Journée d'études "The Renaissance of Counterpoint"

Monday 6 and Tuesday 7 October 2025
Haute école de Musique de Genève (Rue du Général-Dufour 2, Geneva Switzerland)

Organized in friendly collaboration with the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (FHNW)

Organizing Committee:
Niels Berentsen (PhD), niels.berentsen@hesge.ch (HEM), David Mesquita (PhD), david.mesquita@fhnw.ch (SCB), Antoine Schneider, antoine.schneider@hesge.ch (HEM)

Description

The traditional teaching of (written) counterpoint in conservatoires has in recent decades been supplemented, and sometimes supplanted by approaches based on improvisation. On the one hand these methods model themselves directly on the early theorists, who—more often than composition—describe practices of extemporized counterpoint known as "cantare super librum" or "contrappunto alla mente". On the other hand, these "new old" pedagogies also correspond to the very contemporary need to develop innovative, interactive teaching strategies, focused on practical musicianship skills, allowing students to learn music as a living language.

Building on the legacy of the pioneers of this revival, such as Markus Jans and Jean-Yves Haymoz in Switzerland, successive generations of pedagogues have developed their own approaches, based on new insights from historical research (not seldom their own), but also on practical experiences in the classroom and in performance. Whilst originating in designated early music departments, these pedagogies now have also spread to "generalist" music theory curricula in European conservatoires.

The joint study days "The Renaissance of Counterpoint", organized by the Haute école de musique de Genève (HES-SO) and the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (FNNW) aim to sketch a panorama of current pedagogies of improvised counterpoint in Europe, providing a forum of exchange, as well as an occasion to assess the current state of the field. It will do so through a combination of 20-minute lectures in the morning, followed by workshop sessions for students of the HEM and the Schola Cantorum in the afternoon.

Schedule

Monday 6 October

9:00 Official Greeting (Niels Berentsen and Antoine Schneider)

- **Session 1 Room GD-10 "Improvised counterpoint in conservatoire curricula" (chair : Antoine Schneider)**

9:15-9:45 Jean-Yves Haymoz, *The beginnings of the CMA curriculum in Geneva and its development*

9:45-10:15 Isaac Alonso de Molina, *Counterpoint and the musica practica paradigm at the Early Music Department of the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague*

10:15-10:45 Coffee break

- **Session 2 Room GD-10 "Dealing with sources, now and then" (chair : Philippe Canguilhem)**

10:45-11:15 Pedro de Sousa Silva, *Pedagogical Applications of Counterpoint according to Mateus de Aranda, Miguel da Fonseca, and Vicente Lusitano*

11:15-11:45 Antoine Schneider, *French chansonniers: what possibilities for improvisation?*

11:45-12:15 Marcello Mazzetti and Livio Ticli, *Title to be confirmed.*

12:15-13:30 Lunch at UNIGE Mensa (invited participants only)

- **Workshops 1 Room GD-10 (GD-11, GD-13 and GD-14 available for practice)**

13:30-15:00 Florian Vogt, *Improvising 12th-Century Organa*

15:00-16:30 David Mesquita, *Contrapunto concertado – in search of "historically informed" teaching methods*

16:30-17:00 Coffee break

- **Keynote lecture**

17:00-18:10 Philippe Canguilhem, *With voice and pen. Teaching counterpoint then, and now*

18:30 Dinner at HEM (invited participants only)

Tuesday 7 October

- **Session 3 Room GD-10 (chair : David Mesquita)**

09:30-10:00 Catherine Motuz, *Teaching Musical Orienteering Skills*

10:00-10:30 Tim Braithwaite, *False chords and forbidden descant: Counterpoint as a singer's art*

10:30-11:00 Coffee break

- **Session 3 continued Room GD-10 (chair : David Mesquita)**

11:00-11:30 Niels Berentsen *Improvised counterpoint as re-enactment: challenges and affordances*

11:30-12:00 Caroline Sordia, *Counterpoint in a panther's skin: what can Georgian polyphonic singing teach us about reconstructing extemporized practices?*

