

# Performing Polyphony (part 1)

*By Peter Phillips – Director of the Tallis Scholars*

Brotsky's misgivings about Ezra Pound's Cantos could stand for many old-fashioned interpretations of polyphony: take a piece of music that looks simple, something apparently elementary in its technique and naive in its expression by comparison with what one knows, and impose beauty on it. Louds, softs, rubatos, crescendos, diminuendos, the works. Then the ordinariness – that simplicity which can yield beautiful results – will surely be crushed.

The discussion which follows is more concerned with how to avoid a boring performance of polyphony than a bad one. It might be thought that the two were the same, but that is not true. A bad rendition, which shows no respect for the very nature of the music by destroying the clarity of the lines, obliges the sensitive observer to leave the room immediately. The experience is completely hideous. A boring performance by contrast is likely to be one which indeed shows rather too studied respect, where the singing is 'white' rather than colourful, where the performers are putting on a 'renaissance' tone of voice which means only half-singing in order to secure a more successful blend.

There is little I can say to those in the former category, now fewer in number than they were 40 years ago. Perhaps I have said all I can say by building up a following for the 'clarity' approach, and broadcasting it as far and wide as possible. It is the boring practitioners who are so prevalent, encased in self-confidence, subtly turning audiences everywhere against the music, and taking their vision of polyphony just so far but never further, making it pretty. It is easy enough to be misled by the sheer beauty of renaissance music into thinking that that is all there is to it. What more is needed? Religion is the place where we shunt off all our

good thoughts and fragrant wishes, surely this custom-made old music was designed to complement this? Such a point of view forgets that for almost all the composers we have chosen, sacred music was the only music that they composed, compared with the contemporary situation when sacred composition is relatively rare, often forming only a small part of a composer's work. Renaissance composers had no other outlet for their emotions, good, tempestuous and bad, than their church music. They may not have been as highly trained as we are in self-analysis, with all its attendant anxiety-inducing complexes, but there surely was more to them than prettiness.

In what follows, I shall try to address the practical problems of achieving clarity in polyphonic singing. None of what I say refers to choirs which only rehearse and perform with some kind of instrumental accompaniment – piano, organ or orchestra. The moment instruments are involved more than half the work is taken out of the singers' hands, the spotlight is off them, and their chances of maturing as a group sharply reduced. Every choir that aspires to high standards needs to sing a cappella as a basic necessity – after that they will find choral society work a doddle. And I would add that when they rehearse they should consider singing Palestrina in the same way that pianists practise Mozart, for the detail. In their own fields these two composers wrote the same kind of music, in which absolute precision is the only way to do them justice. In their textures, where clarity is paramount, every tiny slip is magnified, so that, in one crucial sense, to perform them well is to confront the ultimate technical challenge. Of course there is more difficult music to play on the piano than Mozart's, and more difficult choral writing to sing than Palestrina's; but with both of them what one acquires in learning to articulate their pristine textures will be invaluable for every repertoire.

## **A short history of recent performance practice**

There can be few things in music-making more opposite than the amateur and professional approaches to rehearsing polyphony. The amateur view, at its most extreme, sees polyphony as an adjunct to later 'choir music', maybe sung by people who cannot read music, and conducted by maestri who don't know what to say if they cannot lead by melodramatic and probably egocentric example. This view has clearly developed from 19<sup>th</sup> century choral practices, when community singing from musical scores was new, and it tends to find the reserved nature of polyphony – the lack of accessible melodies and exciting chromatic harmony – unhelpful. The sheer number of unmemorable notes in the simplest polyphonic motet may require countless hours of rehearsal for singers who are not used to sight-reading, a process which runs the risk of overwhelming a gentle piece and killing it stone dead. The professional approach is that the notes are so easy one hardly needs to rehearse them at all, which runs the opposite risk of the singers never really getting to know the music in its finer points, a kind of death by underwhelming. In amateur singing, rehearsals are exciting, physically communal events of elastic length; for professionals they don't exist without a concert that day or the next and even then are viewed as a necessary evil. The irony is that despite the vastly different routes to the eventual performance, when the concert begins we are all in exactly the same situation. The time for histrionics, perfumed or threatening exhortations is past. The only question is whether the notes will be right, and whether the singers have acquired any feeling for them.

