Singing the Body, Singing the Other, and Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame*

by

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1. From the “Grotowskian” to Ensemble Organum

I am sitting on wide yellow steps, awaiting the start of a performance. Finally, the lights dim, and a small Chinese actress comes on stage. She puts on a pair of shoes, and begins, in an extremely high voice, to speak Nina’s monologue from Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. Then she begins to sing in Chinese, at first quietly, but her voice deepens and expands, filling the large and resonant space we share. Her arms stretch wide, her eyes half close, and across her face flicker expressions of doubt and ecstasy, as if she sees something we cannot. Later, she wears a leather jacket and becomes a tough older woman, then she carries a sword and becomes a warrior, then she is a tiny girl, and all the while she sings in an unbelievably resonant voice, alternately deep and high. She sings in Chinese, though the last song she sings has words I recognize from Kafka’s “Parable of the Law”. I am not terribly interested in the story of her performance, or in the staging, but the sound of her singing and the way she moves when she sings is absolutely captivating. After the performance, and without apparent explanation, I begin to cry and cannot stop shaking. I am emptied, exhausted, utterly blown away.

The performance was Ang Gey Pin’s 2006 solo *By The Way*, in which the actress spoke in English and Chinese, and sang mostly in Hokkien Chinese, a dialect unknown to her before her adult life (Nascimento 2008b). This performance had an inexplicable effect on me that went beyond personal psychological or emotional connection to narrative or circumstance.
I eventually concluded that Ang’s heightened physical presence and the bodily resonance she achieved while singing mirrored a way of engaging with my body that I had forgotten and deeply missed. My physical co-presence in the space with Ang, my attentiveness as a listener, and numerous other factors, aligned and allowed me to momentarily access the intimate relationship between her mind and body and become, briefly, a more embodied mind. The experience of being radically embodied was unavailable in my life as a college freshman who spent many hours a day reading, writing music, or at the computer.

This event changed the course of my life and led me to practically and theoretically investigate the intersection between music and physical theater, particularly where singing and the physical practice overlap. While I began my
investigation by engaging with group of artists loosely termed the “Grotowskian Diaspora” (related, or sometimes not, to the late Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski, 1933-1999), this essay explores the broader phenomenon of artists who use songs or ways of singing drawn from cultural Others in such a way that it emphasizes the bodies or physicality of the performers.  

The central case study I examine is a 1995 recording of Guillaume de Machaut’s 14th century *Messe de Notre Dame* by the Paris-based Ensemble Organum. Organum’s *Messe* has elements in common with the performances of the Grotowskian Diaspora, cross-cultural collaborations like those of the Kronos Quartet, and certain trends in Classical music performance practice, notably what Richard Taruskin terms the “vitalistic” (1988, 183). Like the performances of the Grotowskian diaspora, Organum’s *Messe* emphasizes the bodies of the performers using specific techniques which may help performers and audiences enter a liminal state together, much like the state I entered while watching Ang. In fact, the possibility that Organum’s recording might serve as a catalyst for listeners to enter a liminal state is, I believe, one element of its importance and power, and this possibility will be discussed at length below. Like Grotowskian artists and the Kronos Quartet, among myriad other artists dating back a century or so, Organum uses musical elements of Otherness in their performance which emphasizes the body. On the *Messe de Notre Dame*, these elements are borrowed from Corsican polyphonic singing, and are used to lend individual expressivity through elaborate ornamentation as well as something

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1 Since this essay is written about Western artists from a Western point of view, cultural Others may be understood as any culture that does not fall within the Euro-American, industrialized, capitalist, “first-world”. Thus, the Other may include Corsica, Eastern Europe, and numerous other marginalized subcultures that are not necessarily geographically distinct from the “West”.

akin to Barthes’ “grain of the voice” to Organum’s performance. This double impulse – to emphasize the body through singing and to use songs or ways of singing from cultural Others to do so, is characteristic of many of the performances I discuss in this paper.

In this introduction I will give context to Organum’s recording by briefly tracing my involvement with the Grotowskian Diaspora (since it is through these artists that I became aware of Corsican singing and of Ensemble Organum’s work, and Grotowskian artists have more in common with Pérès and Organum than we might initially assume), before I outline the broader stream of performances in which the Grotowskian Diaspora exists (which includes Ensemble Organum) and, finally, explain why I believe these performances to be important.

In the fall of 2006, during my first semester at Wesleyan, I took a class with visiting instructor Ang Gey Pin, whose performance I described above. This class combined rigorous physical training and a capella singing into a potent and holistic artistic practice that fused music and physicality in ways I had not considered possible. Gey Pin had spent nine years as a lead performer at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, Italy, where she engaged in a practical investigation into forms of physical theater and ancient Chinese chants. This research led to the performances *One Breath Left* (1998-2002) and *Dies Irae: My Preposterous Theatrum Interioris Show* (2003-2006). I was deeply intrigued by her praxis and followed her to Wroclaw, Poland, for the summer of 2007, in the hopes of meeting other artists pursuing a similar line of investigation. In Wroclaw, I studied with and saw performances by Teatr ZAR, Maisternia Pisni, Piotr Borowski’s Studium
Theatranle, and Grzegorz Ziolkowski, all loosely affiliated with Wroclaw’s Grotowski Institute.

While Wroclaw’s Institute has a complicated relationship to Grotowski’s artistic inheritance (Grotowski’s official heirs, Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini, live and work at the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards in Pontedera, Italy; the Institute had no actual connection to Grotowski during his life) the artists I met in Poland in 2007 share with Ang Gey Pin (whose connection with Grotowski was quite direct) an artistic practice that combines physical theater and music, specifically the singing of traditional songs and chants. However, these artists’ interest in “traditional” materials is not primarily folkloristic or rooted in a search for identity. As Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento writes of Ang and Teatr ZAR, in her article *Calls For Remembrance: At Work On Traditional Chants*, “the artists I speak about explain that their interest comes from the possibilities that singing offers for work on oneself—the development of a finer level of consciousness and awareness” (145). Nascimento goes on to note that in Grotowski’s last phase of research, a practical investigation into African and Afro-Caribbean chants known as Art as vehicle, particular attention was paid to the “vibratory qualities” of songs, which were conceived of as a “ladder” used by the performer to “lift himself toward a more subtle kind of energy, to descend with this to the instinctual body” (147).

In the performances I witnessed in Poland in 2007, I was particularly intrigued by the fact that when performers sang (in a manner that at the time I assumed to be related to Grotowski’s practice), it had the effect (intentional or otherwise) of emphasizing the actual, physical, bodies of the performers. Following (however
loosely) Grotowski’s investigation into the “vibratory qualities” of ancient chants, the
singing in performances by groups like Teatr ZAR and Maisternia Pisni, when
compared with a classical chorale sound, was full of Barthes’ “grain of the voice”. In
Ang’s case, in her 2006 solo performance By The Way, the sound produced was so
deep and full of overtones that her entire body seemed to vibrate. One could, as
Barthes describes, hear “the depths of the body’s cavities, the muscles, the
membranes, the cartilage” (270). It was a veritable demonstration of the antithesis of
the breath-driven, emotive voice Barthes heard unfortunately encapsulated in Fischer-
Dieskau (271-2). Additionally, the psycho-physical side effects experienced by
singers in these performances were palpable. Members of Maisternia Pisni, Teatr
ZAR, as well as Ang, all experienced what appeared to be heightened states while
performing, which though they occurred in secular venues, mirrored descriptions of
religious ecstasy: excessive sweat, goose bumps, movements typical of “possession”,
tears, eyes rolled back, and obviously ecstatic facial expressions were present
throughout these concerts and performances.

A distinct side effect of the singing in these performances was that it
emphasized the bodies of performers. The “grain of the voice”, ornamenting and
adjusting tempo when deemed appropriate, combined with the visible heightened
physical states achieved by performers, made audiences acutely aware of the actual,
physical, bodies-in-space of those performing.

If the first common thread linking many of the “Grotowskian” performances I
witnessed in 2007 was a way of singing that emphasized the bodies-in-space of the
performers, the second common thread was performers’ use of songs from cultural
Others. Teatr ZAR, the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, Gardzienice, Theater Association Chorea, Ang Gey Pin’s informal working group in Vallenera, Italy, and Maisternia Pisni, along others in this small corner of the contemporary artistic landscape, all use songs “gathered” from an Other—Caucasus Georgia, Armenia, Greece, Corsica, (Teatr ZAR), Haiti, West Africa, China, Medieval Europe (the Workcenter, Ang’s group), “Ancient Greece”\(^2\), Ukraine, and Byelorussia (Gardzienice, Maisternia Pisni). These were the songs that were sung in such a way that emphasized the bodies of the performers.

Over the two summers following my initial excursion to Poland, I received generous support from Wesleyan University in the form of a Summer Experience Grant (2008) and an Olin Grant (2009) to travel to Corsica, Ukraine, France, Italy, Poland, and Germany, where I met and studied with various individuals who worked directly with Grotowski during his lifetime—Maud Robart in France, Zygmunt Molik and Piotr Borowski in Poland, Ang Gey Pin in Italy and Poland, and, most recently, Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini in New York. I also had the opportunity to work with some of the “traditional” singers from whom the ensembles I initially encountered in Poland learnt their songs: Tavagna, Spartimu, and members of Ensemble Organum in Corsica, and Evgeny Efremov’s Ensemble Drevo in Ukraine.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Theater Association Chorea and Wlodzimierz Staniewski’s Center for Theater Practices ‘Gardzienice’ have both been engaged in “reconstructions” of “Ancient Greek” singing, using a combination of physical anthropology and Macedonian as well as Greek folk music.

\(^3\) Meeting and working with Tavagna, Spartimu, members of Organum, and Ensemble Drevo allowed me to conclude that the Grotowskian manner of singing emphasizes “vibratory qualities” to such a degree that songs no longer sound like they sound sung in contemporary Ukraine or Corsica. While this isn’t necessarily problematic (since given the nature of transmission/reconstruction in Ukraine and Corsica no one here can really claim historical authority, and Corsican and Ukrainian groups have long-term collaborative relationships with artists of the Grotowskian diaspora), it did show me that Grotowskian singing is primarily concerned with the relationship between song and the body, as well as other processes that we do not have the space to investigate here.
In June 2009, I attended the *World as a Place of Truth* festival in Wroclaw, held on the 50th anniversary of the founding of Grotowski’s Polish Laboratory Theater and the 10th anniversary of the director’s death, where I saw performances by Peter Brook, Pina Bausch (just before her untimely death on June 30th), Tadashi Suzuki, Krystian Lupa, Anatoly Vassiliev, and numerous lesser-known directors and ensembles considered by the curators of the festival to be loosely related to or influenced by Grotowski’s practice.

This “field” research allowed me to draw two conclusions. First, Grotowskian techniques are extremely specific, and their embodied knowledge rests within a very small nexus of people who worked directly with the Polish master during his lifetime. A number of scholars have written very astutely about Grotowski’s practice and its ongoing development, particularly Lisa Wolford, Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, and Richard Schechner, and I have nothing significant to add to their theorizations.4 Second, while the work of most groups who either self-identify as Grotowskian, or are loosely termed so by media and criticism for convenience’s sake, has nothing to do with the practice of Grotowski and his close collaborators, these pseudo-Grotowskian ensembles, more often than not, share with Grotowski’s practice a *radical emphasis on the bodies of the performers*. And, as in Grotowski’s practice, this emphasis is often achieved through the use of songs or ways of singing drawn from an exotic Other. In short, while much of the “Grotowskian” work I encountered

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4 Nascimento’s article *Calls for Remembrance: At Work on Traditional Chants*, and Schechner and Wolford’s *Grotowski Sourcebook* are the two items I find most informative and invaluable in understanding the Polish director’s practice and its ongoing influence and development. Also see TDR Summer 2008, dedicated entirely to the “post-Grotowski” European theater. Some of Wolford’s articles are incomprehensibly reverent and pseudo-mystical in their treatment of the Workcenter’s practice (2005, 2008), but her writing on Objective Drama is clear and informative.
in Poland is simply unrelated to the specific techniques espoused by Grotowski, both these “pseudo-Grotowskian” performances and performances actually related to Grotowski are part of a broader stream of performances that use songs from cultural Others in such a way that it radically emphasizes the performing body. This trend dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, and is related to an overall shift in European culture away from “text” and towards “performance”, away from “mind” and towards “body”.

German performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte describes a “performative turn” that occurred around the start of the 20th century, in which certain elements of European culture began to make a shift from “text” to “performance”. This was the result of many factors, not the least of which the publication of a scandalous book by a young professor at Basle University in 1872. This book was *The Birth of Tragedy*, and in it Friedrich Nietzsche described a link between the excesses of Dionysian ritual and ancient Greek tragedy. This, as Fischer-Lichte describes, “was unacceptable to his contemporaries. It not only equated Greek culture with ‘primitive’ culture, and negated the value of the individual, moreover, it also completely disregarded the role and significance of the great texts handed down to us…[because at this time] theatre was predominantly defined by its capacity to convey or mediate literary works of art” (18). Nietzsche’s book at once diagnosed and propelled a shift in consciousness. As Fischer-Lichte articulates:

At the end of the nineteenth century, modern European culture understood itself prevailingly as a ‘text’ culture….Alongside this notion of a modern European culture as a ‘textual’ culture, there also circulated the idea of a
‘performative culture’, although it was labeled differently. This comprised and exemplified all those features and qualities which did not define modern European culture and thus helped to shape and define it ex negativo. Performative culture was understood to be that which was called ‘primitive’: medieval, ‘exotic’ or native popular culture which abounded in display, spectacle, and excess (20).

She continues,

It was the (male) European individual who, defined by ‘mind’, was in the position of the external, superior observer while the performers – the acrobats, the so called primitives, the women–defined by the body, represented and embodied his inferior ‘other’–an ‘other’ whom he desired as well as feared and whom he attempted to exclude not only from power but also from his own self-image. Thus, it was appropriate for them to be represented by/in performances and not in texts. For texts were meant to represent the self-image of the (male) middle-class European. Textual culture and performative culture were thought of as extreme opposites…(21-22)

And finally,

Accordingly, the performative turn which I diagnose at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century…can be described as a shift of focus from ‘text’ to ‘performance’, which allowed and even encouraged a ‘return’ to other, more performative epochs in European culture and, above all a change in focus towards so-called primitive cultures in search for models (22).
In *Theater, Sacrifice, Ritual*, Fischer-Lichte examines performances from a number of contexts, all part of the larger “performative turn”. The critical example employed by Fischer-Lichte to frame her initial discussion is that of Max Reinhardt’s 1903 production of Sophocles’ *Electra*, in which the actress Gertrude Eyesoldt gave a violently hysterical performance of the title role that “permanently transgressed the boundary between the semiotic and the phenomenal body” (5), calling attention not to the suffering of the “character” Electra (her semiotic body), but to her own body-in-the-space, her phenomenal body. The result was that,

She not only blurred and transgressed the boundaries between her semiotic and phenomenal body… but she also lost her self, her individual identity….the actress and the spectators.. stepped over the threshold to a new state… They experienced the time of the performance as liminal time…(13).

While these two bodies, phenomenal and semiotic, cannot be fully separated and exist on a continuum, certain actions – self-inflicted violence, in the case of performance artist Marina Abromovic, the hysterical suffering employed by Eyesoldt, or extremely resonant singing, in the case of artists related to Grotowski – emphasize the bodies-in-space of performers and destabilize semiotic constructions like “character” or the inculturated conception of musical performers as faceless vehicles for transmission. These actions shift performances away from “texts” read by the mind towards “events” experienced by the body. When performers radically emphasize their own bodies, audiences become aware of the bodies of the performers and aware of their own bodies, and thus they become aware of their physical co-presence with the performers. According to Fischer-Lichte, this awareness, in turn,
allows “the [performer] and the spectators, i.e. all those participating in the performance, [to step] over the threshold to a new state… a state of liminality” (13).

In this liminal state, performers and audiences alike may experience a temporary “aesthetic community… based on share[d] experience and not on common beliefs, values, convictions, interests, and so on…” in which, together, they may access ways of thinking, being, seeing, hearing, relating to the body, etc. that are unavailable in daily life. As Anthropologist Victor Turner describes, “Liminality may perhaps be regarded…as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (1967: 97).

It should be obvious here how exactly Ang’s performance described at the beginning of this paper along with other performances loosely related to Grotowski fit Fischer-Lichte’s conception of the “performative turn”. Bodies are emphasized and material from cultural Others is used to do it. Fischer-Lichte’s description of the liminal state instigated by Reinhardt’s Electra mirrors my own experience watching Ang Gey Pin, despite the fact that Eyesoldt did not employ elements of Otherness in her performance.6

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5 Here it is important to clarify Fischer-Lichte’s use of the term “liminal”. While a concert event may in itself be considered liminal, Fischer-Lichte use of this term is closer to Turner’s “liminoid” – rare events which break from previous conceptions of liminality and are not (yet) integrated into society. While a wedding or a graduation is liminal, the first election of a Black President is liminoid, just as the early performances described by Fischer-Lichte, particularly Max Reinhardt’s Electra, which utterly shocked audiences in 1903, were. The performances I describe may be, for some members of society, liminal, especially if they have seen performances of this sort before, though my initial experience of watching Ang Gey Pin was certainly a liminoid event. Regardless of classification, the point is that the state entered by audiences and performers is “betwixt and between”, extra-daily. Even if the event is liminoid, audiences and performers enter into a liminal state. Hence, both my own and Fischer-Lichte’s use of the term “liminal” to refer to the state whose catalyst may be either liminal or liminoid.

6 Eyesoldt’s performance was inspired by a return to an imaginary “Ancient Greece”.

Using songs from an Other to emphasize the body in performance is a broad phenomenon, and extends well beyond the “Grotowskian” performances which were my personal introduction into this arena. Additionally, the use of the exotic to emphasize the body in performance extends well beyond the use of songs, though, ultimately, songs are what concern us here.

To give a sense of how widespread this phenomenon has become, let us reexamine the list of directors whose work was performed at the *World as a Place of Truth* festival which I attended in Wroclaw in June 2009: Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner, Tadashi Suzuki, Anatoly Vassiliev, Pina Bausch. All were avant-garde once, certainly, but now they are among the most famous theater artists in the world. All (except for, on occasion, Brook) place radical emphasis on the body of the performer, and all use cultural materials from the Other to do so. In Wroclaw in 2009, Barba’s Odin Teatret collaborated with Balinese performers to perform a highly physicalized, musical rendition of *Hamlet*, Suzuki’s Toga Company performed an intricately choreographed (in wheelchairs, none the less) version of *Electra* (reversing the direction of the borrowing), Bausch’s Tanztheater conducted research in Turkey to create their dance piece *Nefes*, and a host of the smaller companies present used singing in a pseudo-Grotowskian manner which emphasized the bodies of the performers. In short, performances of the sort Fischer-Lichte describes as scandalizing audiences at the turn of the century have become, if not mainstream, at least a major tributary in the river of 21st century performance.⁷

The use of songs from cultural Others in performances that emphasize the bodies of the performers can be seen in non-theatrical musical performance in the phenomenon of “World” or “Ethnic” choirs. Amateur choral ensembles like Vermont’s Village Harmony sing music from a catalogue of cultural Others – Italy, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Corsica, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Caucasus Georgia, Ukraine, Ghana, and South Africa – while more specific ensembles, such as Balkan music and dance groups, may focus on a particular cultural region (see Lausevic 2007). At the meeting of the Society For Ethnomusicology in 2008 at Wesleyan University, Caroline Bithell gave a paper on the phenomenon of “Natural Voice” choirs in the United Kingdom that made it clear that this phenomenon is not restricted to the United States alone. While Village Harmony and other “ethnic” choirs’ use of songs from the cultural Other may not emphasize the bodies of the performers as radically as artists related to Grotowski and those described by Fischer-Lichte do (see also Fischer-Lichte 2008), the manner of singing employed by these “ethnic” choirs brings out the “grain of the voice” in ways not present in most professional or community choral singing. Often, this means that individual voices and “grainy” timbres are preferred over smooth blend, and thus audiences become aware of the individual bodies of those performing. Additionally, Village Harmony’s habit of teaching Renaissance and medieval polyphony alongside “world” styles, all by ear, and their practice of occasionally performing in so-called “traditional” costumes, locates their concerts as performances which are related to a, “‘return’ to other, more performative

8 When I worked as an intern with Village Harmony during their tour of Corsica and Ukraine from June-August 2008, I noticed that director Patty Cuyler frequently admonished American and British singers for being “ungrounded” and told them that singing “world” music would help them find their legs.
epochs in European culture and, above all a change in focus towards so-called primitive cultures in search for models” (Fischer-Lichte 2005, 22).

The emphasis placed on the body in these performances is often linked with the interpretation of a text or texts. As Richard Taruskin notes, interpretation is the domain of the body, and to willfully interpret a canonical musical score (through, say, ornamentation, or unnotated crescendi or diminuendi) transgresses the authority with which our culture imbues text. This act of violation makes audiences acutely aware of the physical presence of the performers—“There must a body singing that “wrong” note! Who is it!”?

Taruskin, in the essay “Text and Act”, writes a quick “genealogy of musical morals”, describing four phases which led Western culture from a conception of music as something one does to the reification the of musical score (the text) as timeless and autonomous object. First, the spread of literacy, second, the invention of the printing press, third, Romanticism with its ideal of “transcendent and autonomous art… for the ages, not for you or me”, and finally, the advent of recording technology (353-4). This has resulted, he writes, in a culture in which “…it is more common today to invest final authority in the “text”, the artifact…the text is rescued, as it were, from [orally transmitted performance] tradition…and enshrined as autonomous, eternally fixed” (185). Hence, the proliferation of performances in Classical music which Taruskin terms “geometric” (after the aesthetic preferences of Stravinsky, see “Stravinsky Lite, even the Rite” in Text and Act). “Geometric performances” a quick and regular tempo, and absolutely minimal interpretation—ideally the performers become invisible, nonexistent, disappearing in service of the text. This is in sharp
contrast to what Taruskin calls “vitalistic” performances, which allow significant interpretation of the text in the service of personal taste and individual expressivity. While “vitalistic” performances may not result in the sort of heightened embodiment seen in Ang Gey Pin’s work, extensive interpretation (through ornamentation, for example) shifts performances towards “body” on a “text-body” continuum by making audiences aware, even on recordings, of the physical presence of the performers – if the notes are different than expected, bodies must be making those choices.

Taking a step backwards, we can see that a larger category has emerged. While radical embodiment and heightened presence is particularly obvious in live performances, a huge number of musical events, performances and recordings, use elements of Otherness to facilitate a shift from “text” towards “body”. These works may include moments of radical embodiment (as witnessed in Grotowskian performances), but also include Taruskin’s vitalistic Classical performances and recordings (in cases where musical Otherness is used to reinterpret canonical texts), as well as numerous other projects occurring across Western culture.