12:00-13:30 Lunch at UNIGE Mensa (invited participants only)

- **Workshops 2 Room GD-10 (GD-11, GD-13 and GD-14 available for practice)**

13:30-15:00 Martin Erhardt *Nuremberg 1450*

15:00-16:30 Barnabé Janin, *How to improvise a voice upon a cantus firmus with constraints, according to Lodovico Zacconi*

16:30-17:00 Coffee break

17:00-18:00 Round table (Caroline Sordia, Catherine Motuz, Barnabé Janin, David Mesquita, chair : Niels Berentsen)

Abstracts and Biographies

ISAAC ALONSO DE MOLINA

Counterpoint and the *musica practica* paradigm at the Early Music Department of the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague

ABSTRACT

During the last 15 years, the role of counterpoint (the skill of singing or playing ex-tempore additional parts upon a given line of music) has been continuously growing at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague, in a process that has its parallels at other Higher Music Education institutions across Europe. The successive renovations of the EM curriculum, ever increasing the department's involvement with the idea of *musica practica* has situated counterpoint as a central musical skill. Knowledge of, and proficiency with, at least, its basic elements and procedures, in close connection with ear training and sight singing, are now expected from every student taking an Early Music bachelor degree.

During this presentation, several aspects of the current approach to counterpoint will be discussed both in general as well as specific terms. Moreover, a history of its process of implementation together with perspectives of future developments will be drafted. In particular, an assessment of current achievements will be put in balance with a careful consideration of challenges and opportunities.

BIOGRAPHY

Isaac Alonso de Molina teaches Musica Practica (solmisation, improvised counterpoint, early notation) at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague. He is founder and director of the ensemble *La Academia de los Nocturnos* (focused on Spanish music). He graduated from the Conservatory of Valencia in 2001/2002 in four majors (piano, cello, chamber music and music theory), afterwards obtaining a Bachelor degree (harpsichord) and two Master degrees (harpsichord, conducting) at the Conservatory of The Hague. He has been invited to teach and lead Early Music projects in other Dutch conservatories (Amsterdam, Utrecht, Tilburg), and in several summer courses in Spain (Valencia, Morella, Pastrana) and Italy (Urbino). Since 2019 he chairs the Early Music task force of the European Association of Conservatories (AEC).

PEDRO SOUSA SILVA

Pedagogical Applications of Counterpoint according to Mateus de Aranda, Miguel da Fonseca, and Vicente Lusitano

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a pedagogical and analytical reading of the instructions for the composition of counterpoint found in Mateus de Aranda's *Tratado de Canto de Organo* (1533), with particular emphasis on practices involving a *cantus firmus*. These principles, which are fundamentally practical in nature, are examined through two analytical case studies: (1) the works preserved in manuscript P-Brd ms 957, attributed to Miguel da Fonseca, where a remarkable variety of imitative, cadential, and modal strategies are deployed over liturgical *cantus firmi*; and (2) Vicente Lusitano's *Salve Regina*, published in Rome in 1551, which reveals contrapuntal procedures consistent with Aranda's doctrine, particularly in the treatment of dissonance and the interplay between modal structure and imitative texture. The analysis demonstrates an underlying coherence between theory and practice in composers active on the Iberian Peninsula and its transnational circles during the sixteenth century. Finally, a proposal is made for the contemporary classroom application of these principles, through exercises based on historical *cantus firmi*, encouraging the listening to and composition of imitative counterpoint in accordance with Renaissance precepts.

BIOGRAPHY

Pedro Sousa Silva studied flute with Pedro Couto Soares (Lisbon School of Music) and Pedro Memelsdorff (Civica Scuola di Musica di Milano) and Musicology (New University of Lisbon). He has a doctorate in music from the University of Aveiro, with a thesis that discusses the interaction between theory and practice in the interpretation of Renaissance music.

As a flutist, he is often invited in the most diverse contexts in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Holland, Switzerland and Brazil. Currently he has dedicated special attention to his projects A Imagem da Melancholy and Arte Minima.

