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14 Compositional trajectories

PETER M. LEFFERTS

This chapter is intended to operate as a complement to the survey of musical theory presented in Chapter 16. Here, to illuminate a small set of issues in respect to style and compositional practice, we will approach the medieval composer via specific repertory, namely, some sacred chants and some two-voice polyphony.

A persistent conviction of many relative newcomers to medieval music is that all chant sounds the same – melodically vague, undifferentiable, hypnotic and slightly ‘New Age’ – and that it is governed by a universal, monolithic, standard medieval ‘theory of the modes’. Neither of these points is true, but one needs to gain a broad familiarity with some very large bodies of melodies, and the histories of their genres, to be able to come to grips with chant’s diversity in all its dimensions, and it is equally important to learn some individual melodies very well.

The plainchant of the medieval Western church was, in fact, highly varied in musical language. There were different dialects, including Roman, Gallican, Mozarabic, Beneventan and Ambrosian, before and after the hegemonic rise of Gregorian chant circa 800. There are strong generic or functional fault lines within the Gregorian core itself (distinguishing prayer and reading tones, antiphonal psalmody, responsorial psalmody), and variant idioms emerged within the later Gregorian universe (e.g. the German chant tradition). On top of that, many different stylistic strands developed in all the newly composed, later medieval plainsong from the ninth century forward – melodies which over time far outdistanced the Gregorian core in sheer numbers.

And as to mode, both in theory and in practice in respect to medieval melody, the term has a rich and varied multi-dimensional history of meaning and influence. The earliest trace of modal thinking in the West dates to the very late eighth and early ninth centuries. In this era Carolingian musicians were struggling to stabilize, learn and teach the vast body of melodies in the hybrid Roman-Gallican chant dialect that became known as ‘Gregorian chant’. Influenced by a recent eightfold system of classification developed by contemporary Byzantine Greeks, the Franks worked out a similar system to sort and classify liturgical melodies by two significant markers: the very last note (the final) and the range (distinguishing those

melodies lying above the final and those lying around the final as authentic and plagal, respectively). In their early tonaries, which were books listing chants by musical characteristics, the Franks then went another step, further subdividing chant groups by a third powerful marker, the initial melodic gesture.

This process of classification worked well because Western chant was fundamentally diatonic. Indeed, a diatonic backbone is an underlying feature of most sacred and secular bodies of melody from northern Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and East Asia going back thousands of years. For medieval church musicians, the recognition that the myriad melodies of Gregorian chant each ended on just one or another of four different finals and could be conceptualized in notation along a single scale was a hard-won discovery. It was, in fact, one of the signal triumphs of Frankish music theorists in the late 700s and early 800s. The frequent addition of B flat into the white-note scale was one small concession to problems in the process of conceptualization and classification, and some early notations may be attempting to convey microtonal nuances of performance practice as well.¹

Tonaries allowed Frankish musicians (and us) to look at Gregorian melodies of this or that mode and derive from them further observations about the character of Gregorian melodies generally, the characteristics specific to a given mode, or features specific to distinctive subcategories of chants in that mode. In a small number of cases the three markers – final, range and initial gesture – could be ambiguous or in open conflict, because of a chant's lack of consistent diatonicism or the conflict of assignment between a chant's beginning and end. Furthermore, some chants assigned to different modes share a common vocabulary of interior gestures and phrases. The discrepancies between real melodies and the Frankish *a posteriori* method of classification shows us that mode did not originally govern the composition of these melodies, and, moreover, that some chants were – how shall we say it? – not well-behaved.

The discussions by theorists of chants whose modal assignment was problematic offer us additional insights into the character of Gregorian chant and the earliest conception of modality. Their proposals for resolving difficulties in classification included transposition to unusual finals, using accidentals beyond B flat, and, of course, outright amendment of the shape of the non-conforming melody.

In later developments of the theory of the melodic modes that were pursued from the ninth century down to the end of the Middle Ages, theorists turned their attention from simple classification towards an effort to account more abstractly and methodically for the characteristics of the repertoire. They derived their concepts from two principal sources: much earlier Hellenistic Greek theory as found in authors of late classical antiquity

and the Early Christian era, especially Boethius, and additional empirical features of the Gregorian corpus and later medieval chants. Hellenistic notions of scales generated by adjacent and overlapping tetrachords, of mode as scale, and especially of mode as octave species comprised of species of fourths and fifths – a body of concepts that the Franks did not fully understand – eventually dominated the standard explanation of mode in the later Middle Ages. The pseudo-Greek modal descriptions also absorbed empirical features such as reciting tones, and theorists attempted to make accommodation for problem children such as melodies of extremely wide range and those that cadenced to a non-standard final. However, later medieval theories of mode, whether derived empirically from melodies of the Western church or prescriptively from Hellenistic models, still do not account for all tonal features of Gregorian chant melodies.

