In the Gascon Pyrenees, orally transmitted multipart singing is a very lively form of music-making that is not something “ready-made” but a work in progress built by the singers, that depends on contexts: whether these are festive rituals and celebrations, of a familial or religious nature… In this numerus apertus multipart music tradition (Lortat-Jacob: 2000), each person present can participate in the performance in an ideal way. Multipart singing is the source of a certain opacity of performances – close to jumble – and is constantly rebuilt at the crossroads of the musical and the human. Its contextual parameters are more present and active than in other traditions. At the same time, a strongly pragmatic approach towards the Pyrenean area has to take into account the performance dynamics and those of the context, complex in itself and steadily changing. Perspectives of the performance from the inside allow us to perceive some aspects of this complexity in the meaning of Latin complexus reminded by Edgar Morin as “ce qui est tissé ensemble” (that which is woven together) (Morin: 1995). I would therefore like to pick out the characteristics of multipart patterns and variation described in my first publications (Castéret 2002), and even more recently (Castéret 2008 and 2012a), to create a dialogue with the data from the musical analysis of individual singers’ vocal performances within a small group. In other words, I would like to examine the dialogic—defined by Edgar Morin as “the necessary and complementary presence of antagonistic processes or instances [la présence nécessaire et complémentaire de processus ou d’instances antagonistes]” (Nsonsissa 2010)—principle of multipart singing, which is a musical gesture which is both individual and collective.
A social construction

The implementation of performances stems from a long series of steps made of allusions, of insinuations, to build the necessary consensus which must then be maintained. In fact, singing is something implicit which is part of the conviviality system: a potential implemented by the enunciators who select the situation and context. But singing doesn’t appear immediately. All singers insist that singing is first of all a matter of agreement, a matter of the heart, beyond words. During the party, talking gradually gives way to singing; alcohol and food help guests to become relaxed. But the initiative for singing and performance are preceded by circumvolutions, strategies, “toute une mise en scène” (all a staging) as a singer would emphasize.

In fact, in the Pyrenees everything is done to avoid exposing the singers as being individually responsible for the performance and, on the contrary, everything is done to give birth to a performance which appears as collegial as possible. A form of bashfulness manifests itself even in families, for example between father and son.

The multipart development process implies several parameters:

- Firstly: that two singers, at least, tacitly agree to start off the singing.
- Secondly: that the most legitimate singer of the group—in terms of repertory or vocal mastery—can be persuaded to participate;
- Thirdly: that the presence of one singer capable of taking on a complementary vocal part, generally the high part, must be assured.

Then, singing breaks the silence. It emerges from the talking, from the discussions, and suddenly fills all the space. It gradually becomes normal, helped by the consumption of alcohol or food which precedes, prefigures and then accompanies it.

Even if singers take pleasure in showing their qualities—a pareishèr (to show off; to show oneself off to advantage)—they will generally try to ensure the participation of the largest number of people, selecting for this purpose songs known to all and kindly welcoming proposals for songs. In all cases, they are careful to always leave the circle open, because singing during an entire party in a small group would defy the rules of basic courtesy. The operation would be fruitless, because the “public” would quickly turn away from the singers.

Multipart singing thus implies reciprocity, the notion of “giving and receiving” which is well-known in anthropology. Once the consensus is
obtained, and the act engaged, there is a concern to preserve it by maintaining sufficient comportmental equilibrium among the singers: in the choice of songs, in the election of the vocal parts, notably in the distribution of the “high” part; and more globally, in the vocal leadership.

For example, one night, fifteen or so singers between forty-sixty years are gathered. In the middle is Jean-Michel, twenty-seven years old, a young farmer, with a stentorian voice. Jean-Michel sings the ‘high’ part. I am very impressed, by his young age, his vocal mastery. But soon the other singers consider that he is standing out too much and that he’s singing off-key. They stop him very abruptly, and say: “You have the ability to learn the songs, but you must learn to listen. Here, sing the cantus. It’s after you have sung the cantus that you can learn to sing the ‘high part’! [Tu as la tête pour apprendre les chansons, mais tu dois apprendre à écouter. Là, chante la basse [le chant]. C’est quand tu auras chanté la basse un peu avant que tu pourras apprendre à chanter la haute!]

