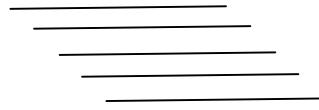


# New as old as new as old as...

Cecilia Arditto



"A texture like that of the Machaut Gloria invites us to listen in layers, from the inside out [...] but not therefore chordal."

Margaret Bent<sup>1</sup>

Every new step in the analysis and interpretation of the music from the past rises necessarily the question of how to frame the early music in relation to interpretation, notation and compositional skills.

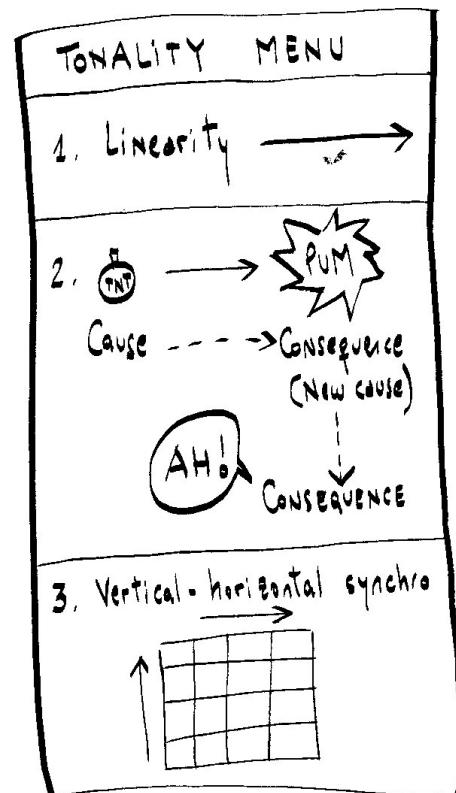
Knowing that we are dealing with a time impossible to recover, these fundamental queries bring to us not only the past, but like a temporal mirror, they also bring the present mechanisms of musical production and perception into question. Subjects such as the relationship between the system and the composition, the notation and its function, the score and its interpretation among others, are essential subjects in the definition of the western music per se, but I find problems similar to those of the actual music in the music that predates the consolidation of the tonal system -around the XIV and XV centuries-.

I like to think that the History of Music doesn't move in a straight line, but "in jumps": jumps that resonate complexly in an uneven historical line. And we can find in the present similar questions to those of 600 years ago, or at least the illusion of these "similar" questions that are posed again nowadays in a different temporal coordinate.

The time span in between the High Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance bears a common feature with our century, that of encompassing the tonal system; the first as slow gestational period, the latter as dissolution. I would like to talk from now on in terms of "tonal logic" instead of "tonality" as a harmonic system.

## The lesson well learned

The concept of "tonal logic" goes beyond the expression of a harmonic system: it is a way of perceiving music beyond the tension-resolution



<sup>1</sup> Bent, Margaret, Boydell Press, "The "Harmony of the Machaut Mass" - Machaut's Music: New Interpretations, Chapter V, 2003.

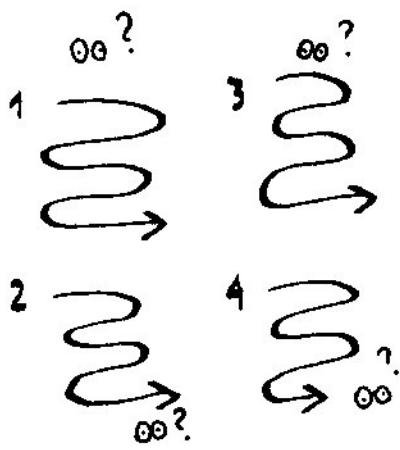
relationships printed by the functional harmony. This “tonal logic” trained us in understanding the universe of music in a particular way, being some of its features: *the linearity, the cause consequence laws, and the attachment of musical events in a synchronized horizontal-vertical grid.*

Even though most of the music nowadays has dispensed with the functional harmony, it’s learned its lesson very well and keeps operating with the “tonal logic” even when working out of the boundaries of the tonality

This idea of linear thinking towards a goal with successive moments of tension and conclusion, where all the events of the piece are attached to this common big arrow pointing to the climax and finally the end of the piece, seems to be the model of much of the “modern music” which adds to the tonal logic, even working with noise, electronics or “extended techniques”. How to deal, then, with Margaret Bent concept quoted at the beginning of this article, and listen to the Machaut’s Gloria “*in layers, from the inside out.*” It seems to me a perception practice very difficult to achieve.

