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# A Survey of Choral Music

*Homer Ulrich*



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THE HARBRACE HISTORY OF MUSICAL FORMS



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—Karl Geiringer

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# A Survey of Choral Music

*Homer Ulrich*

*University of Maryland*

THE HARBRACE HISTORY OF MUSICAL FORMS  
Under the General Editorship of Karl Geiringer  
University of California, Santa Barbara



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## Preface

Choral music constitutes one of the oldest genres of music literature. Well established about a century before opera was invented, it reached a high point of development well before chamber music and symphonic music emerged as independent genres, and during its long history it has occupied the attention of countless composers, the great majority of them in the service of the Church.

Since no single book can possibly account for every work in this vast field, the choice of works to be examined and discussed has had to be highly selective. Works that represent historical or stylistic turning points have therefore been emphasized, even when this has meant discussing certain forgotten compositions in detail. On occasion it has been necessary to resort to large general statements covering the music of individual composers or even of extended time spans. An attempt has been made to do justice to the monuments of the literature, within the limits of a small volume. And above all, the main purpose has been to write a connected account embracing the historical evolution and stylistic characteristics of the principal forms of choral music.

The discussion of the various works is partly historical, partly analytical, but always descriptive. Musical structure, text sources and treatment, and kinds of texture loom large in the account. Certain sacred texts are referred to often, and for that reason the principal texts employed in choral music—Mass, Requiem, Magnificat, and the like—are given in the Appendices. In the interest of avoiding ambiguity, the word “choir” has been used consistently in referring to a performing group and “chorus” when speaking of a musical form or setting.

This book was begun during a sabbatical-year leave of absence, spent mainly

in Italy. I am grateful to the administrative officers of the University of Maryland who made that leave possible—particularly to Dr. Charles Manning and Dr. R. Lee Hornbake. And to Miriam, who holds the most difficult of all jobs—that of an author's wife—I owe more than a word of thanks; in fact, I owe her this book.

*Homer Ulrich*

# Table of Contents

Preface	v
1 Introduction	1
<i>The Mass</i>	2
<i>Techniques</i>	3
<i>Composers</i>	4
<i>Motet</i>	6
<i>English Discant and Fauxbourdon</i>	7
<i>Chanson</i>	9
<i>The Emergence of Choral Performance</i>	9
2 Music in the North, 1450–1525	13
<i>The Renaissance</i>	13
<i>Mass</i>	14
<i>Motet</i>	23
3 Music for the Catholic Church, 1525–1600	30
<i>Mass</i>	30
<i>Motet</i>	38
<i>Venetian Motet</i>	44
<i>Motet in England and Germany</i>	47
4 Music for the Protestant and Anglican Churches, 1525–1625	49
<i>Chorale and Chorale Motet</i>	50
<i>Calvinist Psalm Settings</i>	52
<i>Anthem</i>	52
5 Secular Music, 1450–1600	57
<i>Chanson</i>	58
<i>Madrigal</i>	60

<b>6</b>	<b>Music of the Early Baroque, 1600–1675</b>	<b>66</b>
	<i>Mass</i>	70
	<i>Motet</i>	73
	<i>Other Forms</i>	78
	<i>Oratorio</i>	80
	<i>Passion</i>	81
	<i>Continuo Madrigal</i>	86
<b>7</b>	<b>Music of the Late Baroque, 1675–1750</b>	<b>88</b>
	<i>Motet</i>	88
	<i>Te Deum</i>	93
	<i>Magnificat</i>	96
	<i>Anthem</i>	98
	<i>Cantata</i>	100
	<i>Mass</i>	102
	<i>Passion</i>	107
	<i>Oratorio</i>	110
<b>8</b>	<b>Pre-Classical and Classical Music, 1725–1825</b>	<b>117</b>
	<i>Mass</i>	118
	<i>Requiem Mass</i>	131
	<i>Oratorio</i>	136
	<i>Other Works</i>	139
<b>9</b>	<b>Early Romantic Music, 1825–1860</b>	<b>145</b>
	<i>Mass</i>	146
	<i>Requiem Mass</i>	152
	<i>Oratorio</i>	154
	<i>Other Works</i>	160
<b>10</b>	<b>Late Romantic Music, 1860–1900</b>	<b>164</b>
	<i>Mass</i>	164
	<i>Requiem Mass</i>	167
	<i>A German Requiem</i>	173
	<i>Oratorio</i>	174
	<i>Cantata</i>	176
	<i>Other Works</i>	178
	<i>Choral Symphony</i>	181