The following week, I met up with one of the singers. He explains that Jean-Michel tries too hard to stand out from the rest, whereas it’s better to blend in with what the others are singing. That this is the most agreeable thing and “there, you can show yourself two or three times (by singing the high part) [comme ça, deux ou trois fois tu te montres un peu]”.

Thus, Jean-Michel was not singing off-key at all, but his stentor voice, and his irrepressible desire to sing—certainly a way of existing socially—as soon as he started in the high range, made him stand out too much in the group, so that he was then destabilised. This young singer was brought back to reason, and to a “normal” voice, by his elder colleagues. What is translated here in terms of ear, of listening, was social listening, a problem of social accuracy, of “being socially in tune” rather than musically.

To resume, the singers are very attentive to the guarantees that allow the act of singing to go to its term. And that what is conveyed or represented should be the strongest possible, according to the expression of a singer; as much in the construction of consensus, the assurance of vocal order, or in maintaining this consensus.

‘Se trouver’: in search of communion

If the singers’ collective works well humanly, adjusting the pitch helps singers to combine their respective tones in the manner of a construction game that fits perfectly. Singers usually say that they have to ‘se trouver’, that is to say ‘to meet’, “to agree” with their partner, to coordinate both humanly and musically. A first level is reached when the pitch allows the
emergence of the third part in the bass which densifies the multipart texture that singers feel clearly. Vocal emulation is the other key: a vocal joust that is part of human and acoustic research and allows the singers to explore and to evaluate their voice and find the best acoustic balance (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. ‘Se trouver.’ Bernard Miqueu and Jean-Louis Mondot. Billère, Béarn, Southwestern Gascony, France. 2011. Photograph by Patricia Heiniger-Castéret.

All of them seek more or less consciously another threshold: a moment of vocal fusion conceived as a kind of communion—“two voices as one” (deux voix qui n’en font qu’une)—a sounding point of tension to which each singer is strained, his being fully engaged, solitary and interdependent of the voices and bodies of each of the other singers. A sounding body, built by all these points of tension, like a Roman arch.

Due to the ‘work in progress’ nature of performances, this moment is still fragile, desired but fleeting, sought during the party in an overbidding
towards treble, soon obtained, soon disappeared, soon destroyed, exceeded to the yell.

It is in this kind of moment that singers with high-pitched voices will lift themselves for a moment above the other voices, thus producing that they call *contrahauta* (lit. contra alta).

If the sequence is successful, the whole musical construction will be magnified, perfectly balanced between individual and collective expression: like an impressionist painting in which each point is individual but in the service of a work that transcends the sum total.

The body postures affirm the act of communication in which each singer is both transmitter and receiver. Internalization, arms folded, heads bowed, in the first songs of a singing party, gradually gives way to an intense physical engagement: a physical quest.

The chests stand up after a meal. In the pub where they sing, chest forward, the necks become taut. The eye is dilated fixing the person opposite or looking for a privileged partner. The look expresses by turns tenderness, solicitation or challenge.

If some singers internalize the song, closing their eyes, or placing a hand on their ear, they end up yielding to the call of otherness. In the overexcitement of the party, singers seek each other physically, they measure up to each other, they provoke each other... Duets appear, mouths wide open at twenty centimetres from the partner’s. Trios in which communication combines, in pairs, voice and ear, eye and ear, eye and voice. In some contexts, strongly collective gestures join the voices. An
elbow resting on the shoulder of a neighbor, an arm around the neck or shoulder complete the circle (see figures 3 and 4).