In composing post-Gregorian chants, some composers looked back to Gregorian idioms and turns of phrase. In other cases, composers struck out in a direction reflecting local or regional melodic languages of their own day, whether within the ecclesiastical realm or drawing on secular or personal idioms. Some chant was directly affected by theory, including both new melodies whose composers were constrained from the outset by schoolroom doctrines, and older melodies that were re-edited to fit the mould of theory, such as took place in the twelfth-century reform of Cistercian chant. Pseudo-Greek modal constraints on melody also began to influence secular melodies, but not until a relatively late date; the central role of the fourth below the final and of the fifth and octave above are an especially distinctive feature, for example, in the French chansons of Du Fay written in the 1400s.

Medieval musicians were virtuosos of the diatonic, sensitized to the subtle differences of weight and role of the various scale degrees and the intervals between them, especially the semitones. They were accustomed to locating themselves in tonal space by means of the final note of the melody, from which they could assess the characteristic kernel of tones and semitones around it, the melody's range in respect to the final, and many other tonal features. Tonal weight and role manifest themselves through where individual phrases and whole melodies begin and end, what notes most often appear or are directly repeated, what notes form the upper and lower boundaries of melodic contours, what notes are constantly returned to from above or below, what notes are approached or left by leap or step, and so forth.

Two additional kinds of information are also valuable. The relationship of text to music can hold clues to the tonal hierarchy by means of how individual syllables, words, and larger syntactical and structural units are set in tones. And in rhythmically measured music, especially in metrical

music, the length of a note and its weak or strong metrical position also convey powerful tonal information. If we knew them, the dance steps for dance songs and instrumentally accompanied dances would also help us to understand the roles of the tones in their tunes. But most medieval sacred monophony was either not measured or lost its rhythmic nuances over time, becoming in simple terms 'plain chant' by the twelfth century.

To pursue mode in a musical and scholarly way beyond the simplest classification schemes into subtler issues of melodic behaviour immediately requires limits to be defined that are generic, chronological and geographical. Poised on the brink of that potentially vast effort, the work of many books, a few examples will serve here briefly to lay some groundwork. To begin, let us take the approaches just suggested for reading the tonal language of a melody and put them to work on two medieval plainchants. One, *Exsurge domine*, is Gregorian, thus a Roman chant of ca 700 preserved in a Frankish melodic dialect of ca 800, and the other, *In principio*, is later medieval German chant of the mid twelfth century. To make a pointed comparison, they are both in mode 3. Modes 3 and 4 have E as their final, and here, the third mode is the authentic member of the pair, which means that these melodies both move primarily above the final (rather than around and below it).

To penetrate any farther into their melodic languages, an approach through the text is essential. *Exsurge domine* is the respond of a gradual. In most medieval service books it was performed at mass on the third Sunday of Lent (see Example 14.1).² Its prose-like text is one verse from the Latin Psalter (Vulgate Psalm 9:20). Graduals are highly formulaic chants, and *Exsurge domine* shares with chants in its family of mode-3 graduals many specific formulaic gestures of melody. These gestures are most frequently found at points of formal text articulation, so laying out the text following its structure and syntax allows many features of the melody to come rapidly into focus.³

The psalm verse is comprised of two half verses, each of two subphrases, so we may speak of it in terms of four lines. Their music is rich in mode-3 clichés. The music of line 1a begins with what we know to be a common initial formula, which is centred on F (the final, E, has a very minor role to play here). Lines 1b, 2a and 2b share a subsidiary opening gesture for interior lines that rises from G to C and then falls to A. Lines 1a and 2a end with the same cadence, a formula for the mid-point of half verses that elaborates A and then falls through B flat and G to F and, from there, on to a cadential goal a minor third lower on D. This particular formula, known in mode-3 chants but even more a standard half-cadence in mode 4, ends with a figure that is also typical of cadences in mode 1. Line 1b ends with a formula for the close of half verses, rising and falling from D and then swirling