He is an adjunct professor at the Higher School of Music, Arts and Entertainment (Porto), where he coordinated the Early Music Course and the Master's Degree in Music - Artistic Interpretation and directs Sesquialtera, an academic ensemble dedicated to the interpretation of Portuguese music of the Renaissance. He is often invited by several artistic education institutions (Conservatorio Superior de Música de Vigo, Conservatorio Superior de Música de Aragón, Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien, Joseph Haydn Konservatorium, Koninklijk Conservatorio Brussel, Conservatorio di Musica di Cosenza, Norges Musikkhøgskole, Akademie für Alte Musik Bremen, Universidade Estadual Paulista, among many others) to give courses, seminars, conferences and masterclasses.

He is part of the CESEM research center of the New University of Lisbon and has devoted great attention to the immense unpublished repertoire contained in Portuguese sources of the 16th and 17th centuries.

ANTOINE SCHNEIDER

French chansonniers: what possibilities for improvisation?

ABSTRACT

In France, a number of 16th century chansonniers have come down to us, both in manuscript form, such as the one known as *de Bayeux* or the Ms 12744 at the BNF, and in printed form, such as the various versions of *Le recueil des plus belles et excellentes chansons en forme de voix de ville* published by Chardavoine. These collections of single-voice melodies provide us with a repertoire of songs from which to add improvised voices seems obvious, even necessary. But what strategies should we explore? And how can we use these melodies to improvise? An analysis of the polyphonic repertoire provides us with some answers.

BIOGRAPHY

Antoine Schneider teaches solfeggio and counterpoint at the Geneva and Berne music universities, as well as music education at the ESM Bourgogne-Franche-Comté (early music department).

As part of his teaching, he specialises in the practice of musical improvisation in the Renaissance period. He is regularly invited to give master classes throughout Europe, and improvises as part of the ensemble Les Poissons rouges in Zurich. He is co-responsible for the website Super librum cantare (www.superlibrum.com).

FLORIAN VOGT

Improvising 12th-Century *Organa*

ABSTRACT

In the 12th century, the art of improvised organum underwent a period of significant development. While earlier practices had focused on enriching the chant with a lower voice—using drones and parallel motion in a note-against-note setting—a new style emerged, featuring a florid and, to some extent, rhythmically articulated solo line above the chant. This shift is reflected in both surviving musical examples and theoretical treatises on the “new organum,” which increasingly emphasize formal structure and ornamental technique.

This workshop focuses on improvising “neumatic” organa as preserved in 12th-century Aquitanian sources, particularly in the context of sequences.

BIOGRAPHY

Florian Vogt studied music theory, music education, early music theory, and mathematics in Freiburg im Breisgau, Rochester (New York), and Basel. He earned his PhD from the University of Freiburg with a dissertation on the music theory of Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel. After teaching music theory and *contrapunto alla mente* at conservatories in Freiburg and Trossingen, he was appointed Professor of Early Music Theory at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (FHNW) in 2017. There, he also teaches *Satzlehre* and improvisational techniques in medieval music.

DAVID MESQUITA

Contrapunto concertado – in search of "historically informed" teaching methods

ABSTRACT

From the 16th to the 18th century, the Iberian Peninsula was a stronghold of non-written polyphony. Countless sources prove both the use of popular polyphony across the whole population (*usus*) and professional singing according to rules (*ratio*). Especially in the chapels of the cathedrals, choir boys were trained daily for years to improvise the most diverse types of counterpoints.

There is also a long line of treatises – Lusitano c.1550, Montanos 1592, Cerone 1613, Lorente 1672, Rabassa 1720 and Nassarre 1723, among others – containing lots of information on the subject. Nevertheless, choir boys did not acquire learn improvisational skills by reading such extensive treatises, but rather by imitating and repeatedly applying typical counterpoint patterns that their teachers sang to them.