Fig. 3. The singers’ circle. Bar de l’Union, Fêtes de Laruns. Vallée d’Ossau, Southwestern Gascony, France. 2001. Photograph by Jean-Jacques Castéret.

Fig. 4. The vocal challenge. Café-Restaurant Chez Mouflia, Fêtes d’Orthez, Béarn, Southwestern Gascony, France. 2008. Photograph by Patricia Heiniger-Castéret.
Furthermore, each performer invests something in multipart singing according to his preoccupations and affectivity. In return, singing is the media that allows him to state, to publically externalize his emotional state. And in fact, the quality of the musical outcome depends on the quality of the vocal engagement of each singer. But this quality depends on what each brings into the singers’ circle. Like sensitivity, emotionality; also linguistic or cultural sphere; personal history: genealogical dimension, network, personal strategy, personal status and position in the village. The multipart texture of these sound/social bodies depends on these human parameters (Bosseur 2001).

**A musical construction: patterns and contexts**

If all social and cultural values are expressed through this process, it is the same on the musical level. Multipart singing indeed requires musical rules and also musical and vocal skills.

This polyphony is constructed on a *cantus firmus* by the creation of one high voice and/or one lower voice constructed musically according to multipart patterns. The most common is a parallelism in the high part in thirds except for the second degree, which can be accompanied by a fourth. In the bass part, another parallelism is performed in thirds except for the first two notes of the scale accompanied in sixth and fifth respectively. In fact, these three patterns are the same as the royal tune faux-bourdon in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (see Castéret 2012b).

Drone patterns also appear: one can be produced on the fifth degree in the high part; and the others in the bass on the first degree of the scale or on the fifth degree.

According to the local discussion, and the analysis, the difference between two- and three-part singing comes from the combination of several parameters:

- The know-how of the singers in creating a third voice;
- Their vocal competence. For example, there are few bass voices in this region.
- Also: the necessity of having enough good singers to reassure the other parts in their tone and firmness.
- And finally, a melody line of cantus that allows simultaneous accompaniments in each of the other parts to obtain three distinct and vertically complementary parts.

These patterns are very clear, but vocality is something dynamic, it varies depending on the context. Therefore, if music analysis reveals the conditions of the appearance of patterns and the combination of musical prototypes virtually present in the cultural stock of Pyrenean singers, field experience leads us to consider the contextual parameters such as participating in the realization of multipart singing forms (Castéret 2008 and 2012a).

All this vocal dynamic has a strong impact on the musical achievements, which differ depending on the moment: at the beginning or at the end of a vocal session with friends; or in context of “social over-excitement” such as a feast day.

At the beginning of a party among friends, polyphony usually starts with two parts. The two voices interlace note against note and are not precisely homorythmic. The higher part uses the parallelism pattern in thirds that can be varied by the good singers, using also fourths, fifths, sixths and sometimes octave (fig. 5) according to the degrees of the scale and the melodic outline of the cantus. This is an action of ornamentation that the singers call lolar (flourish).

During the session, the pitch becomes higher, the voice more tense and gradually the varied parallelism can start to change to a drone. Drone segments appear when the melody line of certain segments means an intervention of the second and third degree of the scale and the fifth: (A, B, D for a scale transposed on G), the first two being accompanied by D and the third (D) being in unison. The higher line comes back to the note D. The singer only has to stay on this note for the other degrees as in this paradigmatic transcription (fig. 6).

