



(LEMS 8029)

JOHANNES OCKEGHEM
Missa De plus en plus
Missa Fors seulement

SCHOLA DISCANTUS
Director: Kevin Moll

NOTES BY KEVIN MOLL

This disc presents two significant creations of the Flemish composer Johannes Ockeghem (1497), the 500th commemoration of whose death is observed this year. Ockeghem was far and away the most renowned musician of his generation, and this stature was confirmed by his professional station: he served for over 40 years as first chaplain to the kings of France. In the music theory treatises of the following centuries Ockeghem's name resounds as a shadowy but highly respected figure, although this reputation was founded merely upon a few myths attesting to his standing as a pedagogue and contrapuntal virtuoso rather than on a critical appraisal of his surviving works, most of which languished in total obscurity from the 16th century through the 19th. Indeed, the substance of his music was all but unknown until

the first publication of the *Missa Caput* in 1912 and, more especially, the appearance in 1927 of the first volume of his masses edited by Dragan Plamenac. Due to a variety of reasons his oeuvre is still not nearly as well known as it should be, and this is a pity, for he undeniably produced some of the most exalted music ever written. Each of the two masses recorded here is found in the so-called Chigi codex (Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS C. VIII. 234), a manuscript transmitting most of the sacred output that musicologists can attribute securely to Ockeghem. The *Missa Fors seulement* is found only in that source, whereas the *Missa De plus en plus* exists also in another Vatican codex, Cappella Sistina 14. Both masses are based on preexistent secular songs, yet in many respects they could hardly be more dissimilar in their aural effect. (It should be kept in mind, of course, that the various movements are really intended for performance within a liturgical context, i.e., in alteration with a plainchant setting of the Mass Proper.)

The four-voice *Missa De Plus en plus* is one of Ockeghem's most affecting compositions. It is evidently a middle-period work, characterized by the fourth voice (nominally called bassus, but also designated in various movements as "contra secundus" or "tenor bassus") being thoroughly integrated into the polyphonic texture. The counterpoint is constructed around a tenor cantus firmus taken from a rondeau of the composer Gilles Binchois (1460), who may have been Ockeghem's teacher. This cantus is treated rather freely in that its phrases are often presented non-literally and with considerable embellishment; the many passages in which the tenor is silent for long stretches are presumably freely composed. In his biography of the composer, Ernst Krenek described Ockeghem's expansive compositional style in terms that particularly apply to the *Missa De plus en plus*: "Whenever some of the wide-arched melodic strands seem to have run out of their unbelievable energy, and to be approaching a resting point, new ones, generated imperceptibly just before that point is reached, manifest themselves, and the musical process is tirelessly carried forth over another extended area. It is as if a very long bridge were to be built without pillars; each time a span was completed, at a point where a supporting pillar would normally be required, some miraculous engineering device would cause another span to issue from it, and thus the process would continue until the opposite shore was reached" (from Johannes Ockeghem, London: Sheed & Ward, 1953). The *Missa Fors seulement*, on the other hand, is an extremely personal and deeply mystical creation. It is written for five voices, utilizing melodic material from one of Ockeghem's own chansons. It consists of only three movements, since neither *Sanctus* nor *Agnus* is transmitted in the source. The polyphonic texture in this mass is extremely variegated, with every possible combination of voices

sounding at some time in the piece. The cycle is also remarkable for its overall low register - an effect greatly magnified by the presence of a second bassus part, which is notated partially in the unusual Gamma clef, and which descends to C below the bass clef. (As the composer was renowned for his low bass voice, it is likely that he performed this part himself.) The foregoing characteristics, combined with the fact that the part writing is at times very dense, distinguish this mass cycle as a relatively early, and quite individualistic, attempt to achieve a truly integrated five-voice conception in polyphony. The cantus-firmus procedures used in the cycle are significant as well in that they often present preexistent material in two voices simultaneously, thus foreshadowing the "parody" techniques that became common currency in the polyphonic masses of the 16th century. All these stylistic attributes mark the Missa Fors seulement as one of Ockeghem's latest works; it was probably written no earlier than about 1480.

Both of the masses just discussed present grave problems of performance and interpretation. To begin with, the almost unrelievedly exposed character of the music and the many rhythmically taxing passages demand that nothing less than virtuoso singers be used. Secondly, the problems of *musica ficta* (application of unwritten accidentals) are extremely difficult to solve, since the part writing manifests countless subtle incongruities of pitch, leading to an overall sense of indeterminacy that is seemingly impossible to address in a systematic manner. Thirdly, one of the greatest challenges is to achieve a convincing balance and blend of voices, particularly in the Missa Fors seulement, due to the constant, kaleidoscopic shifting of texture.

Notwithstanding the relative lack of recognition he receives today, Ockeghem was without question one of the most original composers of all time, and every one of his surviving works is stamped by an uncompromising artistic integrity. He was, quite simply, a spiritual visionary whose medium of communication was polyphony. The austere majesty of the two compositions offered on this disc is of a character that exceeds mere beauty - it moves the listener into the realm of the truly transcendent.

KEVIN N. MOLL c1997

MISSA DE PLUS EN PLUS (a 4)

- | | |
|-------------|------|
| 1 Kyrie | 2:59 |
| 2 Gloria | 8:23 |
| 3 Credo | 9:38 |
| 4 Sanctus | 9:44 |
| 5 Agnus Dei | 5:42 |

MISSA FORS SEULEMENT (a 5)

6 Kyrie 3:02

7 Gloria 5:29

8 Credo 8:17

Total Duration: 53:15

[Discantus] Noel Bisson, Vaughan Howells, Eleanor Kelley

Contratenor John Delorey, Arthur Rawding

Tenor William Hite

Bassus (1) Glenn Billingsley

Bassus (2) David Ripley (Missa Fors seulement only)

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SCHOLA DISCANTUS

Schola Discantus specializes in historically informed performances of Franco-Flemish polyphony from the Ars nova and early Renaissance eras (1320-1500). In the 20th century, musicologists have unlocked the technical secrets of this music, thus allowing it to be performed again after lapse of over half millennium. Although many great works are still rarely heard in modern times, it has become clear that in the 14th and 15th centuries music achieved an aesthetic level fully equal to that attained by other art forms of the time. Indeed, for sheer purity and beauty, this late medieval repertoire of vocal polyphony is unsurpassed in the entire literature of music, and it is no coincidence that its creators are exact contemporaries of the likes of Chaucer, Erasmus, Donatello, Brunelleschi, the van Eycks, Botticelli, and Leonardo da Vinci.

CREDITS - Cantemus praeclara oblitaque

Produced by Kevin N. Moll for TRIVIUM PRODUCTIONS

Cover Illustration: Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), "St. John the Baptist" (detail), Used by Permission of the Musee du Louvre, Paris

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Goldhirsch/Digitally edited on Dyaxis System at CCRMA Studios, Stanford University

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