In Ockeghem’s Shadow: Early Settings of the Polyphonic Requiem Mass

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Jackson N. Van Amburg

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ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented to the Department of Music

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Jackson N. Van Amburg

This study examines several of the early polyphonic settings of the Requiem mass written by Johannes Ockeghem and his contemporaries, all written before the start of the Council of Trent in 1545, in an effort to isolate their compositional diversity. Specifically, this study attempts to rebuke assertions that contemporary Requiem settings were uninspired imitations of Ockeghem’s. However, the argument is made that rather than mimicking Ockeghem, composers of early polyphonic Requiem settings are primarily adhering to a restricted style suited for funerals. The Kyrie text has been selected as the basis for comparison, showing that the movement with the least text and traditionally the most musical repetition inspires some of the most innovation.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................ iii
Abstract ........................................................................ iv
Table of Contents ........................................................ v
List of Figures ................................................................... vi
Thesis Body ................................................................. 1
Works Cited ................................................................. 17
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kyrie Text and Plainchant</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Deceptive Cadences in Févin’s Kyrie</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Voice Leading in Prioris’s Cadences</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Josquin’s <em>Circumdedeunt me</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1943 when Charles Warren Fox assessed the current understanding of the earliest polyphonic Requems within a contribution to the *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society*, he uncovered the following paradox: many of these works represent the highest achievement attained by certain composers, but the majority of scholarship into them highly deficient or nonexistent. Kretzschmar’s *Führer* was the only concentrated study of this repertory available at the time and Fox notes that “out of Kretzschmar’s seventy pages devoted to the Requiem, only one and a quarter pages are concerned with works written before 1600.”\(^1\) While not directly a call to arms, Fox’s brief insight makes clear how little is known or understood about the earliest settings of the Requiem. In the intervening years, this narrow slice of history has received more attention, particularly due to the interest in the music of Johannes Ockeghem, whose Requiem is currently the earliest extant manuscript and may even be the earliest ever written. However, Ockeghem’s work has eclipsed nearly every other contemporary Requiem, especially in terms of academic study. As recently as 2001, Richard Wexler had this to say when discussing the use of Ockeghem’s setting of the Tract in the Requiem of Juan García de Basurto:

> There would hardly be much point in examining the style of Basurto’s motets to see if it might resemble what is found in this apparent anthology of music for funerals. The style of the latter is so simple, especially in the final three movements (the last of which is in any event the same as the communion in Brumel’s Requiem),

that anyone who knew a bit of counterpoint could have composed most of it. Indeed, the same could be said of the Requiems by Brumel, Févin/Divitis, and Prioris, which are often so elementary, that one is hard pressed to recognize these musicians’ normal styles of composition.²

Wexler’s opinion that the work of Ockeghem’s contemporaries isn’t worthy of much attention is best reflected by the near complete absence of critical editions or research into these other works. This paper will examine the constraints placed upon these earliest Requiems by religious and societal pressures and compare the Requiems of Ockeghem, La Rue, Brumel, Févin, Prioris, Sermisy and Richafort through the one texted movement that all these composers set, the Kyrie, to provide new insight as to real variation between them.

Roots for the celebrations of the dead go back centuries, with the earliest mentioning of the Eucharist in honor of the dead dating back to the end of the second century, though the written chant did not exist until the 10th century.³ The Requiem originally got its start in the form of a votive mass, where the Church handpicked select texts to be recited, originally referred to as “missa pro defunctis” (“mass for the dead”). The name “Requiem” comes from the first word of text from the Introit, “Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.”⁴ Due likely to its nature as a votive mass, the texts used varied from place to place and were not codified until the Council of Trent in the middle of the sixteenth century. Despite the widespread use of polyphony for settings of the mass ordinary, the Requiem in particular was slow to adopt it. The first known polyphonic setting of the

² Richard Wexler, “In Search of the Missing Movements of Ockeghem’s Requiem”, 64.
complete Mass Ordinary was Guillaume de Machaut’s *Messe de Nostre Dame* of 1364; the *Tournai Mass* predates it, but is instead an assemblage of single movements by multiple composers. It took more than a hundred years for the first polyphonic Requiem to be written, which certainly raises questions as to what took so long. Current consensus believes that funerals seemed too grave an occasion to allow polyphony, at least the type of polyphony that pervaded settings of the Mass ordinary and thus the “Missa Pro Defunctis” became the last holdout of monophony in church music. This belief is further reinforced by the restrictions placed on the Requiem by the Council of Trent, which severely controlled the use of votive masses and polyphony in general within the Requiem. In the years leading up to the Council of Trent changes, there was a great deal of pressure on the church against polyphony, claiming that too many votive masses were being used and polyphony was distracting from the words of the liturgy. With this in mind it is just as surprising it didn’t take the Requiem even longer than one hundred years to first appear in written polyphony.

