

James Hooker

Prof. Durakoglu

History of Music I

17 November 2023

The Complex Simplicity of Ockeghem's *Missa Prolationem*

Music underwent one of its biggest periods of development during the 14th and 15th centuries in the time known as the Renaissance. During this period, ancient ideals from the old civilizations of Greece and Rome returned in full force. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press dramatically increased the preservation and accessibility of music throughout the world. This was furthered by the general increase in musical literacy and study throughout Europe, as well as the contributions of Ottaviano Petrucci, who invented the music printing press - this invention allowed scribes to rapidly replicate music notation. As for specific elements within music, counterpoint was the forefront technique of contemporary composers. Each voice began to be treated equally in the score. Long, melismatic lines started to be reduced into a more syllabic style in order to re-simplify the music of the liturgy, as well as accentuate the comprehensibility of lyrics. These characteristics can be seen most clearly in the works of Johannes Ockeghem, specifically *Missa Prolationem*.

Johannes Ockeghem was one of the most famous composers of the Renaissance period, alongside his contemporaries Jacob Obrecht and Josquin des Prez. Ockeghem (1410-1497) grew up in Flanders as a singer, composer, and chaplain at the cathedral of Notre Dame. He was appointed to the position of treasurer of the abbey by King Charles VII, which allowed him the privilege to travel with the king. With this, his fame grew. His surviving compositions include 10

complete masses, 9 motets, a lament, and 21 chansons. One of his most famous masses is *Missa Prolationem*, a mass for four voices. This piece is very representative of the Renaissance's music style, specifically with its use of imitative counterpoint. To demonstrate a linear equivalence among voices, composers of the time copied a phrase from one voice and placed it in another at a separate interval of time. This technique created impressions of familiarity throughout longer pieces like masses, which improved listener retention and enjoyment.

Ockeghem also followed the Renaissance trend of setting words with their correct declamation, reflecting the meaning of the words. In *Missa Prolationem*, the text is mostly syllabic or neumatic, following the rhythm of speech or text, which makes it much easier to be understood. In his writing, Ockeghem wrote all voice parts equivalently with the intent that no one voice could be singled out as the lead. This was another technique that allowed the text to be more easily understood, but it also led to a sometimes unpredictable treatment of melody and harmony. According to Sound Review's analysis on Ockeghem's masses, "the formal designs of the movements are rhythmically devised in conjunction with the melodic material by having the parts move at different rates of speed so that they are cleverly contrived into a series of double-cans. Thus, both melodic and rhythmic characteristics must be executed with synchronic precision within a highly restrictive compositional structure." Clearly, Ockeghem's *Missa Prolationem* is filled with all the complexities of Renaissance technique. Sound Review concludes that, "listening to the music alone will provide no overt sound clues to this structure—it is ironically simple from the perspective of the listener" which shows the complex beauty of Ockeghem's writing: vastly profound yet very accessible.

Following along with the score is a great way to listen to this piece and appreciate the complexities of Ockeghem's writing, while still enjoying the pleasant simplicity. The canonical

elements can be seen quite clearly, as phrases are traced, imitated, and reordered throughout the piece. Occasionally, segments of the piece comprise only two voices, or sometimes even only one. Breaking up the piece like this further accentuates the Renaissance's favoring of lyrical clarity and the simplification of masses. Personally, I find the single voice lines to be telling of the Renaissance ideal of humanism, which was a line of thinking that placed a high value on the individual and individual interests. Humanism's influence was most importantly emphasized in the never-before-seen fame that came to composers of the time. With the invention of the printing press, composers and their unique styles became well known throughout Europe. Ockeghem's take on humanism can be seen more literally in the single voice phrases of his music, which created an emphasis on individual performance. These moments show an interesting movement from the polyphonic, four-voice experiments with counterpoint that prevailed in Renaissance music to a more simplified expression - as well as demonstrating his uniqueness in the field. Perhaps Ockeghem's experimentations with one or two voice phrases were an inspiration for the popular music of today, where one singer is usually the foreground to a piece of music, with another voice or two harmonizing.

Ockeghem's *Missa Prolationem* is a stellar example of Renaissance music's main stylistic points such as an even treatment of voices, increased comprehensibility of lyrics, and imitative counterpoint. These elements all show a sophistication of the use of polyphony in music as composers grew more comfortable with complexities to the point of experimenting with a return to simplification. Ockeghem and his contemporaries were experts in the field and were certainly men of the time, fully diverging themselves in the concepts of humanism and rebirth in ancient tradition.

Works Cited

Durakoglu, Aysegol. "Early Renaissance Summary"

Grout, Burkholder, and Palisca. *A History of Western Music*, 10th Edition.

Sound Review. "The Complete Johannes Ockeghem Masses"

<http://www.echo.ucla.edu/sound-review-the-complete-johannes-ockeghem-masses/>