

# The Question of “Harmony” in a Local Multipart Music Practice: Eastern Latvia as a Field for Terminological Experimentation

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## Abstract

There are many examples of multipart singing practices in Latvia (as well as in Lithuania, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and elsewhere) that can be examined as being more or less connected with functional harmony. This kind of multipart singing is usually called ‘harmonic polyphony / multipart singing’ or ‘homophonic polyphony / multipart singing’ in the local academic literature. In these cases it means the researchers have considered that the multipart singing concerned is based on the logic of functional harmony or that functional harmony has influenced its creation.

It does not help very much to choose one of these terms as the right one or the better one. In either case doing so is no more than an attempt to put together two different things: the Western term, which comes from so-called “Art music” theory, and musical structures that follow other “mechanisms” and rules.

Does the music designated by the terms ‘harmonic’ or ‘homophonic’ include functional harmony? Does the term designate what the music makers mean? How can the analysis of the chords help to find solutions concerning the terminology? What does ‘part’ mean? How can the local folk terminology help us to make terminological experimentation? From which viewpoint can we analyse the instrumentation of sound in multipart singing practices? What is the role of music theory and anthropology in this context? These are the questions I would like to discuss, using examples of multipart singing from eastern Latvia.

## Introduction

Upon joining the Study Group on Multipart Music of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) some years ago, I was very happy to use the term ‘multipart singing’, which I found to be much more precise and corresponding better to the music that was the subject of my studies. But I have to admit that at that time I used this term rather as an alternative to the English term ‘polyphony’, equivalent to the Latvian *daudz balsība* (*daudz* – multi, *balsis* – voice, part), which is a direct translation of German *Mehrstimmigkeit* and Russian *многоголосие*. So, at first it was merely a question of translation. It was only later, while preparing my paper for the symposium European Voices III (23–26 April 2013, Vienna) and thinking of the instrumentation and instrumentalisation of sound in local multipart music practices in eastern Latvia, that I began to realise the conceptual aspects of the term. One of the conclusions I drew was that the terms we often use to describe and analyse these practices do not always designate

exactly what the singers mean when actually making multipart music. Accordingly, this might be a good reason to review some of these terms used in discussing multipart music in the light of the concept of the ICTM Study Group on Multipart Music, whose current definition of multipart music reads: “Multipart music is a specific mode of music making and expressive behaviour based on the intentionally distinct and coordinated participation in the performing act by sharing knowledge and shaping values”.<sup>1</sup>

As Ignazio Macchiarella writes in the introduction of the book *Multipart Music: A Specific Mode of Musical Thinking, Expressive Behaviour and Sound*,

Often, multipart music is considered mainly (or totally) as ‘musical outcomes’ or mere ‘musical textures’, i.e. as a compilation of ‘musical objects’ [...] or as overlapping between depersonalized melodic lines or musical materials. Based on a largely reductionist approach to music, many analyses try to explain multipart music in terms of structural elements alone:

<sup>1</sup> [www.multipartmusic.eu](http://www.multipartmusic.eu) (6 July 2015).