisca.

<sup>96</sup> Maloy sought to bring attention to Old Hispanic chant, which is marginalized in the study of plainchant history. See her recent article, "Old Hispanic Chant and the Early History of Plainsong," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 67, no. 1 (2014): 1-76.

between Eastern Spain, Southern France, and Italy. Even Western Spain saw influence from Southern France, as can be seen from the Aquitanian pieces in the *Codex Calixtinus*. The study of Spain has much to offer even to the English-language scholar—both the *Llibre Vermell* and *Codex Calixtinus* contain early examples of polyphony, with the former shedding light on the rarely notated simple polyphony. Moreover, these books contribute considerably to our understanding of medieval pilgrimage culture.

To be fair, much of the music that survives from Iberia of the medieval and early modern periods is fragmentary, so there is not much evidence upon which to build, but there are some more substantial manuscripts that survive, including Barcelona 971 and Montserrat 1. Barcelona 971 contains what is referred to as the ‘Barcelona Mass,’ which is sometimes grouped with other early polyphonic masses as a pre-cyclic-mass genre. Montserrat 1, the *Llibre Vermell*, does not fit in at all and is rarely mentioned in music history surveys, or even in more advanced monographs and scholarly articles region of its origin, Spain and France. Most of the little that is written is in Spanish, French, or Catalan.

### **Conclusion**

The *Llibre Vermell* is a fascinating musical source for my purposes here because it demonstrates the existence of simple polyphony as part of the practice of a community of pilgrims in the Iberian Peninsula. As is the case for the extant repertoire of the *Devotio Moderna* in the Low Countries, this repertoire reveals the function of accessible devotional music for the common people. The music of the *Devotio Moderna* and the Iberian pilgrimage tradition, and the practices of sacred music in northern and central

Italy of the 1300s and 1400s share similar characteristics. These include memorable and easy-to-sing melodies with narrow ranges and rhythmic clarity. The vertical sonorities feature parallel movement and/or simple, almost formulaic voice leading. The final example of simple polyphony I will examine is the *laude* and processional music of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy.



## CHAPTER IV

### *LAUDE* AND MUSIC FOR PROCESSIONS IN ITALY (1200-1500)

The sources of late medieval Italy have dominated the study of simple polyphony. This is a consequence of both the Italian background of many of the modern scholars in this subject, and of the fact that there are many extant primary sources of simple polyphony from northern and central Italy. From the surviving evidence, the use of simple and improvised polyphony appears to have been a pervasive tradition in the sacred music of these areas. Therefore, I believe it is essential to include the Italian examples in any survey of simple polyphony.

In this chapter, I will examine the use of simple polyphony in liturgical and paraliturgical music of central and northern Italy during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. I will review scholarship regarding the context and function of simple polyphony in the sacred music of these geographic areas, and present some hypotheses about cases where such evidence is lacking through an examination of primary written documents and notated pieces. I aim to ultimately demonstrate that simple polyphony played a significant role in religious (and occasionally even civic) life in medieval Italy.

#### **Contexts – Geography – Society and Culture**

As stated above, much of the research on simple polyphony addresses the thriving traditions in northern and central Italy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Most of these areas have a history of regional autonomy and were organized in city-states or small duchies. Some of the cities of the northern half of the peninsula in particular have preserved older types of musical performance. In the cities with cathedrals, the

preservation of simple polyphony was perhaps a consequence of the subdivision between the clerical elite and the monks, and the lower clergy. The first often served at both at the cathedral and secular courts. The music sung by the lower clergy would have been more often heard by the lower-class locals, along with ordinary travelers and pilgrims to the Italian peninsula.

Mendicant orders developed a strong foothold in medieval northern Italy, and many of the sources of simple polyphony are associated with these religious groups. At its origins, the Franciscan movement supported voluntary poverty and social egalitarianism. The former ideal was later abandoned for the purpose of furthering the movement's goals of preaching and evangelization. The Dominicans agreed with the abandonment of worldly goods that was characteristic of the early Franciscans, but were more educated and intellectually oriented. Both orders kept the recitation and singing of the Office brief. Individual preaching and study to further the pastoral mission often took precedence. These mendicant orders emphasized preaching to the people rather than focus on the monastic life.