We can situate these works which use Otherness to shift from “text” towards “body” within the larger history of the adoption of the Other in Western performance. While no means exhaustive, a brief contextualization may prove useful to the reader. In the early part of the 20th century, performing artists like Ruth St. Denis and Antonin Artaud, composers like Béla Bartok, Henry Cowell, and even the arch-modernist Stravinsky, whose youthful fascination with Russian folk music is outed by Taruskin in the excellent *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, as well as the architects of the revival of the Olympic games who included Emile Durkheim, looked
towards the Other in a search for artistic and performative models. In the mid 20th
century, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba had traveled India, Japan,
China, Central Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa in search of performative techniques
and became the most influential theater artists of their generation. In music, the
Beatles adopted the sitar, the “World Music” movement was born, and Ravi Shankar
and Yehudi Menuhin released “West Meets East”. In recent years, the Kronos Quartet
have collaborated with Azeri, Inuit, and Romanian musicians, and Robert Wilson and
Tadashi Suzuki have directed multi-cultural spectacles that include elements from
dozens of cultures, “traditional” and “popular”. This is but a tiny sliver of the
intercultural performance projects that occurred in the 20th century. Cross-cultural
fascination, appropriation, and later, collaboration, were major tropes of 20th century
Western performance life, and are still significant in the 21st.\footnote{For more case studied and some excellent theorizations, see Pavis, Patrice, ed. \textit{The Intercultural Performance Reader}.}

Within this large framework comes Ensemble Organum’s \textit{Messe de Notre Dame}. Like the Kronos Quartet’s collaboration with inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq,
Organum’s \textit{Messe} includes performers from two distinct musical cultures – France,
and Corsica. Like the Kronos/Tagaq collaboration, one group is more “cosmopolitan”
than the other, who is represented to varying degrees as embodying certain musical
archaisms.\footnote{More on this in the Organum context later. For the ways in which Tagaq is represented as an
embodiment of “nature” or musical archaisms, see the documentary film \textit{A String Quartet in Her Throat}.} Unlike the Kronos/Tagaq collaboration, Organum’s work relies on a
base text, in fact a very canonical one – Machaut’s \textit{Messe de Notre Dame}. The
musical techniques of the Other, (Corsican singing), are applied directly to Machaut’s
manuscript. In this sense the Organum/Corsican singers collaboration is similar to the
Mozart in Egypt project, in which Mozart’s concertos are performed and elaborated through a mix of Classical Arab and Western instruments and styles, for example, Oud and Piano.

The heavy use of Corsican ornamentation, vocal placement, and variable tempi in the Organum *Messe* situates the performance firmly within Taruskin’s category of the “vitalistic”. Like other vitalistic performances, the Organum *Messe* emphasizes interpretation in a performance of a canonical score and thus emphasizes the physical presence of the performers. Like the way of singing found in Grotowskian performances, the hefty “grain of the voice” of Corsican style further emphasizes the bodies of the performers. Like the artists in the Grotowskian Diaspora, Pérès consciously articulates his agenda as a search for embodied knowledge through the performance of “ancient” music. The simple and obvious difference between performances of the Grotowskian Diaspora and the Organum *Messe* is that the Organum *Messe* is a recording, and experiencing it, one lacks physical co-presence with the performers.

However, this may not prevent a listener from having the same sort of liminal experience I had watching Ang’s performance. Physical co-presence is preferred by Fischer-Lichte but is not the only catalyst for experiencing the emotional/physical arousal associated with trance or liminal states. While co-presence in a performance space doubtlessly increases the chances that audiences and performers will enter a liminal state, Becker and Penman observe that listening itself may be a significant catalyst for experiences of ecstasy or trance. In their article *Religious Ecstatics, ‘Deep Listeners’, and Musical Emotion*, they observe that secular “deep listeners”, those
who self-identify as being deeply affected by listening to music and who listen with
great attention in order to be moved in this manner, experience many of the same
physical side affects while listening to recorded music as Pentecostal religious
ecstacies do. In Becker and Penman’s study, “deep listeners” showed equally intense
responses of physical arousal regardless of the music that was played for them.
Becker and Penman’s conclusion: the individual subject has significant agency when
it comes to instigating “trance” states while listening to music, and the subject’s
attentiveness and predisposition to trance states may be a greater determining factor
than specific types of music.

Gilbert Rouget, in his book *Music and Trance*, divides music’s affective
power into Rousseau’s categories of “moral action” and “physical action” (167).
Rouget argues that music operates as both cultural signifier (it is “read”) and as
physical sound (it is “felt” or “heard”), and that while these categories are obviously
inseparable (all sounds are both “heard” and “read”), certain musics may emphasize
one operation more than the other. According to Rouget, music’s power to instigate
religious trance or ecstatic experience relies on both “moral” and “physical” action. In
Caroline Bithell’s words, “it is only some music that induces certain effects in some
people some of the time; and while music can act on a subject as one of the elements
that triggers trance or other heightened states of consciousness, it is usually the
case… that a number of conditions… need to be present in order for the music to be
efficacious” (71).

Applying Rouget’s “conditions” to the case at hand, we can say that the
emphasis placed on the bodies of performers (achieved on Organum’s *Messe de Notre*
Dame, through the “grain of the voice” and through interpretive ornamentation) is one condition, and the attention of the listener (following Becker and Penman) is another, and finally, physical co-presence, in the Grotowskian and other performances described above, as well as in Organum’s live performances, is another. A whole host of other conditions relate to the social backgrounds of the performers and listeners and their personal preferences. Finally, basic empathy may be a corroborative factor: Italian researchers in Parma in 2006 announced the discovery of “mirror neurons” which facilitate processes like those described by one researcher: “When you see me perform an action - such as picking up a baseball - you automatically simulate the action in your own brain” (Blakeslee 1). Such a process may be at work here: if Pérès and his singers emphasize their own bodies, listening, we may experience something similar. All these conditions may or may not align, and listeners may or may not experience a trance or liminal state, and such a state may vary greatly in intensity. While I believe that performances such as Organum’s draw much of their power from their ability to instigate liminal states, we must remember that no set of conditions is guaranteed to affect any listener in any particular way.

It is undeniable that Organum’s Messe works in a very distinct direction, which it shares with the performances described above: from “text”, towards “body”. As in many of the performances mentioned above, elements borrowed from a cultural Other account for this directionality. While a recording may not affect all listeners as intensely as a live performance, it provides a document of such a performance and, I believe, still holds great efficacy, especially a recording that emphasizes the bodies of

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11 Regardless of Becker and Penman’s conclusions re: “deep listeners”, for most of us music that we like is more likely to move us than music we don’t like.
the performers as explicitly as Organum’s does. As we will see (and hear) Organum’s *Messe* is hardly a “studio album”, live-ness, the interaction of the performers, and their individual vocal timbres (and thus, bodies), are by far the dominant elements.

To give final word on the live/recorded continuum, we must note that Taruskin, throughout the volume *Text and Act* which I quote frequently in this paper, refers to recordings as “performances” and analyzes them as such. Recordings are, for the most part, documents of actual events performed by real bodies, and this is especially true in the case of Organum. As Rick Altman notes,

Musical notation assumes that each sound is single, discrete, uniform, and unidimensional. Stressing the formal concerns of music’s internal, self-referential aspect, musical notation diverts attention from sound’s discursive dimensions, concealing the fact that sound is in reality multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and three-dimensional. As a concept, middle C exists independently of space and time, in the abstract notion of a sound of approximately 262 cycles per second. As a reality, however, no two versions of middle C are identical, because of the different temporal and spatial circumstances in which they originate and are heard…When we listen to recorded sound we are therefore always listening to a particular account of a specific event (4).

That is to say that though a particular recording may take on the status of a definitive performance, becoming a sort of “text”, and thus affect future performance practice, recordings cannot be considered a pure (and therefore “textual”) representation of a musical score, they are always, inevitably, a “particular account of
a specific event”, i.e., performances, in the case of a multi-tracked studio album, or, as is the case with Ensemble Organum’s Messe de Notre Dame, a single performance which occurred in a specific place and time. This performance, though captured on recording, has its own particular materiality that includes and conveys, in addition to the notes of Machaut’s score and any deviations, the sound of the room where the recording took place, and the actions of the performers including those musical elements which emphasize their bodies, all of which are shaped by the recording and playback technology. Remember that Barthes, writing of the grain of the voice, was referring to a recording! We can conclude that recordings may be just as effective as live performances in instigating the liminal or trance states which I attribute to works which emphasize the body of the performers; multiple conditions are necessary.

I believe that works—performances or recordings—which emphasize the bodies-in-space of the performers over the “pure” realization of a text are profoundly important, for two reasons. First, they serve as a diagnostic in a society that has long marginalized the body and physicality—perhaps this is why so many artists (for better or worse) look to the Other for a more “embodied” approach.12 If we have marginalized the body and physicality, then (in Classical music and Classical theater, at least) we have also marginalized individual expressivity in performance, because, as Richard Taruskin notes, interpretation of texts in performance is the domain of the performing body, and interpretation, along with the body, is downplayed in societies which place great value on the preservation of “timeless classics” in the form of

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12 See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, particularly the essay “How to Make Yourself A Body Without Organs”. In this essay, Artaud’s performative conception of the Body Without Organs is considered as an antidote to signification, subjectification, and organization, which Deleuze and Guattari conceive of as widespread socially constructed phenomena that prevent the body from entering states of flow.
musical or literary texts, as does our own (see Taruskin’s “Tradition and Authority” in *Text and Act*). As Taruskin observes, a slavish devotion to a specific, fixed version of the “classics” effectively marginalizes personal taste and confuses the role of performing artist with archivist.

Second, the works I discuss provide a space in which this marginalization of the body may be momentarily overcome. Unlike texts, performances can create a feedback loop between audience members and performers, what Fischer-Lichte terms a “temporary aesthetic community”, a state of liminality or trance. This is particularly likely to happen in performances that emphasize the bodies of the performers, because spectators and performers will become intensely aware of their physical co-presence. This may, in turn, transform the performance into a liminal time and space in which performers and audience members alike may access ways of seeing, thinking, hearing, relating to their bodies, etc., unavailable to them in daily life, as I did in the example that opened this paper. Following Becker and Penman’s research, as well as Rouget’s observation that music’s efficacy relies on both “physical” and “moral” factors, we can see that a recording of such a performance may also be able to instigate a liminal state, if the contents of the recording and other factors align. (And I believe that it is precisely this possibility that makes Organum’s *Messe* an interesting artwork). Because of the multivariable and multivalent nature of the efficacies of recorded/live sound, and the fact that Organum’s performances are well documented and play a part in my analysis, I will refer to Organum’s *Messe* as a recording and as a performance interchangeably, as best fits context.
If in this introduction I have emphasized “trance” or other liminal states, it is because, as Turner observes, during liminal states individuals may experience substantial freedom to re-write behaviors and experiences. To quote in full:

“Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (1967, 97).

Performances or recordings which may instigate liminal states grant performers and audiences the possibilities of accessing alternate ways of thinking, doing, seeing, feeling, hearing, etc., and this “real of pure possibility” is the cornerstone of why I believe such performances are important.  