<b>11</b>	<b>Music of the Twentieth Century</b>	<b>183</b>
	<i>Mass</i>	184
	<i>Requiem</i>	188
	<i>Psalm Settings</i>	190
	<i>Te Deum</i>	192
	<i>Other Sacred Text Settings</i>	193
	<i>Oratorio</i>	195
	<i>Cantata and Related Forms</i>	201
	<i>Other Forms</i>	208
	<i>Orchestral Works with Choir</i>	214
	 Appendix 1: Glossary	 215
	Appendix 2a: The Ordinary of the Mass	219
	Appendix 2b: Missa pro defunctis (Requiem Mass)	221
	Appendix 2c: Te Deum	225
	Appendix 2d: Sequence: Stabat Mater	227
	Appendix 2e: Magnificat	229
	A Selected Bibliography	230
	Music Sources	233
	Index	237

# 1

## Introduction

Choral music may be defined as music written in parts designed to be performed with several voices on each part. It is a product of the mid-fifteenth century; during its long history the number of parts for which it was written has varied from two to a dozen or more, and the number of voices required for each part has been similarly unstandardized. Many works in the choral literature can be performed adequately with eight to twelve voices, while others may require two hundred or more to make their fullest effect. Music has been written for choirs of women's, boys', and men's voices, and for choirs of mixed voices. Further, works for several choirs exist; in such cases each choir may perform individually at times and become part of the total ensemble at others. In many works the music is meant to be heard only with voices; others require instrumental accompaniment—sometimes as elaborate as a large orchestra; in still others, accompaniment is optional.

Much of the choral literature is sacred in function, written to be sung in a service of worship. Many other works are secular (that is, "worldly") in text and function and may be considered purely concert music. And a few, sacred in intent, go so far beyond the practicable limitations of a church service that perforce they can be heard only in concert. Among the secular works are many that lie on the border between choral music and vocal chamber music—that is, music with one, or at the most two, singers on each part; yet many of these works are suitable for performance with small groups and hence may be considered choral music. Such works, especially madrigals, will therefore be included in this book.

A large number of choral works are cast in forms that originated even before choral music itself came into being—notably the Mass and the motet. These forms

owe their texts and, in part, their function to the body of liturgical music that has served the Roman Catholic Church for almost two thousand years, the monophonic plainsong called Gregorian chant. The structures and the techniques of composition that underlie the Mass and motet are in turn outgrowths of the polyphonic elaborations of Gregorian chant that occupied composers from about the eleventh century to the fifteenth. Thus, while a discussion of choral music itself can be carried back scarcely more than four hundred years, its roots in the history of western music are ancient indeed.

We shall offer here, therefore, a brief survey of the state of music in the centuries just before 1450, a date that may be taken as roughly marking the beginning of both polyphonic choral singing and the Renaissance period in music history. The emergence of the principal forms of choral music; a survey of prominent pre-Renaissance composers writing in these forms; the chief techniques of composition they employed; the way in which choral performance came about—these topics are the chief items in the following survey.

## *The Mass*

The repertoire of Gregorian chant consists of thousands of unmetrical monophonic melodies set to sacred texts and divided into classes according to their place and function in the liturgy. The chants of the Mass constitute one such class and the chants of the Offices (Matins, Lauds, Prime, Vespers, etc.) another. The chants are further distinguished according to method of performance: responsorial or antiphonal (see page 9). This book, however, concerns itself primarily with the chants of the Mass and to a small extent with those of the Office of Vespers.

The Mass, the central service of the Catholic worship, celebrates the Eucharist, in which the elements of bread and wine are mystically transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The chants of the Mass comprise two groups. One group consists of texts proper to (assigned to) a particular season of the Church year, or a particular Sunday or festival; thus these texts are variable. This group includes the Introit, Gradual, Offertory, and Communion; together these chants are embraced in the term “Proper of the Mass.” The other group consists of chants that are unchanging and are sung throughout large portions of the Church year—a notable exception being that during Lent the joyful Gloria is omitted; this unvarying group of chants constitutes the “Ordinary of the Mass.” Other items of the Mass, including the various Collects, Prayers, Epistle, and Gospel, similarly divided into Proper and Ordinary, are spoken and play no part in a consideration of the Mass as a musical service.

Before the fifteenth century, single chants of the Ordinary were often set in polyphonic style for an ensemble of vocal soloists; since that time composers have often turned to the same chants and composed settings for choir. It is to this group of texts of the Ordinary—Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus with Bene-

dictus, and Agnus Dei—that we refer when speaking of the Mass in a musical context. The Mass in this restricted sense is one of the principal forms we shall consider in this book (see Appendix 2a for the texts).