The Franciscan and Dominicans often drew from and served the lowest classes. To appeal to the people, these orders commonly adopted the liturgy of the area where they were located, also using the local customs and traditions. Preachers sought to make their sermons direct, but also convincing, colorful, and engaging.<sup>97</sup> As a form of communication of devotion, simple polyphony associated with these movements could be said to have similar characteristics: the music presented liturgical and paraliturgical texts in a straightforward but contrapuntally embellished manner. The words could be easily

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<sup>97</sup> Jeffery, Peter, "Popular Culture on the Periphery of the Medieval Liturgy," *Region VIII Meeting of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians in Collegeville*, June 1980: 420.

sung and understood by participants and listeners, but the texture lent the music a captivating but not overly elaborate flavor. A context in which laypeople could interact directly with paraliturgical simple polyphony was the outdoor procession.

Processions served a practical function by allowing people behaviors not normally available to them. Scholars such as Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn have put forth the idea of a liminal zone in medieval pilgrimages, performances, and processions.<sup>98</sup> In this liminal zone, ordinary people did not inhabit the normal world, but were instead between or outside the boundaries of society. In the medieval and early modern procession, the common person was not only a spectator—he or she was also a participant.<sup>99</sup> The communal and participatory features of the procession that included laypeople and clerics, are in marked contrast to the liturgical experience of the time—something that would later be addressed by the Reformation, possibly contributing to the decrease in importance of religious processions. In processions with relics, laypeople could interact with a kind of spiritual experience that was normally off limits to them, resulting in a more direct and intense religious experience.<sup>100</sup> Singing was one of the more acceptable outlets for the people's energy in this context.

Musicologists interpret some sources, such as Oderigo's description of the Palm Sunday liturgy, as evidence of laypeople joining in with singing. It certainly seems preferable to the prospect of people physically overwhelming the monks and relics in a

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<sup>98</sup> Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, "Sainte Foy on the Loose, or, The Possibilities of Procession," *Moving Subjects: Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Ashley and Wim Hüsken, (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001), 53.

<sup>99</sup> Roger E. Reynolds, "The Drama of Medieval Liturgical Processions," *Revue de Musicologie*, vol. 86, no.1 (2000): 141.

<sup>100</sup> Ashley and Sheingorn, "Sainte Foy on the Loose, or, The Possibilities of Procession," 57.

procession.<sup>101</sup> Simple polyphony could have served alongside singing in unison and octaves as a way to enhance the cohesion of the populace, while also serving to amplify the sound.

### **Italian Sources of Simple Polyphony**

Based on the documents that survive, Padua seems to have been a city that particularly valued a type of simple polyphony. The technique of improvised polyphony even functioned as part of a city-supported procession there. In Padua we also find the first occurrence of one of the terms related to this kind of music: *cantus planus binatim*, which is used specifically to refer to two-voice non-mensural polyphony. Although the supposed creator of this term, Prosdocimus de Beldemandis, uses it this way, Margaret Bent posits that *cantus planus binatim* should be applicable to a wider range of simple polyphony based on a sacred text,<sup>102</sup> which seems plausible to me.

Prosdocimus was highly educated, having studied at the universities of Padua and Bologna before taking a teaching post in Padua in 1420 or 1422, which he kept until his death in 1428. He had a license in medicine, although he was primarily known for his work in music theory, astronomy, and mathematics. One of his treatises on music, *Expositiones tractatus practice cantus mensurabilis Johannis de Muris*, contains the only known contemporary theoretical description of *cantus planus binatim*; it is from this

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<sup>101</sup> Ashley and Sheingorn, “*Sainte Foy* on the Loose, or, The Possibilities of Procession,” 55.