I began my discussion with the “Grotowskian Diaspora” because those artists and performances were my introduction into the broader field of performances which use Otherness to emphasize the body, and this field, at first glance, may appear quite broad. However, as widespread as performances which use materials from cultural Others to emphasize the bodies of the performers may be, they are not mainstream. In most genres of performance, the mainstream, one hundred years after the beginning of the “performative turn” is still very much a mode of performance which is “male, textual [and] “defined by ‘mind’… in the position of the external, superior observer…” while “the acrobats, the so called primitives, the women–defined by the body” all too often are seen to represent and embody “his inferior ‘other’” (21). This

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13 Of course, no performance offers truly “pure possibility”– liminal events always take place in a certain cultural milieu and as Turner and others have noted, any initiation is always an initiation into something. Furthermore, as Turner (1975) observes, “Liminality is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm” – liminal events/performances can be extremely disturbing to the unprepared participant, liminality is not always positive, though in many of the performances I discuss I believe it is or can be.
can be seen in regional theater\textsuperscript{14} as well as Broadway and the West End, and in music in a variety of places ranging from efforts to canonize Jazz\textsuperscript{15}, and in Classical music performance practice. Performances which allow space for more embodied voices are, I believe, quite vital and necessary. As Barthes wrote in 1972,

\begin{quote}
I will not judge a performance according to the rules of interpretation, the constraints of style (which are quite illusory, moreover)... but according to the image of the body which is given me... the certitude here of the body’s enjoyment... whose “grain” I hear so rarely... all playing is flattened out into perfection... the mere consideration of the musical “grain” could lead to another history of music than the one we know... if we succeed in refining a certain “aesthetic” of musical enjoyment, we should doubtless attach less importance to the tremendous break in tonality which modernity has produced (277).
\end{quote}

Finally, let me say that while I believe performances which emphasize the bodies of the performers to be extremely important, I am not endorsing the particular methodology applied by the groups I mention, which contain, in each case, complex and specific political dimensions related to engagement with the Other. While I do not believe Ensemble Organum’s particular efforts to be problematic, there are groups

\textsuperscript{14} A reader may wonder why I am discussing the world of theater and dance to such great lengths. There is a simple reason, and it is that the context in which musicians and musical performers complete the action of which I speak – the use of songs of songs from cultural Others to construct a performance that radically emphasizes the bodies of the performers – is the context of performance. This action cannot really be accomplished on a studio recording, except in so far as a recording may serve as a record of a performed event, as in the central case study here (which is distinct, say, from a recording that is, like many modern popular recordings, constructed in the studio track by track).
\textsuperscript{15} E.g., Wynton Marsalis and JALC. See also Gregory Thomas, The Canonization of Jazz and Afro-African American Literature in Callaloo 25.1
who engage with the materials of the Other in ways which are appropriative. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion.

Now that we have inspected the milieu in which this Organum’s Messe lives, let us focus our lens upon the work of Marcel Pérès and Ensemble Organum as they combine Corsican polyphonic style with the 14th century manuscript of Guillaume de Machaut. To examine a specific artwork and the artists who produced it will shed light on the larger trends we have discussed.
2. Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame*
In November of 1995, the Paris-based Early Music *equipe* Ensemble Organum recorded Guillame de Machaut’s *Messe de Notre Dame* for the Harmonia Mundi label in Arles, France. Upon its release in 1997, the disc was immediately controversial and polarized critics. While some reviewers praised the recording’s innovative style (New York Times critic Allan Kozinn included it on his list of the 100 most important classical music recordings ever, Kozinn 2004, 4), others condemned the “rough” or “rustic” sound produced by director Marcel Pérès and his ensemble, linking it unfavorably to Arab, Middle Eastern, or African styles. Andrew Kirkman, in a review for *Early Music*, wrote that “all the singers perform with full chest voice throughout their ranges, producing a sound which is… rough and rustic sounding… the result smacks… of the bazaar” (Kirkman, 321).

The controversy surrounding Organum’s interpretation of Machaut had begun during the Ensemble’s tour of the United States in 1995. A reviewer in the Boston Globe wrote of a live performance, “…the manner of singing was unusual, ornate, and to these ears, confusing… it has the same nasal, ringing, outdoor, straight-toned, “primitive” quality that we have heard in other contexts in the work of the Dmitri Pokrovsky Ensemble or even the Bulgarian State Women’s Choir… [it was] hard for the ear to find its footing” (*The Boston Globe*, 4 November 1995). *USA Today*, hardly a bastion of Early Music scholarship, ran a feature on Organum, and observed that “the ensemble favors a feverish, red-blooded style… Machaut’s 14th century French
music is given an exotic Greek tinge, and you can be sure nobody will doze off...is reactionary America ready for this?” (Stearns, 4D).

We may not have been. Listeners’ reviews of the recording on websites like Amazon.com continue to vary widely. On the US Amazon site, one unenthused listener wrote, “To imagine this recording, think of an American Shape-Note group with an Arabic muezzin as lead singer, confronted with Machaut’s music” (Leach 1), while another praised the disc’s “incredible power” (Forbes 1).

Why was Ensemble Organum’s Messe so controversial? The reasons are simple. First, it sounds nothing like any other recording of Machaut available in 1997, or any other recordings of canonical Early Music works made in the later half of the twentieth century. The dominant sound of the Early Music revival since the late 1980s has been a smooth-toned, fast-paced, well-blended, predominantly British and male style, known by its primary proponents’ alma mater as the “Oxbridge” school. Pérès’ recording of Machaut sounds nothing like “Oxbridge” recordings, and alienated listeners and critics accustomed to smooth British timbre. The dissonant ornamentation employed by Pérès’ singers was unidentifiable and was quickly assumed to be exotic in origin—“Middle Eastern” or “Arab”. Ironically, the style of singing employed by Ensemble Organum in their performance of Machaut comes

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16 In order to grasp the effect Organum’s concerts had on audiences, it is important to realize how rarely USA Today reviews (or even mentions) Early Music. One possible explanation for the USA Today coverage is that this was the heyday of the Early Music revival, just one year after the release of the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos’ now-infamous disc Chant. However, no other Early Music ensembles are mentioned in other issues in 1995, so we must assume that the extremely unusual style of the recording coupled with sudden interest in “world” polyphonic genres, inspired the music editors of the publication.

17 Pérès and his ensemble had recorded other works in similarly unprecedented styles, but never a work as well-known or widely recorded as the Messe de Notre Dame.
from the Francophone Mediterranean island of Corsica, a mere 200km from the French mainland, though to Western ears Corsican music is certainly an exotic Other.

In this chapter, I will examine Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame* through a three stage analysis borrowed from Mark Slobin (e.g., *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*). First, I will trace the agendas that motivate Organum’s work, primarily as articulated by the group’s director, Marcel Pérès. Second, I will examine the resources deployed by Pérès and his ensemble in their efforts. Third, I will examine the strategies Pérès and Organum use to deploy these resources and achieve their agendas.

2.1 – Agendas

In the last decades, attempts at historically accurate or “authentistic” performances have become increasingly widespread in Early Music. With the knowledge that Pérès and Ensemble Organum employ Corsican singers and style in their performance of Machaut’s mass, we might reasonably assume that historical research informed the decision to apply singers from a living oral tradition to Machaut’s manuscript, the line of thinking going something like, “As an oral tradition from an isolated island, Corsican singing has probably not been affected by Western Art Music performance practice, and it might embody traces of the way people sang in 14th century France. Thus singing Machaut in Corsican style will give us a more historically authentic performance.” However, a little research reveals that historical authenticity is not Pérès’ main agenda, and that he is well aware of the scholarly
quagmires which inevitably await those who claim historical authenticity.  

In fact, Pérès conceives of Ensemble Organum’s engagement with Early Music as a way to access and embody knowledge from the past in order to increase one’s sensitivity and awareness and to re-invigorate modern life. Pérès attempts to achieve this through the adoption of Corsican polyphonic style, which includes specific musical elements that Pérès associates with those qualities lacking in modern life: a qualitative rather than a quantitative engagement with time, individual expressivity in performance (through ornamentation), and the “grain of the voice”. As we noted in the introduction, ornamenting a canonical manuscript, as well as singing with the “grain of the voice”, has the effect of letting audiences know that individual, physical bodies are performing. We will return to this point later. First, let us trace Pérès’ agendas, beginning with the musical and ending in the philosophical.

In the liner notes to the Machaut disc, Pérès writes,

The art of ornamentation is little practiced by performers today, which is much to be regretted. Ornamentation is essential, for it creates the active force of the work, renders its rhythmic substance tangible, ensures the transition from one harmony to another and sometimes unbalances a chord to strengthen the sound of the next one. By means of ornamentation the singer betrays the extent of his involvement with the work (Ensemble Organum 11).

In a 1997 interview with Bernard D. Sherman, Pérès discusses his historical research and long-term work with diverse styles of ornamentation. During their reconstruction of Old Italian chant in the 1980s and 1990s, Ensemble Organum

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18 Richard Taruskin’s *Text and Act* provides a polemical introduction to some of the debates which raged in the 1980s-90s. A more balanced introduction to the authenticity debate can be found in Kenyon’s (ed.) *Authenticity and Early Music*. 
worked closely with the Greek singer and musicologist Lycourgos Angelopoulos because Pérès believed that the Greek liturgy, which survives from the 13th century, might sound like the Byzantine-influenced Milanese chant did in the 13th century or earlier. Pérès recalls,

I asked him [Angelopoulos] if he could be interested in working with me on the Old Roman repertoire. He told me, “I know nothing about Gregorian chant; I cannot be useful to you.” I said, “that’s exactly why I wanted to get in touch with you, because you don’t have the preconceptions. You’ll come to Old Roman chant like a virgin but with all your own background. And it was a revelation, maybe the biggest in my life…ornamentation is the big lacuna in the early-music revival… I feel like saying to those who believe people started to add ornaments on New Year’s Eve of 1600: Wake up! (33-36).

There is a parallel between Pérès’ work with Lycourgos Angelopoulos on Old Roman Chant and his collaboration with Corsican singers on the Messe de Notre Dame. Pérès likely approached Corsican singers because of their ignorance of mainstream Early Music performance practice (i.e., the Oxbridge school), their ignorance of Machaut’s music, and because they are masters of ornamentation, which Pérès considers “essential”. Since Corsican polyphony is a reconstructed oral tradition that is stylistically distinct from the bulk of “Western” styles, Pérès believed that it might offer clues to the way manuscripts were sung in the 14th century. 19

As he states,

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19 See Bithell (2006) 109-117 on the social conditions which produced the renewed interest in Corsican polyphony in the 1970s and 80s. See also Bithell (2003) on the ways in which tradition has been reconstructed through a combination of field recordings and contact with singers from older generations.
In the polyphony of the twelfth century, we know from the notation that this note is longer and that shorter, but not exactly *how much* longer one note is than another. We can get a sense of what this might mean from music we still have that reflects a mentality that treats time differently than we do in the West today. For example, in Corsican polyphonic singing they don’t have a tempo with a beat, they just have the time of the chords, and when the energy of the chord starts to diffuse it changes (Sherman 39).

Ethnomusicologist Caroline Bithell, in *Transported by Song: Corsican Voices from Oral Tradition to World Stage*, observes that in the ongoing collaboration between Corsican singers and Marcel Pérès’ Centre Européen pour la Recherche sur l'Interprétation des Musiques Médiévales (CERIMM), “the theme of archaisms surviving in the practice of today’s singers is prominent… Corsica is represented as ‘an almost ideal field of observation’… where the inherited knowledge of present-day singers offers invaluable evidence for the reconstruction and interpretation of ancient repertoires surviving only in manuscript form” (158). The representation of Corsica as an “ideal musical past” that houses musical archaisms lost to progress on the French mainland is complicated by the colonial relationship between Corsica and France, over the course of which Corsica has often been represented as barbaric, illiterate, and uncivilized. It is additionally complicated by that fact that Corsica is 1,200 kilometers (200 of which are covered by ocean) from Rheims, where Machaut wrote the mass, the fact that Corsica was controlled by Italian principalities from the 11th to the 18th centuries, and the fact that the Corsican language, derived from Latin, is far more Italianate than Francophone. Finally, although the revival of Corsican
polyphony in the 1970s known as the *Riacquistu* ("reacquisition") doubtlessly preserved many aspects of the “old” style, it also innovated, selected, and transformed musical vocabulary.\(^{20}\) In short, it is utterly impossible that contemporary Corsican style is equivalent to French style of the 14\(^{th}\) century. But Pérès seems to know this. As he explains to Bernard D. Sherman about his parallel project with Angelopoulos on Old Roman chant:

> I don’t try to find the authentic way of performing Gregorian chant. I am much too aware of all the different styles that coexisted throughout the centuries. For each manuscript, period, or repertoire, I try to create a specific performance…We tend to think, for instance, that at the time when Machaut composed his Mass everybody knew the work, and that everybody was doing music that way. In history it’s been realized for several decades that this is nonsense, but in musicology you still find this way of thinking (29-30).