Accordingly, the implementation of these sources in the classroom cannot be limited to adhering to their implicit rules and instructions; it has proven much more fruitful and goal-oriented to practice the implicit formulas "trapped" in the examples together in class and to "declenate" them through various interval progressions of the chorale. This collective workout leads us also to the development of reflexes to respond to the introduction of a different formula by another counterpointist, thus enabling the successful improvisation of *contrapunto concertado* (coordinated counterpoint).

BIOGRAPHY

David Mesquita was born in València, where he received lessons in solfège, piano, violin and traditional *dolçaina*. From 2000 to 2005 he studied conducting and music theory in Freiburg. A workshop with Markus Jans in 2004 awakened his interest in improvised counterpoint and led him to study Early Music Theory in Basel.

He has taught Music Theory in Freiburg, Trossingen and Essen, and since 2011 Ear Training and Improvised Counterpoint at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. He defended 2021 his doctoral thesis on “Improvised Counterpoint in Spain around 1700” at the University of Würzburg. Together with Florian Vogt, he has developed contrapunto.ch and published a book on historical ear training (“Gehörbildung“, 2025).

PHILIPPE CANGUILHEM

With voice and pen. Teaching counterpoint then, and now.

ABSTRACT

The famous title chosen by Leo Treitler for his collection of essays about the creation and spread of medieval song through oral tradition and writing seems particularly well-adapted for reflecting on how counterpoint was taught during the Renaissance, and how much its current revival is inspired by historical practice. As we know, counterpoint was neither entirely « improvised » nor entirely « oral », but it is precisely the mixing of different elements in its pedagogy and performance that makes it interesting to reenact. In my paper, I will first provide an overview of the various pedagogical methods that inform us today about counterpoint teaching from the late 15th to the early 17th century. Even though we can only have a partial view of the phenomenon, as we depend on the written sources that have survived, it is clear that different methods were implemented throughout the Renaissance, and that no single process existed. Then, I will explore how this diversity may be reflected today in the classroom, where a number of initiatives focus on the oral and improvised aspects of counterpoint rather than continuing the strictly written discipline inherited from our predecessors.

BIOGRAPHY

Philippe Canguilhem is Professor of Musicology at the University of Tours (France), and a researcher at the Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance. His work focuses on Italian music in the 16th century, with special emphasis on Florentine musical life. On this subject, he has written numerous articles in international journals and a recent book, *Musique et culture à Florence 1530-1570* (Brepols, 2024). He is also interested in improvised counterpoint in the Renaissance, and has published an edition and translation of Vicente Lusitano's counterpoint treatises (Brepols, 2013), and a book on polyphonic improvisation in the Renaissance in 2015 (Classiques Garnier). He has been a senior member of the Institut Universitaire de France (2017-2022), a fellow and visiting professor at Villa I Tatti – the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, and a fellow at the Italian Academy of Columbia University and at the Historisches Kolleg in Munich. He is corresponding member of the American Musicological Society.

CATHERINE MOTUZ

Teaching Musical Orienteering Skills

ABSTRACT

When Morley's protagonist, Philomathes, asks the Master "What is the meane to sing upon a playne song," the Master replies: "To know the distances both of Concords and Discords" and explains that only "by continuall practise" can one always be aware of what interval one is singing above the bass. The"alla mente" treatises of Nanino and Chiodino build on this knowledge by giving practice patterns for florid counterpoint with vertical intervals shown and labelled numerically, allowing the student to learn to maintain this awareness when singing quarter and eighth notes. For the most virtuosic students, the diminution treatises of Riccardo and Francesco Rognoni assume this ability when they provide ornamentation patterns labelled with intervals to the bass.

How can we teach students how to keep track of where they are when improvising simple and florid counterpoint, and diminution? I will discuss how to build this skill using historical pedagogical sources, ear-training exercises, memorisation and real-time practise with a stable tactus. By understanding counterpoint and diminution treatises as using similar pedagogical techniques, I discuss how the methods from florid counterpoint and diminution treatises can be extended to inform the pedagogy of contrappunto alla mente.

BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Motuz pursues an active career as a performer, teacher and scholar. She is co-artistic director of Ensemble I Fedeli and has performed and recorded with numerous ensembles including the Freiburger and Amsterdam Baroque Orchestras, Bach Collegium Japan, Concerto Palatino, the English Cornetto and Sackbut Ensemble, and ¡Sacabuche! Since 2018, she has taught at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, where she studied historical trombone with Charles Toet 2004–2007. She has been teaching improvised counterpoint on and off since 2014, and her other research interests include issues of performance practise and investigating historical ideas about musical expression in the Renaissance.

TIM BRAITHWAITE

False chords and forbidden descant: Counterpoint as a singer's art

ABSTRACT

As the importance of improvised counterpoint is increasingly recognized in understanding historical theory and practice, the question of internal coordination between multiple improvisers remains a key issue. Until now, the focus has primarily been on the identification and execution of predetermined models, which allow the performers to generate contrapuntally coherent and predictable results. Although such models were undoubtedly widespread, both during the Renaissance and beyond, it is difficult to reconcile them with some of the more extreme accounts of practice, which range from descriptions of improvisations that were indistinguishable from notated compositions to instances of apparent chaos. While not attempting to deny the importance of these models, this presentation addresses their inherent restrictiveness, citing

several sources associating them with amateur or poor music-making. In doing so, a more sophisticated practice is brought into focus, in which performers simultaneously improvised without the use of any fixed model. Having identified new goals for polyphonic improvisation, pedagogical strategies are suggested, drawing on both historical sources and classroom experience, which emphasize individual contrapuntal fluency over the execution of predetermined models.

BIOGRAPHY
After completing a master's degree in historical music theory at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague, Tim Braithwaite began his career in early music as a countertenor with ensembles such as Amsterdam Baroque, Vox Luminis, and the Nederlandse Bachvereniging. In 2025, he was appointed artistic director of the Gramophone Award-winning ensemble Cappella Pratensis, one of the few professional ensembles worldwide to sing exclusively from historical notation. Alongside his performing work, Tim teaches Renaissance counterpoint and analysis at the Conservatoire of Amsterdam, as well as courses in historical solmisation, historical improvisation, and singing from historical notation.

NIELS BERENTSEN

Improvised counterpoint as re-enactment: challenges and affordances

ABSTRACT
Re-enactment denotes a variety of activities in which aspects of the (imagined or hypothesized) past are performed in the present. The modern classroom-revival of improvised counterpoint can be compared to re-enactments with an educational purpose (e.g. in 'living history' museums). In both cases past practices are enacted in the here and now to gain a type of experiential knowledge which—supposedly—mirrors that of our forebears. Like re-enactments, furthermore, learning counterpoint improvisationally clearly indulges "the twin passions of work and play" (Agnew 2004, 327).
What exactly are the advantages and limits to such approaches? For instance, is it useful to inflict the rote-learning practices typical of medieval and early modern pedagogies (e.g. the medieval *Klangschrittlehre*) on modern-day music students? Re-enactment practices from the sciences and humanities have important insights to offer as to—first—what type of knowledge can be acquired in through such experiences, and—second—how pedagogical re-enactments relate to an (inevitably modern) academic context. This paper will compare practices from the disciplines of archaeology and the history of science to those in "historically informed" music theory classes. In doing so, it aims to assess the challenges and affordances of pedagogic re-enactment in the twenty-first century counterpoint classroom.

BIOGRAPHY
Niels Berentsen is a researcher, vocalist, and music educator, specializing in late medieval and Renaissance music. He is lecturer at the Haute école de musique de Genève (HES-SO) in Switzerland, teaching historical counterpoint, musical rhetoric, and research at the Department of Early Music. Niels is director of the vocal ensemble *Diskantores*, whose first recording *Hollandse Fragmenten* (muso, 2021) has received strong critical acclaim. He received his doctorate from the University of Leiden in 2016 and has led the research project *Lacunae Ciconiae* (2019-2024). From 2026 he is principal investigator of the SNFS-funded project *Reimagining and re-enacting polyphony* (REIMAGE).

CAROLINE SORDIA

Counterpoint in a panther's skin: what can Georgian polyphonic singing teach us about reconstructing extemporized practices?

