

Ockeghem's Canon *Deo Gratias* – an Experimental Interpretation

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Johannes Ockeghem's *Deo Gratias* Canon for thirty six voices has been highly disputed in the history of music. Some theoreticians refused to believe that Ockeghem had ever written such a canon (François-Joseph Fétis), others argued that although he composed it, the work was lost (Hugo Riemann). The last group (Laurance Feininger, Edward Lowinsky) identified Ockeghem's canon with an anonymous canon, *Deo Gratias* for thirty six voices, which was found in Petrejus's third volume of psalms dated 1542. A very important role in identifying the canon was played by the most famous Ockeghem researcher, Dragan Plamenac (1895-1983). He found in a French manuscript from 1537 in the Bibliotheque Nationale a poem written by Nicolle Le Vestu, which uses an argument of an unknown author, probably Guillaume Cretin. In the poem he mentions Ockeghem's "motet exquis, chef d'oeuvre de nature."¹ Moreover, Plamenac discovered that Vestu's poem was accompanied by a miniature showing Ockeghem and his chapel choir singing "Gloria in excelsis" from a choir book (Figure 1). These arguments are developed by Edward Lowinsky in an article: *Ockeghem's Canon for Thirty-six Voices: an Essay in Musical Iconography*.²

¹ Dragan Plamenac, *Autour d'Ockeghem*, [in:] *La Revue musicale*, 9/4-6, 1928, p. 38.

² Edward Lowinsky, *Ockeghem's Canon for Thirty-six Voices: An Essay in Musical Iconography*, [in:] Gustave Reese and Robert J. Snow (ed.) *Essays in Musicology in Honor of Dragan Plamenac*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 1969, p. 155-80.



Figure 1: A miniature showing Ockeghem and his chapel singers

According to Lowinsky “‘motet exquis’ was originally intended to present the heavenly concert of the angels.”³ The text of “Gloria in excelsis”, which Ockeghem and his choir sing in the miniature, has an angelic connotation as a chant of the angels on Christmas night according to St. Luke 2:14. The number of singers is nine, which stands also for the chanting of nine angelic choirs according to the most famous medieval theory by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and gradually developed by other authors. The first print of the canon in Petrejus’s psalm collection was made in 1542, where the composition bears the heading “Novem sunt musae” (Nine Muses). Lowinsky argues that, first of all, Ockeghem was not interested in any humanism and it was not his intention to give the canon such a title. The editor of Petrejus’s collection of psalms was Lutheran and because Ockeghem’s name stood directly for France and Ca-

³ Edward Lowinsky, *Ockeghem’s Canon for Thirty-six Voices*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

tholicism he changed the heading into Nine Muses. However, despite the nine muses, there is still a link with nine angelic choirs and nine muses in the treatises of Georgius Anselmus Parmensis and Franchino Gaffurio. Surprisingly, there are also nine angelic choirs on the cover page of *Musurgia universalis* (1650) by Athanasius Kircher, symbolized as the *Canon Angelicus 36 Vocum in 9 Choros Distributus* (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The cover page of Athanasius Kircher *Musurgia universalis* (1650)

Lowinsky continues that another problem is connected with the person of Sebastian Virdung who, in a letter dated 1504, described Ockeghem's canon as a motet for six voices with each voice being a canon for six parts which together constitutes thirty six voices. As Lowinsky claims, Virdung did not see any copy of the work and the possible number of voices was only imagined by him, since he wrote a letter to receive proper

copies of Ockeghem's three works. The final argument of Lowinsky which serves as proof of the authenticity of Ockeghem's canon is that Josquin's canon for twenty four parts *Qui habitat in adiutorio altissimi* may be an answer to Ockeghem's work. If the thirty-six voices canon stands for a vision of nine angelic choirs, Josquin's canon symbolizes twenty four elders standing before the immaculate Lamb.

The analysis of the thirty-six voice *Deo Gratias* reveals that it consists of four canons for nine voices: the first canon for nine sopranos, the second for nine altos, the third for nine tenors, and the last one for nine basses (Figure 3). All the canons can be performed together, although the most common method is to present each canon separately. There are also different performance practices in this field. In each canon one can observe the same progression of the two chords of F-major and C-major but the second chord seems to be the prolongation of F-major. As a result, the harmony of the work consists of the F-major chord shifted in different registers. It triggers an association with the technique of bell ringing, where there are four groups of bells: the smallest, medium sized, heavy, and heaviest. The comparison of all pitches from Ockeghem's canon with the F-major chord of bells: fundamental tone, tierce, quint, and nominal clearly show the similarities (Figure 4). Ockeghem was probably aware of this resemblance, since from 13th century the customary practice was to relate tower bells tonally.

The image shows the first canon of the piece. It begins with a large, ornate initial letter 'D' in a square frame. The musical notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The text 'E o gratia.' is written below the staff. The melody consists of a sequence of notes, including a triplet of eighth notes near the end.

The image shows the second canon of the piece. It begins with a large, ornate initial letter 'D' in a square frame. The musical notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The text 'Eo gratia.' is written below the staff. The melody consists of a sequence of notes, including a triplet of eighth notes near the end.



