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**Rethinking Counterpoint through Improvisation**  
**A Multidisciplinary Conversation with Edoardo Bellotti,**  
**Michele Chiaramida, Michael Dodds, Andreas Schiltknecht,**  
**Peter Schubert, and Nicola Straffelini**

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§ I partecipanti alla tavola rotonda hanno confrontato le loro esperienze su una serie di problemi derivanti dal tipo di curriculum nel quale insegnano e dalla diversità fra gli studenti di oggi e i loro predecessori.

§ The panelists brought their different experiences and confronted a series of problems rising from both the general curricula in the frame of which they are working, and the goals of modern students in comparison with those of their predecessors.

### **What do we teach and how**

This paper collects the thoughts of the panelists who shared their experiences about teaching historical counterpoint, using improvisation as a learning tool. The round table was also the general closure of the conference. At that point everyone had agreed on the essential role of improvisatory activities for enhancing the learning process. It was also quite clear that there is a big difference between general oriented courses, and highly specialized curricula, in which an historically informed praxis is well spread.

During the discussion two crucial points emerged. The first is what is taught under the label counterpoint, and the way this course is integrated in the study curriculum. There is yet a diversity of approaches in defining counterpoint, especially when it comes to acknowledge its status in comparison with tonal harmony, still the core of theory and composition courses on both sides of the Atlantic. Time concern and the enlarging of the spectrum of different styles throughout the centuries call for hard choices: something has to be left behind. Modal counterpoint might be at risk, or just kept in an ancillary function, depriving it of its stylistic coherence for making an abstract scholastic hybrid, functional to an evolutionistic interpretation of the musical language. The second point is what strategies are used to teach. Here improvisation comes in the game. When dealing with counterpoint historically, in other words when adhering as much as possible to a precise style and period, to choose didactic strategies similar to those used at that time is proved to be very successful. At this point improvisation gains surprisingly more and more space in different teaching environments, and proves to be not only an engaging activity for the students, but also a conceptual tool for rethinking counterpoint.

### **A Composer's Perspective on Historical Counterpoint Teaching**

Nicola Straffellini, active composer and professor of composition at the Bonporti Conservatory in Trento, offered some interesting answers to the question why one should still study historical counterpoint for becoming a good composer. First of all, counterpoint is like a gym, in which a composer can exercise his skills. This was the attitude of many musicians, for example Schonberg, who wrote canons to maintain his fluency. A second reason is that experiencing the historical techniques becomes an analytical tool for a better understanding of their evolutions and adaptations in the works of important composers, for examples the micro-polyphonies of György Ligeti, or what Luigi Nono and Bruno Maderna did, starting from the manuscripts of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice. But there is also a more important argument. To study historical counterpoint does not only mean to get acquainted with musical structures and forms, but also to get familiar with the idea itself of western music. It is essential for the composer to be able to elaborate a given

material, and this process is achieved through a peculiar set of techniques: in so doing the composer makes its own thought alive.

One should then discuss what to study and how. If we consider counterpoint as a mere preparatory exercise, Doubois' approach to an academic scholastic counterpoint could be enough, but if we are more interested in the influences on the twentieth century music, we should make reference to the many treatises that are presenting the counterpoint historical dimension and development. For a composer, the better way is still to start from the works of the great masters. In his classes, for example, Strafellini explains two voices counterpoint by looking at Orlando di Lasso's *Cantiones duarum voces*; then he goes on with Palestrina, Victoria, and others. In these works one can find that idea of western music that is so important for the formation of a young composer.

It is also interesting to notice the students' reaction to this teaching method. At first they take it as a requirement, but as soon as they get to analyze the real music of the past, they start to understand the incredible craft which is beyond this repertoire, and are encouraged to experiment some of these techniques in their own language, which is exactly what they should get in their training as a composer.

### **Integrating historical informed pedagogy in the classroom**

A very interesting aspect emerged during the conference has been the critical comparison and evaluation of applying a historical informed pedagogy in the learning process. Michele Chiaramida works with historical counterpoint with his students in Latina, struggling with time restraints, and a not-yet institutionalized frame in which setting his course. Andreas Schiltknecht teaches traditional courses in music theory and counterpoint at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Mannheim, though getting more and more persuaded of the necessity of an historical informed approach.