### Requiem Mass

A special form of the Mass, represented by many outstanding settings from the sixteenth century on, is the *Missa pro defunctis* (Mass for the Dead). In this form certain chants of the Proper are made invariable, and are grouped with selected chants of the Ordinary in the following order: Introit, Kyrie, Gradual, Sequence, Offertory, Sanctus with Benedictus, Agnus Dei, and Communion (see Appendix 2b). The generally used name of the form is derived from the first words of the Introit: *Requiem aeternam* (“Eternal rest”).

## Techniques

### Isorhythm

The most available sourcebook of Gregorian plainsong is the *Liber usualis*. In that book the chants of the Ordinary are grouped by texts: a number of Kyries, a number of Glorias, and so on. Those responsible for selecting the music for a particular service were free to choose from a variety of melodies for each part of the Ordinary. Given this latitude, and given the variety of melodic types available, any musical unity in the Ordinary is not to be looked for. Beginning in the late fourteenth century, composers sought to bring about a higher level of unity in their polyphonic settings of the chants. One of the techniques they developed to achieve this unity was later called *isorhythm* (Greek *iso*: “same”).

Composers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had made considerable use of rhythmic patterns, especially in the short compositions called *clausulae*. A *clausula* consisted of a phrase or more of plainsong above which one or two untexted voices had been added. Usually the plainsong melody was modified and became a series of long-drawn-out tones, each tone held beyond normal length; hence this voice was called the *tenor* (compare “tenant,” “tenure,” “*tenuto*,” etc.). The rhythmic patterns of the upper voices consisted of various combinations of long and short tones; often one such combination, called a rhythmic mode, would prevail throughout a composition. During the course of the fourteenth century an extension of that principle applied mainly to the tenor resulted in the isorhythmic technique.

The effect of isorhythm was to impart a degree of organization and unity to the somewhat amorphous compositions employing borrowed tenors. Many Mass movements of the early fourteenth century employed the device of isorhythm, and occasionally it was applied to other voices than the tenor. Isorhythm remained a potent means of unifying compositions until about the middle of the fifteenth century, after which it became virtually obsolete.

## Cantus firmus

Another technique for unifying an extended composition developed under the name *cantus firmus* (“fixed melody”). The unifying element is a fragment of plainsong that typically appears, in whole or in part, in one of the voices—usually the tenor—in each of the movements of the Mass; the other voices are composed in free counterpoint above it. Sometimes the cantus firmus appears throughout each movement (often set in long note values); sometimes it is quoted only intermittently.

Plainsong was not the only source of cantus firmi, however; at later stages in the development of the technique, any preexisting melody could be used, or an abstract melodic pattern was composed for the occasion. A Mass was often named for the source of its cantus firmus. For example, one of the fifteenth-century Masses attributed to both Leonel Power and John Dunstable in various manuscripts is the *Missa Rex saeculorum*, for it is based on the plainsong beginning with that text. Many Masses by various Flemish composers are based on secular chansons, songs, and the like; a notable example is the *Missa L’Homme armé*, after a popular song of the time, set by a number of composers, including Palestrina, Josquin (with two settings), and many more. And a few Masses whose cantus firmi are abstract melodic patterns are often identified by the appropriate solmization syllables, for example, Palestrina’s *Missa Ut re mi*. Cantus firmus techniques were also employed in many motets of the time, as we shall see below.

## Composers

### Machaut

Composers in the eleventh century through the fourteenth were occupied principally in developing the arts of counterpoint and enlarging the resources of rhythm and rhythmic notation. Independence of the voices in a polyphonic context, a notation that permitted both duple and triple meter with proportional divisions of the basic beat, imaginative and free settings of a wide range of texts in both secular and sacred contexts—these were among their accomplishments. Most of these composers worked in virtual anonymity; before about 1325—with the exception of Leonin and Perotin, both active in Paris toward the end of the twelfth century—little is known about any of them.

During the *ars nova*, however, composers began to emerge from their anonymity, and names and careers can be identified. (*Ars nova*, “the new art,” refers to the music of the fourteenth century as contrasted to the *ars antiqua*, “the ancient art,” of the thirteenth. *Ars nova* is the name of a theoretical treatise written by Philippe de Vitry around 1325.) Among the earliest-known prominent composers was Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300–1377). Cleric, poet and musician, Machaut served in a number of positions in his long and active life. He traveled as far as Russia as secretary to King John of Bohemia, he was a member of the court of Charles V of France, and from 1340 to his death he served as canon at Rheims. A composer of both secular and sacred music, Machaut is of great

historical importance for his polyphonic setting of the entire Mass, the first known to have been composed by one individual.