<sup>102</sup> Bent, Margaret, “The Definition of Simple Polyphony, Some Questions,” in *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, 33-42. Rome: Torre d’Orfeo, 1989.

particular discussion that the term originates. The *Expositiones* states that *cantus planus binatim* should be ‘*voces pares et dulces*.’<sup>103</sup>

At the time of Prosdocimus de Beldemandis, Padua was part of the Venetian Republic, as it had been since 1405. In addition to the works of Prosdocimus, a number of more direct sources are preserved in Padua. Two books of the cathedral library contain evidence of simple polyphony performed in association with city processions and dramatic Offices. Manuscripts C55 and C56 were compiled between 1407 and 1472, and include a number of thirteenth-century rituals and music. These books describe theatrical performances that would take place during the Office of major feasts, such as Easter. Some of the pieces were connected to two-voice improvised singing prescribed in the *liber ordinarius* of the cathedral from the middle of the thirteenth century.<sup>104</sup>

One of the dramatic offices, the Annunciation Office, was recorded by the city statutes to have been performed outside the cathedral as part of a city procession, an important civic and religious event to Padua. The people of the city took part in processing and singing while the Angel and Mary were carried from the chapel of the Palazzo della Ragione to the Roman arena. A chapel was built on the latter site in 1305, and this was where the office would be performed. Here is a direct connection between simple polyphony and the procession.

Another example of simple polyphony is connected to Venice. In his examination of some Byzantine manuscripts from the fifteenth century now in the Monastery of Docheiariou on Mount Athos, Dimitri Conomos suggests that the composers were

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<sup>103</sup> Pierluigi Petrobelli and Sergio Durante, “Padua,” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/05783>. (Accessed June 11, 2013).

<sup>104</sup> Pierluigi Petrobelli and Sergio Durante, “Padua.”

influenced by music they heard in Italian churches. Byzantine liturgical music is an overwhelmingly monophonic tradition; even the use of drones was not established until the sixteenth century.<sup>105</sup> However, two composers are known for having experimented with polyphony in the elaboration of Byzantine chant. At least one of the two, Ioannes Plousiadenos, had a strong connection to Venice. Conomos calls him a “Latinophile musician.” Plousiadenos supported the union of Florence and thought highly of the Roman Church.<sup>106</sup> He even lived and worked for a time in Italy, spending twenty years copying manuscripts in Venice from 1472 to c.1492, and then visited the city again later. It appears that Plousiadenos wanted to insert his Western-style polyphonic communion verses into the repertory of the Greek Church.<sup>107</sup> Figure 4.1 shows a transcription of the verse of a psalm setting, set by Ioannes Plousiadenos.

This music and the psalm settings of Manuel Gazēz—the second Byzantine composer of simple polyphony with possible connections to Italy—feature two note-against-note parts that mostly move in parallel motion. There is also some oblique motion and even occasional voice crossing. The pieces strongly favor the interval of the fifth, the fourth, and the unison. Intervals of the second and third are primarily used as passing notes, but they occasionally occur in a parallel context. The treatment of the voices seems similar to both early organum and to various types of simple polyphony that survived in performance in many areas of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe, such as Northern Germany, the Netherlands, and Iberia. While the Byzantines did not end up

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<sup>105</sup> Dimitri Conomos, “Experimental Polyphony, ‘According to the...Latins’ in Late Byzantine Psalmody,” *Early Music History*, vol. 2 (1982): 1.

<sup>106</sup> Dimitri Conomos, “Experimental Polyphony, ‘According to the...Latins’ in Late Byzantine Psalmody,” 7.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

*Psalm 148.1*

Rubric: A double melody according to the chant of the Latins

The image shows a musical score for Psalm 148.1. It consists of three systems of music. The first system has two staves: the top staff is labeled '[black]' and the bottom staff is labeled '[red]'. The text 'Ai' is written below the first staff, and 'ME' is written below the second staff. The second system has two staves with the text 'TE TON KI TON KU' written below. The third system has two staves with the text 'TON KI PI OS' written below. The music is written in a medieval style with square neumes on a four-line staff. The text is in Latin and Greek. The word 'mode 4 plagal' is written below the first system.

**Figure 4.1.** Transcription of excerpt of *Psalm 148.1*  
from MS 312; 66v<sup>108</sup>

adopting these techniques, the few experimental pieces are evidence that the sounds of simple polyphony were very much in the ears of those living in and visiting Italy in the fifteenth century.

In order to illustrate the functions and the range of usage that simple polyphony had in medieval Italy, I will discuss two examples of different contexts that include simple polyphony. First, I will discuss the paraliturgical music of the Franciscans in the fifteenth century as shown by Rome, St Isidore's College, MS 1. 88. Second, I will comment on the performance practices of a thirteenth-century procession as described in Oderigo in his *Ordo Officiorum*. This will offer clear evidence that simple polyphony played a significant role in a variety of contexts.