### The whole and the part and the whole and the part and...

Machaut’s Mass is the first mass that was completely written by one composer. It looks like a very interesting inflection point for the analysis of modern perspectives in music because we are in front of music that is totally composed by one person, totally written –versus improvised music- and the most interesting aspect, that it is made before the tonal system was consolidated.



The original manuscript of Machaut Mass sheds some light on its genesis and ways of interpretation. Notation in western classical music is more than merely a registration in paper of a corpus of sounds. Notation is in my opinion a way of thinking about music impossible to put apart from the language. Machaut’s manuscript of the Mass shows us the four voices of the piece written individually like four independent blocks. They are not placed in vertical synchronicity one on top of the other, but successively one after the other. The “score” looks like a series of parts, without measures, were the score is omitted: the “score” is just that: the adjacent parts.

It is clear that Machaut thinks in the relationship of four voices while composing and that the Mass is not a kind of “exquisite cadaver” with the superposition of four surprising and unconnected voices. But the way these four voices related to each other is not so straightforward as we can guess. It is a large source of interpretations and speculation among Machaut’s interpreters and theorists as we can note in different recordings and articles about this Mass.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The controversies among theorists are interesting. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson proposes an actual interpretation of the Mass, in terms of chords and harmony. He writes in his book “Machaut’s Mass” the statement “Machaut is dead and has been for 600 years; we can not own him anything anymore.” Margaret Bent in clear controversy with Leech Wilkinson adds to the idea of XIV century harmony and the opening to old-as- new way of listening. Concerning recordings, there are many and very different.

We can say that the composition of the Mass was ruled in first instance by the form superimposed by the genre Mass, also by the strict counterpoint laws and by the styles and modes of that time. But, luckily, that is not all. The composition of the Mass is also based in the interpretation of those laws including their exceptions and in the individual solutions of the composer. So, the reconstruction of the “score” seems to me not the reconstruction of a notational puzzle but the reconstruction of a historical time forever gone.

Going back to the manuscript, we can guess that every singer is not able to know what the others are singing in relation to the vertical synchronicity of the piece. The voices flow in a individual and independent logic, where the common meeting points are the cadences. Even though all the voices share a common web and conform a unique piece, the ways of relating to each other are ungraspable to our modern ears. We know that the tenor (third voice) is the basis on top of which the other voices are articulated. The way in which these other voices relate to each other is not so clear, however.

Once all voices set together, it is easy to fall down into an *aggiornamento of the listening*, which is to hear Machaut with modern years and find in his music a motivic behavior, imitations among voices and chord progressions that *are absolutely impossible in that music at that time*. To hear with “early ears” is impossible, like pretending that the sun and the planets go around Earth forgetting the astronomic beliefs of today.<sup>3</sup> Anyway I find this “listening reconstruction” a very nice perception exercise, which opens up the imagination and shakes the perception of reality in general.

