OCKEGHEM | PEROTIN

Master Leoninus was generally known as the best composer of *organum,* who made the great book *(Magnus liber)* of *organa* for Mass and Office, for the enhancement of the Divine Service. This book was in use until the time of the great Perotinus, who made a redaction of it and made many better clausulas, that is, *puncta,* he being the best composer of discant and better than Leoninus… This Master Perotinus made the best *quadrupla,* such as *Viderunt* and *Sederunt,* with an abundance of striking musical embellishments; likewise, the noblest *tripla,* such as *Alleluia, Posui adiutorium* and *Nativitas* etc. He also made three-voice conductus, such as *Salvatoris hodie,* and two-voice conductus, such as *Dum sigillum summi patris,* and also, among many others, monophonic conductus, such as *Beata viscera* etc. The book, that is, the books of Master Perotinus, were in use in the choir of the cathedral of the Blessed Virgin in Paris…up to the present day.

Anonymous IV, *De mensuris et discantu,* c. 1270-80

This passage, from a treatise written by an Englishman who was at the University of Paris in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, is the source of virtually everything that we know about Perotinus or Perotin, "little Peter." Anonymous IV (so called because his is the fourth anonymous medieval musical treatise in a nineteenth-century edition) names two men who composed polyphonic elaborations of liturgical plainchant which were preserved in a large book at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Perotinus, like his predecessor Leoninus, possessed a master's degree, undoubtedly from the University of Paris. While Leonin was known for his *organa* (in which a single voice sang a florid, rhythmically free line above a plainchant melody sung very, very slowly), Perotin was celebrated as the best maker of discant (metrically controlled polyphony in which all the lines moved at similar rates of speed). Anonymous IV singles out Perotin's *quadrupla* or four-voice compositions for special praise, and he names two of them, *Viderunt* and *Sederunt,* along with several other works. All seven of the pieces attributed by Anonymous IV to Perotin can be located in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts, copies of the original *Magnus liber.*

Perotin's *quadrupla* are both settings of the Gradual, a chant from the Ordinary of the Mass in which a choral respond surrounds a psalm verse which is performed by a soloist. In these polyphonic settings the chant melody or tenor is sung complete: those portions of the chant that would have been sung by the choir (most of the respond, after the intonation of the first word or two, and the end of the verse) are sung in ordinary plainchant, while the soloist's material is greatly elaborated in rhythmically measured polyphony. Much of the time the tenor is held out in extremely long note values while the three newly-composed voices

move quickly above it; at other times the tenor moves at approximately the same rate of speed as the new voices.

Perotin's music may come as a revelation to modern listeners hearing it for the first time, an effect perhaps similar to that on the congregation of the faithful in Paris which was its first audience in the twelfth century. Three upper voices, their motion organized by repeating rhythmic cells called modes, dance above an endless drone. A single syllable is held for so long that a change of syllable becomes a dramatic event. Melodic motifs are exchanged between voices. The melodic patterns shift slowly, kaleidoscopically, in rising waves of tension and release generated by dissonance and consonance; the rhythmic units, too, are both balanced and gradually evolving. At last the chant changes to another note and a new cycle begins. By these means Perotin is able to take control of the listener's sense of the passage of time and hold one's rapt attention for as long as twelve minutes (measured by the clock—a measure that did not exist for most people in his day). Modern writers have likened Perotin's music to the best of twentieth-century minimalism, and, indeed, one of the inspirations for today's program was a performance I heard six years ago at Oberlin of Steve Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians.*

As Anonymous IV noted, Perotin also composed several conductus or non-liturgical songs with a text in Latin verse, usually on a serious or sacred subject. His monophonic *Beata viscera* sets a text by the Parisian cleric and poet, Philip the Chancellor (d. c. 1237), of which we perform the first and last two verses; the remainder are poisonously anti-Jewish, a bitter reminder of our human capacity for hatred. The first strophe of the poem paraphrases a Christmas responsory, while later lines interpret events that took place during the Israelites' forty years wandering in the desert as prefiguring the coming of Christ: "the nut of the mystical rod" is from Numbers 17:8 ("the rod of Aaron…brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds"); "water from a rock" refers to the way God provided Moses and his people with water in the wilderness (Exodus 17:1-6); and "the pillar leading the way" is God leading them after their escape from Egypt: "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire" (Exodus 14:21).

Seven works are attributed to Perotin by Anonymous IV, but the vast majority of medieval music is transmitted anonymously. It is undoubtedly perverse to sing a concert of those very few twelfth-century pieces to which we can attach a name—and equally perverse to sing not one but two *quadrupla,* which are the great exception in a repertoire consisting almost entirely of music for one, two, or three voices. We admit the perversity, but hope that you will appreciate the opportunity to compare *Viderunt* and *Sederunt.* These two masterpieces are at once similar in overall layout and in small-scale rhythmic palette, and worlds apart in musical and dramatic effect: where *Viderunt* is radiant and joyous, *Sederunt* ranges from ominously threatening to sweet and back. And we acknowledge in a small way the wonderful anonymous repertoire by performing the lovely three-voice conductus *Serena virginum.*

Why pair Perotin with Ockeghem? More perversity, no doubt; but perhaps there are more reasons than are obvious at first glance. Ockeghem's music, like Perotin's, may have the miraculous effect of tak-

ing hold of and altering our sense of time, and to do so Ockeghem, like Perotin, uses means both melodic and rhythmic (pitch and duration, the basic elements of music). His counterpoint spins out long melodies whose relationship to one another is not obvious—there are few unanimous cadences and few immediately noticeable points of imitation, although many subtle instances occur, almost hidden within the texture of the music. His rhythm, too, is complex and varied, oftentimes obscuring the music's organization into regular metrical units of two or three.

Ockeghem shares with Perotin in Western music's great tradition of basing polyphony on liturgical chant. His *Salve regina,* for example, paraphrases the chant melody of the Marian antiphon and places it, unusually, in the lowest voice. The *Missa Mi mi,* too, of which we sing the *Sanctus* and *Agnus dei,* refers to material in another piece, in this case Ockeghem's own chanson *Presque transi.* The relationships are subtle and diffused throughout the mass, pointing again to an aesthetic that placed a high value on subtlety and on hidden meanings. The work's title, transmitted in one of its three complete sources, seems to convey yet more hidden meanings, but the most likely one seems to be a reference to the solmisation (the note names of the medieval scale) of the final *(e mi)* and fifth above it *(b mi)* in the fourth mode; and indeed, another source calls the mass simply the *Missa Quarti toni* or Mass in the fourth mode.

I would like to express my particular thanks to Matthew Peattie, who has had more subtle effect than he may realise on the course of my life, and with whom I enjoyed singing *Sederunt principes* for the first time.

—Scott Metcalfe