The old-fashioned assumption that choirs are a load of sheep who need shepherding, and that their conductors are Romantic heroes, has retreated in recent years. Chamber choirs singing a cappella have become more common, as has general knowledge of how much they cost. I think it has now been generally accepted that The Tallis Scholars are not amateur – and that I am not a Romantic hero; nonetheless, we do still encounter the notion that we cannot be taken as seriously as an orchestra

(hence the title of this book) presumably because, as I explain later, it is too much of a stretch for many people to imagine that a group of singers could be as professional as a group of instrumentalists. For this reason we instinctively dislike being called a 'choir', preferring 'ensemble'. Ironically – not that I wish to labour the point – most of my singers come from the hyper-professional training required at cathedral evensong, when the rehearsal will not be long enough for all the music of the day to be sung through even once. Many orchestras would balk at that regime.

One misunderstanding which can come out of the conjunction of polyphony with a choral society mentality is that polyphony must be suited to the big-choir approach: it looks so simple on the page. It may do, but this simplicity disguises the fact that in performance it is essential that everyone taking part can not only hold a line, but can sing through the line to the cadence with the necessary support and projection, as if singing solo. Even in the simplest four-part music there is no place to hide: no orchestra or organ to keep the pitch or to tidy over imperfections, no camouflage for passengers to wander about or fall off their part. And if this is true in Tallis' *If ye love me*, how much more is it true in his *Spem in alium* which, with its vast structure, has long provided choral societies with a temptation? But the reality is that *Spem* needs not 250 people throwing themselves at it, but 40 (or 80) people capable of singing unusually difficult polyphonic lines with confidence. It is the ultimate test for an ensemble which is the antithesis of a 'choir', and to this day is rarely performed to the highest standards even when entirely sung by professionals.



Janet Cardiff, "The Forty Part Motet" (installation view, Gallery 308, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture), 2015; co-presented by Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture and SFMOMA. Photo: JKA Photography

The role of the conductor has also needed to change to accommodate the demands of polyphonic writing; and it has changed in partnership with the new understanding of the singers' role. While it is true that at best the 19<sup>th</sup> century autocratic hero figure can produce highly disciplined performances from a large number of participants, it is also true that it will have to be the kind of music on which he can impose his will – this is the only way he can justify being an autocrat. This means choosing music which can withstand the imposition of louds and salts, special attacks and sudden diminuendos, holdings-up and rushings forward. Letting things happen unscripted in performance is not an option for such a conductor. Many choirs have rehearsals for many weeks before a performance, which means a lot of time for the conductor to impose his will on the music and the singers. He has to fill this time and, not least because the notes are not as difficult as in many later repertoires, little choice but to 'do' something with them. He needs to find new corners to

tease out, new perspectives to unveil, to inspect the words further and further for the most hidden of meanings. I have known a kind of competition develop between conductors to find these meanings, especially when the language in question is Latin, who then devote hours trying to express them in a romantic way, instead of spending the time building up a good basic choral sound which can be used as a reliable instrument in many differing situations.

Polyphony cannot be made to work like that because, ironically given its elitist origins, it has a fundamentally democratic style. The equalness of the voice parts in renaissance music should condition every approach to it, remembering that, in the most effective democracies, the voters think about what they are contributing to. It is inimical to this idiom that the singers should slavishly obey what one outsider – for the conductor is not singing – chooses to impose on them. A satisfying interpretation of polyphony can only come from a reactive group of people who are listening to what is going on around them, and then, when the music calls for it, adding something of their own. This has serious repercussions for the role of the conductor, the nature of rehearsal, the secularisation of something that was originally sung in church, authentic performance, everything from top to bottom of what it takes to perform polyphony well.