To begin with, this happens on segments of 4 or 5 notes only. What is more, the segment must be composed, rhythmically, on a suite of short values. At the same time, we notice an acceleration of tempi.
Variations of the parallel patterns or the occurrence of drones are even more important on the day of village festivities, that is to say in strongly collective contexts. In Laruns (Béarn, valley of Ossau), the aperitif takes place in the covered market where a large part of the population of the village crowds in: at least three hundred people. The principal activity is singing (see http://www.sondaqui.com, Hèstas de Nosta Dama / Fêtes de Laruns). Here, each group and each individual wants to be heard, even if it is sometimes just a shout. Between the higher voices there is a distinct stratification of melodic lines. Each wants to pass over the next fellow. However, in this sonorous overbidding, if a fellow cannot go over, he can go under. In this place, we can experience more varied multipart inventions than elsewhere: numerous drones on the dominant of the scale in the upper voice, but also things never heard elsewhere like bass parallel patterns sung in an octave above, drones on the first degree of the scale but in the upper voice while in this valley bass drone is not used.
Melodical context and individual creativity

If there is a multipart variation inter-pattern—an outside variation—, variation appears also inside patterns. It affects all consonances which form the three-part pattern (fig. 1). Each note of the cantus scale can thus alternatively generate different intervals: major second only in the drones; minor or major third, perfect fourth, fifth, sixth and sometimes octave (fig. 7). We can note firstly that in all the multipart parallel performances—leaving aside the bass (I) and the high (V) drones—the notes G3 or D4 can appear on the whole zone of the scale G3-D4, except A3 in the case of the bass and C4 in case of the high part. Therefore, installing a drone takes more than a single note, a special consonance (second) in this culture. After all, that is a step which is quickly passed, since the note in question still holds a function of passage, which means that the singers clearly prefer a melodic-linear thought.

Fig. 7. Flourish. Variations of the cantus.

It should also be noted that the variation particularly concerns the most widely-used heights of the melodic scale: D3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4. In these cases we often find an octave between high and bass, lines that exceed a pulse are, however, excluded from performances.
A variation of the multipart pattern occurs, however, mostly on the secondary notes of the melody as passaggio, embroidery or anticipation. Seventh and seconds are very rare. They appear sometimes as transitions, keeping the same pitch between two strong consonances or as anticipations of consonances (figures 8 and 9).

![Fig. 8. The use of the seventh as consonance.](image)

More generally it seems that passaggio or embroidery serve different purposes depending on the melodic context. They can occur intentionally as agreement or melodic effect of the accompanying part, usually the high part (see fig. 10).

These melodic ornaments can be the product of the singers’ inventiveness. In this performance of *Maudit sia l’amor*, for instance (fig. 11), the fourth is chosen to conserve a parallel movement, to vary the melodic line which otherwise would remain on D. The singer restarts the next stanza (fig. 12) with an octave breaking the upward movement, which is more classical and was previously employed.

![Fig. 10. Passaggio or embroidery.](image)
Variation also appears because of the individual stylistic research which itself depends on the melodic identity of the cantus. In *A l’arrastora deu hroment* the singer chooses (fig. 13) to break the parallelism by fetching a sixth, using a very elegant counter-movement. But, as the next note is resolved on D3, which must be accompanied by a fifth, the most obvious and conjoint outline led him to employ a fifth on E3 in the previous consonance. The same took place in another valley in this performance of *Pastorejant lo long d’acera aigueta* (fig. 14).
Like the occasional opportunities for melodic variation, the accompanying line can seek a certain autonomy in relation to the cantus, to preserve a more melodical character as a line stabiliser. For example, *De la plus charmanta anesqueta* (fig. 15) presents here a first sequence of four notes in parallel fifths brought about by the two sequence terminals. The next sequence could restart in parallel thirds. However, two fourths appear that allow a melodical joint movement of seconds to be conserved while the cantus makes a jump of a third. Here, the high part line thereby becomes autonomous. Indeed, the melodic motif produced in the high part of the second sequence is simply a mirror (thus inverted) of the first high part sequence.

In the upward movement of the *La haut sus la montanha* refrain (fig. 16), which is rather rushed and thus not easy on the prosodic level, the high part tries to stay as linear as possible in order to avoid accidents; the same occurs in *Sur le pont d’Avignon trois filles s’y promènent* (fig. 17) where motives also appear in which the high part gains a certain autonomy, avoiding the cantus jump.