Example 14.2 Hildegard of Bingen, beginning of *In principio*, 1140s

The image displays a musical score for Hildegard of Bingen's 'In principio', consisting of seven staves of music. Each staff is numbered 1 through 7 on the left. The music is written in a single melodic line on a five-line staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes. The score is divided into two columns of staves. The first column contains staves 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. The second column contains staves 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. The lyrics for each staff are as follows:

1 In prin - ci - pi - o om - nes cre - a - tu - re vi - - - ru - e - runt

2 in me - di - o flo - res flo - ru - e - runt

3 po - - - ste - a vi - ri di - tas de - scen - dit

4 et i - stud vir pre - li - a - tor vi - dit et di - xit Hoc sci - o

5 sed au - re - us nu - me - rus non - dum est ple - - - nus

6 Tu er - go pa - ter - num spe - cu - lum a - spi - ce

7 in cor - po - re me - o fa - ti - ga - ti - o - nem su - sti - ne - o

figures, reiterations of individual pitches, and insistent spinning around single notes and intervals of a third, are typical of the most elaborate kind of Gregorian idiom. Weighing the role of pitches, D–F–A–C emerge as a central collection, pitted against a secondary set including E–G–B \flat . Thus it should come as no surprise that *Exurge domine* shares many of its turns of phrase with D-final chants. Its own final, E, is an infrequent and weak secondary pitch.

Our other third-mode chant, *In principio*, is the last number, a chorus, in *Ordo virtutum*, a sacred music drama or sung morality play of the 1140s by Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) (see Example 14.2).⁵ In its lyrics a narrative introduction and conclusion frame the direct speech of Christ. Hildegard writes a kind of heightened and occasionally rhymed prose that can be parsed as a series of sentences. These are lines of irregular syllable and word count that are syntactic units mainly ended by a verb. In setting her text Hildegard employs a very personal non-Gregorian melodic language. With only a few exceptions, each sentence unfolds as a free, florid variation on the same melodic arc, beginning with an ascent from E to B, spinning around B in the upper register, and cadencing via a descent from C, D or E down to low E.

Here in *In principio* mode 3 is represented with very different pitch language than that of *Exurge domine*. The melody is broader, extending from the C below low E to the G above octave E, for the unusually wide total span of a twelfth, though it principally unfolds within the E–E octave. Most striking, the note E plays a very different and more central role here than in the gradual. Low E begins and ends the chant, and it begins and ends almost every text line, and high E is an important pitch, too, as a frequently occurring upper boundary tone. The next most important pitch to E is B natural, which is similarly emphasized. (There is no place for B flat in this idiom.) Sentences, phrases, subphrases and individual words begin and end on E or B, and most melodic gestures either spin around E or B, or rise or fall through the fifth or fourth from one to the other. The central melodic role of these two pitches, and the very minor role for C, is the basis of a melodic language very unlike that of mode-3 Gregorian melodies. Instead, it is a personal idiom consistent with other florid E pieces by Hildegard, and at the same time it reveals Hildegard to be well-schooled in the prescriptive Germanic modal theory of her era (species theory), with its strong roots in quasi-Hellenistic notions of species of octave, fourth and fifth.

Taken in sum, the melodic and tonal languages of *Exurge domine* and *In principio*, two florid chants classifiable in the same mode by final and range, exploit their tonal space in very distinct ways. The differences are not those of two different melodies by the same composer or by two contemporaries,

Example 14.3 Anon., sequence *Fulgens preclara*, ninth century

but are representative of the differences one finds between melodies in bodies of plainchant written over 400 years apart in different geographical regions by musicians with very different schooling and different ideas about the roles of the tones in a high-lying E-final chant.

