

Ockeghem and the English

This program is the fifth of thirteen in Blue Heron's multi-season survey of the complete works of Johannes Ockeghem, *Ockeghem@600*. As we study and perform Ockeghem's music, we are forming a distinct impression of his compositional character—curious, experimental, boldly asserting his superior craft vis-à-vis his models by surpassing their technical achievements, and stretching the theoretical systems of his time in ways that challenge our ability to find a definite solution. No two of his pieces sound quite the same or address formal problems in the same manner. As Fabrice Fitch observes in his study of the Masses, “most of them present a highly distinctive profile, determined by features peculiar to the one work alone. Thus, the soundscapes of individual works vary considerably, and the differences between them are often more obvious than their similarities.”

These tendencies are already obvious in the music of Ockeghem's younger years, including the *Missa Caput*, one of his earliest surviving works. Probably composed by around 1450, the Mass borrows its cantus firmus (the preexisting plainchant melody quoted by the tenor) and much of its structure from an anonymous English Mass that arrived on the continent perhaps a decade before. The technical innovations of the English work, in particular the way in which it handles the two lower lines of its four-voice contrapuntal texture, influenced a generation of French and Flemish composers. Ockeghem adopts the new manner of writing in four parts, but then ups the technical ante considerably by the daring and novel use to which he puts the cantus firmus.

The cantus firmus melody quotes a long melisma on the word “caput” from an antiphon sung during the foot-washing ceremony on Maundy Thursday in the Sarum rite. The Sarum antiphon is in the seventh mode, with a G final and no flat in its signature; the Caput melisma begins on a B-natural, ends on G, and features many prominent Bs and Es. The English Caput Mass places the plainchant melody in its traditional locus in the second-lowest voice, and unsurprisingly, the Mass, like its tenor, is in a sparkling G mode, featuring numerous G and C major triads. This is the normal situation in modal polyphony, in which the mode of a piece generally corresponds to

the mode of its tenor. The Gloria of the English Mass, performed on this program, conveys an excellent sense of the whole work—sunny, jazzy, energetic, seemingly uncomplicated, with the top two parts granted the lion’s share of melodic and rhythmic interest, the bottom two proceeding mostly in longer note values and together creating the harmonic framework.

Arrestingly strange in sound from its very opening measures, Ockeghem’s *Missa Caput* could hardly be more different in effect. Its young composer (probably less than 30 when he wrote the piece) takes the cantus firmus of the English Mass—not the plainchant itself, which he likely did not know, as it belongs to the insular Sarum repertoire—intact, including the rhythms devised by the English composer, but he directs that it be sung down an octave, where it becomes the lowest voice in the counterpoint. Now its numerous B-naturals, in order to function as the lowest note of a “perfect consonance” or stable harmony, require F-sharps a perfect fifth above them. This is unusual enough in fifteenth-century music, where sharps lie outside the gamut of “real music” and must be borrowed from the “imaginary” world of *musica ficta* (feigned or false music), and usually function as temporarily raised leading tones at cadences—F-sharp leading to G, for example. The greater oddity is that Ockeghem’s Mass is not oriented to a final of G, as is its cantus firmus, the *Caput melisma*, but to D, with F-naturals and B-flats in abundance. In short, the cantus firmus, which normally serves as the structural foundation of the counterpoint, is in a different mode or key than the music in which it is embedded, and the two modes conflict more often than they are compatible. The modal schizophrenia that results is obvious right from the outset, as the D-A sonority of the first measure is followed immediately by one on B with an F-sharp above it, which is in turn quickly succeeded by another D sonority, this time with an F natural in the topmost voice. Soon more F-sharps ensue, and it’s not long before a B-flat turns up, too. The Mass is rife with such harmonic contradictions from start to finish.