Machaut's Mass, to which the date 1364 is usually assigned, contains the five chants of the Ordinary plus the concluding *Ite, missa est*, and is set for four voices. Machaut used the isorhythmic technique in all movements except the Gloria, but he handled it differently in each movement. For example, in the Kyrie and Credo it appears in two voices, tenor and contratenor; it is used throughout in the Kyrie, but confined to the final Amen in the Credo. In the Agnus Dei it appears only in the two upper voices, and in the *Ite, missa est* in all four. Machaut was one of the earliest composers to reflect the expressiveness of the text in the music. In the Credo, for example, the section which speaks of the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ is set off in a broad and impressive style that contrasts with the music surrounding the passage, thereby establishing a tradition followed by later composers into the nineteenth century (see Example 1).

### Dufay

Machaut's unified Mass remained unusual for almost a century. Settings of single Mass movements in a variety of styles (cantus firmus, chordal style, and *ballata* style; in the latter, one or two voice parts were accompanied by one or two instruments) continued to be composed well into the fifteenth century. Among the composers who wrote in these styles was Guillaume Dufay (c. 1400–1474), one of the most highly esteemed members of the Burgundian school.

Dufay received his early education at Cambrai, after which he lived in Italy for a decade or longer. He was a member of the Papal Chapel at Rome in the years about 1430, lived in Savoy and traveled extensively, and in 1436 was appointed canon of the Cathedral of Cambrai. Ordained as a priest and trained in canon law, he was regarded as much for his learning as his music, and became known as one of the foremost composers of the fifteenth century.

### EXAMPLE 1

### Machaut, *Mass*, Credo

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Machaut's Credo. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a contratenor line (bass clef). The first system is in 2/2 time and features the lyrics "Et pro - pter no - stram sa - lu - tem". The second system is in 4/2 time and features the lyrics "Ex Ma - ri - a Vir - gi - ne, et Ho - mo fac - tus est." The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and clefs, with some notes marked with a sharp sign (#).



He composed about 25 single Mass movements or pairs of movements in the styles described above, but beginning about 1430 he also composed complete Masses. Eight or more settings of the complete Ordinary are attributed to him, some in the prevailing three-voice setting, others in four voices. The four-voice setting became standard with him, and was generally adopted through much of the Renaissance period. The tenor became the next-to-the-bottom voice; the former contratenor part was now split into two—one high (*altus*) above the tenor, and one low (*bassus*) below the tenor. The top voice, formerly called *discantus*, was now often called *superius* (highest), from which the word “soprano” evolved (see table below). The modern disposition of the vocal quartet is virtually present in these Masses as well as in the motets of Dufay, although the development of the modern voice *ranges* (especially the development of a true bass range) was an accomplishment of the Renaissance period.

c. 1350	c. 1450	c. 1600
<i>discantus</i>	<i>superius</i>	soprano
<i>contratenor</i>	<i>contratenor altus</i>	contralto (“alto”)
<i>tenor</i>	<i>tenor</i>	tenor
	<i>contratenor bassus</i>	bass

## Motet

The chants of the Proper were mentioned above as comprising a group of chants with texts assigned to a particular season or festival of the Church year. Since the thirteenth century, texts drawn from the Proper or from other portions of the Gregorian chant repertoire have also been set polyphonically. One type of setting, originating probably in France, employed a phrase of chant above which one or two (occasionally three) newly composed voices were added. The lowest voice, the tenor, retained its original text, but the text supplied to the upper voices was freely chosen from sacred or secular poems, sometimes in the vernacular (as opposed to the Latin of the tenor phrase). Later each of the added voices sometimes had a different text. The original chant phrase, with its sacred text in the tenor and with one or two untexted added voices above, had been called a *clausula* (the rhythmic aspects of the *clausula* were mentioned on page 3). When words were supplied to the added voices (called *duplum* and *triplum*, respectively), the whole became known as a *motet* (French *mot*: “word”). From the early thirteenth century to about the fifteenth, motets were performed by solo singers—either in connection with or separate from the Church service. Thereafter, however, the form of the motet was available to composers writing for choral groups.