Michele Chiaramida speaks about his experience of teaching composition at the keyboard at the Respighi Conservatory in Latina. What he tries to face students with is not only the set of counterpoint rules, but also the professional profile of an organist or keyboardist in the Italian seventeenth century: a musician who was accomplished with Gregorian chant, its liturgical forms, and the *alternatim* praxis mostly based on versets improvisation for responding to the choir. The main historical sources used are Girolamo Diruta's *Il Transilvano*, Ludovico Zacconi's *Prattica di musica*, and Adriano Banchieri's *L'Organo suonarino*. Diruta provides the basic rules for introducing note against note counterpoint and modal coherence. When the students are able to recognize aurally the different modal cadences, and when they can improvise a simple but correct counterpoint on a *cantus firmus*, one can introduce different kind of *obblighi*, and *contrapunto fugato*, following the prescriptions by Zacconi. Banchieri offers a nice guide to the study of *basso continuo*, rooting it in counterpoint. Disregarding time limitation, students seems to

absorb the stylistic features more easily, and affirm to have grasped a better understanding of the compositional methods.

Andreas Schiltknecht teaches music theory to general students, working in a more traditional way. The more he gets to know historical approach, the less he dares to teach it to the students. This is because the normal concept of teaching in Germany is not only anachronistic, but seems to be unable to adjust to a different perspective, or to integrate it in the canon. For a generic type of student it might be quite impossible to get an experience in historical counterpoint, simply because of time limitation. The question is whether they need such an education or not, and whether it would not be better to focus on 'tonalizing' them, instead of 'de-tonalizing', introducing the study of historical counterpoint. Obviously one should distinguish between a general course, and individual needs, that could be addressed in a specific curriculum. Nevertheless as a teacher, one can understand the advantages of learning how to improvise counterpoint: it is not only a matter of theory, but at first it helps students to develop a good ear training, and make them more engaged in what they are studying, and more inclined to socialize together while creating music in the class. It would be therefore interesting to try to integrate these techniques in a standard course.

Peter Schubert has tried in his textbook on Renaissance counterpoint (SCHUBERT 1999) to adopt the historical approach: all the examples are from treatises. The problem is that it is conceived for the classroom in North America, where counterpoint is written out. In the second edition of the book, he added as many improvisatory activities as possible, like improvising canons, or singing a voice and playing at the piano the others. If he had to plan a third edition, improvisation would be even more predominant. Play and sing, in fact, develops a better attention to the line – at least the one the student is singing. This improvisatory approach is totally applicable to harmony, if one would decide to skip over early music and counterpoint for time's concern.<sup>1</sup> Anyway no matter what is chosen, the improvisation should be grounded in a style, because it helps the student to critically locate what he/she is learning: the student need to see the models, the good pieces from the good composers.

Michael Dodds brings in the issue of what is happening in our minds when we are improvising: he experiences two different states of minds. On one hand there is a sort of a calculating, rational awareness of choosing the right

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<sup>1</sup> The method is discussed in SCHUBERT 2011. For a practical application see Peter Schubert's videos on YouTube 'See what an ass I am', dealing with improvising a continuation of a melodic fragment, a basic harmonization, and a set of variations in Mozart's classic style:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKcATH42tWU>>

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r0DODEf\\_po](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r0DODEf_po)>

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsOpwYgrJFc>>

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-trkrMWbjGA>>

intervals for the next sonority. On the other there is a more fluid intuitively approach, responding to the texture (for example playing the violin on a very well known ground bass). Schubert agrees that it is important to ‘train our intuition’: it is a sort of constant back and forward between rational analysis and intuitive approach. The danger of doing something intuitively is that you remain stuck in patterns that are not developing or evolving. So, for example when a student is asked to think about all the possible solutions on a two notes *cantus firmus*, he might stumble across a good one that he did not possess intuitively.

Edoardo Bellotti’s main question in teaching improvisation is simply what is working and what is not. One thing he has discovered is that the old system of writing three parts counterpoint does not help. Analyzing organ scores of the sixteenth century, the student can be helped to detect counterpointal structures on which he/her can improvise. This approach helps to understand the importance of making mistakes in the music learning process. Improvising is not making music, is playing music.

### **Bibliography**

SCHUBERT, P. (1999, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008), *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

——— (2011), *Global Perspective on Music Theory Pedagogy: Thinking in Music*, «Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy», 25, pp. 217-33.