Contratenor parts in polyphonic songs from the late Trecento (Italy, ca. 1400): Challenges for concepts of polyphony and improvisation

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Background in music history. In the 14th century, both in France (Ars nova) and in Italy (Trecento) emerge highly specialized compositional practices of polyphonic songs on vernacular texts in the formes fixes. Whereas transmission in two voices (cantus and tenor) is predominant in the early Trecento, after mid-century a three-voice-transmission (cantus, tenor, and contratenor) becomes increasingly important, but exists side by side with a continuous transmission in two voices.

Background in music psychology. Music and cognition, especially theories on expectation.

Aims. For an analysis of the contratenor concept in Italian Trecento music, some prominent terms as counterpoint, improvisation, or polyphony have to be re-evaluated. In addition, some concepts from the field of music cognition are discussed for their relevance for musicological research on early polyphony.

Main contribution. The contratenor concept of the late Trecento is based on a model of polyphony which is not strictly linear (i.e. a combination of several independent melodic lines), but a combination of a cantus-tenor-core and a contratenor which acts as a sort of 'commentary'. This concept of polyphony refers to the theory of contrapunctus and to the genre conventions of the formes fixes. The comparison of two different contratenors to Bartolino da Padova’s ballata El no me giova reveals common functions of the two contratenors even though their idioms are quite different. Within this framework some models from music cognition as the primer/target model of expectation and models of culturally framed learning processes complement the results from source studies and music analysis.

Implications. Music historians should be aware of implicit cognitive concepts in their analytical and historiographical methods. Music psychologists might consider the historical variety of categories like polyphony, counterpoint, or consonance.

Keywords: Trecento, Contratenor, Contrapunctus, Bartolino da Padova, expectancy.

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Introduction

Regarding polyphonic music of the Late Middle Ages, the music of the Italian Trecento (ca. 1330-1415) appears as a unique repertoire. The prevailing genres of composition are polyphonic songs, with the ballata and the madrigal as the most prominent *formes fixes*. The songs were composed and executed by a small cultural elite of both clericals and non-clericals, including women, in northern Italian city states as e. g. Florence or Padua. Often they were part of half-official rituals that consisted of conversation, good meals and dance and were meant to demonstrate the cultural level of the city. The songs are transmitted in a corpus of manuscripts from ca. 1375-1420; the most famous of these is the Florentine *Squarcialupi Codex* (*Sq*., ca. 1415). Furthermore, an abundant wealth of fragments contributes to our understanding of the music from the period. In a recent study, I have discussed a corpus of about 60 songs from five composers from the late Trecento; the present article summarizes some results from this study. The problem emerging from the transmission of many of these songs is that, if transmitted in more than one manuscript, they often appear in both two- and three-voice-versions. This transmission is at odds with a widespread metanarrative on the development of polyphonic thinking in the 14th century. According to this narrative, in the middle ages we can see a continuous tendency to increase the number of voices – first from monophony to polyphony, then increasing from two to three to four, the goal or *telos* being four-voice-counterpoint of the Renaissance polyphony model. Thus, in...
repertoire lists and encyclopedias, the number of voices is a central classifying
criteria. Deviant voice numbers are highlighted because they are ascribed historical
significance. According to the narrative, two-voice polyphony prevails in the earlier,
three-voice polyphony in the later phase of the Trecento.6

A detailed study of the polyphonic songs of the composer Bartolino da Padova (ca.
1365-ca. 1405) has led to the conclusion that within this repertoire it is not possible to
reconstruct the “original” number of voices of single songs or to explain the
continuous two-voice transmission just with regard to local or temporal preferences of
the sources.7 Whereas the cantus and tenor usually are transmitted with only a few
variants, the third voice, called contratenor, can be present or omitted in the sources.
In most cases, the manuscripts show no signs that the omission was due to a scribal
error or to some physical damage of the source. Furthermore, as has been known for
some time, in some cases there even exist two different, mutually independent
contratenors, at times within the same source.8 In sum, these results give reason to
rethink the implications of the voice-number narrative. Sure, the broad transmission in
three voices documents a lively and widespread three-voice practice in Italy around