Two other post-Gregorian plainchants, *Fulgens preclara* and *Ortum floris*, introduce issues having to do with consistency of tonal behaviour. *Fulgens preclara* is an early Frankish sequence of the ninth century for Easter Sunday Mass (see Example 14.3).⁶ Its text has the typical couplet form of the sequence, that is, a chain of paired text lines, in which each pair of lines is set syllabically to a melody and its immediate repetition (with some permissible irregularity at the start and finish of the chant). This sprawling melody is interesting in the first place because of its unusually wide

Example 14.3 (*cont.*)

Cadential gestures

The image displays a musical score for Example 14.3 (continued). It consists of 15 staves of music, each containing a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. The staves are numbered 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 15. A vertical box labeled "Cadential gestures" is positioned on the right side of the score, spanning from the beginning of staff 2 to the end of staff 15. This box highlights the final measure of each staff, which contains a double bar line and repeat dots, indicating a cadence. The music features various rhythmic and melodic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The overall structure is a series of short, self-contained melodic phrases, each ending with a cadential gesture.

range – from G to the D a twelfth above. The span is not, however, articulated as a single central octave that occasionally is breached, as Hildegard handles it in *In principio*. Nor do we find it to be a modal octave articulated into species of fifth and fourth, and then extended by a fourth or fifth above or below, as one might expect in a melody governed by Hellenistic modal theory (e.g., G–D–G with an extra fifth above to D, or D–A–D with an extra

fourth below to A). So it is not a melody ping-ponging between boundary tones of the fifths and fourths, and cadencing to one of the boundary tones. Rather, the melody rises through pitch regions best defined in terms of ascending registers and successive pitch centres (cadential goals) around which individual phrases and sections spin.

Fulgens preclara starts its fifteen arcs of melody in its lowest register, the region from G to C, for couplet 1 (lines 1, 2), then shifts to E for couplets 2 and 3 (lines 3–6) before settling around D for the next eight couplets (lines 7–22). While cadencing to D, the melodic lines open up a higher register in contours first reaching G, then A, then B flat. The last three couplets and closing singlet (lines 23–9) move upward again to centre around and cadence on high A (via material first introduced in couplet 6).

The *Fulgens preclara* melody is highly motivic, with motives that are closely word-bound, and it is repetitive both on a local scale and across couplets. Most markedly, all couplets, in all pitch registers, present close variants of a single cadential gesture. The tonal region around high A shares figures with the phrases cadencing to D, especially in initial gestures (now up a fifth), and with the phrases cadencing to E, especially at the cadence itself (now up a fourth). Well-behaved and coherent in its own terms, *Fulgens preclara* is not conventionally well-behaved either in textbook modal terms or in respect to the empirical features of earlier Gregorian chants. Its melodic language, not surprisingly, is most akin to other new Frankish compositions of the ninth century.

Ortum floris is a non-liturgical Latin devotional song – a versus – probably of the later twelfth century, in four stanzas set strophically (see Example 14.4).⁷ As is typical for versus poetry, the text is rigorously governed by an elaborate and strict scheme of versification, which, in turn, is tightly reflected in the melody's repetitions of motive and phrase. It unfolds in the relatively narrow range of a sixth, mostly above the final, in a tonal realm with G as the final and a signature B flat. These features allow it to be classified as a transposed first-mode chant. But the usefulness of that classification is to be doubted. This song's distinctive melody, alien to the language of Gregorian first-mode chants, is cut from the cloth of a popular G-major/G-minor idiom employed in many Anglo-French sequences, lais, planctus, conductus and versus that were newly composed in the twelfth century.⁸

The pitch collection of *Ortum floris* is diatonic with the addition of B flat, but the B-flat/B-natural inflection is handled in a recurrent way that strikingly challenges one of the most prominent musical features of first mode, namely the minor third above the final, and defines what is best explained as two alternating pitch sets or tonal areas, one primary and one

Example 14.4 Anon., versus *Ortum floris*, twelfth century

Or-tum flo-ris con-cin-nat laus o-ris Vas dul-co-ris mi-ri-flos o-do-ris

Flos e-ta-tis no-vi-ta-tis ra-di-us splen-do-ris

De-be-a-tis ce-li pra-tis ver-nans in his o-ris

O-dor ti-mi-a-ma-tis Vas ple-num a-ro-ma-tis

Fon-tis-ma-tis bap-tis-ma-tis un-da pu-ri-o-ris

fir-ma-ra-tis nau-fra-ga-tis fluc-ti-bus er-ro-ris

Da-tur na-tis E-ve-gra-tis or-tus re-demp-to-ris.