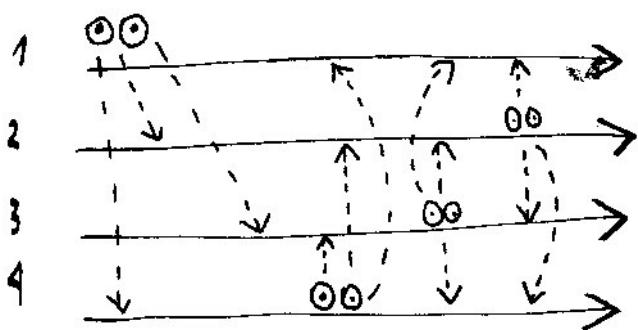
As a result of the interpretation of the Mass through the manuscripts, where the singers read from the parts without an existing score, the flow of the time is less *corporative*. The musicians are permanently listening and reacting to each other, what establishes a fluctuating relationship between the whole –the piece- and the part –the individual lines-. The piece as a whole becomes more flexible and not only in terms of rhythmical phrases. Pitch fluctuation is also important. The vertical reference points in the flowing of the piece are more unsteady in relation to harmony and tuning (nobody knows exactly in which part of the vertical web is situated), so the cadence points at the end of every phrase are twice as consonant: in terms of consonant harmonic resolution and pitch adjustment.<sup>4</sup>

In listening to Machaut’s Mass version from the manuscript, I find that the tension between the Mass like a whole in relation to the individual parts contains is more fluctuating: the four voices belong to a superior structure that has them but at the same time each voice has its own breathing.

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The Schola Cantorum Brabantiae under Rebecca Stewart I guess is the only ensemble which reads from the original manuscript and keeps the flavor of the old-as-new that Bent proposes; the Oxford 2 Camerata where Jeremy Summerly makes a tidy and tied version; the microtonal craziness of the Ensemble Organum (Marcel Peres) offers certainly a different interpretation of the Mass. Early music seems to be alive!

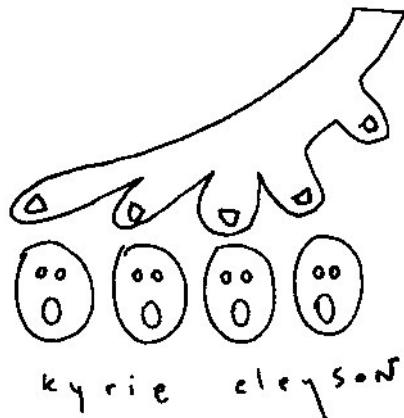
4 The version of the Mass by Marcel Peres is a good example where cadences are also pitch adjustment points: the superposition of the extreme microtonal ornamented voices concludes in perfect consonant chords, full of harmonics at the end of the phrases.



has been drawn throughout the piece in a finer temporal adjustment that restrict the phrasing in a kind of "Machaut's mass quantization" The voices are piled one on top of the other and the four lines conform a unique organism. The choir becomes a unity, like a choir keyboard operated by only one hand. The versions sang from the modern score -mainly all of them- are cleaner, tidier and stiffer.

The transcriptions of the Mass made after Machaut's times organize the four voices in a perfect vertical synchrony, framing the whole mass with modern measure bars, mainly in three/four.

It is clear that the music read from this manuscript sounds different. The temporal grill



Morton Feldman in conversation with Xenakis in relation to the performance of his Trio (1980), said:<sup>5</sup>

*Feldman: I'm neither happy nor unhappy with it.*

*Xenakis: What do you mean, why?*

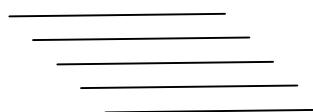
*Feldman: I thought it was just a little stiff.*

*Xenakis: You wanted more agitation?*

*Feldman: No, I wanted them to breathe with each other more naturally. Breathe rather than count.*

*Xenakis: But they counted correctly.*

*Feldman: Yes, they counted correctly. Maybe that was it, that it was a little too mechanical in the counting.*




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<sup>5</sup> The conversation was part of a five day master-class given by Morton Feldman during the Festival Nieuwe Muziek, June 19 July 6, 1986. Morton Feldman's Trio (1980) was performed by Aki Takahashi, piano, Mifune Tsuji, violin and Tadashi Tanaka, violoncello on Thursday, July 3, 1986 at De Kloveniersdoelen, Middelburg.