

Ma maistresse: Songs, masses & a motet for My Lady

Born in Saint Ghislain in the county of Hainaut (now in Belgium), probably around 1420, Johannes Ockeghem enters the historical record in 1443 as a *vicaire-chanteur* at the church of Our Lady in Antwerp, a modest appointment appropriate to a young professional singer. By 1446 he was working for Charles I, duke of Bourbon, and in 1451 he joined the chapel of Charles VII, king of France, whom he would serve for the rest of his career, residing mainly in Tours, where he held the prestigious and well-remunerated post of treasurer at the royal collegiate church of St-Martin. Ockeghem was esteemed by his contemporaries and successors as a master beyond compare, learned and skilled as both singer and composer, virtuous, generous, and kind. Johannes Tinctoris, in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* of 1477, placed him at the head of an exalted list of composers whose works exuded 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.

Upon Ockeghem's death on February 6, 1497, he was mourned by numerous musicians and poets. His surviving works include a dozen settings of the Ordinary of the Mass, a Requiem, four motets, and about two dozen songs.

Today we explore a complex of interrelated works which seems to have originated in a song by one Barbingant. Apparently undocumented in archival records, Barbingant is known to us by a small handful of ascriptions in musical sources from the 1460s and 1470s, including three French songs and one mass. The songs enjoyed considerable success: one (*L'omme banny de sa plaisance*) is found in no less than ten sources, while a phrase from another, *Au travail suis*,

appears to have provided words and music for the opening of Ockeghem's *Ma maistresse*, and Ockeghem took the song as a model for his *Missa Au travail suis*. *Au travail suis* was so highly regarded that one scribe ascribed it to Ockeghem himself. Modern scholarship has been divided on the question, but Barbingant's authorship seems most likely; the association of the song with Ockeghem's Mass may have provoked the ascription to the much more famous musician.

It is not absolutely certain whether Ockeghem's song borrowed its "Ma maistresse" figure from *Au travail suis* or if the loan went the other direction, but several points argue in favor of the former. For one thing, it seems to have been more common for the opening line of a later song to quote an internal line from another, rather than the reverse. (Busnoys's *En soustenant vostre querelle*, for example, takes its incipit from the last line of Binchois's indisputably earlier *De plus en plus*). What's more, *Ma maistresse* raises the stakes on *Au travail suis*, for where Barbingant sets his "Ma maistresse" motive in imitation at the octave, Ockeghem employs imitation at the fifth, a rather more difficult and, in the 1450s, rarer technical manoeuvre.

Songs & masses

Although the idea was not completely new, fifteenth-century composers absorbed 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.

Summa theologiae (Q. 1, art. 9), written 1265–74

The most obvious and most common analogy made available by courtly love was between the unattainable object of desire and Mary, and the virelai *Ma maistresse* provides an exquisite example. The poem merits a rubric like that given by the Burgundian court chronicler and poet, Jean Molinet, to his poem *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”). *Ma maistresse* speaks of a lady “perfect in good qualities, if ever a woman was, / She alone whose reputation and fame it is / To be without peer,” of the speaker’s urgent desire to see her and his hope for her pity. The song, written in the early 1450s 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 the Mass based on it—a Mass that, according to an allegorical interpretation, may have originally been intended for a Marian feast or 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 the 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.

No two of Ockeghem’s Masses sound quite the same or address formal problems in the same manner. As Fabrice Fitch observes, “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.” Indeed, the *Missa Au travail suis* presents a stark contrast with the *Missa Ma*

maistresse. The distinctive features of the former include its unusual scoring, with two lower parts moving in the same range, and two upper parts very close in range, and its brevity, which relates it to a *Missa brevis* tradition centered in Milan. The Mass maintains an ambiguous relationship to its model: after citing the song's tenor literally in the Kyrie, it then seems to abandon all reference to the song, aside from the head-motif of each Mass movement, which is drawn from the song's opening gesture. As so often with Ockeghem, there seems to be no explanation of these mysteries.

Credo sine nomine & *Cent mil escuz*

Although based throughout on plainchant and otherwise unrelated to *Au travail suis*, the *Credo sine nomine* does share material with the Credo of the *Missa Au travail* in one passage, that setting the words "Et incarnatus...et homo factus est." It is unclear which work quotes which, but the quotation of a Credo based entirely on chant in a freely-composed Mass based on song, or vice versa, is characteristic of Ockeghem, at once playful and serious, allusive, and densely layered.