Fig. 14. An excerpt from *Pastorejant lo long d’acera aigueta*.

Fig. 15. An excerpt from *De la plus charmanta anesqueta*.
Sequences, formulas, systems

Consonances of fourths, fifths and sixths, whether they are combined or not, can form sequences of some notes in the pieces that explore the scale area between D₃ and G₃, and whose contour is structured by these two terminals (particularly the low terminal). In these contexts, the recurring sequences, not necessary required by the musical basic rules, indicate in fact a tendency towards fixation that is not simply a melodic variation but clearly a formula which once again reveals a line tending towards individualisation (figures 18 and 19).

In *La haut sus la montanha* (fig. 20), the upward movement previously described leads to a downward conclusive movement, followed by a fourth and three fifths. The paradigmatic transcription presents the possible variation of this shape. However, one point remains unchangeable: the sequence of parallel fifths E₃ / B₃, D₃ / A₃. We also find this enchainment in all pieces where this kind of secondary cadence appears, which relies on the low dominant as in *Par un beau soir que j’étais factionnaire* (fig. 21).
In Quest of Communion: The Dialogic of Multipart Singing

Fig. 18. Multipart formula.

Fig. 19. Multipart formula.

Fig. 20. Excerpts from *La haut sus la montanha.*
Moreover, whatever the context, E3, which can be accompanied by different notes, will tend to favour the fifth. The recurrence of this consonance and its privileged position in the secondary cadences seems to show a system.

We can thus redefine the accompaniment pattern in high (fig. 22):

In fact, the combination of parameters weaving vocal parts leads to a selection of the most conjunct line movements, which are the most stable and therefore the easiest to perform and are considered more melodic in an aesthetic sense by the singers. Even if the melodic contour of the *cantus*, i.e. its identity, broadly defines the other parts, they are not mere accompaniments. This is evidenced by a share of variation and a search of the melodic line for which the singers, at least in the high part, provide an obvious melodic care.

In contrast to a search of consonance in a vertical thought, it is the search for melodic line that is obviously present here: that is to say, the melodic gesture of a singer for the multipart realization of a melodic sequence or of a whole sentence. Vocal parts are in this way above all a projection of the outline of the *cantus*, but not its exact replica.

All of that, the concepts explained by the singers, shows a linear thinking tradition, defined by Ignazio Macchiarella as a melodico-linear type (Macchiarella 1991). This definition cannot, however, make us forget that a melodic trait, in the *cantus* or in the high part, is structured by support points; that stanzas present secondary and main cadences, and that a trait is the sequence of short rhythmic values that resolve to a long value. But whether it is on these resolutions or on the initial supports, the vertical dimension of the plurivocality dominates. We must remember that, in this
respect, the support points do not change, that only those consonances are used which are regarded as the strongest, and which also structure the layout of the melodic line. Thus, even if the thought is melodic-linear here, the appearance of plurivocal parts is the result of a dialectic between horizontal and vertical considerations.

**Conclusion**

Multipart singing combines contextual determinisms, human, musical, shared models and free choice of the individual, all concurring to shape the identity of a performance. Paradoxically, variation is equivalent to a gradual autonimisation and empowering of the parts while singers pursue fusion and communion. Human research is musically based on timbre fusion and joint effort. It is expressed in a dialectic between horizontal and vertical musical thought. The vertical dimension, the chord, in the suspense or conclusive cadences, is the achievement, the convergence of individual, horizontal, gestures. But variation delays the appearance of these vertical listening points to better reinforce them, to magnify them in an almost erotic thought. We can say that performance is a global gesture like an iceberg, of which the most important part is not necessarily visible. An entire society and its cultural values are expressed throughout the construction process of multipart singing, forming a recognizable sounding emblem of a deep local identity. Multipart performance is both the issue and the result of this kind of cultural musical thought. Beyond this, for an emic listening, each performance reveals the pulse of the group or the community! It reveals it to be seen, and to be listened to.

**References**

