

canon, so called because the notation provides just one voice, to which others must be fitted by applying given rules. Here the words are even more suitable: "Prenez sur moi vostre exemple," or "Learn from me your lesson." The poem, a rondeau, goes on to offer advice (or commiseration) in affairs of the heart, but the line can also be understood as giving a clue toward solving the puzzle, for the single part supplied will serve as lesson for the others. How that lesson should be interpreted is indicated by key signatures, which invite the first singer to begin on A, with two others stacked above in fourths, starting therefore on D and G. These canonic voices, or "followers," work through the same melody, with occasional half-step adjustments to accord with the governing mode.

Gloria in canon by John Dunstaple (c. 1390 - 1453)

Sumer is icumen in and *Prenez sur moi* have both long been prized as jewels of medieval canonry, but this piece by the English composer Dunstaple is new. Dunstaple spent time in France and Italy, and sources for his music are widely dispersed—though the discovery of a manuscript in Tallinn, in the 1990s, was unexpected. *Our Gloria* was written out, not quite complete, on one side of a leaf the pianist Erika Franz bequeathed in 1967, with the rest of her collection, to the Estonian Theater and Music Museum, where it remained unnoticed until the museum's holdings came to be examined after the country regained independence. Thus Dunstaple became a beneficiary of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The manuscript furnishes one voice with instructions for adding three more to generate what is so far the earliest instance of a thorough-going canon (not a round) of the kind known as "four-in-one," i.e., having four voices following the same path, as distinct from a "four-in-two" canon, which is made up of two two-part canons, separate but simultaneous. At the bottom of the page there is fragmentary notation of an accompanying part or parts. Margaret Bent, doyenne of Dunstaple scholars, reconstructed this to create a magnificent six-voice setting, superb in its ricochet effects, passing dissonances, and exultant sonorosity.

13 Canons for women's voices, Op. 113 by Johannes Brahms (1833 - 97)

Born with the Renaissance, the canon lived on as music became and Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Modern. By opus number and publication date (1894), these canons belong among Brahms's late works, but some may have been written 30 years before, when the composer was conductor of the Hamburg Women's Choir. Most are simple canons at the unison that could be sung as rounds; this is true of the first of our selections, setting words by Goethe. However, the set also includes two double canons, both to Rückert texts. In *An's Auge des Liebsten* the arrangement is four-in-two, the altos following the sopranos a fifth below. For the grand finale, Brahms supplies something stranger: a four-part unison canon for the sopranos combined with a two-part unison canon from the altos, the sopranos' canon, extraordinarily, being based on the final song from Schubert's *Winterreise*. Since the altos's canon is necessarily much simpler, using only five notes, the whole six-part structure might be compared with that of *Sumer is icumen in*, which had been published a dozen years before this set appeared, and which Brahms just might have known, given his antiquarian interests. Certainly he demonstrated his awareness of the canon tradition in picking an apophthegmatic text through which the genre can seem to speak of itself—specifically, of its concurrent uniformity.

Die heiligen zehn Gebote (The Ten Commandments) by Joseph Haydn (1732 - 1809)

In July 1792, near the end of his first English tour, Haydn received the degree of Doctor of Music at Oxford, and to mark the occasion he sent the university a three-part canon that would work when sung backwards or upside-down (that is, with all the intervals going the other way). This he set to the line "Thy voice, o Harmony, is divine," but he soon replaced that sentiment with the sterner words of the First Commandment, in German, and added nine more canons to take care of the rest. He was, like many composers of his time, a regular canonist, whether in short settings such as these (his others are secular) or in movements of string quartets.

Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen, Op. 2 by Anton Webern (1883 - 1945)

The boats are leaving their tonal moorings: composed in the autumn of 1908, this was Webern's last work with a key signature (G major), and that implied tonality is greatly weakened. What holds strong, though, is the principle of canon. In the first quatrain, women's voices in thirds are in canon with the men; then the voices split into a four-part canon before coming together again to take up and extend the opening section on the last two lines of Stefan George's poem. The invitation in that poem to depart was in accord with Webern's (and Schoenberg's) mood at this moment of looming atonality. Canon kept a link with the past.

Miserere nostri by Thomas Tallis (c. 1505 - 1585)

This luminous masterpiece makes supreme canonic mastery into a kind of hovering. The top two voices are in canon throughout, one echoing the other, but there is also an elaborate canon unfolding in the bottom four voices, each of which moves at its own speed, in the ratios 1:2:4:8, the slowest and the second fastest inverting the melody line. There is also a seventh voice, wending its own way, though, of course, observant of the rest. To make all this work is an astonishing feat. To make it work to an effect of such beauty is staggering.

Tallis was joining—and, one may think, crowning—an Elizabethan tradition of setting “Miserere” verses as display pieces of canonic expertise. When, in 1575, he and Byrd published a volume of Latin motets in honor of the queen, this they placed last.

Miserere mihi, Domine by William Byrd (c. 1540 - 1623)

One of Byrd's contributions to the same collection was also a “Miserere” canon, perhaps deliberately made to contrast with Tallis's in its intimacy. His six-part setting is based on what was already a venerable technique of developing polyphony around a chant sung slowly: a *cantus firmus*. Soon after the start, the first phrase of the chant appears in the top part, and then the whole of it is delivered by the lowest voice. Once this is done, the *cantus firmus* is repeated in a canon at the fourth between the topmost two voices, while two other voices execute their own canon, where the follower is a sixth below the leader. This second part thus incorporates a double canon of the variety four-in-two.