<sup>108</sup> Dimitri Conomos, "Experimental Polyphony, 'According to the...Latins' in Late Byzantine Psalmody," 5.

## Franciscan *Laude* and Hymns

Except for the sources from the cathedrals of Padua and Cividale del Friuli, most of the notated evidence of simple polyphony from Italy originated in Dominican and Franciscan monasteries. Mendicant orders were not advocates of long and elaborate services. The early Dominicans were even opposed to simple discant and singing in octaves, with precepts against each in 1242 and 1250, respectively.<sup>109</sup> Somehow centers of the order overcame these earlier resolutions, as the Dominicans were instrumental in preserving simple polyphony in the following centuries. The travel and interaction with people outside the monasteries required by Dominicans perhaps contributed to this acceptance of at least a small amount of elaboration on chant.

Hymns and *laude* are more popular genres, appropriate for use both inside the monastery and outside, among the people. Many of the singers did not have extensive musical training, and simple note-against-note polyphony would resound well in the streets. More complex forms of *laude* developed alongside this tradition and were most likely sung by trained singers provided by confraternities. Simple polyphonic *laude* and hymns were performed in Padua and Siena and other cities of Italy during the fifteenth century.<sup>110</sup>

The Franciscans were involved in the preservation and use of simple polyphony, possibly also because of the call to spread the word among the common people, as well as the aversion to flamboyance. One Franciscan source is a manuscript that contains some

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<sup>109</sup> Jane Disley, "The Dominican Processional Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Lyell 72 (GB – OL72)," *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, eds. Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, (Rome: Torre d'Orfeo, 1989), 223.

<sup>110</sup> Frank D'Accone, *The Civic Muse: Music and Musicians in Siena during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 96.



paraliturgical music: Rome, St Isidore's College, MS 1. 88,<sup>111</sup> compiled in an Italian Franciscan convent during the fifteenth century. The script and notation suggests a provenance of northern or central Italy, possibly Milan or Venice or around the Umbrian region.<sup>112</sup> This source contains a number of laude and hymns with two or three written voices. The polyphonic pieces in this manuscript tend to be simple and note-against-note in texture. Even one of the three-voice works, *Lauda Syon salvatorem*, is of almost entirely note-against-note counterpoint and abounds with parallel motion. Many of the works in RSI 88 are dominated by parallel thirds or fifths. *Lauda Syon salvatorem* is also an example of a sequence that was transformed into a hymn.<sup>113</sup>

Figure 4.2, a reproduction from RSI 88 exemplifies a three-voice texture and counterpoint of simple polyphony in the general definition, even though it contains three notated voices. Thus, at the same time *Lauda Syon salvatorem* shows that simple polyphony can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Figure 4.3 shows a transcription of the work. Some would not define this piece as *cantus planus binatim* because of the number of voices,<sup>114</sup> but I believe the note-against-note counterpoint and parallel motion used in *Lauda Syon salvatorem* justifies it to be classified as simple polyphony. This work offers performers a polyphonic technique that is not overly elaborate, enabling singers to perform a work with polyphony that allowed the singers and laypeople to focus on the

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<sup>111</sup> Also known as RSI 88.

<sup>112</sup> Fabio Carboni and Agostino Ziino, "Polyphonic Laude and Hymns in a Franciscan Codex from the end of the Fifteenth Century," *Early Music History*, vol. 31 (January 2012): 87.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*: 105.

<sup>114</sup> Gallo, F. Alberto, "The Practice of Cantus Planus Binatim in Italy from the Beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> to the Beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century," In *Le polifonie primitive in Friuli e in Europa: Atti del congresso internazionale, Cividale del Friuli, 22-24 agosto 1980*, edited by Cesare Corsi and Pierluigi Petrobelli, 13-30. Rome: Torre d'Orfeo, 1989.

words, while simultaneously giving them the opportunity to enjoy different musical textures.



