

Multipart Music as a Conceptual Tool. A Proposal

Ignazio Macchiarella

Abstract

The term 'multipart music' began to be used within our literature recently. Literally, it designates a generic co-presence of manifold components 'inside a music' without qualifying exactly what kind of co-presence is in play. Nevertheless, 'multipart music' is used more and more often, replacing the historically connoted term 'polyphony' which immediately refers to the domain of so-called Western art music.

Importantly, 'multipart music' has the advantage of containing the term 'part' which can be considered in the theatrical sense of 'role', thus shifting the focus towards the essence of the musical action, namely the performative behaviours from which the sound intertwining springs. These actions can be interpreted as coordination of different *sound gestures*, i.e. bodily actions which begin and end and which have characteristic features and configurations that can be represented in terms of rhythmic-temporal dimensions and pitch chains. In such a perspective this paper focuses on what individuals do when they sing/play together in organized ways. Using different examples, the paper offers a contribution to the theoretical discourses of the ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) Study Group on Multipart Music.

What is the point of the term 'multipart music'?

As is usual in musicology (and in the humanities in general) terminologies are often ambiguous or far too generic and little effective: 'multipart music' is no exception! The term 'multipart music' began to be used within our recent literature mostly in order to generally replace the term 'polyphony', or in a vague attempt to extend the field of polyphony (see Ardian Ahmedaja's article in this volume). Literally, multipart music designates nothing more than a generic co-presence of manifold components inside a music, without qualifying exactly what kind of co-presence is in play, what the term 'part' means, what the relationships among the parts are, and so forth. Thus, the locution 'multipart music' is simply the attestation of a compound music, made up of different elements resounding together – which is a sort of tautology since, in a sense, all music is always made up of various elements. In this regard, 'multipart music' works pretty much like the term 'polyphony' which, in an equally generic way, denotes nothing more than a co-presence among more sounds (poly-sounds), without specifying how this musical co-presence occurs.

In actual fact, such a kind of terminological vagueness seems inevitable: the phenomenon that we are interested in studying – this organ-

ized resounding of manifold sound components (let us just call it this for the moment) – manifests such a disparate variety of musical experiences that no definition could be more effective, and no expression could adequately represent this substantial diversity of musical processes – at least according to today's knowledge and current research perspectives. Indeed, to insist on searching for a more effective and more comprehensive denomination would imply a kind of paradox, precisely because of the substantial, both formal and conceptual, variety of the articulation of the phenomenon in (and among) different cultures: it would be like trying to find a word with a potential universal meaning in order to deal with something of which one admits a substantial and irreducible cultural variability. In fact, as a conscious collectively shared human experience, making music together in a coordinated manner requires different forms of conceptualization that, as appropriate, may refer to rationalities even very different from ours.

Therefore, the choice to resort to 'multipart music' is not due to its literal meaning. Rather, it springs from the fact that it is a relatively recent term that does not carry as much baggage as 'polyphony'. Furthermore, it has the advantage of containing the term 'part' which – beyond the common sense in the context of Western musical grammar – can be considered in the theatrical