6 Especially in Germany, Kurt von Fischer and Dorothea Baumann set this narrative on the agenda, e.g.
Geining, Die Überlieferung der Kompositionen Francesco Landinis in Musikhandschriften des späten
14. und frühen 15. Jahrhunderts vol. 5 of Musico mensurabilis (Hildesheim et al.: Olms 2012; PhD Diss.
Hamburg 2009) and the contributions by Margaret Bent and Elizabeth Eva Leach (cf. note 5).

Mehrfachüberlieferung von Ballaten und Madrigalen in Italien um 1400,” in: Die Musikforschung 60
(2007), pp. 2–12.

8 The phenomenon of multiple contratenors has been studied for some decades, e. g. by Hans-Otto Korth,
Studien zum Kantilenensatz im frühen 15. Jahrhundert. Kantilenensätze mit auswechselbaren
Contratenores, vol. 29 of Berliner Musikwissenschaftliche Arbeiten (München/Salzburg: Katzlichler,
1986) and especially by Pedro Memelsdorff, e. g. “‘Lizadra donna’: Ciconia, Matteo da Perugia, and the
Late Medieval Ars Contratenorinis”, in: Philippe Vendrix (ed.), Johannes Ciconia. Musicien de la
transition (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2003), pp. 233–278 (even in: Studi musicali 31 (2002), S. 271–306); id.,
“‘Più chiar che’l sol’: Luce su un contratenor di Antonello da Caserta”, in: Recercare 4 (1992), pp. 5–22;
id., “Ore Pandolfum: Il contratenor come glossa strutturale”, in: Maria Teresa Rosa
Barezzani/Rodobaldo Tibaldi (ed.), Musica e liturgie nel medioevo Bresciano (secoli XI-XV). Atti
dell’incontro nazionale di studio (Brescia, 3-4 aprile 2008) (Brescia: Fondazione civiltà bresciana,
2009), pp. 381-420.
1400. Yet, the third voice, the contratenor, was apparently not regarded as necessary in the written versions of the songs by contemporary musicians and scribes.

There are two main areas of interdisciplinary interest implied in the contratenor concept of the late Trecento. On the one hand, it may serve as an example for strategies of historical contextualization of seemingly unequivocal terms like “voice”, “polyphony”, or “counterpoint”. On the other hand, it opens the field for questions of musical cognition, with respect to both the compositional process and the evaluation of the sources.

1. **Contrapunctus theory as conceptual framework of late Trecento polyphony**

A reconstruction of compositional processes in the late Trecento requires a clarification of the model of polyphony relevant for this repertoire. With regard to the song transmission in the sources and to theoretical texts from the period, we can infer that the cantus has in fact to be understood as something more than just one voice or part. In secular songs, the cantus part implies already the possibilities of tenor progressions at central passages. Tenors usually have supporting, at times even complementary function in relation to the cantus. For the relation between these two voices, there exists a theoretical regulation in the form of the so-called contrapunctus theory of the 14th and 15th centuries, e.g. Prosdocimus de Beldemandis. Six basic principles are at the core of the contrapunctus theory:

1. Contrapunctus is restricted to perfect and imperfect consonances (perfect: 1, 5, 8; imperfect: 3, 6) and excludes dissonances (2, 7, 9, +4/-5 etc.).
2. Contrapunctus begins and ends with a perfect consonance.
3. Parallels of perfect consonances are not allowed.
4. Imperfect consonances should be interspersed with perfect ones.
5. Mi contra fa is forbidden.
6. A perfect consonance should be reached from nearest imperfect consonance (3→1, 3→5; 6→8).