ABSTRACT
Georgia has long been known & renowned as a "polyphonic island in a sea of monophonic cultures". In 2001, its ancient musical tradition was recognized as a masterpiece of humanity's oral and intangible heritage by UNESCO. A typical feature of this orally transmitted culture is the emphasis placed on improvisation, particularly in some regional musical dialects. Drawing from my own background singing & transmitting Georgian polyphony, I'd like to explore from a learner's perspective the ways in which the experience of "music as a living language" can fuel our desire, capacity and maybe necessity to play with it. What connections & what differences are there between the practice of an orally-transmitted polyphonic tradition and that of reconstructed Western polyphony techniques? How does the former challenge our priorities and mindset as (aspiring) professional musicians, particularly when we learn, or relearn, to extemporize? What does it teach us about context, authenticity, skill, musicianship, embodiment – all important questions for present-day pedagogy of historical counterpoint practice? And perhaps most importantly, how does it shed light on the space for – and role of – improvisation in music-making?

BIOGRAPHY
Caroline studied voice & improvisation in Ghent and early music in Brussels, before completing a degree in medieval & Renaissance music (voice / shawm) at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. Meanwhile, she has kept honing her skills in improvised counterpoint as well as in Alexander technique. In 2023, she was a laureate of the Royaumont Foundation and founded her own ensemble, Olla vogala. Her passion for traditional music also led her to co-found Georgian polyphony ensemble Alilo in Basel. In addition, she plays symphonia (medieval hurdy-gurdy) and works as a literary & film translator and as a radio producer.

MARTIN ERHARDT

Nuremberg 1450

ABSTRACT

In the 1450s, the Lochamer-Liederbuch, which contains almost 50 German-language songs, was written in wealthy bourgeois circles in the Franconian city of Nuremberg. Most of them are notated for one voice; however, the seven three-part pieces contained in the book provide beautiful inspiration for how to deal with the monophonically notated songs in order to perform them polyphonically – improvised. How the cantus and contratenor can relate to the tenor and what (secret) agreements these two improvising voices can make in order to fit also with each other will be the subject of our journey of discovery, which we will embark on singing both with several and with only one singer per voice. If appropriate instrumentalists are present, we can also use the concordances from the Buxheim tablature book as a source of inspiration for our stylistic improvisation.

BIOGRAPHY

The lecturer, Martin Erhardt, also grew up in Franconia, but later chose Halle as his adopted home. He teaches historical improvisation, recorder and counterpoint at the Leipzig University of Music and Theatre, as well as recorder and music theory at the conservatory in Halle. He also performs as a recorder player, harpsichordist, organist, portative player and singer. He has performed with his ensembles Nusmido and all'improvviso at the Leipzig Bach Festival, the Halle Handel Festival and the Heinrich Schütz Music Festival, among others. He is the director of EX TEMPORE (Leipzig Improvisation Festival for Early Music) and author of the textbook 'Improvisation with Ostinato Basses'. In 2022 his transcriptions of Bach's English Suites for recorder solo were published, and in 2023 he presented his reconstruction of John Dunstaple's Missa da gaudiorum premia.

BARNABÉ JANIN

How to improvise a voice upon a cantus firmus with constraints, according to Lodovico Zacconi

ABSTRACT

In the second book of the second part of his work *Prattica di musica*, published in 1622, Lodovico Zacconi considers the different ways in which a singer can make a counterpoint upon a cantus firmus by choosing various melodic constraints (*obligationi*). Our workshop will be devoted to the patient, orderly and, if possible, enjoyable practice of these various exercises. Far from being tedious, these *obligationi* appear rather as an element of a game that allows the contrapuntist to develop and enrich their skills.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor at the CNSMD in Lyon (early music department), medieval fiddle player and singer, member of the Obsidienne ensemble and artistic director of the ensemble Coclico. He is the author of a practical manual of Renaissance polyphonic improvisation, *Chanter sur le livre* (Symétrie, 2014), and the co-manager of the website Super librum cantare (www.superlibrum.com).