Figure 3: Four canons of *Deo Gratias* according to Petreius, *Tomus tertius psalmorum selectorum*, Nuremberg, 1542, no. 40

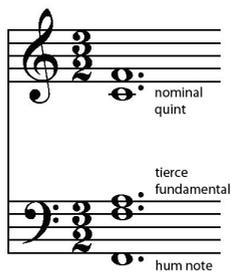


Figure 4: The most prominent partials of the common open bells

Is the similarity to bell ringing a kind of special sign which stands not only for a symbol of nine angelic choirs but also for something else? As Lowinsky argues, the canon “creates the sound likeness of the unity of angelic harmony... and to reproduce the aspect of never ending praise.”⁴ The question is, to whom is this angelic praise addressed? Is it possible to associate Ockeghem’s vision with any representation of angels in Flemish or French paintings of this time? To answer this question it is important to take a closer look at 15th century paintings featuring angelic concerts.

As Emanuel Winternitz proves in his article, the main topic of angelic concerts in the 15th century was the adoration of the Virgin and Child Jesus, and the Coronation of the Virgin.⁵ He reports that: “The crowned Virgin, enshrined by dense crowds of angels, is the visual embodiment of the very old theme – the lauding and adoring angel choirs in heaven.”⁶ Ockeghem, who was in service at the French court from 1453 till his death and much travelled as a diplomat, knew the tendencies in paintings and was well acquainted with the painters of his time: Zanobi Machiavelli (1418-1479), Geertgen tot Sint Jans (1465-1495), St. Lucy Legend (1480-1510). If the canon symbolizes nine angelic choirs, it can represent in music the topic of the adoration and coronation of the Virgin similarly to the paintings of that time (Figure 5). Ockeghem loved riddles, labyrinths, musical puzzles, enigmatic exercises (the best known examples are *Missa Cuiusvis Toni* and *Missa Prolationum*) and very often used numerology (most famously the combinations of numbers in his name and surname, which he used several times). Looking at the miniature showing Ockeghem and his fellows singing “Gloria in Excelsis,” it is clearly visible that the lectern is surmounted by two figures: the angel announcing the blessed tidings to Mary and the Virgin Mary herself (see Figure 1). Is it possible that Ockeghem’s music could follow this visual representation?

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵ Emanuel Winternitz, On Angel Concerts in the 15th Century: A Critical Approach to Realism and Symbolism in Sacred Painting, [in:] *The Musical Quarterly*, October 1963, p. 450-63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

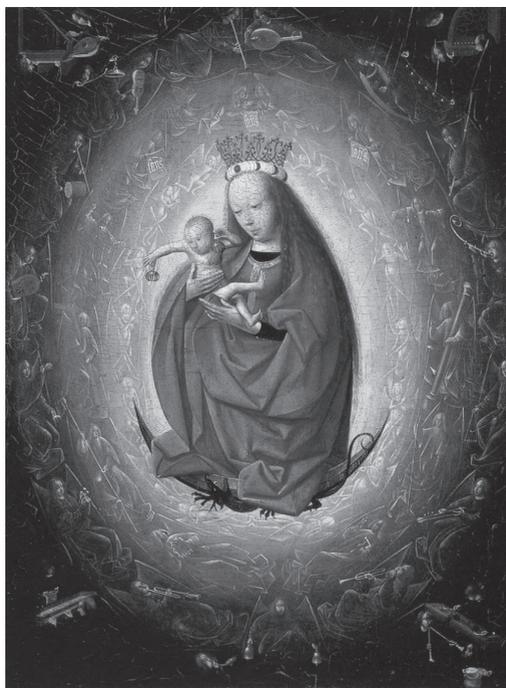


Figure 5: Geertgen tot Sint Jans (1465-1495) *The Glorification of Mary* (1480?)

Four canons recall the four groups of nine bells which praise the Holy Virgin Mary, but why didn't the composer use the text *Gloria in excelsis Deo* or *Ave Maria* but *Deo Gratias*? Otto Ursprung claims that the *Deo Gratias* canon was not destined for the church but for "[...] chamber music of general spiritual nature". The place in the miniature is not identified; it could be an interior of a church or an altar. According to *New Grove Music Encyclopaedia*, Ockeghem's canon was written in 1542 or 1568. In 1542 Ockeghem was among the seven singers in the Duke of Bourbon's service but it is also possible that he was among the *vicaires-chanteurs* at Notre-Dame in Antwerp. In 1568, however, he was in the service of Louis XI and became a canon at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. If he was born in 1410, in 1542 he would be 32 years old and in 1568 58 years old. In the aforementioned miniature, Ockeghem is portrayed as a rather old

man in glasses, so he cannot be 32. Certainly, the picture could have been painted later than the piece was composed, but it is doubtful whether this could happen 20 years later. Strangely, the cathedral in Paris is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, just like the topic of Ockeghem's canon according to the hypothesis presented in this article. If this is true, the composition was probably written for this cathedral and as the text of *Deo Gratias* points out at the end of the mass, for a festive Marian mass, perhaps commemorating the consecration or foundation of the cathedral or a new Marian feast. The commission of the canon could be also connected with King Louis XI. In 1472 Louis XI ordered the prayer angelus to be said three times daily. However, Ockeghem was not in this year a canon of Cathedral Notre-Dame. He was in the service of the king and could write a special decorative work for such an occasion. If all Ockeghem's motets are devoted to the Virgin Mary, it is almost certain that *Deo Gratias* could fulfil its function in Marian liturgy. Unfortunately, at the present stage of research about Ockeghem's work this is only a hypothetical interpretation, which is impossible to prove.

Bibliographical references

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