'Simple Polyphony' in the Modern Devotion: the manuscript Berlin, SPK germ. oct. 190

I. Introduction

The Modern Devotion was an influential reform movement, which arose in the Netherlands during the late Middle Ages. During the 15th and 16th century, the movement was a constituting cultural factor, not only in the Netherlands, but also in several other European countries: for example West Germany, North Switzerland and northeast France.

Most of the written testimonies date from the late 15th century, including a number of music manuscripts. For a long time, musicologists believed that polyphonic music was forbidden in the area of the Modern Devotion. In-depth research into the relevant theoretical and everyday sources of the Modern Devotion has led to a more differentiated view. According to these sources, it was not polyphony as such that was forbidden, but merely one style, *contrapunctus diminutus* in particular. The polyphonic music of this movement can be characterized as 'simple' polyphony: this predominantly homophone type of polyphonic music was practiced in medieval monasteries, as well as in humanistic circles throughout the Renaissance. Apparently, circles of the Modern Devotion had made their decision for simple polyphony in a conscious manner. Music in the Modern Devotion consists almost exclúsively of religious songs which fulfilled a central role within the process of daily meditation. Meditation was focussed on text, for that reason all parts of the polyphonic songs needed always to be declaimed synchronously. The result is a style of 'simple polyphony' which can be found in all manuscripts of the Modern Devotion which contain polyphonic music.

II. Question

Regarding the great number of polyphonic songs written in the modern devotion it is interesting to question whether there can be found stylistic differences. There are several manners on which these polyphonic pieces can be approached. One possibility is to follow a vertical line, examining indivídual songs that appear in a number of sources. This yields many results for individual songs, but only little information about their context. Another possibility is to follow a horizontal line. That means that one must aim at the songs of a whole manuscript and compare them with other manuscripts in order to get information about its musical style and cultural context. My hypóthesis is that there are characteristic earmarks of polyphony of each source of the Modern Devotion depending on their órigin.

Starting point for my hypothesis is the observation that in the simple polyphony of the Modern Devotion the transmission of the cantus is much steadier than the transmission of the other voices. We can find the same cantus with only few variations in several sources, but this cantus is combined with a duplum that differs exceedingly from manuscript to manuscript. Sometimes we even find different alternatives within one source! So the configuration of the duplum and its combination with the cantus can give us a hint about individual style characteristics.

While 'simple polyphony' is characteristic of all polyphonic songs of the Modern Devotion, each manuscript seems to be written in a unique manner differing from other sources. I would like to present some stylistically distinguishing features by comparing polyphonic songs from two manuscripts of the Modern Devotion.

III. Berlin 190

The first manuscript lays in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz at Berlin. It dates from the late 15th century and consists of 185 folia, containing nearly 200 Dutch and Latin songs: thus it is quite a large source; most songbooks of the modern devotion are less voluminous. Among these songs, 45 are polyphonic, 41 of them in a two-part setting, four in a three-part setting. An íntegral edition of this important manuscript is currently being prepared by the *Research Group for Late Medieval Religious Song in the Low Countries* at the University of Utrecht. This manuscript has been located at a convent of sisters at Utrecht, the convent of St. Agnes.

With few exceptions the polyphonic settings of the manuscript are unique and cannot be found in other manuscripts in this way. They show an independent conception.

Two-part songs

For musical analysis, normally several points must be compared. Because there is only 20 minutes time for this lecture, I shall concentrate on the interval structure of the two-part songs.

With regard to this aspect, they can be divided into four groups:

1. Songs with notably perfect consonant intervals in contrary motion
2. Songs with much parallel movement, notably in fifths
3. Songs with an above average number of perfect dissonants such as seconds, seventh and quarts
4. Songs with an above average number of imperfect consonants, such as thirds and sixths

1st group.

The first group contains 19 songs. Most of them show contrary movement in a style which can be found in the 13th century Notre Dame-period too – in fact this is the typical style of simple polyphony. These songs also show predominantly perfect consonances and only a few imperfect consonances, and few dissonant intervals in transitional positions.

I will demonstrate this with **Vox dicentis**

This two-part song is a part of the second lesson of Christmas. As a polyphonic song, the composition is known from only two other sources of the Modern Devotion. Unisons and octaves appear at rhetorically important places where I have signed the text with comma and colon, structuring the song in different groups. Within these groups, the voices move in contrary motion, crossing at the note *c*. Demonstration *Clama, et dixi*.

This style is rather timeless; we can find it in nearly all manuscripts with simple polyphony.

2nd group

Parallel movement of voices, mainly fifths, is the most striking characteristic of the 2nd group, containing 10 songs.

Singing in parallel fifths was very popular not only in the 10th century, but also in later times. A group of four small treatises indicate the practise of 'fifthing' in the 15th century. This was merely an oral practise, whose written traces are found in manuscripts such as Berlin 190. Some of these 10 songs, such as *Kyrie Magne deus potencie* can be found in much older manuscripts. Most of them, however, don't have older roots but are written down not earlier than the 15th century, belonging to an oral tradition that might be much older.

For example I have chosen **In dulci iubilo**

This very popular Christmas song combines two languages and is known in this form mainly from manuscripts of the Modern Devotion. In this song we find two sorts of parallel movement: unisons and fifths. Cadences are found at the end of verses which rime: *iubilo, weset vro, presepio*. Here we have a slight contrary movement for the cadence, for the rest parallel movements with unisons and fifths.

