

A Mass on whatever tone you please

During his lifetime, Johannes Ockeghem was esteemed as one of the greatest musicians in Europe, perhaps the very greatest. Writing in the 1470s, the theorist Johannes Tinctoris placed him at the head of a select group of modern composers whose works “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.” But within a generation his star had fallen and his music, at once astonishingly complex and enchantingly sensuous, had come to seem unpleasingly learned, overfull of compositional artifice. Most of his works had completely disappeared from view; the handful that remained known to a few savants were those whose incomparable technical virtuosity might still command respect, if not love.

Heinrich Glarean, writing in the middle of the sixteenth century, relegated Ockeghem (whom he knew as Okenheim, just one of the many versions of the composer’s name that may be found in early sources) to the status of a footnote to his ecstatic treatment of Josquin, the anointed master of the next generation. Glarean was nevertheless able to put his finger on the key to understanding the *Missa Cuiusvis toni*, one of the few works that preserved something of Ockeghem’s reputation fifty years after his death.

A somewhat older composer was Okenheim, also a Belgian, who is said to have excelled everyone in this skill [of writing canons]. Indeed, he is known to have composed a certain chattering song in 36 voices. We have not seen it. He was certainly admirable in invention and keenness of skill. He also loved the *catholica* in song, that is, songs composed so that they could be sung in many ways according to the will of the singers, yet so that the relationship of the harmony and the consonances would be observed no less...

This Okenheim composed a *Missa ad omnem Tonum* (for so he called it), although it is to be sung upon three solmisation syllables only, corresponding to the three species of fourth. No clef is placed at the beginning, but only a circle with a question mark indicating either a line or a space. We decided to present one Kyrie, so to speak, of this Mass, so that the reader may see that the tenor can begin on *ut*, *re*, or *mi*.

Heinrich Glarean, *Dodecachordon* (Basel, 1547), bk. 3, ch. XX, p. 454

The passage requires some explanation. First Glarean refers to Ockeghem’s skill at writing canons, mentioning a 36-voice canon which he has not seen. (Indeed, no such piece is known to

exist, although a motet for 36 voices is praised in the *Déploration* composed by Guillaume Crétin not long after Ockeghem's death.) He tells us that Ockeghem loved a type of music called a *catholikon* which might be sung in various ways (*modi*). (As an example he provides the song *Prenez sur moy*, a three-voice canon at the upper fourth in which each part sings in a different mode.) Then he describes the *Missa ad omnem Tonum* or "Mass on any tone"—the Mass transmitted in two late 15th-century sources as *Missa Cuiusvis toni* or "Mass on whatever tone you please."

Now, *tonus* or *tone* is one of those musical terms with a confusingly large number of meanings. According to Tinctoris (*Terminorum musicae diffinitorium*, c. 1494), "*Tonus* has four meanings. It may signify *coniunctio* [a melodic interval of a second], *discordantia* [a harmonic discord of a second], *intonatio* [i.e. the beginning of a melody], or *tropus* [a manner of singing, i.e. one of the modes]." Glarean makes it clear that he has the third meaning in mind, which Tinctoris subsequently clarifies: "*Tonus est cantus intonatio*: Tone is the beginning of a song." So the "tone" that establishes how the *Missa cuiusvis toni* will be sung is the first note of the song. Glarean specifies that he is referring the first note of the tenor part—the part traditionally regarded as the primary determinant of the mode of a polyphonic piece. Finally, Glarean notes that not every starting note is possible, but that the tone must be chosen from the three tones sung to the solmisation syllables *ut*, *re*, and *mi*, corresponding to the lowest note of each of the three fourth-species.

A fourth-species is a scale segment of four notes; there are three species of fourth which are distinguished by their internal structure of whole tones and semitone. (In this instance "tone" means melodic interval, Tinctoris's first definition.) Fifteenth-century musicians conceived these scale patterns in terms of the solmisation syllables *ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la*, the ancestors of our *do-re-mi*. Note that these syllables are not linked to a specific pitch or note, but rather tell you where the lone semitone occurs in the six-note pattern: *mi-fa* is always a semitone; the other steps are whole tones. Ascending from *ut* one sings the four notes *ut-re-mi-fa* following the interval pattern tone-tone-semitone, constituting the first species of fourth (C-D-E-F, for example, or G-A-B-C); the second species, starting from *re*, is *re-mi-fa-sol* in the pattern tone-semitone-tone (e.g. D-E-F-G); and the third, from *mi*, *mi-fa-sol-la*, semitone-tone-tone (e.g. E-F-G-A).

According to Glarean, although Ockeghem's Mass bears the title "on any tone," it should be sung on three tones only: "the tenor can begin on *ut*, *re*, or *mi*." In fact, all four parts of the Kyrie start on the same note, and the tenor also ends on the same note, which is the *final* or home sonority of the piece—in modern terms, its "key." And as far as Glarean was concerned, the three finals *ut*, *re*, and *mi* were the only possible finals for a piece of music: "Every song ends either on *re* or on *mi* or on *ut*," he says elsewhere in his book.