secondary. To grasp the alternation, let us formulize the melody as XYZY, or in more detail, reflecting the versification, as

$$XX Y^1 Y^2 ZZY^3 Y^1 Y^2$$

The first of the two pitch sets, the primary material, is the opening G material in section X spanning the fourth F to B flat (i.e., from a tone below G through the tone and a semitone above). It returns at section Z in a recognizable extension opening up the fifth from G to D. The contrasting or secondary pitch set, in section Y, functions as a realm 'away from home'. Spanning the fifth from F to C, it is centred not on the lowest pitch, F, but on A, moving a minor third above to C (by tone and semitone, with B natural) and a major third below to F. Y^1 and Y^2 are an open and closed melodic pair (and the melodic phrase Y^3 is a variant of Y^1). Closure in Y^2 is accomplished by a return to the original G pitch set via the cadential reintroduction of B flat and the $Bb-A-G$ descent. If the two pitch sets are condensed to scales, we have $F-G-A-Bb-C-D$ systematically contrasted with $F-G-A-Bb-C$, with very different weights for the individual pitches in each set.

To practised throats and ears, the four chants discussed above emerge as representatives of very different tonal idioms and formal types. Each is

unique, yet is related to a larger repertory, grounded in a particular time and place, with which it holds many features of style in common. Growing in familiarity, and thus in individuality, all four chants resist being packaged as New Age background music and reduced to the status of aural wallpaper. Medieval chant is far from homogeneous, and its distinct idioms are there to be savoured by the virtuosos (and connoisseurs) of the diatonic.

The medieval polyphony surviving in musical notation floats atop a vast unwritten substrate whose roots undoubtedly go back for millennia before a significant amount of evidence begins to turn up for it in the ninth century. Procedures for making polyphony differ both chronologically and geographically, and depend on the performance milieu as well. And it would not be surprising if the elite practices of professional singers at cathedral and court bore some kinship to local folk polyphony, though this escapes proof for now.

As one secure point of departure for some basic considerations of polyphony, we may safely say that a very high percentage of all medieval polyphony is for just two voice parts. This is true historically, generically and geographically well into the fourteenth century. It is true for ecclesiastical organa, for conductus and versus, for simple polyphony including psalm and lesson tones, for secular and sacred motets from France, for secular songs in French, Italian and English, and for polyphonic instrumental dances. Moreover, most of the three- and four-voiced polyphony from the end of this epoch is based on two-part counterpoint, with two voices clearly working as a structural duet to which one or more additional parts have been added.

Questions of ultimate origins always lead scholars onto dangerous ground, but it seems intuitively likely that two-voice polyphony began in the decoration of unison performance, so that the discantus, the second ('dis') melodic line ('cantus'), may be understood as splitting off from the first and ranging alongside it through the same tonal space.

The calculated addition of a second voice to a complete, previously existing melody, whether the new musical line is added in precisely the same register or lies generally higher or lower, seems plausibly to be a next step (beyond splitting off and returning) in exploring the potential of the effect. If instead the process of composition is more simultaneous in the composing together of two entirely new voices (a way of making artful polyphony from scratch that is new in the West in the twelfth century), then we still normally assume, and can usually detect after the fact, the priority of one voice over the other in the act of composition.

A basic observation, therefore, concerns the degree of entanglement or separation of voices, the most fundamental and deliberate conception

under which composers and performers are operating. The new part may be added above or below the original, or be deliberately entwined – that is, sharing range and frequently crossing the given voice. We tend to find that the crossing of voices is usually either welcomed or shunned. If mainly unfolding in distinct registers, the two voices may stay free of all contact, just touch on unisons, or cross occasionally.

The setting may be note-against-note (strictly or very nearly so), or more florid. If more florid, it is most often the second part that will have more notes than the original, as long as it is not merely adding some kind of drone. The relationship may be to set many new notes against one in the original or, in some cases, to set a larger number of notes in the added voice against a smaller cluster of original notes. In the latter case, just how to align the notes for a modern edition or performance can be a knotty conundrum.

In the resulting polyphony, the original voice may retain its primacy, or instead become a background element, a foundational *tenor* or *cantus firmus*. Looked at from the other direction, we may ask of the second part whether it remains subordinate or whether it emerges to an important degree as independent, acquiring the characteristics of a cogent, coherent, idiomatic melody. It may move entirely into the foreground, or have its independence but still be subordinate, which is for example how we would characterize the tenor of a Machaut chanson of the mid 1300s.

We further will want to know what constraints or rules are apparent for the defining of consonance and dissonance, and for the handling of voice-leading and cadences, and what is their effect on the independence and tonal features of the new part. Under these constraints, how do the tonal and melodic features of the new voice compare to those of the original? And what is the stylistic relationship of the new line to contemporary idioms for new monophonic songs, or in comparable polyphony?