3rd group

The 3rd group is a small group of five songs which show an amazing number of dissonant intervals including quarts:

My example is **Mit desen nyewen iare**

This song is one of the only three Dutch polyphonic songs of the manuscript. Most of the polyphonic pieces in Berlin 190 contain Latin texts. *Met desen nyewen iare* is known only from manuscripts from the Modern Devotion; within these circles it was rather popular. The song is transmitted in eight manuscripts. Each source shows a different duplum.

Most of the dissonances appear at the end of verses. You can find them for instance at the word 'openbare', and in the last staff at 'al verblijt'. Considering the melisma on 'openbare', we see that nearly each new note in the cantus (staff under) forms a dissonant with the duplum. And I wonder whether it is a sort of scribe's fault; one he didn't manage to get into the right form. Perhaps we can pick up a small glimpse of influence of the polyphonic music (not the simple one), a cadence of the modern type on *e*, where the syncopes are missing. My tiny little bows show where the syncopes should have been written. However, the other septimes and seconds hardly can be explained. The character of this song is quite modern, look for instance at the cadence at *iare* that consist mainly of sixths, so perhaps the scribe tried to near the new polyphonic style of the 15th century – and didn't succeed!. Indeed, Berlin 190 is not the only manuscript of the Modern Devotion with a high percentage of dissonant intervals; they even seem to be quite regular.

4th group

The last group contains six songs with the highest percentage of imperfect consonants of whole the manuscript, that is thirds and sixths.

My example is: **In natali domini**

This song is a Christmas carol too, which is known only from two other sources; both belonging to the Modern Devotion. This song shows a remarkable preference for imperfect consonances, notably the third.

The slide shows 18 imperfect consonants: 17 thirds and one sixth. The other intervals are 12 fifths and 2 unisons, no dissonants. This song has a majority of imperfect consonances, and that also applies to five other songs. However, no more than 3 thirds were found in succession. Parallel movement in these songs also still happens by means of fifths, not thirds.

IV. Comparison with Utrecht 16 H 34

In a following step I want to compare the interval structure of these four groups with the interval structure in another source of the Modern devotion:*Utrecht 16 H 34*. I have analyzed and published the polyphonic songs of this manuscript at an earlier date.

Utrecht 16 H 34 is composed of ten originally independent little paper booklets. These booklets came from various houses of the Modern Devotion in the Eastern Netherlands, most of them written by members of a men's convent in Zwolle, the brethren of the Common Life. It contains 121 songs, 28 of them being polyphonic.

Though both manuscripts originate from the Modern Devotion, the style of polyphony is quite different:

Like Berlin 190, some songs show the interval structure of the first group, the style of the Notre Dame period. However, in contrast to Berlin 190 where we see 10 of such songs, there is only one song with a notable parallel structure in the Utrecht source.

This manuscript, as well, contains songs with lots of dissonances, especially quarts, but less than Berlin190.

On the other hand, the Utrecht source contains much more songs with imperfect intervals than Berlin 190. There are even songs with a series of 10 thirds as a parallel movement or as a voice crossing.

Finally, in the Utrecht source 13 of 28 polyphonic songs show a slight approach to *contrapunctus diminutus*, a style that lacks nearly completely in the Berlin manuscript.

In these songs, the homophonic structure is changed into a more polyphonic character in both the voices. In this aspect the part-song settings of this manuscript differ from all the other concordant

sources that transmit a structure that is homophonic and dominated by a combination of dissonances and perfect consonances. The cause for this style can probably be found in the performance practice of Zwolle where it was allowed to sing in*contrapunctus diminutus* on Christmas Eve. Thus here we probably come across a local use of singing that lacks in other songbooks of the modern devotion, as far as I know.

V Devotio moderna?
So the questions arise: What is the reason for these differences? Where do they come from? Why do we have in one manuscript more songs in a traditional style, such as the first group of Berlin 190, and in another manuscript a more modern style, for example in the case of Utrecht. Unfortunately I cannot give an exact answer yet. But I suspect that different musical traditions in the houses of the Modern Devotion could have influenced the type of simple polyphony their songbooks show. This also can be the reason for a different transmission of cantus and duplum. In all probability, the *cantus* was copied, but the *duplum* was conceived anew in each songbook. Anyway, we can see an enormous creative process in each community of the Modern Devotion influenced by local rules. Utrecht 16 H 34 is located at Zwolle, at the community of the Brethren of Common Life. These men were well educated priests who spend most of their time writing and reading Latin books. They copied liturgical books too, but were not professional musicians.
Berlin 190 has been located in a female community of tertian nuns at Utrecht. Female members of the Modern Devotion got much less education than male members. Their education in Latin in the majority of cases was only rudimental and so was the education of writing music. Nevertheless, several of them wrote personal songbooks.
Another songbook belonging to a female member of the modern devotion, is the songbook of Anna of Cologne. The feature of the polyphonic songs of this manuscript is similar to Berlin 190. Even more: the version of *In ducli iubilo* is nearly identical with that of the Berlin manuscript, whereas the same song in the Utrecht manuscript differs highly.

VI Summary
I would like to finish with a short summary.
Simple polyphony is a quite flexible term that fits for all polyphonic music which is not written in *contrapunctus diminutus*. The tradition during the Middle Ages shows a wide range of types. These different features can probably be explained by the sources containing those songs. In this paper I compared different types of simple polyphony in two manuscripts of the Modern Devotion. By relating these types to their cultural context, that is to say male and female convents, we might establish a hypóthesis that connects cultural history to music history. But: to exceed the purely hypothético basis, we have to go on with research about simple polyphony. If we combine vertical study for individual songs with horizontal study for manuscripts with simple polyphony in relationship to their cultural context, we might get a more differentiated view on simple polyphony than we do now.

Thank you for your attention.