

Sources and survivors

Living in an age of blithely easy access to digital copies of practically anything, we may find it hard to imagine just how precious a thing was notated music in the years before Ottaviano Petrucci developed a system for printing polyphonic music, issuing his first book, the *Harmonice musices odhecaton* (One Hundred Songs of Harmonic Music) of 1501. Composers seem to have worked out their creations on reusable slates, transcribing the results into some sort of exemplar from which a scribe would produce workaday performance copies or, in special cases, ornately decorated presentation manuscripts for nobles or other wealthy patrons. Virtually nothing in the hand of a composer survives from the fifteenth century, and even copies of treasures like polyphonic masses or motets are breathtakingly scarce. One single manuscript copied shortly after the death of Johannes Ockeghem in 1497 contains almost all of his settings of the Ordinary of the Mass (nine complete cycles and three partial cycles), plus the incomplete Requiem. While some of these survive in perhaps one other source, four Masses are transmitted uniquely in this one manuscript, as is Ockeghem's short but typically rich setting of the Marian antiphon *Ave Maria*. We owe our knowledge of many of Ockeghem's works to a kind of miracle—and we have lost at least four other masses, if references to them in treatises of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries can be believed.

The manuscript in question, the Chigi Codex, was commissioned by or for the French noble Philippe Bouton (1418-1515) and produced at the Bourgeois workshop at the Habsburg-Burgundian court of Mechelen. The first section of the manuscript is devoted entirely to Masses by Ockeghem; it seems to have been planned as a sort of commemorative volume to him and to Johannes Regis, for it also contains five of Regis's seven extant motets. (Two of these, too, survive only there.) Sometime after Bouton's death the manuscript made its way into Spanish hands. In the seventeenth century it came into the possession of Cardinal Fabio Chigi, later Pope Alexander VII, and eventually it wound up in the Vatican Library.

The Mass featured on today's program, Ockeghem's *Missa Ecce ancilla domini*, was originally the first work in the codex (its order was subsequently altered), and its first opening was spectacularly illustrated. Indeed, it is likely that the Chigi Codex survived not because later

generations prized the music it contained—Chigi’s librarian noted laconically on a leaf of the book that “la musica è stimata molto buona” (the music is considered very good)—but because it was so handsomely written and so lavishly illuminated.

[INSERT picture of Chigi fos. 19v-20 side by side. CAPTION]

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Chigi C VIII 234, fos. 19v-20. Full-color digital images are available at http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Chig.C.VIII.234.

In addition to the lovely depiction of the Annunciation and the colorful marginalia, note the text in the tenor part at lower left—not the words of the Mass itself, but those of the plainchant antiphon which Ockeghem has taken as the basis of his piece: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). This and later entries of the antiphon text, alongside and sometimes directly below the words of the Mass, appear to instruct the performer to sing “Ecce ancilla domini” where the tenor part quotes the chant, an audible sign of the Mass’s dedication.

Manuscripts may be fragile bearers of cultural artifacts like polyphonic music, but prints from the early sixteenth century have not fared all that much better. Petrucci’s books were published in very small runs, most of which has disappeared. Less than half of the first edition of *Odhecaton* remains, just one copy of the second edition of 1503, and five of the third of 1504. And in the early years of the new century a new format was becoming more popular. Rather than the choirbook format seen in Chigi, in which all the voices of a polyphonic texture appear adjacent to each other (not in score), scribes and printers were beginning to favor partbooks, one for each part. The partbook format brings with it a new danger, that one (or more) of the books might not survive. This is precisely what happened with Petrucci’s *Motetti a cinque* of 1508, which is the only source of Regis’s five-voice setting of the Marian sequence *Ave Maria...virgo serena*. Our performance employs a reconstruction of the missing voice by Theodor Dumitrescu. (Quite a lot of the material in this motet may sound familiar from Josquin’s celebrated work beginning with the same text. Dumitrescu has also proven that Josquin is not the innovator in this case, but is rather emulating the now less well-known master of the previous generation.)

Fifteenth-century songs, the best of which are exquisitely crafted masterpieces of an artistry and profundity every bit the equal of the later art song repertory, were often copied into pocket-size volumes for collectors. (Whether such *chansonniers* were ever used by musicians is doubtful: they tend to be decorated *objets d'art*, not performing materials, and in any case it is virtually certain that fifteenth-century singers performed songs from memory.) A typical example is the so-called Dijon chansonnier from c. 1465-1470s, the only source of *Permanent vierge*. Although unascribed in Dijon, the song is copied there between two other anonymous songs that are elsewhere ascribed to Ockeghem. The attribution of *Permanent vierge* to Ockeghem, first proposed by the nineteenth-century music historian August Wilhelm Ambros, has recently been lent support in a detailed rhythmic analysis by Sean Gallagher, adviser to Blue Heron's Ockeghem@600 project.¹ *Permanent vierge* combines a French rondeau with two Latin-texted cantus firmi, both Marian antiphon chants, in a hybrid form known nowadays as a motet-chanson. The French poem glosses the text of yet another antiphon, *Mulier amicta sole*, which the scribe wrote sideways in the margin. The words are from Revelation 12:1: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars."

—Scott Metcalfe

INSERT DIJON MS fos. 165v-166 side by side. CAPTION

Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale MS 517, fos. 165v-166. Digital images at patrimoine.bm-dijon.fr/pleade/img-viewer/MS00517/viewer.html.

¹ Sean Gallagher, "Syntax and style: rhythmic patterns in the music of Ockeghem and his contemporaries," in Philippe Vendrix, ed., *Johannes Ockeghem*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1998, pp. 681-705.