### **Why have a conductor for polyphony?**

The role of the conductor in polyphony is ambivalent in a number of ways; but underneath it all his or her problem is essentially how to retain his sense of purpose while doing a job which of necessity commands instant obedience when there are, say, over 20 people present, yet which requires something rather different when there are fewer. It is my opinion that he must cede a lot of that power to his performers, which may well make him uneasy, caught between controlling everything

and leaving the singers to get on with it as a self-directing vocal ensemble. In fact, in both the amateur and the professional world, the conductor has the apparently menial but actually crucial task of acting as a kind of aesthetic umpire. Groups of singers left to themselves in rehearsal can rapidly degenerate into argument, since everybody can easily have an opinion about what they are doing when they are asked. The astute conductor will allow discussion, for example about the phrasing of a point of imitation which everyone will eventually have to sing, pick the view which seems both the most prevalent and the nearest to his ideal, and impose it. This way he will maintain a sense of progress where anarchy would often be the only alternative. In the theory of democracy there should be unlimited time to discuss what everyone feels, but rehearsals are of finite duration, as is the patience of people who lead busy lives. In this sense the skilful conductor has a difficult, unconventional but ultimately essential job to do. He must have enough ego to quieten the egos of everyone else present, not because it is his divine right as conductor, but because that is simply his task as the person called conductor. No one else will do.

In the professional world it is a commonplace attitude for singers to want to rehearse as little as possible, not least because rehearsals tend to be badly paid. They will know how much a rehearsal is worth in advance and, once they are confident their singing will not be ridiculously exposed in the performance, will want to do the bare minimum once they are at it. Sending them home early is always good for morale, which contrasts dramatically with the point of view of the keen amateur. In the professional climate the conductor needs to make quick and transparently fair decisions, knowing that he will always have the full attention and co-operation of those present, since any other approach vitiates the principles by which they agreed to attend the rehearsal in the first place. An academically inclined singer might well violently disagree with the line I customarily take about any

number of issues to do with the music in theory pitch, tempi, phrasing, scoring, ficta – but will only say so in rehearsal if their preferences will force them to give a substandard performance. Otherwise they are trying their hardest to do what is wanted, which should be something stylish and individual with what the composer has given them. In some ways this does resemble what I imagine a 19<sup>th</sup> century orchestral rehearsal must have been like, with the difference that the whole process of command and obedience has been deconstructed and built up again from scratch. In this version the performers know themselves to be on an equal footing with the conductor, but have voluntarily pooled their talents for the period of the project in question in the service of an artistic ideal.

The only disappointment for me in directing amateur or semi-professional performances of polyphony is that the singers often lack the experience to take responsibility for the lines they are singing, and the eventual standard of their performance will depend on how willing they are to acquire that experience. The rank and file chorus singer is probably never going to be prepared to take the necessary risks, and will need to be told everything that is expected of him or her, familiar from rehearsing oratorio choruses. The problem is that polyphony cannot be prepared like this. It is impossible to attach a dynamic to every note, an exact contour of phrasing to every point, a reliable scheme of ebbing and flowing which the habitual chorus member and his or her inevitable pencil can record in the copy and reproduce precisely in every performance. Anyone who has tried to map out a detailed dynamic scheme for a renaissance motet will know how time-consuming and ultimately self-defeating such a process is. Phrases that look on paper as though they might start loudly and diminuendo before building to the next set of entries rarely obey such neatness in the heat of the moment. But if everyone's copy says it must be so, then to some degree it probably will be so, and the result is likely to be forced



and unconvincing. The best answer is to dare to leave just about everything to the heat of the moment.

The history of publishing renaissance music, incidentally, has reflected the move towards this understanding. The oldest editions gave a piano reduction and detailed dynamic markings attached to the voice-parts themselves. It is difficult to sing from these editions if one does not intend exactly to follow what Fellowes, or whoever the editor was, felt about the piece, and one notices how often the very best choirs of yesteryear recorded polyphony with all the dynamics of the leading editions of those days meticulously in place. The King's College 1964 recording of Palestrina's *Stabat Mater* and the coeval Novello edition are a case in point (and if the editor of that publication was following the enormously influential markings which Richard Wagner had imposed on the piece in his 1848 edition, then one can see how necessary a new approach to editorial interference had become). Clearly, in the early stages of the general dissemination of polyphony it was felt the rank and file could not be trusted to make interpretative decisions of any kind so that, following tradition, someone in authority must do it for them. We will never know how justified that rather condescending attitude was, since general knowledge and understanding of this music is now quite widespread, not least as a result of Fellowes' efforts. At some stage it was recognised that it is hard to sing anything other than *forte* when the copy tells you to, and the next stage was that the markings were confined to the piano reduction. The piano reduction anyway had its merits: it could be useful in giving a second reading where the printed polyphony clearly had errors in it; and the suggestions for dynamic schemes could be useful, or ignored. But even this came to be seen as extra to requirements (and piano reductions were time-consuming luxuries for the new one-man editor/publisher to produce) and now one buys copies which are completely clean of any such helps. I favour this in principle because it leaves me and my performers to take the risks I am