The commonest simple form of polyphony is parallelism – a thickening or doubling by mirroring the contour of the original a few steps away. Whether flexibly or strictly applied, parallelism effectively preserves the identity of the original melody. The two voices may move out and back from unison to the interval of parallel motion – thus starting as one, then splitting and rejoining. Alternatively, the discanting voice may be set from the outset at the desired interval and remain always at that distance, or fall back into a unison at cadences. Note-against-note parallelism appears to be a strong norm in the earliest practices of which we have any record, for example ecclesiastical organum of the ninth to eleventh centuries, and thereafter in what scholars call simple polyphony, meaning the most rudimentary and widespread practice of extemporized polyphonic adornment of a chant. Some elementary written examples barely go beyond it.

Example 14.5a Guido, modified parallel organum at the fourth below from *Micrologus*, ca1025

I - psi - so - li - ser - vo fi - dem

I - psi - me to - ta de - vo - ti - o - ne com - mit - to.

Example 14.5b Anon., reciting tone for a Christmas matins lesson, ca1300

Pri-mo tem-po-re al-le-vi-a-ta est ter-ra Za-bu-lon et ter-ra Nep-ta-lim

Pri-mo tem-po-re al-le-vi-a-ta est ter-ra Za-bu-lon et ter-ra Nep-ta-lim

Example 14.5c Burgos, Monasterio de Las Huelgas 9, fol. 54v, from the sequence *Victime paschali laudes*

im - mo - lent Chri - sti - a - ni

im - mo - lent Chri - sti - a - ni

Example 14.5d London, British Library, Additional 16975, fol. 166, from the hymn *Conditor alme siderum*

Chri - ste re - demp - tor om - ni - um

Chri - ste re - demp - tor om - ni - um

From the medieval West there are examples in two voices of parallel seconds, third, fourths, fifths and sixths. Not all possibilities for these intervals sounding above or below are found, however, and some preferences demonstrably unfold on geographical or chronological axes. For example, parallel fourths lying beneath the chant are the predominant language of

Example 14.6a Anon., *Nobilis humilis*

Two staves of music in a single system. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The bottom staff is an alto clef with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: No - bi - lis hu - mi - lis Ma - gne mar - tyr sta - bi - lis. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with the second staff providing a parallel motion below the first.

Example 14.6b Anon., *Laudes deo*, troped lesson from Christmas midnight mass, mid fourteenth century

Two systems of musical notation. Each system consists of two staves (treble and alto clefs) with lyrics. The first system has lyrics: Lau - des De - o di - cam per se - cu - la. The second system has lyrics: qui me pla - sma - vit in ma - nu de - xte - ra. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes with various phrasing slurs.

ecclesiastical organum in Anglo-French theory and practice from the ninth to the eleventh centuries (see Example 14.5a).

The status and role of the fourth, and of the location of the added voice, then change in an extraordinary and epochal paradigm shift. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in organum, clausula and motet, the counterpointing voice is conceived as lying above the original melody, and the preferred interval for parallel voice-leading is at the fifth above (see Examples 14.5b, 14.5c, 14.5d).⁹ Parallel fourths disappear in two-voice writing, and the fourth is treated more and more as a harmonic dissonance. A great sea-change in taste has occurred.

A different sonorous image emerges at the same time in some elite polyphony in the British Isles, where thirds and sixths are often used harmonically as consonances and in parallel voice-leading. We believe that this very different sound world reflects folk practices and is a regional preference that extends into Scandinavia and Iceland. English discant treatises allow parallel imperfect consonances and acknowledge discanting below as well as above the given voice. In practice, in two voices, thirds are found in parallel above and below, as well as twining around the original voice, and sixths are found below (see Examples 14.6a, 14.6b, 14.6c).¹⁰

Example 14.6c Anon., *Ave celi regina virginum*

A - ve ce - li re - gi - na vir - gi - num

A - ve ce - li re - gi - na vir - gi - num

Example 14.7 Anon., clausula on *Nostrum*, early thirteenth century

No - - - strum.

