

Ockeghem, Busnoys, Regis, Caron & Faugues

A month ago we inaugurated Ockeghem@600, a long-term project to perform all the surviving music of Johannes Ockeghem, with a program that explored the relationship between Ockeghem and the two most famous composers of the previous generation, Guillaume Du Fay and, especially, Gilles Binchois. That program suggested the kind of approach Blue Heron will take in Ockeghem@600—not a chronological march through the complete works of a single composer (which would be impossible with Ockeghem anyway, since we don't know when most of his music was composed), but rather a survey of the entire landscape of music in Europe from the perspective of one musician's work, extending our gaze about a generation before and after. By the time we wrap up the series around 2020, in time to commemorate Ockeghem's 600th birthday, more or less (he was born circa 1420), we should all have a better sense of the musical world Ockeghem shared with other composers from one end of the fifteenth century to the other.

Today we will hear Ockeghem as the first in a company of five composers whom the theorist and composer Johannes Tinctoris praised as the most accomplished practitioners of modern musical art.

At this time...the possibilities of our music have been so marvelously increased that there appears to be a new art, if I may so call it, whose fount and origin is held to be among the English, of whom Dunstable stood forth as chief. Contemporary with him in France were Dufay and Binchoys, to whom directly succeeded the moderns Ockeghem, Busnoys, Regis and Caron, who are the most excellent of all the composers I ever heard. Nor can the English, who are popularly said to jubilate while the French sing, stand comparison with them. For the French contrive music in the newest manner for the new times, while the English continue to use one and the same style of composition, which shows a wretched poverty of invention.

Johannes Tinctoris, *Proportionale musices* (1472-3)

Although it seems beyond belief, there does not exist a single piece of music, not composed within the last forty years, that is regarded by the learned as worth hearing. Yet 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.

Johannes Tinctoris, *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477) [translations slightly modified from Oliver Strunk]

Sean Gallagher has dubbed Tinctoris's group of five moderns the "Tinctoris Five."

Tinctoris's Five belonged to a community of singers born, trained, and for the most part employed in a relatively small area of northern France and the southern part of the Low Countries. Some were friends, some were colleagues, some were rivals; Tinctoris, at least, felt as free to criticise their music as praise it. But it was a relatively small circle of musicians who were able to compose polyphonic music, and there are a number of sources in which we can see that they regarded themselves, accurately enough, as something of a select society. One such document is a motet by Loyset Compère, *Omnium bonorum plena*, written not long before Du Fay's death in 1474, whose text (by Compère himself?) includes the Five among singers for whom the Virgin Mary is requested to intercede:

...pour forth prayers to your son
for the salvation of those who sing.
And first of all for G. Dufay
(for whose sake hear me, mother),
moon of all music
and light of singers;
for Joh. Dusart, Busnoys, Caron,
masters of songs;
Georget de Brelles, Tinctoris,
cymbals of your glory;
and Ockeghem, Des Pres, Corbet,
Hemart, Faugues, and Molinet,
and Regis too and all
who sing, and for me,
Loyset Compère, praying
with a pure heart for these masters...

A later list, in Guillaume Crétin's *Déploration* on the death of Ockeghem, of singers performing the music of Ockeghem in Heaven, includes Du Fay, Binchois, Dunstable, Regis, Busnoys, and "more than twenty others."

Besides hailing its "sweetness," a term of unspecific approbation that could be applied as well to a courtly lady as to a piece of music, Tinctoris praised the music of the Five and their musical father Du Fay for its *varietas*.

The eighth and last rule [of composition] 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 cadence, now by another; now by one harmonic interval, now by another; now by one melodic interval, now by another; now with suspensions, now without; now with imitation, now without; now with pauses, now without; now florid, now plain. Nevertheless, the highest reason must be adhered to in all these...

Every composed work, therefore, must be diverse in its quality and quantity, just as an infinite number of works show, works brought out, not only by me, but also by innumerable composers flourishing in the present age. For more and other varieties exist in the masses *L'homme armé* by Guillelmus Dufay and *Vinus* by G. Fauges, than in the motets *Clangat* by Johannes Regis and *Congaudebant* by Anthonius Busnois, and more and other in these motets than in the songs *Ma maistresse* by Johannes Okeghem and *La Tridaine a deux* by Firminus Caron.

Liber de arte contrapuncti, bk. 3, ch. 8 (trans. after Albert Seay)

Varietas, a concept developed by classical rhetoricians, was applied by humanist theorists to other disciplines. "In food and music novelty and abundance please," wrote Leon Battista Alberti in *De pictura* (1435-6): abundance ought to be embellished by a variety of ideas and of expression. Gallagher interprets Tinctoris's musical *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,” while Alexis Luko finds specifically technical meaning in Tinctoris’s references to harmonic and melodic intervals, cadences, suspensions, and imitations.