advocating; but I accept that at some level of amateur endeavour it makes the music seem more daunting and unfamiliar. One very simple way a modern editor can facilitate access to the music is to put an accent on the syllables one would stress in speech, throughout the text. This device can make phrases come alive in rehearsal immediately, without the natural lie of every textual sub-clause having to be laboriously explained by the conductor.

I have been asked, sometimes with more than a hint of irony, whether a conductor is really necessary in the performance of polyphony, a question which the conductorless British group *Stile Antico* has recently brought to the fore. Certainly it is anachronistic to have a conductor standing out in front of the performers, waving his arms around and 'interpreting' the music. The very most our predecessors in the 16th century would have had in the way of direction was someone keeping the pulse, probably in an audible form like tapping the stand or the choir-stall with a finger or a roll of parchment. I have already said that in modern rehearsals having someone in control is always going to save time; but in performance the issue is less clear-cut. The tempo and the first down-beat need to be given at the start, but they could be indicated by one of the singers. Since polyphony in theory rarely changes tempo in the middle of a movement there should be no difficulty in the singers directing themselves, assuming they watch each other carefully; and this method, in so far as we understand original practice, would have the merit of being authentic. Indeed the chambermusic-like nature of polyphony would seem to be well served by this way of doing things: string quartets achieve their subtleties by intense listening within the group, small chamber choirs should do the same.

How do I justify what I do on stage? The self-conducting method has been known to work well, but rarely with groups which employ more than one voice to a part. I am certainly surplus to requirements on the rare occasions that we sing, as

for example the Hilliard Ensemble does, with four or five people in total on the stage. But the moment there are eight or ten standing there, and two singers are responsible for one line, the director gains a new importance. The two ends of the line begin not to be able to hear each other; the two singers performing the same part cannot look into each other's eyes without turning their backs on other singers; the sheer number of people begins to make an on-the-spot consensus about the minutiae of the performance less achievable. It is true that much of the time all I'm doing is setting and keeping the tempo, but there are moments when suddenly the presence of a conductor is absolutely crucial, by which I mean that a conductor not being there would instantly lower the standard of the performance. Although the singers may not always seem to be watching me directly, I have the power, with a single movement of the hand or expression in my face, fundamentally to change what they are doing, in speed, dynamic level or strength of interpretation. An ill-considered gesture from me can instantly disrupt the flow of the music; a deliberate look or gesture can up the ante in a split second.

Many good singers instinctively think they can do their job perfectly well without outside cajoling from a conductor, and that there would be a perceptible gain in the chamber-music subtleties if they were left to present the music as a group. Assuming the performing conditions were ideal (which is rare, especially in churches) so that everyone could clearly hear and see everyone else, and that the group was prepared to accept one of their own number as a kind of leader, then some of the time they would be right and I have no doubt some of the results, the phrasing, the dialogue within the music, would be very exciting. The drawbacks are that no one is in a position to comment on the balance of the ensemble, because this leader, while singing, can only ever have a very partial impression of the overall picture, and the 'interpretation', however democratically arrived at, would inevitably be in danger of losing its way. Also I gather, though it is outside

my experience, that taking responsibility both for one own line as a singer, as well as for the ensemble as a whole, is almost impossible to do properly.

*The article is taken from the book 'What We Really Do' (second edition) and has been published by the ICB with permission from its author Peter Phillips. If you are interested in purchasing the book, please visit: <https://www.amazon.com/What-We-Really-Do-Scholars/dp/0954577728>*

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