So the *Missa Cuiusvis toni* is a piece of music designed to work in three different "keys" built on the tones *ut*, *re*, or *mi*, using three different scales. Yes, three! Here is one way in which 15th-century harmony is richer than later systems. The harmonic system with which we are familiar uses basically two modes, major and minor, so labelled according to the type of third in the scale. But before the seventeenth century music could be written in three distinct modes (at least) which are characterized not just by the variety of the third degree, but by the intervallic pattern of the whole scale, including the possibility of a semitone above the final, where both major and minor scales have a whole tone. It is easiest to think of the three possible modes in which the *Missa Cuiusvis toni* might be sung as scales built on C, D, or E, using only the white notes of the piano.

A word of caution: this is not "transposition" in the modern sense, in which a piece is moved from one key to another, like C major to G major, changing the note names while maintaining the structure of the scale and the harmonies. In this case the note names and pitches are unspecified and, in fact, irrelevant: what changes is the pattern of intervals in the scale above the final.

A "Cuiusvis toni" scheme imposes severe technical constraints. Some harmonies that are possible in one mode are not possible in another. For example, a triad built on the fifth degree of the scale, which is extremely common in the modes on *ut* or *re*, is impossible in the mode on *mi*, for in *mi* the fifth above the fifth is diminished: that is, if your final *mi* is the note E, its fifth degree is the note B, and the fifth above that is F natural, making a diminished fifth. As a result, a cadence progressing from a triad on the fifth degree to a sonority on the final cannot be written in a "mass on any tone" and never occurs in the *Missa Cuiusvis toni*. One consequence of this

and other restrictions placed upon the harmony is that the music, because it must function in three drastically different modes, does not conform to the norms of any one of those modes, but inhabits its own strange world—and yet Ockeghem, as he so often does, manages to create music of arresting beauty while surmounting the most difficult technical challenges. Just one astonishing feature of the mass is that it sounds so utterly different in each mode that the uninitiated listener might never realise that she is hearing the same music, transformed by modal transposition.

It is perhaps not surprising that the *Missa Cuiusvis toni*, apparently an experiment without precedent, seems not to have inspired any imitators.

Ave rosa speciosa

We open the concert with an anonymous work transmitted only in the so-called Chigi Codex, a monumental manuscript volume copied around 1500 in the Burgundian Netherlands which is the principal extant source of Ockeghem's masses, as well as the motets of his contemporary Johannes Regis (c. 1425-1496). Those who have attended earlier concerts in our series Ockeghem@600 may well recall Regis as the composer of *Clangat plebs*, *Lauda Syon*, *Celsitonantis ave genitrix*, or *O admirabile commercium*, all motets for five voices notable for their irresistible forward momentum and brilliant, sonorous harmony. (Blue Heron has performed all but one of Regis's motets that survive complete; the last will feature in an upcoming program in the series and we plan to record them all along with Ockeghem's.) The six-voice *Ave rosa speciosa* has many features in common with motets ascribed to Regis, including its multiple texts, innovative use of tenor *cantus firmi* (here there are two tenors in canon), and carefully calculated deployment of its forces for the maximal effect in sonority and direction. It was surely written by a composer who knew Regis's music very well; many authors have wondered if it might be by Regis himself.

Songs

The remainder of the program consists of four songs. The first, Ockeghem's *Se vostre cuer*, survives in just two sources, one without any text and the other lacking all but the first strophe. Our friend and colleague Fabrice Fitch, a musicologist and composer now living in Scotland, has supplied the missing strophes so that we may sing this marvellous rondeau in its complete form.

Escu d'ennuy and *Donnez l'aumosne* are found uniquely in the Leuven Chansonnier, a small songbook, most likely copied in the Loire Valley in the 1470s, that was rediscovered in an auction in Brussels just four years ago and is now held by the Alamire Foundation in Leuven, Belgium. The texts of both are striking, *Escu d'ennuy* for its heraldic imagery, *Donnez l'aumosne* for its portrait of the lover as a pilgrim begging alms from his lady. The latter song lacks one short strophe, and again we are grateful to Fabrice Fitch for composing a most fitting substitute.

S'elle m'amera / Petite camusecte reveals a playful side of Ockeghem one might not have suspected from this most profound, serious, and skilled musician. Of course, Ockeghem's wit, like Bach's, is far from casually constructed, but is rather the product of some very clever counterpoint: note, for example, the imitative relationships between the three lower voices, singing the slightly risqué text about Robin and Marion and their stroll in to the woods, or the way the uppermost voice, singing the rondeau "S'elle m'amera," derives much of its melodic material from that of the lower three.

—Scott Metcalfe