From this statement, we can assume that Pérès does not believe that Corsican singers embody “the way” that Machaut’s mass was sung in the 14\(^{th}\) century. Rather, Corsicans are perceived to embody musical archaisms that offer an alternate approach to polyphony, including a different sense of time, vocal placement and tuning, and an active and complex system of ornamentation. Since Pérès readily admits that he is not in search of historical authenticity, why does he apply Corsican style to Machaut’s mass? Pérès elucidates, referring again to Organum’s collaboration with Lycourgos Angelopoulos:

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To really restore these musics, and clarify their vocal aesthetics, it’s better to reconstruct the liturgies they belonged to and to believe in what you are doing… This is what I found, for example, when I started working with Lycourgos Angelopoulos. He has another way of approaching time. This is because he is a real church singer. He is used, for instance, to singing for liturgies that go all through the night. The biggest criticism I would make of many reconstructions of medieval music is that, listening to them, I don’t feel the atmosphere of the ancient liturgies… To know the Eastern liturgies can help us, since today the Catholic traditions are almost dead (Sherman 38).

In Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame*, Corsican style takes the place of the “Eastern liturgies” which “help us” to discover the “atmosphere of the ancient liturgies”, and is used to create the right “atmosphere” needed to revitalize the “Catholic traditions”. Exact historical authenticity is not a concern. The elements of Corsican style adopted by Organum – ornamentation, vocal placement, non-tempered tuning, and irregular tempi – are the elements Pérès considers necessary to achieve the “atmosphere” needed to revitalize the “Catholic traditions”.

It is important to note that Organum’s performances are not solely musical. The Ensemble perform the entirety of the Latin Mass, in full liturgical dress, lit only by candlelight, and only in churches. And, as Pérès states, he requires that his singers, “believe in what [they] are doing.” This does not necessarily imply a level of religiosity, but rather a commitment to the role of celebrant, to the role of facilitating the Latin Mass, which is, after all, a religious ritual. This commitment to the role of

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21 Apparently, Pérès’ house is lit only by candlelight as well. See Sherman (23-42).
celebrant and Organum’s recreation of 14th century lighting and dress may seem paradoxical when combined with their musical practice, which is admittedly unhistorical.

Thankfully, Pérès and his ensemble are not a musical Renaissance Fair, and their agenda is not limited to historical authenticity. Rather, their agenda is to, through the act of performance, access embodied knowledge from the past and recover cultural memory lost to modernization. As Pérès states,

Music is a tool that can help us to better understand history, how human beings… used to live…to increase our sensibility, our aesthetic sense… When we learn the ancient arts, we develop our sensibilities to be able to perceive more things in the reality of our human relationships and ways of living. Quality of life is one of the most important things we can learn from people of the past, because one thing we have to learn from the past until the nineteenth century is that people had a different quality of life—one that, at most social strata, had certain cultural advantages that we have lost, in spite of all the technical progress… we make poorer the quality of everyday life (Sherman 40-41).

The reason to reinvigorate the “Catholic traditions” with the “Eastern Liturgies” is so that performers and audiences can access and embody “quality of life” that has been lost to overzealous “technical progress”. While “authentistic” performance attempts to perform music in the context in which it might have existed at the time of its composition, Ensemble Organum uses elements from the “past” to address the concerns of the present. The mythical—completely unhistorical—14th
century that Organum creates through the performative elements of dress, lighting, and musical style is designed to give the Ensemble and audiences what Pérès considers to be lacking from the present. In this sense it is in fact a mythical 20th century.

As we observed previously, the elements of Corsican polyphonic style Organum borrows must be considered musical embodiments of those qualities Pérès hopes to take from the “past” to revitalize modern life. These elements, as we have noted and will explore at length below, are a qualitative engagement with time and a heightened emphasis on the body and physicality, qualities which are certainly lacking in modern, industrialized, life. Of course, these elements are not from the “past”, they are from Corsica. And thus Organum’s endeavor is, in reality, the borrowing of traits from a cultural Other in order to reinvigorate stymied Western culture. It is to these resources employed by Pérès and his singers that we now turn our attention.

2.2–Resources

Here I will outline and probe the resources deployed by Marcel Pérès and Ensemble Organum in their performance of the *Messe de Notre Dame*.

The most obvious resource employed by Ensemble Organum is the manuscript of Guillame de Machau’s (1300-1377) remarkable *Messe de Notre Dame*, written at Rheims Cathedral in France around 1363 (Ensemble Organum 2). The *Messe de Notre Dame* was the first polyphonic setting of the Latin rite by a single individual, and Machaut charmingly requested that it be sung in perpetuity in Rheims Cathedral for the salvation of the composer and his brother (Yudkin). Sadly,
it is no longer sung at Rheims, but it remains one of the most important and oft-performed compositions in the history of Western Art Music, notable for its unusually dissonant harmonies, virtuosic hocketing, and complex rhythmic relationships between the voices (Bent).

All the movements of the Mass except for the *Ite Missa Est* are based on pre-existing plain chant tenors that Machaut elaborated into four-voice polyphony. The *Kyrie, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Ite Missa Est* are isorhythmic motets that feature precisely scored rhythmic events. The *Gloria* and *Credo* are written in the syllabic conductus style, which gives them a strong sense of forward motion. The *Kyrie, Gloria, and Credo*, are built on D Dorian tenors, while the *Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Ite Missa Est*, are centered around tenors in F Mixolydian.

The second resource employed by Pérès and his ensemble is the substantial recording history of the *Messe de Notre Dame*. The complete *Messe* has been recorded 31 times since 1951, and had been recorded 22 times before Ensemble Organum entered the studio, most notably by the Hilliard Ensemble, Ensemble Gilles Binchois, and the Oxford Camerata (Roberge 2). The recordings by the Hilliards, Ensemble Gilles Binchois, and the Oxford Camerata are, in light of the Organum recording, remarkably similar. All fit snugly into the Oxbridge school of Early Music performance: male triplums sing the highest part in head voice, all the voices are smooth and blend extremely well, the tempi are absolutely regular and always medium to fast (a downright brisk 104-108 BPM on the Hilliard recording). The Hilliards and Camerata sing vowels that are laughably British, though the Hilliard recording features some moments of estimable musicianship, along with a number of

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22 An additional 27 recordings of sections of the *Messe* exist (see Roberge and McComb).
short secular works by Machaut. The Camerata attempt a sort of “historical authenticity” by recording at Rheims Cathedral, but the performance is marred by poor mic placement, and alternately vigorous and plodding singing. They also include a secular work by Machaut, the longer *Voir Dit*.\(^23\) Ensemble Gilles Binchois intersperses the plainchant Propers for the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin (just as Organum do), and as one would expect they sing some admirably French vowels. Regardless, their vocal placement (male, head-voice triplums abound) and metrical regularity places them safely within Oxbridge territory. All of the major recordings of Machaut’s Mass made in the years directly before Organum’s ultimately embody the Oxbridge aesthetic that has come to dominate the world of Early Music: smooth vocal production (male head-voice triplums), incredible blend, and a regular (often a fast) tempo.

As the perfect antithesis to these British sounds, Pérès deploys Corsican style. At least four Corsican singers participate in the performance (part of the ongoing collaboration between Corsican artists and Pérès’ CERIMM), including Jerome Casalonga, François Barbalozi, and Jean-Pierre Lanfranchi of the E Voci di U Commune Ensemble, based in Curbara, as well as Jean-Etienne Langianni of the Tavagna “Club” from Rusiu (Langianni lives in Bastia and is now a permanent member of Organum). Pérès and the other non-Corsicans on the recording also sing

\(^{23}\) This recording inspired a Professor at Wesleyan to tell me that the director of the Camerata had confessed to her that they had been drinking to stay warm in the frigid Cathedral, and had had “a bit too much”.

with Corsican placement and sing Corsican ornaments with considerable success, though the most prominently ornamented lines are left to the Corsicans themselves.24

The exact historical roots of Corsican polyphonic singing have been obfuscated by time. The constant invasions, takeovers, revolutions, and internal conflicts that have shaken this island at the crossroads of the Western Mediterranean since the advent of nautical transportation have erased any possibility of a genealogy of musical style (Bithell 1996, 39). However, scholars agree that Corsican polyphony’s roots lie in the Western Mediterranean, not in Middle Eastern, Arabic, or Maghrebian musics. Caroline Bithell observes, quoting Cooper (2005), that the ‘‘…largely unregulated approach to intonation’ in Irish sean-nós singing or other orally-transmitted ornamental genres [which include Corsican polyphony] is ‘fundamentally different [from the] very regulated, systematized, sophisticated, and highly theorized’ nature of [Arabic] maquam” (2006, 62).

Corsican polyphony is much less refined and systematized than Arabic music and thus, by extrapolation, must have originated in the West alongside its stylistic cousins, Sardinian and Southern Italian folk polyphony.25 This positions Corsican music and language, much like Sicilian music and language, and Sardinian music and

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24 In June 2008 I worked with the supremely gifted Langianni as the intern for a Village Harmony workshop he co-taught in Canari, Corsica. Some of the material covered were Corsican manuscripts not unlike the Messe de Notre Dame, and I was able to observe first hand the flexible yet disciplined process of applying Corsican ornamentation to a written score. This gave me some appreciation for the years necessary to master the technique, and Pérès and the other non-Corsicans in Organum seem to, after a decade of collaboration, achieved this.

25 Hear, for example, “Ecce I Māma-Su Nghia Sena” on Alan Lomax’s Italian Treasury: Puglia: the Salento. Certain structural and stylistic elements are obviously similar to Corsican polyphony. Sardinian polyphony is made distinct by the unusual “Tenore” style of extremely low and gravelly throat-based bass production, though linguistic and stylistic similarities do exist. Certain Sardinian songs, for example “E Brunedda”, are commonly sung by Corsican ensembles as a gesture of common origin, though this does not imply an actual historical connection.
language, not as an unwanted import from the “East” or “South”, but as a marginalized subculture within the West.

Regardless of geographic origins, it is important to note that the sounds of Corsican polyphony function as a musical Other to listeners familiar with Western timbres and rhythms. As Bithell observes,

… To the average devotee of Western classical (or even popular) music… Corsican music can easily appear subversive. Its harmonic divergences are perceived as dissonant, its labile pitches as out of tune. With its apparently improvisatory nature, it can seem approximate, chaotic, or undisciplined… falling into the category of what Olwage has referred to as the “anachronistic voice” (60).

Hence reviewers’ compulsion to link Corsican singing with the exotic other. Only recently have Corsicans themselves begun to conceptualize of Corsican polyphony as subaltern or subversive to Western norms. As Bithell notes,

In the project to gain recognition for a Corsican identity separate from that of France (beginning in the 1970s-80s), music offered unequivocal proof of cultural difference… formulated via a set of rudimentary but functional oppositions such as tempered/non-tempered, regular/irregular, syllabic/melismatic, tonal/modal, harmonized/polyphonic… In some quarters this perception of difference has been accompanied by an equally conscious refusal to be colonized by the dominant system of what is often identified locally as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ music (61).
In spite of the political weight with the Riacquista imbued Corsican polyphony, it is important to observe that it is not inherently a music of subversion or rebellion. In fact, the bulk of song texts are love poems, laments for the dead, or sections of the Catholic liturgy. Before the colonial period, polyphony was certainly not conceived of as a means to achieve political ends. Rather, it has become a differentiating agent since the struggle for an independent Corsican identity began.