## Machaut

About 23 motets by Machaut have survived, and they too generally employ the isorhythmic principle. He usually adhered to the prevailing setting of the time: three-voice, with the tenor taken from a liturgical chant and designed to

be performed instrumentally, and with different texts in the upper voices. Machaut went far on the road toward lyric melody: the upper voices are generally lighter and freer in rhythm than any composer's before him. And a noteworthy feature of his harmonic style is the relatively frequent use of cadential\* consonances provided by thirds and sixths. Dissonances of the type common in the thirteenth century are still present, along with many empty octaves and fifths (that is, lacking the interval of the third), but the tendency to employ triadic\* harmonies at cadences, a characteristic of later *ars nova* music, is especially prominent in the music of Machaut.

## Dufay

The majority of Dufay's motets are built on derived tenors and are composed isorhythmically. They are most often written for three, four, or five voices, with the tenor of the four-voice settings in the next-to-bottom voice; when a derived tenor is not used, the main melody is generally in the top voice. The textures are varied, in that often an extended passage is set for the two upper voices or even for a single voice; such effects together with other passages in chordal style give Dufay's motets an expressive quality and a high degree of charm.

## English Discant and Fauxbourdon

Among the methods of composition available to composers about the beginning of the fifteenth century were two, one English and one Burgundian, that had many points in common although their origins were quite different. The English method arose possibly out of the practice of adding two improvised parts to a cantus firmus, one a third above it, the other a sixth above it. Thus a series of chords in the first inversion or a series of sixth chords,\* to use modern terminology, resulted in those passages where parallelism was strictly observed. This method, called *English discant*, found its way to Burgundy and France early in the fifteenth century and became the model for a corresponding continental style (see Example 2). Opinions differ among the authorities as to the origin and scope of English discant. According to some theories, the cantus firmus was the middle voice, with one voice added above and one below. (See Ulrich-Pisk, *A History of Music and Musical Style*, p. 103, fn. 2.)

### EXAMPLE 2

Anon., *In te Domine Speravi*

The musical notation consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a series of chords, mostly in first inversion, representing the discant. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a single melodic line labeled 'Cantus firmus'. The lyrics 'In - te - ter - num.' are written below the lower staff, aligned with the notes of the cantus firmus.

\*Terms defined or discussed in the Glossary are marked by an asterisk at their first appearance in the text.

The continental version, called *fauxbourdon*, was applied to two-voice compositions moving in parallel sixths; between these two voices a third (unwritten) voice was improvised at an interval of a fourth below the top or principal voice. Again a series of sixth chords resulted; thus the sonorities and harmonic appeal of the two versions were similar. In the English discant the point of departure was the bottom voice; in fauxbourdon it was the top voice. In both cases, however, the chordal effects were identical, and the sixth-chord style, as it may be called, permeated virtually all forms of composition later in the fifteenth century. The interest in vertical tonal combinations undoubtedly had an effect in lessening the independence of the several voices and hastening the adoption of a harmonically motivated homophonic texture.

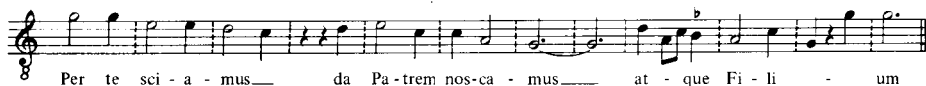
### Dunstable

The early fifteenth century in England was marked by the work of John Dunstable (c. 1370–1453) and the spread of English musical style to France. Dunstable combined the melodic grace of the chanson (see page 9) with the technique of English discant. The result was a high degree of mellifluous sonority presented in clear designs. Many of his works were copied in other manuscripts, especially in France, an unmistakable indication of the regard in which his music was held. Among his works are about a dozen motets, settings of single movements of the Ordinary (but no complete Masses), a few secular songs, and several miscellaneous settings for three voices of various liturgical texts.

The chief styles and forms of the time are represented in Dunstable's compositions. The isorhythmic technique, prominent in the motets and in several of the Mass movements, is often embodied in the sonorities of English discant to bring about a fusion of old and new. Among the miscellaneous three-voice pieces on sacred texts are some in cantus firmus style with liturgical tenors, and others freely composed with independent melodies. An outstanding characteristic of virtually all Dunstable's works is the lightly flowing and expressive melodic line. The melody often outlines triads; larger leaps are used to enhance the expressiveness of the texts, and dissonances are employed largely as passing notes on weak beats (see Example 3). The several melodies are equal in importance and constitute a smooth polyphonic texture in which the natural rhythm of the text to a large extent controls the rhythm of the melodies.

#### EXAMPLE 3

#### Dunstable, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*



### Binchois

The style of Dunstable is reflected most strongly in the works of the Franco-Flemish composer Gilles Binchois (c. 1400–1460). Binchois was born in Mons and served the Burgundian court at Dijon in various offices for about thirty years.