5

15

[Bars 9–14 not shown]

Far to the south, parallel seconds are attested in some Milanese funeral music, where note-against-note polyphony follows beneath the chant in a mixture of parallel seconds and parallel fourths.¹¹

Elements of the parallel style often remain detectable in more elaborate works, in particular where a counterpoint of varied harmonic intervals and voice-leading can be read as the florid expansion upon a simpler substrate. In a large number of two-voice Parisian conductus and discant clausulae of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for example, harmony is governed by fifths sounding above the principal voice at the beginning and the end, at the outset and conclusion of most important interior phrases and sections, and in metrically strong positions more locally. Although the two voices may cross, an underlying scenario of splitting and rejoining is not at work here; rather, the rule is greater distance, independence, and equality of the parts (see Example 14.7).¹²

The two-voice French and English ecclesiastical organa of the later tenth century, such as are preserved in a Winchester repertory, are composed

Example 14.8 Guillaume de Machaut, refrain of virelai *Se je souspir*, mid fourteenth century

Se je sous - pir par - fon - de - mont Et...

7 ten - dre - ment Pleure en re - coy C'est par ma foy.

12 Pour vous quant vo fai - tis corps gent Da - me ne voy.

‘from the top down’, with the discanting line ranging beneath the given chant, while organa of the twelfth century are composed ‘from the bottom up’. Reversing field again, composing ‘from the top down’ defines the compositional strategy in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century polyphonic French refrain songs, where the tenor is added around or below the principal melodic line, the *cantus*. Machaut and his contemporaries and successors explored various possibilities for the relationship of the cantus and the tenor in respect to cadences and the width of counterpoint, and on occasion they will cross the voices.¹³

The tightly interwoven cantus and tenor of the refrain of Machaut’s virelai *Se je souspir* show one possibility (see Example 14.8).¹⁴ In this song the text is sung only by the upper voice, whose tune is a well-shaped melody lying above and below its final on F. This melody in all likelihood was composed in its entirety before the tenor was added to it. The tenor is closely related, yet subordinate, helping to propel rhythmic activity within the phrase by off-beat accents, and to sustain sound and motion across the phrase rests in the cantus. It is, in respect to range, not a lower-lying part but tightly intertwined with the cantus in the same plagal register around the final; the voices share the ninth C to D, to which the cantus adds one higher step (E); they cross regularly, and cadence to a unison. The two parts sound mainly thirds and fifths together, with occasionally unisons, seconds and fourths, while rarely separating to sixths and octaves, and once a tenth; contrary motion between the voices predominates. In other polyphonic French chansons we see composers explore different

Example 14.9 Giovanni da Firenze, first text line of madrigal *Nel meço*, mid fourteenth century

The image shows a musical score for two voices in 2/4 time. The upper voice (treble clef) has a more active, rhythmic line, while the lower voice (bass clef) has a more sustained, harmonic line. The lyrics are written below each staff.

Upper voice lyrics: Nel me-ço a sey pa-gho-ne

Lower voice lyrics: Nel me-ço a sey pa-gho-ne

Second system (starting at measure 7):

Upper voice lyrics: vi d'un bian-cho

Lower voice lyrics: vi d'un bian-cho

possibilities for the relationship of the two voices in respect to width of counterpoint, especially with the duo lying further apart on average. In effect this means that the tenor lies more consistently beneath, or further beneath (rather than entwined around) the cantus. By later in the fourteenth century the tenor most often sounds the octave beneath the cantus at structural cadences.¹⁵

Early Italian trecento two-voice madrigals articulate a different concept of polyphonic duo. Characteristically they begin and end on a unison and are fully texted in both voices, with simultaneous declamation of syllables and no crossing of parts. The conception is of two equal voices singing the text together that split, keep their distance, and then rejoin. The duo is decidedly not entwining, however. The upper part is generally more rhythmically active, while the lower has more long-sustained notes, especially in the melismas that open and close the setting of each line of text; upper-voice rhythmic diminutions usually decorate one tone or a simple progression over the longer-held lower note. As a rule the upper voice here, too, as in the French chanson, has precedence in the structural duet, and the typical prevalence of harmonic fifths, and of parallel fifths in the underlying contrapuntal motion suggest the conceptual origin of the style in modified 'underfifth' parallelism. The setting of the first text line of Giovanni da Firenze's madrigal *Nel meço a sey paghone* exemplifies these features of the earliest two-voiced trecento duet songs (see Example 14.9).¹⁶