Interestingly, the musical traits highlighted by politically motivated Corsicans in their struggle for a separate identity, those traits which are most Other in the ears of the “West”, are those employed by Pérès on the Organum recording of the *Messe de Notre Dame*: melismatic ornamentation, nasal and chest vocal placement, non-tempered tuning, and irregular tempi. These traits are subversive to Western musical norms, and, as Pérès and Corsicans conceive of them, they are subversive to Western social norms, though Pérès’ and Corsicans’ conceptions of subversion may differ greatly.

What follows is a discussion and analysis of the particular musical traits (the melismatic ornamentals known as *rivuccate* (lit. “ricochet”), timbre that favors the chest and nasal resonators, non-tempered tuning, and irregular tempi) that distinguish Corsican polyphonic style and are employed by Organum. These particular traits are most prominent in Corsican *paghjella* singing, an orally transmitted genre of song best described as a “style of treatment.. allowing for a degree of improvisation, albeit within very fixed parameters” (Bithell 63). Sung by three singers (sometimes the bass is doubled for formal performance), typically men, a *paghjella* is begun by the *secunda* (middle voice), who is joined by the *bassu* (low voice), followed by the *terza*
(high voice). The secunda leads the song, deciding when to move from one chord to the next. Each new structurally important note is preceded with an improvised (yet somewhat formulaic) ornament. The bassu follows the secunda to form a new chord, and is followed immediately by the terza, who will sing an ornament in response to the one sung by the secunda (the bassu does not usually ornament). This system of rapid, stacked arrivals and departures from each chord creates the haunting interplay between consonance and dissonance that characterizes Corsican polyphony.


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26 Corsican ornaments are not formulaic in the sense of Parry and Lord’s oral poetry or in the sense of Treitler’s conception of Gregorian chant. They are brief and fast and far less complex than the formulas analyzed by Parry, Lord, and Treitler. They are formulaic in the sense that they are generally similar to each other, and rarely vary more than a third from either of the pitches they link. Bithell (2006) notes that older Corsican singers teach a “way of ornamenting”, not individual ornaments, though the spread of recordings has resulting in some younger singers unfortunately learning ornaments note for note, rather than the overall style of treatment.
Paghjella texts come from a variety of sources, with orally transmitted folk poetry being the most common. The only requirement for texts is that they have a certain number of stanzas that fit one or more of the orally transmitted melodic structures. A group may sing dozens of texts to the same melodic structure, or may sing multiple melodic structures to one text. A paghjella-like style of treatment may also be applied to religious repertoire as well as to madrigale and other forms of folk song. (For an indepth discussion, see Bithell 2006).

Caroline Bithell distinguishes between three types of rivuccate ornamentation commonly employed by Corsican singers: (1) true ornaments, with clearly distinguishable pitch values, that are often considered part of the architecture of a song and are relatively inflexible in performance; (2) smaller, faster melismas that are difficult to assign exact pitch values to, but remain distinct from the last category, which is (3) “pronounced vibrato or oscillation around a note” (Bithell 66). Rivuccate function as a means for singers to express their individual artistry and personality, as well as control the timing of a song.

Since Paghjella singing is not strictly measured, the ability to control and nuance the rhythm of chord changes is considered the most important aspect of performance. Commenting on the perceived metrical freedom often described by outsiders, one singer observes, “Our songs are not measured. But they have an interior beat, an interior rhythm” (Bithell 66). This un-metered “rhythm” is controlled by the secunda, who signals to the other voices through the use of rivuccate.

Another defining aspect of Corsican style is timbre. Although, as Bithell notes, “timbre and vocal placement are clearly implicated in the melismatic treatment
of the vocal line”, she draws attention to timbre’s most important role in Corsican polyphony: as part of the harmonic grammar. By singing in timbres produced by chest and nasal resonators, singers choose physical resonances which facilitate the emergence of “an ethereal fourth voice resulting from a fusion of the harmonic overtones produced by the three material voices; the guttural, gravely, forced, strident, and shrill qualities of the vocal timbres… are instrumental in bringing out these overtones by both intensifying and multiplying them” (58). The emergence of overtone harmonics is further facilitated by the non-tempered tuning system employed by Corsicans. Fifths are often sung tuned slightly wide, thirds can be neutral (somewhere around 11/9), and fourths may be tuned harmonically (11/8, instead of 4/3), all of which serves to both intensify and multiply the production of overtones.

A musical example will clarify the elements outlined above.

Song: É Muntagne D’Orezza

Words (Corsican, traditional, from the Castingnicca, arranged by Jean-Etienne Langianni):

Sò le muntagne d'Orezza chi m'anu resu felice.
U cantu di lu culombu cun quellu di a pernice.
Chi ci teniamu caru tuttu lu mondu la dice.

Performed by Tavagna, on the live recording In Veru. I have transcribed the first half of the first stanza to elucidate the different forms of ornamentation.

Example CD Track 1.
Ornaments of the first type—clearly articulated neighbor pitches that become part of the architecture of the song—are indicated by a circled 1 above the staff.

Ornaments of the second type—faster melismas that are difficult to assign an exact pitch to—are indicated by a circled 2. Ornaments of the third type—pronounced oscillation or vibrato around or between pitches—are indicated by a circled 3. Notes marked with an asterix are sung with a very slight delay. Arrows indicate non-tempered tuning and unnotated accelerandi and diminuendi. At “d’orezza” we can see how the terza adjusts to the secunda by flattening the F# to match the flattened C.
It is immediately obvious upon listening that Corsican polyphony is a distinct musical Other in the face of Western art or popular music.

To summarize, the resources deployed by Pérès are the manuscript of the *Messe de Notre Dame*, relevant recordings of the Machaut Mass that predate the Organum version (those of the 1980s-1990s Oxbridge school), and Corsican polyphonic style. Corsican style is embodied and deployed by the Corsicans who participate in the performance, and it is also deployed by the non-Corsicans on the recording, presumably under the guidance of the Corsicans. Corsican style constitutes a strong musical and political Other in the face of more mainstream “Western” aesthetics: its “rustic” sound cannot be separated from its role as political agent in the struggle for Corsican independence. Corsican style also emphasizes the bodies of those who employ it: ornamentation and singing with the “grain of the voice” emphasize individual expressivity and physicality (the singing bodies exist, and we can hear inside them), and, as Bithell claims, may lead to the psycho-physical arousal associated with trance and other liminal states. This will be discussed below.

2.3– Strategies

Pérès’ agenda, as we have observed, is to reinvigorate doldrums modernity with “quality of life”, recovered through engagement with “the ancient arts”. Fortunately for Pérès, Corsican polyphony is an extremely rich source, and he is able to accomplish his agenda through a simple strategy: apply Corsican style to Machaut’s manuscript. Yet many dynamics, musical and social, are at work here, and examining the musical application of Corsican style to Machaut’s manuscript, as well
as the collaboration between Organum and the Corsicans, may unearth some complexities in a seemingly simple strategy.

Members of E Voci di u Cumune (a Curbara-based Corsican ensemble) have collaborated with Marcel Pérès’ CERIMM on a number of recordings and performances since the mid-1980s, notably *Corsica: Chants Polyphoniques*, and *Chant Corse: Manuscrits Franciscains* (Bithell 157-158). What differentiates the *Messe de Notre Dame* from Pérès’ previous collaborations with Corsican singers is that the manuscript sung is by Machaut, and not an indigenous Corsican source. Here, Corsicans are imported to “Corsicanize” a central work of the Western canon, providing the stylistic elements which constitute Pérès’ lost “quality of life”: melismatic ornamentation, non-tempered tuning, nasal and chest vocal placement, and irregular tempi.

An excerpt from the “Gloria” will clarify the application of Corsican style to Machaut’s manuscript. A listener can easily identify the chest and nasal vocal placement present throughout the recording that creates the extenuated presence of overtones. Irregular tempo is just as easy to observe—if in doubt, try tapping a regular tempo through the first minute of the “Gloria”. However, the precise application of each of the three styles of Corsican ornamentation is best revealed through musical analysis, and a single musical example will suffice.

“Gloria”, words from the Latin Mass, composition by Guillaume de Machaut, performed by Ensemble Organum.

Example CD track 4.
As before, ornaments are indicated by circled numbers corresponding to their type. Notes marked with an asterix are sung with a very slight delay. Arrows indicate non-tempered tuning and unnotated accelerandi and diminuendi.

While in the manuscript the Triplum enters on E with the rest of the voices on “Je-su”, here Lanfranchi enters significantly early, and sings a clear, structural ornament (type 1) rising from the C#, to D, to E, then an ornament of the second type
(faster melismas, difficult to assign an exact pitch value to), followed by another ornament of the second type. No transcription is necessary to reveal ornaments of the third type: the best example comes at the very beginning of the “Gloria”, where Lanfranchi (singing the triplum in full chest voice) sings a clear oscillation around the initial syllables “Et in terra…” It is obvious that Ensemble Organum and Pérès apply Corsican style to Machaut’s Messe de Notre Dame: they employ Corsican singers and sing in an unmistakably Corsican manner. I consider the matter settled.

Now, how does the strategy of applying Corsican style to Machaut’s manuscript fit Pérès’ agenda of harvesting “cultural advantages” from the past that will reinvigorate lackluster modernity? Previously, we observed that the use of Corsican style has the effect of emphasizing the body-in-space of the performer, thanks to a hearty dose of Barthes’ “grain of the voice”. Rivuccate ornamentation allows singers to express their individual artistry and personality, which further emphasizes the performing body and links Corsican style with Taruskin’s “vitalistic” performances (more on this later). Finally, the irregular tempo of Corsican polyphony constitutes a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, engagement with time, presumably un-oppressed by the fascism of the mechanical timepiece.²⁷

Drawing a parallel between Organum’s Messe de Notre Dame and other performing artists working at the close of the 20th century may clarify the strategies employed by Pérès. The use of traditional or ancient chants to gain self-knowledge or

²⁷ While I sympathize with many aspects of Pérès’ endeavor, the notion that time must be irregular or unmeasured to be experienced qualitatively rather than quantitatively is downright silly. Think of the difference between five minutes when you are late or five minutes when you are early. Both are measured, and both are experienced quantitatively. I don’t think these two categories are separable—some degree of qualitative and quantitative engagement with time is always present. Though I suppose we could concede here that unmeasured and irregular tempo are, on a continuum, less qualitative than strictly measured tempo.
to rediscover lost cultural memory in performances that use ancient narratives or performative structures (like the Latin rite) but do not necessarily strive for historical exactitude has precedence in the late 20th century. Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, writing about Poland’s Teatr ZAR and the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards (Pontedera, Italy), two international performing ensembles of the “Grotowskian diaspora” working with ancient songs and texts in the 1990s and early 2000s, observes:

Engagement with traditional songs stemming from mythical narratives and founded in ancient traditions, in a space constructed by the artists as the original home of these events, transforms time into a ‘primordial mythical time made present’. The re-enactment of the mythical narrative reactualizes the event and ‘a return in illo tempore, to a past that is mythical, completely unhistorical’ (154).