Another sort of variety may be heard in the different sonic worlds created in the works on this program, and here we touch on one of the many mysteries of fifteenth-century music, one but dimly understood nowadays. A normative scoring for a piece of music in four parts composed around the middle of the century comprises a top part or superius generally sung by an adult male using falsetto; a tenor part sung by a man of ordinary range, neither too high nor too low; and two contratenors or parts written “against the tenor,” one *bassus* or low, the other *altus* or high—the former sung by a bass, the latter by a high tenor. Something like this distribution seems to be what is needed for Ockeghem’s *Salve regina*, in which the plainchant melody is lightly decorated and assigned to the lowest voice, and for the anonymously transmitted *O pulcherrima mulierum / Girum celi circuivi*, which Sean Gallagher has convincingly argued was composed by Antoine Busnoys for the wedding in July 1468 of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, and Margaret of York. (Three voices honor the bride with verses from the Song of Songs, while the tenor’s text from Ecclesiasticus celebrates the groom.) The same division into four voice types is reflected in an item from the Burgundian court ordinances of January 1, 1469, not long after Charles ascended the ducal throne: “For singing polyphony there shall be at least six high voices, three tenors, three *basses contres* and two *moiens [contres]*...” But the more one performs music from these years, the more one begins to feel that the idea of a standard distribution is an illusion. As Tinctoris said, Ockeghem, Regis, Busnoys and their contemporaries were creating a “new art” and each piece offered an opportunity to play against whatever norms may have existed, seeking *varietas* in sonority as well as in contrapuntal techniques and compositional strategies. These composers create strikingly different kinds of sonority, as this small sample of their music demonstrates—none better than Ockeghem, who towards the end of his *Salve regina* sets the exclamations “O pia, O dulcis” to some of the most ravishing passages of music written in the fifteenth century.

In the absence of a fixed pitch standard, it is not always possible to determine what sort of voices the composer had in mind. Take Faugues’s *Missa Vinnus vina*, for example. The Mass is written

with an unusual signature in an odd combination of clefs, and the overall compass is only two octaves and a third, several steps smaller than average. The superius part tends to lie very low and the lower contra part rather high—their lowest notes are only a fifth apart—but each spans a wide range, of an octave and a fifth or sixth, as does the high contratenor, while the tenor is restricted to a slow-moving cantus firmus spanning a mere fifth. All this suggests a vocal scoring other than the four-type “norm,” and one might choose either one falsettist and a variety of higher and lower tenors, or, transposing the piece a fourth downwards from its nominal written pitch, assign a higher tenor to the top part and baritones or basses to the lower. We have chosen the latter strategy, which produces a wonderfully rich sound, but I am not at all sure it is what Faugues imagined. Our scoring for *Clangat plebs* is similar, with a tenor on the superius and a low bass on the bottom—but here the overall compass is a more usual two octaves and a fifth and the entire written range is low, and it may be that Regis intended the singers to transpose the piece *up*. The situation for *O pulcherrima mulierum* is clearer: the motet is written in a set of high clefs that surely require the singers to transpose it down a fourth, bringing it into our supposed “normal” range and its associated four-part scoring, which you will hear this evening. (The practice of transposing high-clef music down, at least, is unambiguously documented—but not until the middle of the next century and later.)

As for the songs, we don’t even have definitive answers for such basic questions as whether the composer intended the lower parts to be sung or played on an instrument, or if, if they are sung, whether the singers should sing text or simply vocalise. It seems safe to say that the top part of a song, under which the scribe will normally have written the first stanza of the lyrics, should be sung with text (unless the piece is to be performed by instruments alone), but the sources do not usually help us to work out which syllables ought to be sung to which notes, and in this period the melodies crafted by composers often do not seem to have a clear relationship to the words they are meant to carry. The job of deciding is left to the singer in a process which Warwick Edwards has usefully described as “syllable deployment” rather than “text underlay.”

Sometimes the verbal text itself is in question. The Latin of *Clangat plebs* is a grammarian’s nightmare, as Leofranc Holford-Strevens has shown, mixed up out of errors perpetrated by an overambitious poet (probably Regis himself) and inaccuracies introduced by a copyist who was

highly skilled in music but not in Latin. (Holford-Strevens emended the text we are using.) A line or so of *O pulcherrima* is missing: at this point the scribe of the unique source simply threw up his hands and stopped writing words. (Sean Gallagher supplied the missing words from the Song.) In the case of Caron's song *Helas que pourra*, an early source preserves a different text, *Helas m'amour ma tresparfete amye*. In the absence of autograph sources, it can be a challenge to decide how to solve such problems.

If you are bewildered by all this, you may take comfort in the fact that we all are, to one degree or another. The evidence is fragmentary and resists easy interpretation, and our knowledge of fifteenth-century performance practices remains in a pretty rudimentary state. I hope that we will develop a clearer understanding of such things as we progress through this project.

In his talk before our last concert, Sean Gallagher made the point that the origin of all this music is local, written for a very specific group of singers that very likely included the composer himself. We can probably detect the presence of Ockeghem in the athletic *contratenor bassus* parts of his sacred music and some songs, and I imagine that in the *Missa Vinnus vina* we are encountering a particular four-man ensemble from Sainte-Chapelle in Bourges, where Faugues worked, in *Clangat plebs* we hear music conceived for five singers at the collegiate church of Saint-Vincent in Soignies, where Regis spent more than forty-five years, and in Caron's songs we meet musicians from his home town of Amiens.

One further mystery concerns the cantus firmus *Vinnus vina*, as the tenor is labelled in the sole source of the mass, a manuscript probably copied in Naples, far from Faugues. Neither *vinnus* nor *vinus* (as Tinctoris has it) nor *vina* is a word in Latin. The incipit apparently derives from a verse by the twelfth-century poet Hugo Primas of Orleans which is found in a fifteenth-century manuscript.

Datur in convivio vinus-vina-vinum.
Masculinum deficit, atque femininum,
Sed in neutro genere, vinum fit divinum.

At the banquet is served *vinus-vina-vinum*.
The masculine is not good enough, nor is the feminine.

But in the neuter, wine becomes divine.

The reference must be to the *sacrum convivium* of the eucharist. What this has to do with the simple tune which is repeated over and over again in the tenor of the mass, is anyone's guess.

—Scott Metcalfe