Kyrie in G, K. 89 by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 91)

Like Haydn, Mozart wrote numerous canons as exercises, display pieces, homages, or jests, helping to give the genre the mixed formal-comic air it retained in examples by later composers from Beethoven to Berg. Some of Mozart's canons have outrageous texts, but his first was a Kyrie he composed when he was fourteen and on his first Italian tour, accompanied by his father. Their principal destination was Milan, to fulfil a commission for an opera to be performed at Christmas time, 1770 (*Mitridate*), but the trip lasted over a year, and included visits to Florence, Rome, Naples, and Bologna. Everywhere Leopold Mozart sought out musical opportunities for his son, and in Florence brought him into contact with a noted contrapuntalist, Eugenio Ligniville. The boy copied out sections of a sacred canon by Ligniville and came up with his own in this Kyrie, setting the three segments of the text as five-part rounds, the “Christe” picking up the descending-sixth motif from the first “Kyrie.”

Ma Fin est mon commencement by Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300 - 1377)

Here is another finely polished gem from the medieval canon treasury. If it does not sound too much like a canon at all, that is because Machaut goes in for delayed gratification. There are, indeed, ripples of imitation on the surface, but these are intermittent. Meanwhile the music is executing a bizarre long-range plan: each of the two upper voices sings the other's part in its entirety backwards, as if one of them went through the alphabet from A to Z and the other at the same time from Z to A. (This sort of canon is known as a “canon cancrizans,” or “crab canon,” from the observation—also noted by Shakespeare—that crabs could switch from one direction to its exact opposite without turning around.) Obviously the two voices come close in the LMNO area, which is where the note values lengthen. There is also a third voice, lower, doing a forward-backward routine all on its own; in other words, at the midpoint, after the first line of text, it turns and runs through its melody in reverse. Once again, the words make the canon sing of itself: “Ma Fin est mon commencement,” or “My end is my beginning.”

Like the Ockeghem example we heard, the piece is a rondeau, in this case of the simple form ABaAabAB, where the upper-case letters indicate lines repeated with the same words and music, and the lower-case letters lines where the words are different. The whole song therefore ends where it began, after so many spinnings through time.

Twelve Proverbial Canons by Richard Dirksen (1921 - 2003)

During a career of very nearly half a century at Washington National Cathedral, Dirksen wrote a great deal of choral music, including these settings of verses from the Book of Proverbs. In December 1991, soon after his retirement, he put them into a collection of canons along with settings of the verses of Psalm 101. All are rounds, and Dirksen suggested ways in which they could be performed—for instance, by singing one or more of the lines in unison before breaking into canon. He also gamely invited choirs to make their own choices, the only fixed requirement being that if there is a coda, as there is for “The Wicked Flee” and “Wine is a

Mocker," it must, of course, come last. "The Wicked Flee" is in three parts, the others in four.

Dirksen further reminded his singers how important the words are, and stated that his model was Haydn's set of canons on the Commandments. Tonight's performance gives us the opportunity to compare these master round-writers of two centuries apart.

The Land is Bright by Richard Dirksen (1921 - 2003)

Dirksen's canon book has a dual appendix, comprising a hymntune and this stately piece written for an event preceding the unveiling of the Churchill Memorial Porch at his cathedral in 1974. The poem, by Arthur Hugh Clough, is one Churchill quoted in a wartime world broadcast, and is also inscribed below a window within the porch. It is again set as a round.

Nesciens mater by Jean Mouton (<1459 - 1522)

"Nesciens": without knowing, ignorantly. So begins another marvel of Renaissance canonic art, where, paradoxically, consummate science—knowledge—is at work.

There are many links here with Tallis, from a later generation. Both composers worked at obscure provincial establishments for years before they were plucked into royal service, Mouton when he was into his 40s. With both, perhaps, experience fed into mastery. Mouton offers not one but four canons unfolding in parallel: a quadruple canon of eight voices, eight-in-four. Moreover, beautiful scalar passages in the early part of the piece link across from one canon to another, like angels descending and ascending in witness of God's arrival on earth.

In a more particular connection with the Tallis canon heard at the end of the first part, contrapuntal intricacy slows down the harmony to the pace of heaven. Time, which normally flows, here slows, and glows.

O salutaris hostia by William Byrd (c. 1540 - 1623)

The point about canons maintaining harmony has been made many times in what we have heard. Now it is unmade. This unlikely item, an example of early Byrd, is for six voices, three of them in canon, the others weaving around in imitation and, one may say, helplessness. The canon is initiated by the third voice to enter, that of the second altos, who are followed by the sopranos a fifth above and the second tenors a fourth below. Since these voices deliver the text in well-separated lines, the canon is quite easy to hear—but so is the gathering harmonic confusion. As our conductor puts it, the piece is "a little cautionary tale about canons leading where others ought not to follow." Yet to persist, when so much is going wrong, must also elicit our admiration.

© Paul Griffiths (www.disgwylfa.com)