This reminds us of Organum’s creation of a “completely unhistorical” 14th century made present through an engagement with “traditional songs stemming from mythical narratives” (i.e., 650 year old settings of the Latin rite, sung in an orally-transmitted polyphonic style). Of course, in the work of the artists described here, and in Organum’s work, this unhistorical past is in reality an alternate version of the present, responding to perceived deficiencies in contemporary life. Pérès’ agendas dovetail with the artists discussed in Nascimento’s essay: he, too, considers the purpose of engaging with performative materials from the past to be a search for embodied knowledge and lost “quality of life”.
Nascimento continues to comment that while many elements (dress, lighting, clear work ethic, commitment of the performers) are important for the creation of a ritual atmosphere and the transformation of a theatre or performance space into a liminal time and space, an element integral to the work of Teatr ZAR and the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and to their ability to “transform time into a ‘primordial mythical time made present’ is the psycho-physical activation of performers and audience members through the vibratory qualities associated with certain styles of chanting.

Caroline Bithell identifies intense psycho-physical effects associated with Corsican polyphonic singing. She notes that numerous Corsicans attest to experiencing heightened states described in terms like “ecstatic vibration” and “nirvana” while singing polyphony (2006, 72-73). Bithell goes on to observe that the psycho-physical effects of paghjella singing probably have at their core the unusual overtone harmonics created by rivuccate ornamentation, nasal and chest vocal placement, untempered tuning, and the close physical proximity of the performers, as well as the (homo)erotic and religious overtones of performance (69-73). The intense pleasures experienced by singers are often visible and sometimes physically theatrical, with singers moving in obvious expressions of ecstasy.

A particularly exaggerated example was given by the ensemble Barbara Furtuna when I saw them perform a concert in Corsica in 2008. Extreme gestures, rolled eyes, and exaggerated expressions of ecstasy abounded. During the Marian hymn “Tota Pulchra Es Maria”, one singer appeared to be on the verge of an orgasm.
Liturgical events are typically more subdued, though singers still commonly close their eyes and lean their head in apparent ecstasy.

While Pérès and his singers do not explicitly articulate experiencing heightened states while singing, and the recording offers few clues to how their bodies might appear in performance, Pérès’ stated desire to use music to discover “how human beings used to be…to increase our sensibility, our aesthetic sense” (Sherman 40) evokes the discourse surrounding the artists in Nascimento’s essay, who conceive of their work with chants as an active meditation akin to yoga or martial arts that leads to heightened and refined awareness. Coupled with liturgical dress, candlelight, and Pérès’ maxim that his singers should “believe in what they are doing”, the intense vibratory timbres of Corsican polyphony and their possible psycho-physical side effects may have been an attracting factor in Pérès’ decision to
use Corsican style to facilitate the process of instigating a liminal state and accessing and embodying knowledge from the “past” (i.e., from Corsica).

Recalling Rouget’s division (after Rousseau) of music’s efficacy into “moral” and “physical” action, we can extrapolate further. For Pérès and his singers, Rouget’s “moral action”, the fact that they “believe in what [they] are doing” (Sherman 38), their shared commitment to the liturgy and their shared understanding of the Latin rite, combined with their individual social histories, and attentiveness (recall Becker and Penman), is certainly necessary for any attainment of the correct “atmosphere of the ancient liturgies” described by Pérès, but equally important to this effort is Rouget’s “physical action”, the affective power of the physical sound of the music itself, especially the vibratory qualities associated with Corsican style described above by Bithell.

What Pérès discovers in Corsican style is a remarkable mirroring of form and content. The vibratory qualities (ornamentation, placement, non-tempered tuning) of Corsican style may give Ensemble Organum the needed push towards the creation of a liminal space in which they can access and embody knowledge, and at the same time, these musical elements of Corsican polyphony are microcosms of the very “knowledge” that Pérès hopes to access: an qualitative engagement with time, and a more intimate relationship with the body. Whether or not Pérès and his singers actually access and embody “knowledge” is not for us to decide. We can see why, given Pérès’ stated agendas, the application of Corsican style to the Machaut manuscript is so effective.
However metaphysical Pérès’ discourse may seem, Organum’s work is firmly located in the socio-political milieu of late 20\textsuperscript{th} century France. By applying a politically charged\textsuperscript{28} and musically anachronistic style to a canonical Western manuscript, Pérès creates an alternate model of the present that proposes social and philosophical changes though musical choices. These possibilities are drawn, not from the “past”, but from a very concrete and contemporary musical Other: Corsica. While the application of Corsican polyphonic style to Machaut’s manuscript fits Pérès agendas perfectly, Ensemble Organum’s \textit{Messe de Notre Dame} is symptomatic of a number of trends in contemporary performance and, now that we have revealed some of its inner workings, we must re-examine it in proper context.

\textsuperscript{28} In mainland France, Corsica is still commonly represented as barbaric, illiterate, savage, and full of nationalist terrorists. In the 1970s-80s, Corsican polyphony, especially the group Canta U Populu Corsu, was directly linked with the FNLC and other Corsican nationalist groups, and the sound of Corsican polyphony continues to be associated with the struggle for independence from France. See Bithell 2006.
3. Conclusion

In a remarkable essay entitled *The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past*, Richard Taruskin argues that the aesthetics which dominate the current historical and authentic performance trends in Early Music are in fact reflections of Modernist tastes. These tastes preference, to quote Stravinsky “… Music that is based on ontological time [which is] generally dominated by the principle of similarity” (metrical regularity, the “unmediated” realization of a score) and frown down upon “… music that adheres to psychological time [and] likes to proceed by contrast…[and therefore] succumbs to the seductions of variety”–essentially any music that allows for individual emotional expressivity and metrical irregularity in performance (1988, 41).

As we will recall from the introduction, Taruskin goes on to name these two contrasting types of performance “geometric” and “vitalistic” – the first is the darling of modernism, the latter is tied to romanticism and in some cases, argues Taruskin, postmodernism. As an example, Taruskin compares two performances of Mozart’s Sonata for two pianos in D major, K448, one by Béla and Ditta Bartók, the other by Stravinsky. The Hungarian composer and his wife give:

An unabashedly vitalist performance…. Features any number of tiny, unnotated, and hence (in Stravinskian terms) criminal and treacherous crescendi and diminuendi, accelerandi and ritardandi, and that most heinous of ‘sins’ and ‘follies’, according to Stravinsky’s explicit designation in the *Poetics*: ‘a crescendo...’ (183).
The other performance of K448, conducted by the master of modernism himself, “is execution, pure and simple. You could not hope to find a drier, harder—in a word, more geometrical—performance of any music” (183).

And Taruskin concludes,

It would be absurd to ask which of these two performances is the more authentic, or which is more faithful to Mozart’s intentions… The difference between them is clearly an aesthetic and an ideological one, historical only to the extent that one exhibits a style of performance we take to be emblematic of nineteenth-century music making, while the other is obviously and wholly of the twentieth century. And we all know which of them lies closer to the norms of ‘authentistic’ performance today. (183-4)

Of course, when Taruskin writes of the geometrical tendencies of ‘authentistic’ performance, he is not referring to Ensemble Organum. He is referring to a vast swathe of authentistic performances that include the dominant group in Early Music, the Oxbridge sound embodied by the Hilliard Ensemble, the Gothic Voices, and the Tallis Scholars.29 And one could not hope for a more geometric performance

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29 It’s important to observe here that by the late 1990s, many performers were aware of Taruskin’s initially controversial but ultimately widely accepted position that “authentistic” performances are in fact Modernist. While the scholarly debate raged, ensembles readily acknowledged catering more to taste than to notions of historical authenticity, and Taruskin pointed out that he considered this position in fact far more authentic. Nevertheless, the aesthetic initially marketed as “authentic” performance (and Taruskin takes credit for the now-necessary scare quotes around the “A-word”), which is irrefutably Modernist, continues to dominate the market, proving (at least in Taruskin’s eyes) that discourses of authenticity have great impact on power relationships and economics and are, in this case, authoritarian. For more see the excellent “Last Thoughts First” in *Text and Act.*

Peter Phillips, founder and director of the Tallis Scholars, states in a 1997 interview with Bernard D. Sherman, that although we can never know what the chorale music of the Renaissance sounded like, he’s “uncomfortable with the implication that because we can’t know exactly how they sounded we are therefore absolved of all responsibility to try to find out” but also that he doesn’t think “there’s much future in making it disagreeable to our ears to satisfy some theory, even on the rare occasion that we can substantiate the theory, because then modern audiences won’t go for it and we as performers will cut the ground from underneath our feet.”
of Machaut’s mass than that by the Hilliards: the fastest, cleanest, most blended, most anonymous (devoid of distinguishable individual voices), most familiar sounding recording to date. What does it sound so familiar? Because, as Taruskin writes, “There is… no aspect of today’s authentistic performance practice more pertinent to twentieth-century aesthetics, and none harder to justify on historical grounds, than its ambience of emotional detachment, its distancing of voice from utterance” (189). The Hilliard recording is icy in its detachment, individual utterance is absolutely absent, and as Taruskin observes, this is the sound that we, as 20th and 21st century listeners, are accustomed to.

Organum’s performance is of a different nature. Belief replaces irony and detachment. A plethora of unnotated diminuendi, crescendi, accelerandi, and ritardandi are present. The performers sing Corsican ornamentation that expresses their individual artistry and personality. Regular tempo is frequently eschewed far beyond mensural duration. In Taruskin’s terms, it is the vitalistic performance extraordinaire.

By the late 1990s, Oxbridge groups were admitting that they catered more directly to taste than to notions of historical “authenticity”. In response to a jibe by Taruskin that the Tallis Scholars’ habit of performing five-movement masses without Proper plain chants interspersed between is “like hearing a giant rondo with the episodes removed”, Phillips replies, “…I think he has a point, but it doesn’t worry me, nor does it seem to worry the people who buy our discs. I invite him to look at the sales figures” (120). For more, see the full interview in Sherman 117-130. This isn’t a bad thing at all, in fact, in Taruskin’s opinion (and in my own) it’s a far more authentic barometer of musical success than “getting it right” historically.

Also, we should note that the Tallis Scholars and other Oxbridge groups’ clean and straightforward approach is much more conducive to the recorded medium than Organum’s performative approach is. The compelling elements of a recording like Organum’s are much more apparent in live performance – the interaction between the singers, individual singers’ ability to ornament, and the liturgical action along with candlelight, dress, etc., are theatrical in nature. The approach taken by the Hilliards and the Tallis scholars is, I believe, really designed for consumption on recording because it transmits the music as “textually” and cleanly as possible.
While Taruskin initially notes that we associate vitalist performances with Romantic performance practice (hence his citation of Bartok), he later argues that Modernist performance practice and the cult of textual authenticity in fact derive from the Romantic period and notions of *werktreue* (1995, 10-14). This leaves Organum’s *Messe* hanging. If it is not a return to 19th century aesthetics, then what is it?

Let us recall Erika Fischer-Lichte’s conception of the “performative turn”, a shift at the start of the 20th century from “text” towards “performance”. This “turn” was exemplified by artists who looked towards “so-called primitive cultures in search for models” (22), and using elements from these cultures, created performances which emphasized the body and physicality.

Like many of the performances discussed in the introduction, Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame* fits under the umbrella of works stemming from Fischer–Lichte’s “performative turn”. The Organum *Messe* is a *performance* (not just a recording or the musical realization of a manuscript, but a full performance that relies on liturgical dress, candle-light, and embodied belief for efficacy, albeit captured here on recorded disc) that uses as a model elements from a “primitive culture” (Corsica) in order to propose an alternate past (a mythical 14th century in which Machaut was sung in a Corsican style) but in reality proposes an alternate present, a 20th century musical practice full of the individual expressivity and emphasis on the bodies of the performers lost to the Stravinskian modernism that dominates Classical music performance practice. And like many of the performances described by Fischer-Lichte, Organum’s *Messe* created significant controversy, because it dragged a sacred text, Machaut, from the protected realm of revered object
into the unstable realm of interpretation, because it shifted an important element of “culture” from “text” towards “body”.