So things sound strange indeed—but we can’t be certain exactly *how* strange. The problem is that fifteenth-century musicians did not invariably specify in their written music how to inflect the notes of the scale, raising or lowering them a semitone by adding a flat or sharp, but left many such inflections implicit. The application of such chromatic alterations was governed by a

combination of theory, melodic convention, and custom. Singers were expected to solve these questions on the spot, and they didn't always agree how to resolve issues when observing one rule or custom creates a conflict with another. (An early sixteenth-century correspondence documents one such disagreement between musicians.) Such questions arise over and over again in Ockeghem's *Missa Caput*, and many commentators have expressed their perplexity over it, one writing that "the application of these alterations, which were taken for granted, presents difficulties without number,"¹ another describing the harmonic style of the Mass as "erratic and arbitrary."² Absent personal guidance from Ockeghem himself, it does not seem possible to arrive at a definitive solution to the puzzles posed by the piece and so, as Jaap van Benthem remarks in the preface to his edition of the *Missa Caput*, "We can be quite sure that any performance of the composition not supervised by the composer or someone acquainted with the composer's intentions must, even at the time, have been different from all others."

We make no claims to have discovered what Ockeghem would have wished (and our reading of the piece differs from van Benthem's, naturally), but we have attempted to conjure up a performance that a group of well-trained fifteenth-century singers might have produced from the surviving source material. And however the *Missa Caput* is realised in performance, it makes for compelling listening—mysterious, certainly, but hauntingly beautiful, sonorous, meditative, and fascinating, the extraordinary creation of an phenomenally gifted, skilled, and imaginative composer at the beginning of his career.

The contenance angloise

The English Caput Mass is but one of a large number of works by English musicians that crossed the Channel in the first half of the fifteenth century. According to contemporary witnesses, the style practiced by John Dunstaple and other insular composers had a profound effect on continental musicians. While it is far from clear exactly how and when English music and

¹ Charles van den Borren, *Études sur le quinzième siècle musical* (1941), p. 197.

² Manfred Bukofzer, "Caput: a liturgical-musical study," *Studies in medieval and Renaissance music* (1951), p. 287.

musicians exerted an influence across the Channel (aside from a few specific cases such as Ockeghem's *Missa Caput*), that they did seems undeniable, for English music of the fifteenth century is abundant in manuscripts from northern Italy and Germany.

In order to place Ockeghem's Mass in this context, our program offers a small sample of English music from across these years and includes English sacred music, an English song, and two French songs by English composers. The earliest piece is by one John Pyamour, who became a clerk in Henry V's Chapel Royal in the late 1410s and was commissioned to impress boy choristers and take them to the King in France. Preserved only in continental sources, *Quam pulcra es* is Pyamour's only known work. The text, from the Song of Songs, was also famously set by Dunstaple.

Next we turn to the music of Walter Frye. Presumably a near-contemporary of Ockeghem, Frye himself remains obscure and undocumented, but his works were extremely popular in continental Europe: the antiphon setting *Ave regina celorum* turns up in more than a dozen manuscripts, including a couple of chansonniers devoted primarily to secular music, in which it is the first item. The song *Tout a par moy* survives in ten sources, in one of which it is ascribed (unconvincingly) to Binchois.

Our last two songs come from the Burgundian court. The first, *Le souvenir de vous me tue*, is by Robert Morton, described in a document of late 1457 appointing him to the chapel of Philip the Good as "chappellain angloix"; absent the appellation, one would have assumed Morton was French. *Le souvenir*, one of his most famous songs, is poignant and ravishingly lovely. Finally, before turning back to the Sanctus and Agnus dei of Ockeghem's Caput Mass, we will hear a song by the most celebrated of all Burgundian court composers, Gilles de Bins, called Binchois, whose elegant style and perfectly balanced melodies established a standard to which all song composers of the fifteenth century might aspire. Whereas *Le souvenir* features a text in a female voice (revealed by adjectival endings), *Dueil angoisieux* sets a ballade by Christine de Pizan.

Binchois meets the eloquence of Christine's lament, perhaps written on the death of her husband, with music of simple, restrained, pathos.

—Scott Metcalfe