Contrapunctus theory is strictly dyadic in its thinking. It regulates the succession of dyads (i.e. of sonorities consisting of two notes). “Only indirectly does counterpoint result in placing melody against melody; the melody resulting from the contrapuntal

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11 The numbers given in this table represent interval types (8= octave, 5= fifth etc.).
operation is secondary to the principles governing the succession of dyads.”¹³ This
theory primarily concerns improvised note-against-note counterpoint on a given
\textit{cantus firmus}, a challenge which all choir boys had to master when celebrating chant
in mass or other sacred ceremonies.¹⁴ It is thus not entirely equivalent with the
situation of \textit{cantus}-centered composition of secular songs.

Moreover, Margaret Bent has emphasized that \textit{contrapunctus} theory is not valid for
all voice relations, but only for the voices “in counterpoint”, i.e. between \textit{cantus} and
\textit{tenor} on the one hand and between \textit{contratenor} and \textit{tenor} on the other.¹⁵
\textit{Contratenors}, on the other hand, have a considerable freedom in their movement and
show generally – compared to what we would expect from a voice as polyphonic
entity - at times strange and discontinuous shapes.

Besides the \textit{contrapunctus} theory, the second important framework is the generic
conventions which are particularly strong in Italian \textit{Trecento} music. There are clear
theoretical descriptions of the lyrical forms in treatises on poetry as e.g. Antonio da
Tempo’s \textit{Summa artis rithimici vulgaris dictaminis}.¹⁶ Even in terms of musical
structure, the genres were well defined both in declamatory form and basic melodic
syntax,¹⁷ as will be exemplified below.

¹³ Bent, \textit{Ciconia, Prosdocimo}, p. 73.
¹⁵ On the subject of contratenor see even Margaret Bent: “Naming of Parts: Notes on the Contratenor, ca.
1350–1500”, in: Gioia Filocamo und M. Jennifer Bloxam (ed.), \textit{‘Uno gentile et subtile ingenio’: Studies
¹⁶ Antonio da Tempo: \textit{Summa Artis Rithimici Vulgaris Dictaminis}, ed. by Richard Andrews vol. 136 of
\textit{Collezione di opere inedite e rare} (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1977).
2. A case study: Bartolino da Padova’s *El no me giova*

The following example shows the opening of the ballata *El no me giova* by Bartolino da Padova.

Music example. Bartolino da Padova, Ballata *El no me giova*, ed. Rotter-Broman, b. 1-16 with two *contratenors* (one in *PR* and *Sq*, the other in *ModA*) \(^{18}\)

In ballatas, the texts usually contain a restricted set of motives related to the concept of courtly love. Both text and music have a cyclical structure: The first two verses, called *ripresa*, are repeated in the end of the piece with the same music. When they return, they have acquired new layers of meaning through the preceding parts (two *piedi* and a *volta*). The text of the *ripresa* of *El no me giova* reads: “El no me giova ne val don[n]a fuçire/Ché quando fugio allor me par morire” ("It's no use or help fleeing, my lady, because it feels like dying when I do it."). This is a typical example of the working premises of courtly love: the lover keeps on singing and knows he will never reach the adored Lady, but he will not stop adoring her. The cyclical return of the *ripresa* matches the circulating motion of the lyrical self.

Let us first regard the three-part-version of codex Reina (PR) (the first three lines in the music example). The *cantus* shows a typical melodic design in the long melisma on the first and penultimate syllables (bb. 1-5 and 9-16) and the syllabic declamation of the syllables 2-9 of the endecasyllabic (11-syllable)-verse (bb. 5-8). Characteristic for Bartolino are the frequent short pauses in both *cantus* and *tenor* and the syncopations between the melismatic parts. They create a tension to be solved by continued declamation (b. 5) and by the cadence in bars 14-16. The word ‘cadence’ must not be interpreted in the modern sense of reaching the tonic. It is rather a model of two dyads plus a melodic formula in *cantus* and *tenor* which moves to the final note of a phrase. Following rule (2) of the *contrapunctus* rules, the basis for a final note (or a resting point) is a perfect consonance, reached with closest motion from an imperfect consonance. In bb. 14-15, *cantus* and *tenor* (i.e. the voices “in counterpoint”) move stepwise from the sixth *f*-d to the octave e-e.