In two-voice polyphony that polyphonically elaborates a chant or chant excerpt, tonality is ultimately governed by the behaviour of the chant. In freely composed polyphony (free, that is, in the sense of lacking the constraint of a pre-existing melody) of the later twelfth century and beyond, the possibility exists for the deliberate juxtaposition of contrasting tonal areas. As in monophonic chants, we may find temporary internal shifts and

Example 14.10 Anon., conductus *Soli nitorem*, early thirteenth century

The musical score for 'Soli nitorem' is presented in two voices. The lyrics are: So - li - ni - to - rem e - quo - ri pu - gil - lum ad - do - la - ti - cis hu - mo - rem ro - bo - ri fron - des ad - phis hu - mo - rem ro - bo - ri fron - des ad -

also permanent shifts of tonal language and behaviour. One final example, a two-voice Notre Dame era conductus, *Soli nitorem*, will introduce us to some of the possibilities (see Example 14.10).¹⁷

The two voices of *Soli nitorem* are tightly entwined equal partners in their duet. The overall tonal centre of the conductus is G, which is indeed the

Example 14.10 (cont.)

iun - go fi - li - cis
 iun - go fi - li - cis

— Dum pre - su - li qui se - cu - li no -
 — Dum pre - su - li qui se - cu - li no -

stri noc - tem il - lu - mi - nat et te - ne - bras ex - ter - mi -
 stri noc - tem il - lu - mi - nat et te - ne - bras ex - ter - mi -

nat cla - ro vir - tu - tum sy - de - re sub - iun - ge - re lau -
 nat cla - ro vir - tu - tum sy - de - re sub - iun - ge - re lau -

dis pre - sum - mo ti - tu - lum.
 dis pre - sum - mo ti - tu - lum.

tonal centre of about 60 per cent of the polyphonic versus and conductus of the Aquitanian and Notre Dame repertoires. Here, both voices move primarily in the G to G octave, though the lower descends occasionally to the D below lower G, and they hold a great deal of motivic material in common. In the repertory to which *Soli nitorem* belongs, there are G pieces with B natural and G pieces with signature B flat, but a very high percentage, curiously, actually employ both B natural and B flat, changing from one

Example 14.10 (*cont.*)

The musical score consists of six systems, each with two staves. The notation is square neumes on a four-line staff. The music is written in a medieval style, featuring a variety of note values including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, often accompanied by rests. The systems are separated by horizontal lines. The final system concludes with a double bar line.

to the other in a structural way. *Soli nitorem* shows just this alternation. (*Ortum floris*, the tonally fluctuating chant discussed above, originates in the same milieu.)

This conductus explores a total of three tonal areas, which are aligned with its formal architecture and with the poetry's verse structure. An initial cauda, none of whose musical material is later reused, is on G with signed

B flat. Then follow the first four lines of the conductus text, written as two couplets. Each couplet is set with declamation on double longs for its first line, moves to declamation on single longs (fifth mode) for its second line, and is followed by a first-mode cauda that concludes with a short point of sustained-tone organum. Tonally, the text couplets are set on G with B natural; each musical section begins at the octave and concludes at the unison.

In the second half of the poem, however, the poet shifts versification and syntax, and the composer has matched this textual shift with a shift of tonal material, now emphasizing the fifth A to E with C as central pitch axis and (local) final. Closure is achieved in a final cauda that revisits the musical material of the previous first-mode caudae, thus moving back to a tonal centre on G with B natural, though the cauda material is now recast into a rhythmically broader fifth mode before the final sustained-tone flourish.

A move into a discussion of three- and four-voice writing, as it emerges at the very end of the Middle Ages, would not be out of place at this moment, but space does not permit it. I will simply emphasize that most fundamental considerations are the same as for two-voice writing. We may ask if a pre-existing melody is being garlanded with additional parts unfolding together with it, or is the entire polyphonic complex of new composition? If new, does one voice have priority? Or now is there perhaps a structural duet of two counterpointing voices that has conceptual or chronological priority? Can we speak of the work having been composed from the bottom up or from the top down? And is its tonal language consistent or deliberately varied? From these points of departure, our trajectory of inquiry must move back into the theory treatises, to generate from their dicta a set of queries involving the grammar and vocabulary of consonance and dissonance, and of voice-leading and cadencing. Furthermore, the unfolding of constructive principles in three and four parts is more diverse, and even more contingent on genre (motet, chanson, conductus) and geography (for instance, the fourteenth-century motet in Italy, England, and France) than previously. But these must be topics and questions for another day.