**Figure 4.2.** *Laude Syon salvatorem*, Rome, St Isidore's College, MS 1. 88; 15v <sup>115</sup>

### **Performance Practice of Processions**

Given the improvisatory nature of simple polyphony, sometimes we must endeavor to surmise its use without notated music. The lack of these kinds of sources does not mean that the technique was absent. In addition, it is also desirable to discover explicit examples of the music's functions. Primary written sources such as Oderigo's *Ordo Officiorum* offer that opportunity without containing any examples of notated

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<sup>115</sup> Fabio Carboni and Agostino Ziino, "Polyphonic Laude and Hymns in a Franciscan Codex from the end of the Fifteenth Century," 137.

The image shows a musical score for three voices: C (Cantus), D (Dessus), and I (Tenor). The score is divided into three systems. The first system contains the first two lines of music. The second system contains the next two lines. The third system contains the final two lines. Each line of music includes a vocal line with Latin lyrics underneath. The lyrics are: 'Lau - de sy - on sal - va - to - rem', 'Lau - de do - mi - ni de - i pa - tris - mi - sericordia - rum', and 'san - ti - spi - ri - tus A - glo - rum Do - mi - ni et'. The notation includes treble clefs, a 3/8 time signature, and various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

**Figure 4.3.** Transcription of *Laude Syon salvatorem*<sup>116</sup>

music. No sources of notated organum or simple polyphony survive from Siena, located in central Italy. It might not have been important to preserve the practice of polyphony in notation there, or perhaps examples that might have been notated simply do not survive.

However, descriptions of liturgical practice in Siena survive in the form of the *Ordo Officiorum*, written by Oderigo in 1215. Despite the early date of this source, the polyphonic practices described seem to have endured until at least the late fourteenth

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<sup>116</sup> Carboni and Ziino, “Polyphonic Laude and Hymns in a Franciscan Codex from the end of the Fifteenth Century,” 147.

century.<sup>117</sup> According to Oderigo, the cantor had the power to designate two or more soloists to perform in organum with or without him. The places where organum was deemed appropriate varies: examples include parts of offices, such as the invitatory antiphon and psalm, *Venite exsultemus*, at Matins; the hymn *Nunc sancte*, along with the Terce antiphon, responsory, and verse on Sundays and feast days.<sup>118</sup> Part of the Mass was also sung in organum: the Alleluia and its verse on Sundays and feast days. The *Benedictus Dominus* responsory was performed in organum by the clergy while processing around the church and cloister; an antiphon that follows, *Specialis Virgo*, is also sung in organum by the group while returning to the choir after the blessings and prayers.<sup>119</sup> These are just a few instances Oderigo records singing in polyphony.

Based on the above examples in Oderigo's *Ordo Officiorum*, it appears that singing music in organum could have been done for embellishing special occasions (Sundays and feast days) and processions, although it was not limited to these kinds of events. Moreover, it is possible that there was more than one type of organal singing. Oderigo notes that the performers consisted of two or three solo singers, save in a few instances: the Sunday processions and certain feasts, most notably Palm Sunday. The usual Sunday processions seem to include the whole choir singing in organum.

The Palm Sunday example is particularly interesting, as a rubric contained in a twelfth-century Siena cathedral hymnary and processional (BCIS, MS F. IV. II.) corroborates Oderigo's description of organum as prescribed for Palm Sunday. As in

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<sup>117</sup> Colleen Reardon. "Siena." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25719>.

<sup>118</sup> Frank D'Accone, *The Civic Muse*, 72-73.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

many cities, Palm Sunday was an important event for Siena. After the morning Mass, the bishop, clergy, and townspeople would all process to the church of Saint Martin while singing three pairs of responsories and verses: *In die qua invocavi* and *Deus Deus meus*, *Fratres mei* and *Amici mei*, and *Eripe me* and *Accureunt linguas*.<sup>120</sup> BCIS, MS F. IV. II. mentions two other verses that were sung, *Circumdederunt* and *Quoniam tribulatio*. People of the town seem to have participated in the unison singing of the responsories, while the verses were sung in organum by an undesignated number of singers. Oderigo, who usually specifies when there are solo singers, is vague as to the performing forces of such an event, so we might argue that the whole choir of clergymen sang the verses in organum. The townspeople might have even joined in on the melody. The question of whether the clerics were singing while moving or standing still is not addressed.