Cadences in 14th century polyphony are thus resting points, but they do not define a central tonic of the song like in more recent music. Thus, there are normally not one single, but several local “tonics” within the same piece. This implies also that the listener cannot anticipate on which tone the next cadence is going to occur. In the *cantus-tenor* core of *El no me giova*, we observe a series of cadences from bar 4 into 5 (e-b→d-d; with a so-called Landini-cadence in the *cantus*), bar 5 into 6 (a-f, sharpened to ff→g-g) and bar 8 into 9 (b-d→c).

With this in mind, we can now concentrate on the contribution of the *contratenor* to this *cantus-tenor* core. Interestingly, the *contratenor* does not support the first cadence (the ‘right’ position would be a fifth above the tenor, i.e. a), but pauses just at the beginning of bar 5. Whereas the *cantus-tenor* core as described fulfills the contrapuntal convention for the first cadence, the *contratenor* sets it into question.

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19 Translation: Giovanni Carsaniga in *Medieval Music Database*,
This first cadence – which even occurs in other songs\(^{20}\) – forms thus a specific starting point for the song. Its consequences are seen in the following bars, where the contratenor again thwarts the \(c\) cadence in bar 9 with the lower \(a\), and especially in bars 11-14. There the cantus is first reluctant to reach the envisaged goal, circulating in syncopated movements before turning into the \(e\) cadence in bar 15. The tenor supports the cantus’s generic play on the penultimate syllable and prepares the \(e\) cadence with stepwise motion first one bar before the resolution (b. 14). The contratenor, however, as a consequence – or: what I take for consequence in the composer’s play with the listeners’ expectations in relation to the first cadence – choses a very unusual, unexpected, and at this place strongly dissonant tone, seen from the 14th-century conventions: the minor sixth \(c\) above the tenor \(e\), resolved first one bar later to the regular fifth \(b\).

When regarding the contratenor as a part, it seems discontinuous, unsteady in its motion and uncharacteristic, and this is frequently typical for contratenors in the late Trecento. For contratenors, we have thus to draw the voice entity paradigm into question, i. e. the view that the voice is a coherent, continuous entity, which observes clear melodic constraints over the entire duration of the song. A contratenor may be regarded as an ad libitum voice with a function distinct from that of the cantus-tenor-core. I emphasize that I see this as a significant quality that merits special analytical attention. Yet, under this condition, we ought not expect from contratenors the qualities of a perfect voice entity: it may change position and function, it may pause or repeat some of the cantus’s notes – and still serve its meta-plan (or, as Pedro Memelsdorff has suggested, paratextual)\(^{21}\) role for the whole song.

To understand the music of the late Trecento, we should thus avoid models of polyphony implicitly derived from the established narrative of the increasing individual voices with the Renaissance polyphony. The framework for both conception and reception of polyphonic songs in the late Trecento repertoire is on the one side a strong genre conception based on the characteristics of the poetry, on the other side a common reference to some standard contrapunctus procedures.

3. Alternative contratenors: composition or improvisation?

Given the situation laid out above on late Trecento polyphonic songs, a non-specialist reader might wonder whether this situation is comparable to the distinction between composition and improvisation, which would mean that we could sort out the contratenor parts as “improvised” parts from the cantus-tenor-core of the song as the


Contratenor parts in polyphonic songs

Contratenors in Italian songs from the Trecento cannot be considered ad-libitum-voices in the sense of embellishment, or shifting contributions to the cantus/tenor-core, depending on the individual singers’ preferences. As far as we can judge from the sources, 14th century musicians and scribes did not regard contratenors as voices of less prescriptive quality per se. In fact, when transmitted in more than one source, contratenor parts are often identical or nearly identical with each other, as in our example El no me giova, where both Sq and PR transmit the same contratenor with only one slight rhythmic difference (b. 5). But at the same time, there are many cases where sources transmit singular contratenors to cantus-tenor-versions of songs transmitted in three or two voices elsewhere. This practice of composing new contratenors must have been widespread in northern Italy in the first decades of the 15th century. For El no me giova, there is the Codex ModA, which contains a different contratenor to this song, supposedly by the composer Matteo da Perugia (see the fourth line in the note example).