According to Tarkusin’s equation of vitalistic performances and postmodernity, Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame* can be considered a postmodern recording of Machaut, one that levels the playing field between composer and performer, and proposes a compelling, alternate future for 21st century performance practice. As Taruskin observes, modernist performance is characterized by a “…hostility to unwritten performance tradition, which accounts for… practically everyone’s reluctance to embellish the bare notes of the scores they execute… It has also resulted in a newly militant reluctance to make the subtle, constant adjustments of tempo and dynamics on which expressivity depends, for these can have no sanction but personal feeling” (168).

He concludes, “I hope to foster alternative models of authentic performance, which I would prefer not to call “irresponsible” but “postauthoritarian”, a term that chimes with some of the more encouraging symptoms of the postmodern attitude… Postmodernist performance values, I would like to think, have to do with the opening-up of borders, in particular that border between the creative and re-creative closed two long centuries ago” (47). That is to say, between composition and interpretation, between composition and creative performance. Of course, this is precisely what Marcel Pérès and Ensemble Organum accomplish on their remarkable recording of the *Messe de Notre Dame*, and I believe the controversy surrounding their interpretation to be a healthy sign of a changing performance climate.
It is important to observe that Organum gains whatever “postmodernism” they have in the eyes of the Classical music world by borrowing traits from a musical Other that is certainly not self-consciously postmodern, and is, in all likelihood, aesthetically pre-modern, and ideologically modernist (to be explained below). Here we encounter a difficult possibility: postmodernism and postmodern performance practice aesthetics as understood by Taruskin may be much older than we think they are, dating back, in the West, to before Romanticism. But this becomes troubled when we consider that while Corsican polyphony may, because of its geographic position, represent an “older” western performance practice, the vast majority of performances under the umbrella of the “performative turn” borrow materials from Others outside the “West”, and that this borrowing, more often than not, results in performances that fit Taruskin’s description of the postmodern in terms of rebalancing the creative/re-creative. Yet we cannot say that contemporary Egyptian, Indian, or Japanese aesthetics fit somewhere within the Western historical narrative. They have their own genealogies which cannot be reduced to Western modes of understanding history.

It is not interesting to draw conclusions as to whether the creative/re-creative is more balanced in other cultures, or if it was more balanced at some point in our own past. We can observe that confidence that for the last, say, one hundred years, Western culture has drastically preferred texts and marginalized the body, preferred the act of composition (the creative) and marginalized interpretation in performance (the re-creative), and that there is (and has been for some time) a large effort underway to right this imbalance. To glance towards cultural Others and

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30 E.g., Oud players on “Mozart in Egypt” embellish more freely than their western counterparts.
towards the past in search of models is a sign of our times: unprecedented
globalization and material documentation over the last century have made us more
aware than ever of other ways of life, even those distant in time and location. We can,
then diagnose a tendency, which Ensemble Organum’s Messe exemplifies: looking to
the Other to make performances which emphasize the body or embodiment. Whether
or not the Western gaze is reductive and appropriates Otherness to serve its own
purposes is ultimately dependent on the individual actions of individual artists in
specific cases. No generalizations are possible, though in all cases, we can rest
assured that some reduction takes place.

In Organum’s case, this reduction takes place to a minimal degree. Corsican
techniques are mastered, and Corsicans participate in the performance. At the same
time, nothing on the disc represents Corsica as a savage or barbaric source of
mysterious musical antiquity. The liner notes stress the technical mastery of
ornamentation, and the Corsican participants are represented as autonomous artists
whose legitimacy is independent of their ethnic origins.

Patrice Pavis, in his introduction to The Intercultural Performance Reader, writes that “foreign material cannot be completely comprehended or mastered unless
one knows how it has been prepared, especially with regard to the training of actors”
(17). The same is true for Pérès’ singers and other musicians. Pérès’ long-term
collaboration with Corsican signers allowed members of Organum the time in
tutelage necessary to embody this “foreign material” and prevent dilettantism from
reducing the techniques of the Other to the vocabulary of the borrowers.
We should also note that the Corsicans who sing with Organum came of age during the Riacquistu, meaning that they themselves made conscious returns to “traditional” music, and may share many of Pérès’ agendas and beliefs in regards to gaining lost knowledge from the “past”, though they may also be distinct in that emphasizes regional identity while the other emphasizes something akin to “spiritual knowledge” (Bithell 2006). To return to the “past” in search of national/regional identity is characteristic of modernity and the many “roots” identity movements that sprung up across the world (e.g., Eastern Europe, post-colonial Africa) in the 1960s-80s. While Pérès does not articulate a desire to return to any particular cultural roots, and Organum’s work is not explicitly linked with regional or national identity, Corsican polyphonic style is inextricably tied to the Riacquistu (especially in France) and thus with modernity.

While an aesthetic reading from the point of view of Early Music or Classical Music scholarship (i.e., Taruskin) may suggest postmodernism, an ethnomusicological or anthropological reading suggests impulses linked to 20th century modernity and a desire to return to folk or regional roots in search of identity, at least on the part of the Corsicans involved in the recording. Pérès’ own articulations link his practice with more esoteric artists (such as those linked to Grotowski) who create performances in which they can use singing “for work on oneself–[for] the development of a finer level of consciousness and awareness” (Nascimento 145). Ensemble Organum’s Messe de Notre Dame sits somewhere between these three worlds.
While it may be tempting to link the phenomenon of polysemic intercultural performances such as Organum’s with postmodernity, we cannot say that intercultural collaborations in and of themselves diagnose postmodernism. As Pavis notes, …It is tempting to postulate a confluence of intercultural theatre [and performance in general] and postmodernism. It is certainly arguable that the two phenomena coincide in time, and in the practice of artists like Wilson, Suzuki and Béjart. But these represent only one type of cultural exchange…which levels cultures… Certainly this kind of interculturalism, that of Wilson and his epigones, holds the ideological and aesthetic high road—being much more adapted to the spirit of the times – for cultural relativism has come to terms with all valorization, and no longer feels any need to relate either to one culture or cultures (19).

We can see immediately that Organum’s work, which borrows from the Other to propose a distinct alternative in the face of overwhelmingly hegemonic world of Classical performance practice, does not fit with postmodern works by directors like Robert Wilson, which draw from multiple cultures equally to create a sort of smorgasbord of cultural relativism. Taruskin’s vitalistic performances do coincide generally with postmodern attitudes, and Organum’s work, in the light of Oxbridge performances, does break down the barrier between the creative and re-creative. But in the grand scheme of things Organum’s Messe cannot be considered a postmodern work. It is characterized by impulses linked to modernity (though not to aesthetic modernism), and at the same time it is characterized by an aesthetic which, in the light of conservative Early Music performances, could be considered postmodern, but
when compared with the music of Anthony Braxton, could not. It is linked to Fischer-Lichte’s performative turn and to the other intercultural performances described in the introduction. It has similarities to Grotowski’s work and others in various times and places (e.g., Avicenna, or Gurdjieff) who take interest in ancient songs as a means of accessing and embodying lost knowledge or “working on oneself” and whose interest goes beyond the folkloristic or a search for identity. The exact positionality of Organum’s *Messe* is, well, messy. It sits at the crossroads of many impulses in 20th (and now 21st) century performance, and it is this confluence of impulses that makes it interesting.

Throughout this essay I have placed great weight on elucidating how performances like Organum’s, which emphasize the bodies of the performers through the use of songs from the Other, might instigate trance or liminal states. The reason for this is, I must confess, partly personal. Performances of this nature, accomplished with great skill, have had profound effects on my own life and on the lives of many artists with whom I have had the pleasure of studying and working. Following these artists, I believe that it is time we addressed and actively worked against de-physicalized performance practice (and de-physicalized life—these are inseparable) wherever it may be found. This can be subtle – even a little dose of the re-creative where it did not exist before bestows some of the dignity we place on texts onto a living, breathing, human being. You tell me which is more important.

I cannot offer any moral imperative – the body is not “better” than the text. But I can say that in my own life as a performer and composer, I have observed that the body and the physical is largely marginalized from musical discourse and
understanding, and that the rare performances or work situations I have encountered that skillfully addressed the body and its relationship to music-making were much needed and deeply cathartic. This may be because all acts of music-making are acts of the body, and in our obsession (particularly in Early Music) with the realization of texts we forget this. We would do well to remember, as John Blacking writes, in the introduction to *How Musical Is Man*, that “many, if not all, of music’s essential processes can be found in the constitution of the human body and in patterns of interaction of bodies in society” (Blacking xi).

I should say here that I am not suggesting employing a certain formula of “emphasizing the body” (i.e., running around hitting oneself while singing) but rather long-term engagement with specific techniques that might level the playing field between text and body in our musical lives. Of course, I realize that many, many musics of the 20th century, and many of the musics taught at Wesleyan address this problematic quite effectively, or at least more effectively than does Western Art Music. The opportunity to engage with some of these musics has been a great boon to my education, but, sadly, access is limited and the vast majority of individuals primarily encounter music that is centered around the realization of texts.

In particular instances, performances which emphasize the body may instigate liminal or trance states. My first encounter with Ang’s *By The Way*, as described in the introduction to this essay, had such an effect on me. I use personal account not because I think I am unique but because I believe this experience to be a common one – the testimonies of friends and colleagues on two continents over the last three years has indicated that many people are deeply affected by performances which use songs
to emphasize the body, and that in the wake of viewing such performances, many individuals seek practices or techniques by which they may become more embodied minds. As we have observed, this can occur because the techniques employed by these artists (Organum among them!), given the right conditions, may create a liminal space in which audience members and performers can access ways of thinking, seeing, doing, hearing, engaging with the body, etc., that are unavailable to them in daily life. This is distinct from engaging with a text, which is primarily “read”. In these performances a connection occurs, recalling the Italian researchers’ “mirror neurons”, on the level of body-to-body.

The writings of Altman, Rouget, and Becker and Penman on the nature of trance states, listening, and recorded sound imply that one may be able to experience a state of liminality or trance by listening to a recording of the sorts of performances I describe (though of course, bodily co-presence does help). This corroborates many of my own suspicions, drawn from listening to Organum’s Messe and other recordings, and is a hopeful conclusion in a world where recordings are widely available over the internet and quality live performances of this sort are expensive and few and far between.

Again, this is not to propose any sort of formula. One could create a “ritualistic” performance using “ancient songs” (or songs from Other cultures, as these are often mistakenly equated), sung in a way that emphasizes the body, all in the hopes of creating a liminal space, and the result could be completely banal, or

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31 Irena Tomazin (Slovenia), Ricardo Brunetti (Italy), Adam Horowitz (USA), and Nina Julia Bang (Denmark, member of Teatr ZAR), among many others, related personal narratives in which they saw a performance of this nature and subsequently sought to change their relationships with their bodies through various practices (singing, movement practices, etc.)
even worse, blatant appropriation and misrepresentation. Thankfully, Pérès and his singers avoid these traps through long-term collaboration and the embodiment of specific techniques, as well as a relatively equivocal program of representation.

Ultimately, I think Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame* fits best within Barthes’ “other” history of music, a history based around an “aesthetic of musical enjoyment”. This history places less emphasis on the “break in tonality” produced by modernity and other ideological twists and turns (where we have found it difficult to situate Organum’s work), and more emphasis on the materiality, the “grain” of sound itself. This history is in itself a movement away from “text” and towards “body”, and fittingly mirrors the efforts of Pérès and his collaborators. Finally, this history is the best home for Ensemble Organum’s *Messe de Notre Dame* because Organum’s work offers, like so many of the performances I deem to be vital to our artistic life, “certitude here of the body, of the body’s enjoyment” (277).
Works Cited

Texts:


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**Sound Recordings:**


Performances:


Films: