

Notes on Divine songs

by Scott Mettcalfe

This concert concerns itself explicitly with a theme that has run through many of Blue Heron's programs over the years: the profound interpenetration and interconnectedness of sacred and secular, of spiritual and corporeal, in the cultures of our past and of our present. I use the plural, cultures, in order to emphasize the diversity of understandings conceived by individual human beings. I doubt that any two people alive today experience or interpret the world in precisely the same way, and I am equally certain that the individuality of human beings is not a recent development. Late medieval Christendom may appear relatively monolithic to us, but this impression is surely a faulty one attributable to our remove of several centuries, a lack of detailed evidence concerning the innermost thoughts of all but a very few, and our lamentable tendency to pass simplifying judgement on groups of people we do not know very well, including our own ancestors.

If I were to essentialize about our own culture for a moment, I might say that modern Americans tend to divide sacred and secular things into separate compartments: the soul in one box, the body in another. Seldom, in the public sphere at least, do we recognize that the two exist in one and the same place, indeed, are the same thing (or anyway, that's my feeling). But if we have any cultural practice in which the connection or identity of the spiritual and the corporeal is most manifest, it is perhaps music-making, and especially singing. The most abstract of all the arts, music creates meaning out of sound and is able to shake people to their core by means of the progression and combination of tones. Music-making is a physical act (this is true for all musicians but even more so for singers, for whom the body is the only instrument), but what is brought into being by that physical act can have a direct spiritual force. The actions of a human body produce physical phenomena, sound waves, and the effect of those physical phenomena on the body and soul of a listener (including another musician participating in the music-making) can be intense.

How this happens is entirely mysterious and perhaps inexplicable, but a fifteenth-century European Christian musician, steeped in habits of allegory, metaphor, and analogy, might have

interpreted it thus: All earthly phenomena correspond to heavenly ones. The music we produce on earth is analogous to the divine music of the angels and the spheres. Not only does the Sanctus we sing offer a rapturous preview of that sung by angelic choruses, but the love song of a courtier to his lady may symbolize one sung by the believer to the Virgin Mary. As Andrew Kirkman puts it in a recent book, “From the perspective of a late medieval worldview permeated by patterns of religious allegory...potentially spiritual content inhered already in the secular entity, awaiting, as it were, the appropriate context or mindset to activate its higher, spiritual meaning.”¹ Although the idea was not completely new, fifteenth-century composers incorporated secular melodies into sacred music with much greater frequency and freedom than did their predecessors, basing numerous Mass cycles and motets on preexisting music drawn from songs, which were often incorporated into the new composition in such a way as to be immediately recognizable to the listener. Far from violating propriety, the use of song melodies was meant to offer enlightening parallels to the listener; the poetic texts they evoked in the memory, even if not sung, suggested metaphors by which humans might attempt to comprehend their relationship to God. Aquinas had stressed the utility of metaphor in conveying divine truth, which might not be directly apprehendable by all:

It is befitting Holy Writ to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things. For God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature....It is also befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons...that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it.²

The most obvious and most common analogy made available by courtly love was between the unattainable object of desire and Mary, and our concert opens with an exquisite example, Johannes Ockeghem’s virelai *Ma maistresse*. The poem merits a rubric like that given by the Burgundian court chronicler and poet, Jean Molinet, to his *Dame sans per*: “Dictier qui se poeult adreschier soit a la vierge Marie ou pour un amant a sa dame” (“Poem that may be addressed either to the Virgin Mary or by a lover to his lady”).³ The text speaks of a lady “perfect in qualities, if ever woman was, she alone whom rumor and fame hold to be without peer,” of the

¹ Andrew Kirkman, *The Cultural Life of the Early Polyphonic Mass* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 44

² *Summa theologiae* (Q. 1, art. 9), written 1265–74, quoted by Kirkman on p. 45

³ See Kirkman, p. 49.

speaker's urgent desire to see her and his hope for her pity. The song itself, written as early as 1450 and perhaps the earliest we have from Ockeghem, is one of his most bewitching creations, and its soaring melodies lend an air of enchantment to his Mass based on it—a Mass that, according to the allegorical interpretation, would have originally been intended for a Marian feast or for a Lady Chapel.

Just the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Missa Ma maistresse* remain, although a complete cycle may once have existed. Both movements draw liberally and audibly on the discantus and tenor of his chanson. The bass of the Kyrie quotes the entire tenor line of the first section of the song, while in the Gloria both the first and second sections of the song's discantus melody are quoted complete by the tenor. At the last moment, at the words "In gloria Dei patris, Amen," the tenor reprises the opening gesture of the song. Besides these direct and extended quotations, the song's melodies are absorbed into all the lines of the Mass.

A pioneer both in the development of the cyclical Mass (that is, a setting, unified by various means, of the five movements of the Ordinary of the Mass) and in the use of borrowed material, Ockeghem composed thirteen extant cycles (three of which survive in partial form): six are known to draw from pre-existent secular songs and a seventh may well be based on a song that has been lost. Our program presents a complete, composite Mass Ordinary made up of movements from four of them; each section of the Mass is preceded by the song that inspired it. We also include a couple of instrumental renditions of songs whose texts might easily be read as allegories: Ockeghem's countermelody to the tune of *O rosa bella* ("O beautiful rose, O my sweet soul / Do not let me die, for courtesy's sake!"), and Johannes Tinctoris's embellished version of Ockeghem's *D'ung aultre amer* ("To love another my heart would demean itself"), a song which lent its melodies and presumed symbolism to a number of motets and Masses, a Sanctus, and one other song.

Although mass cycles are nowadays sometimes regarded as sacrosanct wholes, such an attitude was foreign to the fifteenth century, which, however much it valued complete masses, considered it perfectly seemly to extract and sing whatever was needed for the liturgy at hand. The numerous independent mass movements by fifteenth-century composers testify to the usefulness

of single mass sections set polyphonically. In any case, only the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Missa Ma maistresse* survive, and the Credo of the *Missa Fors seullement*, another incomplete cycle, differs significantly in style, voice ranges, and voice designations from the Kyrie and Gloria which precede it, suggesting that it may have been conceived independently. The complete Mass, if it ever existed, “might have been an amalgamation of rather diverse movements.”⁴

While *Ma maistresse* offers a classic example of Marian analogy, *Fors seullement* presents the rather rarer case of a Christological application of a song, albeit with potential Marian implications. Here a woman, overwhelmed by grief, speaks to a man she is “sure of losing”: the song might be read allegorically as a sort of *Stabat mater*, the 13th-century hymn that describes Mary weeping at the foot of the cross. (As so often with these songs, subsequent lines or stanzas do not seem to fit the allegory so gracefully, for it does not appear appropriate to speak of the Savior’s “rigueur”—hardness, implacability, pitilessness—nor of Mary cursing her loyalty to her son.) In this interpretation, the *Missa Fors seullement* refers directly to Christ’s Passion and is most appropriately sung during Holy Week. In the Credo the tenor sings the entire melody of the song’s upper voice, plus some of the second voice’s melody from the B section.

The song *Presque transi* expresses a desperate desire for death and an end to a painful and wearisome life. It is in the Phrygian mode on E, the mode most alien to our sense of tonality, often used for laments, and like most Phrygian pieces spends much of its time in tonal regions (C and G) that feel distant from E, so that its final cadences feel like a surprising collapse from poignant yearning into bitter resignation.

That Ockeghem composed a Mass based on *Presque transi* went long unrecognized in modern times, and it may be that the scribes of the extant fifteenth century sources were also unaware of the connection, for they entitled it not *Missa Presque transi* but *Missa Quarti toni* or *Missa My my*, or nothing at all. *Missa Quarti toni* means “mass in the fourth mode” (i.e., Hypophrygian). As Ross Duffin has demonstrated, *Missa My my* (or *Mi mi*) means exactly the same thing, for

⁴ According to Jaap van Benthem, in the preface to his recent edition of the work.

each mode could be referred to in shorthand by means of a unique pair of solmisation syllables.⁵ We don't know what Ockeghem called the work (no such thing as an autograph exists for fifteenth-century music), although the name *My my* may have originated with him. The relationship of song model to Mass is much less obvious here than in a standard cantus firmus Mass, including the other three Masses represented on this program. There are no long, verbatim quotations from the song's melodies in the Mass's tenor or anywhere else, but material from all three voices of the song permeates the Mass, as shown by Haruyo Miyazaki, the first scholar to identify the parent song.⁶ The allegorical potential of the song within the Mass is also mysterious; might it, too, be thought to refer to Christ's suffering on the cross, "on the verge of death, a little less than dead, living in sorrow without receiving any comfort"?

For the Agnus dei we turn to the *Missa De plus en plus*, based on a song not by Ockeghem but by one of the two most famous composers of the previous generation, Gilles Binchois. The song is celebrated both for the extraordinary loveliness of its tune and for its arrestingly strange harmonies. Binchois's songs betray a marked fondness for ending in a place one would not predict, and this final is certainly one of his most surprising. (The waywardness of Binchois's tonal strategies inspired David Fallows to devise "The Binchois Game": I give you the beginning, or indeed most of the song; you guess what the final will be.) The text of *De plus en plus*, though, is entirely unremarkable, expressing in generic terms a yearning to see the absent beloved, the "sweet lady, noble and fair," "she whom I wish to obey in everything." A Marian interpretation for the Mass seems inevitable. The way Ockeghem handles the source song is also pretty straightforward: the *Missa De plus en plus* treats the cantus firmus in the classic manner, with song tenor quoted in tenor in both strict and ornamented forms, often in longer note values, sometimes proportionally transformed. And Ockeghem deploys the song's tenor melody in such a way as to make the final of the Mass movements, in contrast to that of the song itself, completely predictable. The theorist Johannes Tinctoris considered such predictability the norm,

⁵ The syllables indicate the solmisation of the species of fourth or fifth that constitutes the upper part of the mode's octave range; in mode 4, Hypophrygian, this is the second species of fifth, from B mi down to E mi. Those interested should read Duffin's article, "*Mi chiamano Mimi...but my name is Quarti toni: solmization and Ockeghem's famous Mass*," *Early Music* xxix (2001): 164-84.

⁶ Haruyo Miyazaki, "New light on Ockeghem's *Missa 'Mi-mi'*," *Early Music* xiii (1985): 367-75.

writing that “out of fifty composed songs, there is scarcely one that does not begin on that place in which it finishes” (*Liber de natura et proprietate tonorum*, 1476, ch. 19).

Predictability is hardly the salient quality of Ockeghem’s music, however. His melodies spill forth in ever-flowing streams; each voice pursues its own independent course within the contrapuntal texture, only occasionally imitating or even referring to the gestures of another line. Latterday writers have found it terribly challenging to account for Ockeghem’s music, which has been characterized as mystical, irrational, cerebral, or arcane, beguiling the listener with (in Lawrence Bernstein’s memorable phrase) an “aesthetics of concealment.” But Tinctoris, in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (*Book of the Art of Counterpoint*) of 1477, placed Ockeghem at the head of a list of composers whose works were filled with divine “sweetness”:

... at this present time, not to mention innumerable singers of the most beautiful diction, there flourish, whether by the effect of some celestial influence or by the force of assiduous practice, countless composers, among them Johannes Ockeghem, Johannes Regis, Antoine Busnoys, Firminus Caron, and Guillaume Faugues, who glory in having studied this divine art under John Dunstable, Gilles Binchois, and Guillaume Du Fay, recently deceased. Nearly all the works of these men exhale such sweetness that in my opinion they are to be considered most suitable, not only for men and heroes, but even for the immortal gods, Indeed, I never hear them, I never study them, without coming away more refreshed and wiser.

What did Tinctoris mean by sweetness? The word fell so easily off fifteenth-century tongues that it is extremely difficult to attribute any specific meaning to it, but it may suggest suavity of melody, richness of harmony, or smoothness of counterpoint. Tinctoris also singled out *Ma maistresse* as a model of *varietas*, which he regarded as the greatest virtue of polyphonic music, specifying a number of contrapuntal techniques whereby such variety could be achieved.

The eighth and last rule is that variety must most accurately be sought for in all counterpoint for, as Horace says in his *Poetics*, “One who sings to the kithara is laughed at if he always wanders over the same string.”

Wherefore, according to the opinion of Tullius [Cicero], as variety in the art of speaking most delights the hearer, so also in music a diversity of harmonies vehemently provokes the souls of listeners into delight; hence the philosopher [Aristotle], in his *Ethics*, does not hesitate to state that variety is a most pleasant thing and human nature in need of it.

Also, any composer or improviser...of the greatest genius may achieve this diversity if he either composes or improvises now by one quantity, now by another; now by one perfection [cadence], now by another; now by one proportion [vertical interval], now by another; now by one melodic interval [motive: *coniunctio*], now by another; now with suspensions [*cum syncopis*], now without; now with *fuga* [imitation], now without; now with pauses [rests], now without; now diminished [i.e. florid: *contrapunctus diminutus*], now plain [*contrapunctus planus*].

Sean Gallagher interprets *varietas* as a “mode of composing” in which “composers could work out a sequence of musical passages, each having its own localized sense of regularity and coherence, the nature of which was continually changing.” In *Ma maistresse*, you will hear shifts in contrapuntal texture, with imitation deployed in ever-varied ways; variation in the speed at which the melody moves forward, now urgent, now languidly suspended; and changes in tonal emphasis: note especially the way the harmonies in the second part of the piece create an entirely new mood. You will encounter many, many equally persuasive exemplars of *varietas* throughout this concert, of an ineffable sweetness, and I hope we will all come away refreshed and wiser.

Finally, a brief mention of pronunciation: We are experimenting with fifteenth-century pronunciations of Latin (more like French) and of French (rather more like Latin, with many more final consonants pronounced than is usual in the modern spoken language). In the Latin works the French vowels and consonants help to create a more specific and distinctive sound-world, perhaps akin to Ockeghem’s own (he was born in the French-speaking province of Hainault, not far from Brussels, and spent most of his career in Tours in France). In the French, the heightened diction adds clarity and precision, aids comprehension, and underlines certain commonplaces of fifteenth-century French poetry such as the juxtaposition (not actually found in the texts sung this evening) of the verb “amer” (to love) with the adjective “amer” (bitter), which in this pronunciation sound identical, the final R pronounced.