In the light of alternative contratenors, there are some interesting things to notice at the two cadences already discussed: In bar 5, Matteo’s contratenor has different notes, but the same rhythm as the contratenor in Sq, slightly different from the rhythm in PR. The effect to the cantus-tenor core is comparable: the cadence is evaded, the resolution to d comes one bar “too late.” In bar 15, Matteo’s contratenor is in the usual place, a fifth above the tenor, but even here this cadence is betrayed because the contratenor does not pause, but progresses to a third above the tenor. The third is according to the contrapunctus treatises an imperfect consonance and as such not able to form a perfect ending of a phrase. So, a contratenor composer may choose notes which in cases vary strongly in height and length, but its reference point is the cantus-tenor core of the song as a whole together with the internal structure of the

23 Anna Maria Busse Berger: Medieval Music and the Art of Memory, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Busse Berger demonstrates e.g. that treatises of music theory and the musical notation of the so-called Notre Dame School are intimately bound to techniques of memorization and thus less strongly preshadowing the rise of the modern composer than has been assumed.
24 This does not exclude certain local characteristics, notably in the case of Matteo da Perugia, see Memelsdorff, Lizzadra donna; Più chiar ch’il sol; Ore Pandolfum (note 8).
poem and common procedures of cadences within the rules of two-voice counterpoint.

In sum, to understand how musicians of the fourteenth century did “process” the structure of polyphony requires research on the conceptual frameworks of composition and the songs’ cultural environment, and invites reflections about the working models of counterpoint, polyphony, voices, the ontological status of the sources, and narrative conventions within the discipline.

Moreover, in the analysis of the songs, the contrapunctus rules on the one side, and the genre conventions on the other side, are referred to as norms which allow an understanding of the compositorial decisions in relation to categories of expectation and deception – categories which for a long time have received much attention within the field of music cognition. As these procedures seem to play an important role within the communication between late Trecento composers and their audience, the question arises how recent results from this research could contribute to our understanding of compositorial processes in the Trecento.

4. Late Trecento Polyphony and cognition: some reflections

The term “cognition” opens up a large field of human capacities. Cognition refers to “processes linked to perception, learning, memory, attention and the role of the perceivers’s (implicit and explicit) knowledge for these processes”. It is beyond doubt that polyphonic composition is an activity where music perception, memory and knowledge are intensively involved. But how can we understand the historical characteristics of the related cognitive processes for this specific musical and social milieu in Italy 600 years ago?

In recent times, the role of cultural knowledge in all processes of music perception has been valued as increasingly important in music psychology. On the other hand, beliefs in a universal musical language valid for all times and places have weakened considerably. “One idea that is frequently emphasized is that every ethnic culture is special, unique, and different. At a more general level, it is believed that music is not a universal language. Rather, it is assumed that it is more like a spoken language, a system of understanding that is learned only over an extended period of time.” In

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26 The genre conventions are discussed in detail in chapter IV: Musikzeit und Textzeit in Ballaten und Madrigalen in Komponieren in Italien um 1400, pp. 156-332.
29 Krumhansl et al., Cross-cultural music cognition, p. 14.
post-colonial critique, there is an obvious awareness of the risks of “western bias” or other implicit value judgments in the experimental models.\textsuperscript{30}

To try to understand a historical musical “system” as a foreign language, implies the reconstruction of this language’s “grammar”. For the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, Margaret Bent has used the term “grammar” metaphorically to circumscribe the cognitive basicality of the contrapunctus rules for 14\textsuperscript{th} century musicians.\textsuperscript{31} The general procedures of contrapunctus theory may even be expressed in more formalized grammar schemes. But they regulate, as we have seen, not every aspect of composition, especially not the contratenor’s relation to the cantus, and the melodic conventions for the three different voices are both less clear theorized and more variated. So, the reconstruction of the contratenor strategies cannot be deduced from contrapunctus rules, but has to rely on a combination of source studies (both music manuscripts and text sources) and analysis, without a result that might be easily converted into a basic “grammar”.

In this regard, however, it is interesting that recent research has focused on the non-verbal capacities of learning a new musical system without prior acculturation.\textsuperscript{32} This has implications for both the research object and the researcher him- or herself as well. On the one hand, it can make plausible how a little circle of connoisseurs gained its shared knowledge of this broad repertoire without a theory on the composition and evaluation of, say, the polyphonic ballata. This connoisseurship is an implicit precondition for my hypothesis that the composers are playing with their own tradition in the late Trecento (see below). On the other hand these findings can also encourage broad analytical studies into a repertoire of early music like the songs of the Trecento because our learning capacities may adapt to a foreign musical system even when we acquire it in an unsystematic way or via mere exposure.

The strongest relation between the historical and psychological issues in this research exists within the field of expectation.\textsuperscript{33} This category is used frequently within my analyses (as can be seen from the discussion of the contratenor’s deception of cadence expectations in Bartolino’s ballata) and has clear relations to the field of music cognition. For music of the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the relations between historical and psychological aspects have been explored by David Huron\textsuperscript{34} and Elisabeth Helmut.

\textsuperscript{30} Krumhansl et al., Cross-cultural music cognition, p. 38
\textsuperscript{34} David Huron: Sweet Anticipations. Music and the Psychology of Expectation (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2006).
Margulis.35 Margulis differentiates between different forms of expectation within the “contemporary analytical discourse” where, as she notes, “allusions to predictive listening are ubiquitous”.36 In this context belong also processing models, especially the priming paradigm: “words (or tones) that a preceding context have established as predictable are processed more quickly and more accurately than unrelated words (or tones).”37 Margulis stresses especially the point that “experiencing music constantly involves ‘listening ahead’ in one form or another.”

One point in Italian ballatas and madrigals where these issues are especially manifest is the first cadence, which can occur even before the syllabic declamation of the first verse begins. It can be shown that the first cadence often contains a combination of motives and dyadic progression that returns at other central points in the same song, sometimes in the original form, sometimes varied. The beginning of a song influences thus the continuation.38 Different ballatas by different composers may differ stylistically, but the procedures are comparable. So, for the listener the first cadence is kind of a primer and poses the possibility to judge a following target (progression or melodic shape) in its relation to this primer – even with the effect of surprise because of a deliberate distance. A parallel is also another special feature of the late phase of the Trecento, namely the play with models derived from the earlier periods of the Trecento. For the genre ballata this involves especially models by the “star” composer Francesco Landini who had gained a legendary status as blind organist, singer and philosopher.39 Even here one can describe the situation with the priming paradigm: composers first allude to the prominent model, then distance themselves from it, and the knowing listener can appreciate the strategy via expectancy responses. In connection with the generic conventions even the role of the poetic texts for the development of musical connoisseurship could be taken into account, with contributions from research on the interrelation of temporal organization and rhythmical structure of poetry and music on memory.40

While the aspects of grammar and of expectancy open up for a broader interdisciplinary scope between the field of historical musicology (including analysis) and music psychology, there are some problems to be solved and some caveats to be

36 Margulis, Surprise and Listening Ahead, p. 198.
37 Margulis, Surprise and Listening Ahead, p. 204.
38 Rotter-Broman, Komponieren in Italien um 1400, pp. 191-207.
raised. These concern the sources, the cultural setting, and the epistemological stance of our historical investigations.

1. When concerned with the field of music history, the category of cognition stands in a close but not unproblematic relation with the sources. To understand what people did and valued around 1400 requires extensive studies of musical manuscripts, theory treatises, the poetry set to music, as well as other text genres, of which the sources in mensural notation (and, with severe restrictions, modern editions of them) are the most important visual representation of our research objects as potentially sounding objects. But at the same time, there is no a priori given answer to the question how the sources are to be evaluated in relation to the compositional process of the music represented in them. At first glance, a piece transmitted in three voices on one folio of a manuscript might suggest that every voice is a world of its own because their graphic representations are laid out apart from each other, given the layout in the medieval songbooks is never in scores. But, as we have seen, the differentiation between the functions of the parts or voices has to be concluded from analytical findings and transmission details, and it is not easy to pinpoint to the precise function of the written manuscripts within the musical culture and practice. Composition is a combination of cognitive capacities, and as such composition is to be regarded as the capacity of planning music in the mind. This is independent of the medium, be it, as it is sometimes called, orally (which means: without visual aid) or on parchment or paper, and it is also independent of whether there exists a social role of composer in the milieu the music is composed within. But we have to turn to the sources for getting into contact with these planning processes.

2. Music reception and conception (i.e. composition) are surely cognitive categories, but at the same part of a cultural practice. They are directly interwinned with the question of “cultural knowledge”, which requires clarifying of the relationship between subject and community. Fürniss emphasizes this aspect when asking: „Polyphony being a collective practice, how much ‘marge de manœuvre’ has the subject within the collective construction? And concerning polyphony of the 12th to the 16th century: what is the place of the subject as a socially and musically acting person in these times? To whom is the singing addressed? The listener is s/he relevant for the conception of polyphony?“ For the polyphony of the late Trecento, we have to take the function of the music as demonstrating civilization and cultural learnedness into account. To reconstruct the social dimension of musical decisions requires research paradigms from sociology and social history.

3. The cultural world of polyphonic music from the late middle ages seems at first sight not too distinct from foreign cultural surroundings from all over the world of

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This notion is implicit even in proverbial formulations as „The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there“. But can we really address music from this late middle ages as if it was a foreign culture? I would like to raise a cautionary sign here: The past – I mean this very special past of European ‘early polyphony’ – has a specific quality in that it is both a foreign and a well-known country. We – as historians – are not working with a ‘past’ out there, separated from our everyday experiences, but we are working with artefacts (even if not always with works), codices, musics, ideas, narratives and so on, which are part of our presence – and which have their roots in our own past. Thus, the label ‘early polyphony’ has in itself a twofold implication: it is surely not ‘our polyphony’, a timeless, easily-assimilated polyphony; as such it is foreign. But at the same time it is ‘early’ not in a loose sense, but ‘early’ just in relation to later forms of Western art-music. It is thus qualified as a precursor of something that we know. We ought to be aware of this implicit ambivalence between foreignness and familiarity of the research object ‘early polyphony’. In this respect I see an epistemological difference between e.g. *Ars nova* polyphony and central African vocal counterpoint. To understand the foreign country of ‘early polyphony’ poses specific problems just because we never moved out of it.

**Biography**

**Signe Rotter-Broman**, born in 1968, has studied musicology, history, and scandinavian studies in Frankfurt am Main and Kiel, Germany. She received the Dr. phil. at Kiel university with a study on the string quartets by the Swedish composer Wilhelm Stenhammar. In 2010, she received her Habilitation with a study of compositional techniques in polyphonic songs from the late Trecento (published as vol 6 in the series *musica mensurabilis*, Hildesheim 2012). In October 2012, she was appointed professor for music history at the University of the Arts at Berlin. Her research areas encompass European modernism (with special regard to Scandinavia), music of the middle ages and the renaissance, methodology of music history and music analysis.

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