Among the sacred works and elevated sentiments of the rest of the program, *Cent mil escuz* appears the odd one out. What is this decidedly mundane song—a hit composed by the memorably named Firminus Caron, praised by Tinctoris alongside Ockeghem, like Regis—doing in such company? The song's last phrase, setting the words "Aulcuneffoiz quant je pourroye," is a close match for the opening point of imitation of *Ma maitresse*, here extended to involve the third voice as well. The motivation for the musical reference is hard to see, but just possibly it was this feature that inspired a considerably bawdier poem found in a handful of slightly later sources. (Reader, I blush to print it, but such is the record of our past.)

La teneur de cent mille escuz
Et le dessus de ma maistresse
Je soubzhaitte pour prendre liesse
Et ne faire guerre que a culz

Avoir mes ennemis vaincuz

A hundred thousand escus in hand
and a position atop my mistress
is what I want for happiness,
and not making war except on asses.

To have vanquished my enemies

Just in case anyone has failed to perceive the reference to two songs, the author has underlined it with an obvious pun: the return to the refrain can easily be read as “But with Bacchus I would sing / The tenor of *Cent mille escus* / And the top part of *Ma maistresse*.”

A motet & a new songbook

Just two works on the program stand entirely outside the *Au travail suis* complex. We open the concert with the splendid and exuberant *Celsitonantis ave genitrix* by Ockeghem’s near-exact contemporary, Johannes Regis, a pioneer of the five-voice motet, perhaps the author of this motet’s rather over-ambitiously classicizing text (its numerous errors have been emended by Leofranc Holford-Strevens), and another one of Tinctoris’s five illustrious moderns. The other work unrelated to *Au travail suis* is the anonymous song *En attendant vostre venue*, but the song has more connections to our program, albeit subtle ones, than might appear. *En attendant* is found uniquely in a songbook that returned to light just three years ago, the first major rediscovery in the field of fifteenth-century song since before the Second World War. Now safely entrusted to the Alamire Foundation in Leuven, Belgium, and known as the Leuven Chansonnier, the songbook, probably copied in the 1470s in France, contains fifty songs, including *Au travail suis*, *Ma maistresse*, and *Cent mil escuz* (with a unique last strophe, which we sing in this concert). Many of the songs in the Leuven songbook are fifteenth-century top hits transmitted in numerous other manuscripts, though for some Leuven contains a unique reading. Even more exciting, there are also twelve songs that are unique to it, which have been wholly unknown until now. Among them, *En attendant* caught my eye because its fourth line, “Quant de vous seul je pers la veue,” is also the first line of a song by Ockeghem. Ockeghem, whom Jean Molinet’s lament *Nymphes des bois* describes as “doct” or learned, seems to have had a broad knowledge of the music and poetry of his contemporaries and forebears and was fond of referring to it in his own creations, as we find in *Ma maistresse* and the *Missa Au travail suis*, in songs such as *D’ung autre amer* and *Fors seullement*, both of which draw their first lines from Alain Chartier’s *Complainte*, and in other works, both sacred and secular. Today’s performance of *En attendant*, which is very likely

the first since the fifteenth century and certainly an American premiere, offers a small taste of the “new” repertoire in the Leuven Chansonnier, which has just been made public and has barely begun to be studied. Blue Heron plans to feature much more in future seasons.

As for Barbingant, whoever he was, he seems to have died before Ockeghem and ascended to heaven, where Guillaume Crétin’s *Déploration...sur le trépas de Jean Okeghem* records him among the choir of musicians who welcome Ockeghem by singing his works—including, among no less than three settings of the Ordinary and the Requiem, the *Missa Au travail suis*.

Son dict finy, tous instrumentz cesserent,
Et sur ce point les chantres commencerent.

La du Fay, le bon homme survint,
Bunoys aussi, et aultres plus de vingt,
Fede, Binchois, Barbingant et Doustable
Pasquin, Lannoy, Barizon tres notable:
Copin, Regis, Gille Joye et Constant.
Maint homme fut aupres d’eulx escoutant,
Car bon faisoit ouyr telle armonyne,
Aussi estoit la bende bien fournye.

Lors se chanta la messe de *My My*,
Au travail suis, et *Cujus vis toni*,
La messe aussi exquise et tres parfaicte
De *Requiem* par ledict deffunct faicte.

Their piece finished, all the instruments fell silent,
and at this moment the singers began.

There Du Fay, the worthy man, stepped forth,
Busnoys too, and others, more than twenty,
Fedé, Binchois, Barbingant, and Dunstaple,
Pasquin, Lannoy, the very famous Barizon,
Copin, Regis, Gille Joye, and Constant.
Many men were there listening to them,
for it was good to hear such harmony,
and the ensemble was well staffed, what’s more.

Then the *Missa My my* was sung,
Au travail suis, and *Cujus vis toni*,
and also the exquisite and most perfect
Requiem mass composed by the deceased.

Barbingant must have been pleased.

—Scott Metcalfe