Outside of Saint Martin's, the hymn *Nunc sancte* was also sung in organum, in a 'festive' manner. The 'festive' designation was given both by Oderigo and the twelfth-century hymnary and processional, and this seems to indicate that at least the singing of this hymn was a long-standing tradition that included the earlier manuscript.<sup>121</sup> Oderigo even refers to the 'little processional book' on multiple occasions.<sup>122</sup> Unfortunately, as stated above, there are no surviving notations of the kind of polyphonic technique found associated with thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Padua, in BCIS, MS F. IV. II., or elsewhere.

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<sup>120</sup> D'Accone, *The Civic Music*, 88.

<sup>121</sup> D'Accone, *The Civic Music*, 88.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

Oderigo continues, describing more instances of performing organum: three antiphons (*Cum appropinquaret*, *Cum audisset*, and *Multa turba*) and a hymn were sung in organum on the return procession to the cathedral. Members of the clergy sang a number of other pieces while paused at the Porta Salaria on the way back. At the cathedral square, there was some unison singing in addition to a sermon by the bishop or other church official. Then the cantor and two clergymen sang several verses in measured organum (*'modulando'*). Oderigo's specific indication of the music being rhythmically measured is a marked contrast from the other organal singing mentioned previously.<sup>123</sup>

In general, the Palm Sunday procession in Siena offered many opportunities for a variety of improvised polyphony, including measured and unmeasured singing by soloists, and unmeasured singing by a choir. This might have served to subdivide the movement of the procession into sections, offer a variety of sounds for the long duration of the celebration, and bring out the festive nature of the event. Choices in texture could reflect stops on the journey through the town; this would be similar to what has been noted regarding the choice of chant texts.<sup>124</sup>

Processions could even have acted as a display of the power of the city and church by showcasing the skill and range of its clergy. The outdoor setting of much of the performance was especially suitable for a note-against-note simple kind of improvisatory singing. Finally, the rituals involved with high feast days had a tendency to be resistant to change; earlier traditions of performing would be more likely to remain in use here.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> See Craig Wright's "The Palm Sunday Procession in Medieval Chartres" for discussion on this topic.

## Conclusion

Reinhard Strohm makes a distinction between sacred music of the choir and music of the chapel.<sup>125</sup> The music of the choir tended to be functional and simple in nature, while the music of the chapel was the ornate art of the elite. In the northern and central regions of medieval Italy, the emphasis on simple and improvised polyphony in the religious music might indicate the lack of a dominating sacred elite with a high level of music education. A simple and straightforward texture allowed the text to be understood, and the technique of creating this musical elaboration could be acquired and grasped with little formal education. For the same reason, simple polyphony served a valuable purpose by appealing to and encouraging participation by people of the lower classes in the processional event. Similar to its use by the music of the pilgrims of Montserrat and the members of the *Devotio Moderna*, simple polyphony was used to lend variety and interest to liturgical and paraliturgical tunes in northern and central Italy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Processions were some of the most visible settings for simple polyphony. Early organum and later improvised polyphony already had an association with processional antiphons and verses of the liturgy, so it would have been obvious to extend its use to religious activity out of doors. Processing singers in both rural and urban areas could delineate significant landmarks on the journey through changes in texture and sonority. Civic processions could serve to display the power of the city in which they took place, and in that context perhaps elaborate improvisation by some of the more skilled singers occurred. Processions in smaller towns and rural areas or those featuring the participation

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<sup>125</sup> Reinhard Strohm, *The Rise of European Music, 1380-1500*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 270.

of mendicant orders might have been flavored with less distracting and extravagant sounds, but simple polyphony such as that described in the two examples above could add power and moderate embellishment to chant.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Simple polyphony was a widespread phenomenon in many areas of Europe from the early Middle Ages on, and it lasted well into the early modern period. It was a practice of the lower classes and people with limited education, since it was easy to learn while still appealing to the common man, for whom it was performed or who were even the performers themselves. Thus this was likely the polyphonic music most people had access to and familiarity with. As musicologists we should also concern ourselves with this sort of music in addition to the more complex and groundbreaking music of the elite composers.

In most surveys and overviews of medieval and Renaissance music, the practice of simple polyphony is usually limited to the subject of Winchester organum and brief mentions of later use of techniques similar to those that appear in that manuscript. Definitions are often quite limiting as well. Simple polyphony is mostly identified with the use of parallel motion, and while that was often the case, I have showed that contrary motion was standard in many notated examples of simple polyphony.

Defining simple polyphony is not an easy task, as should have become apparent from this study. In general, the technique tends to appear in notation as unmeasured and in two parts. However, in agreement with some scholars, I do not believe that simple polyphony has to be limited to two voices (three appear occasionally), and I believe that it can appear with notated measure. Although the nature of simple polyphony is difficult to describe, it is fairly easy to recognize. The music is syllabic and homorhythmic, counterpoint tends to be dominated by either parallel motion or contrary motion, and the

preferred movement is achieved in an almost formulaic fashion. Ends of phrases are marked with dissonances—‘passing tones’ of thirds, sometimes even seconds—that ‘resolve’ to consonances (octaves or fifths). The intervals of fourths and sixths are common in the middle of phrases. The surviving examples of notated simple polyphony serve as settings to paraliturgical or liturgical texts, and it seemed to function as non-distracting, simple music that was easy to perform and was appropriate in devotional, meditative, or religiously celebratory contexts.

I have focused on three major examples in this paper: first, the music of the *Devotio Moderna*; second, music of the pilgrims to Montserrat as evident from the *Llibre Vermell*; and finally, the laude and processional music of late medieval and early Renaissance northern Italy. My study of simple polyphony of the *Devotio Moderna* emphasizes the important role music played in that spiritual community. Members belonged to all classes, but mostly the middle class. Both class configuration and function probably had an effect of the increased importance of simple polyphony. Copying books provided useful work and preserved techniques of performance, and most of these books were used by the members of the house who had created them. The fact that these pieces were copied and found practical use in these houses indicates that at least some members had a level of musical literacy; however, the ad hoc notation reveals that this literacy was not particularly advanced or modern in nature. Music served both the individual and the members of the group or house, and it was important that it be devotional, humble, and often meditative. It was crucial that music not be distracting; elaborate or ostentatious music stood next to jewelry, the owning of servants, and other objects of luxury, and was considered even harmful to one’s spiritual health. Simple polyphony offered little

elaboration of a tune and allowed for the participation of several people. The *Devotio Moderna* is an essential context in which to investigate the concept and practice of simple polyphony.

The *Llibre Vermell* is a book of pilgrim culture, miracle stories, and music found at Montserrat, often neglected by scholars outside of Spain and France. Medieval pilgrims, including those whose musical traditions have been informed by the *Llibre Vermell*, came from all classes. However, Montserrat was not as cosmopolitan as some other sites: this pilgrimage venue would probably have had more local people participating. As a result, the music contained in the *Llibre Vermell* might have had a local flavor, although the small number of pieces presents several genres. This pilgrim music was intended to offer spiritually healthy opportunities to dance, sing, and play instruments. Besides being appropriate for the layman, the songs had to be appealing and functional. Simple polyphony was one of the techniques that could well serve all these purposes.

The late medieval and early Renaissance genre of the *lauda* was similar to the music of the *Devotio Moderna* and the *Llibre Vermell* in that it was devotional and was destined for performers and listeners of all social classes. Laude of a rather simple sort of polyphony were more suitable for the non-professional performers and listeners of the lower classes. Given its limited performance demands, this technique also found a good home in the procession that was the context for many laude—it was effectively incorporated into movement with very little trouble. Mendicant orders, with which many extant sources of notated simple polyphony are associated, tended to prefer means of communication appealing to the common man. Chant elaborated with simple polyphony

could have been a musical equivalent of the direct but colorful sermons performed by mendicant preachers. Finally, the possibility for alternation between simple polyphony and monophony offered changes in musical texture and sonority that could provide a musical response to physical landmarks, as well as lending variety.

### **Pathways for Further Research**

The idea of a chronological and evolutionist narrative in music history is in the process of being revisited in academia, but the idea still affects musicologists, at the very least unconsciously. Overviews, surveys, and other less in-depth writings still tend to adhere to the concepts of development and progress. Unfortunately, this means that many traditional, conservative, and less complex types of music are treated as ‘digressions.’ Simple polyphony especially suffers in this regard, and is even entirely ignored in serious study. The lack of surviving notation compounds this problem.

As one might imagine is the case for a neglected field of study, simple polyphony requires further inquiry in a variety of areas. This paper is meant to be an introduction to simple polyphony and a survey of some exemplifying practices. I have exposed the surface of the topic in general, and I have not been able to go into depth about a number of issues.

The central questions concerning simple polyphony are related to performance practice. The use of rhythm is a major point of contention in most music of the medieval period, before notation was adequate for its precise indication. Even pieces of the twentieth century raise controversies of rhythm. F. Alberto Gallo, and other early scholars of simple polyphony defined it as unmeasured music in the vein of

Prosdocimus's concept of *cantus planus binatim*. However, the fact that this music was often notated without rhythm does not mean that it was performed in a free fashion. It could have been improvised in that manner,<sup>126</sup> but there are other possibilities. Simple polyphony in general was based on oral tradition, so perhaps rhythmic realization was transmitted as part of that reality; or the lyrics of the piece could have shaped the rhythmic performance of the music. This would have been especially appropriate for the music of the *Devotio moderna*, where the words were to express devotion to God and the music was deliberately kept simple in part to prevent distraction from the meaning of the text.

Another problem of performance practice is the composition of the performing forces. The founder and other writers who belonged to the *Devotio Moderna* seemed to have considered instruments frivolous: their use was probably not common, but the practices in Iberia and Italy do not preclude instrumental accompaniment. In fact, the performance of the *Llibre Vermell*. But what about the use of soloists as opposed to choral performance? These questions of performance practice remain open to further inquiry.

In addition to questions of performance practice, I would argue that regions other than the ones discussed here warrant further study as well. Although England, France, Germany, the Low Countries, and, to a lesser extent, Iberia, have drawn most of the focus of the little work that has been done, simple polyphony occurred elsewhere as well. For instance, the Republic of Georgia has an improvised polyphonic tradition that goes back centuries, and it is largely ignored by scholars outside Eastern Europe. The simple polyphonic traditions of other European regions, such as Scandinavia, Austria, Hungary,

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<sup>126</sup> Although it might have been challenging to continuously change notes simultaneously, precise synchronous movement might not have been required, so this method of performance is possible.

Bulgaria, and Croatia also require more thorough examination, particularly in Anglo-American academia.

An intriguing issue related to the exploration of the simple polyphonies of other regions is the effect that geographic characteristics and time period have on local practices of simple polyphony. Contemporary modern practices vary significantly across Europe, and despite the centralizing force of the Church, performance practice likely would have reflected regional practices. Regionalism in chant has received some attention, but there is much work to be done in the question of its place in the practice of medieval and Renaissance simple polyphony. Chronology appears to be another factor. It seems that intervals of thirds and sixths came to be more commonly notated in the later period when it had become fashionable to privilege those intervals. ‘Cadencing’ on the octave, and to a lesser extent on the fifth, remained common in simple polyphony as it did in the more complex polyphony of the elite. However, perhaps simple polyphony reflected practices of the local commoners, as indicated by traditions of parallel movement or privileging of fourths that survived into later periods in some areas.

In sum, I sought to contribute a wide-ranging overview of the subject of simple polyphony and expose some of the patterns across three exemplary musical cultures. There is so much more work left to be done in the study of simple polyphony, which has only recently emerged as a legitimate field of inquiry. It is admittedly difficult to sift through the confusion of primary evidence and sparse number of English-language studies addressing the subject, but it is a worthwhile endeavor just to add some clarity to our understanding of this practice. I have contributed a brief overview of simple polyphony as a topic, several case studies, and speculation as to its creation and use.

Simple polyphony is exciting despite its 'simplicity,' lack of flashiness, and situation on the periphery of the concept of a linear evolution in polyphony. The music was incredibly enduring and continued to be performed for hundreds of years, straddling various cultures, eras, and regions. The technique was an important tool both for singers in churches and monasteries, and for singers completely outside the liturgical context. We cannot forget that music existed also outside of highly educated, wealthy, and powerful contexts.

## APPENDIX

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