As for which Requiem setting is the first, the answer comes down to who is being asked and to whom they owe their allegiance. The two earliest settings are those on Guillaume Dufay and Johannes Ockeghem, though the lack of clear dating on either work prohibits awarding a definitive title of “first” to either of them. A copyist’s record exists indicating a Requiem mass by Dufay was copied during 1470, but no copies of such a work have been identified. This also prohibits any analysis of the potential influence Dufay’s purported Requiem could have had on later settings. While Dufay’s is non-extant, Ockeghem’s Requiem also does not exist in its supposedly complete form; the earliest surviving version is found in the Chigi Codex, a manuscript made around 1500, which holds a near complete catalogue of Ockeghem’s polyphonic masses, as well as other works by
contemporaries such as Antoine Brumel and Pierre de la Rue. With no date attributed to it in Chigi and no other records, endless speculation has ensued about which funeral inspired the composition. At one end, it could have appeared for the death of Charles VII in 1461, which would mean it possibly predates Dufay's, or at the other end much later for the death of Louis XI in 1483. Whatever the case, it would still be the earliest extant polyphonic Requiem and thus the first for comparison here.

Ockeghem's Requiem is a paraphrase mass, using the chant from the liturgy as its basis. This is atypical for Ockeghem, as very few of his works feature the paraphrase technique and they are all much smaller-scale compositions. However, it is the nature of Ockeghem's paraphrase techniques used in the Requiem that is most interesting, for it adheres extremely closely to the original chant. There are minimal points of departure and most of the contour is preserved exactly with little ornamentation or embellishment. Fabrice Fitch refers to this “consistent sobriety” as a unifying factor between the different sections of the work, and this seems to reflect the contemporary desire to keep the Requiem as pared down and restrained as possible. The other aspect of the work that stands out is the fact that it appears to be incomplete, missing the final three pieces consistent among all other contemporaries: the Sanctus, Agnus Dei and Communion. While it is entirely possible Ockeghem did not write these final movements, there is an empty set of pages in the Chigi Codex where these three movements were potentially supposed to appear, which has ultimately lead to attempts by scholars, such as Wexler quoted above, to try to infer the style and traits of the missing movements from comparisons with later Requiems. This will be addressed later. For now, the Kyrie is the one movement

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consistently set by Ockeghem and his contemporaries, so we shall start there in the comparison of the different works.

\[\text{Figure 1: Kyrie text and plainchant for the Missa pro defunctis}\]

The plainchant version of the Kyrie in Figure 1 dictates the formal, melodic, and modal characteristics of the three settings\(^7\). Typically, the first section is repeated three times, followed by three repetitions of the “Christe” section, and this is closed out with two statements of the first “Kyrie” section followed by the final “Kyrie” section serving as the third repetition. This final statement is meant to serve as a signal that this is the final statement, and it is also where the chant’s melodic apex is reached with the high C and D. This section also differs from all the preceding sections in that it deviates from strict stepwise motion, with the leap of a fifth between C and F. “Kyrie” and “Christe” (“Lord” and “Christ”, respectfully) are set to stepwise ascending lines and “Eleison” (“have mercy”) is set to descending melismatic figures consistently. It is worth noting that the melody indicated above for the Christe section is rarely used in early settings of the Kyrie. Ockeghem, Sermisy, Prioris, and Fevin all appear to use a fragment of the motive instead, starting from the B-flat. This removes the stepwise ascent that is so clearly the hallmark of

the Kyrie melody from the middle section, likely to avoid even more repetition than is dictated by the repeated tripartite form. Given the shortest text in the mass and this traditional pattern of repetition, it is remarkable how drastically Kyries can vary from composer to composer.

Following the typical Kyrie structure, Ockeghem states “Kyrie eleison” three times, followed by three statements of “Christe eleison” and finished with three final statements of the initial text, with the final statement setting the music of the final Kyrie statement from the chant\(^8\). Ockeghem exploits this repetition by setting different voices for each statement, using the groupings indicated below that allow for sections to contrast and provide a feeling of expansion as the movement moves through various smaller pairings to reach an arrival point with the full choir. Ockeghem remains the only composer who set his Kyrie text this way, clearly isolating each individual statement.

First Kyrie 1: Discantus, Contratenor, Tenor.

First Kyrie 2: Discantus 1, Discantus 2

First Kyrie 3: Discantus, Contratenor, Tenor (exact repetition First Kyrie 1)

Christe 1: Discantus 1, Discantus 2

Christe 2: Discantus, Contratenor, Tenor

Christe 3: Discantus 1, Discantus 2 (exact repetition of Christe 1)

2\(^nd\) Kyrie 1: Discantus, Contratenor, Tenor (altered repetition First Kyrie 1)

2\(^nd\) Kyrie 2: Discantus 1, Discantus 2

2\(^nd\) Kyrie 3: Discantus, Contratenor, Tenor, Bassus (new melodic material)

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\(^8\) Ockeghem. \textit{Requiem: Urtext}. 2005. All measure numbers come from the respective editions cited at the start of each section.
The chant appears quite clearly in the highest voice in most of the groupings, as can be seen in the first eight measures. Ockeghem clearly demarcates the end of the first word in every statement (except the second Kyrie 3) with a cadence on a unison or octave G approached through an expanding sixth to the octave, usually emphasized even further by the suspension leading to the F# in m. 9 of the above example. All three statements of Christie leave out the initial ascent and instead sustain the B-flat apex in the highest voice and have the lower voice(s) accompany it, continuing to paraphrase the remainder of the chant melody in each section. The final statement (the second Kyrie 3) takes material from the final section of the Kyrie chant, outlining the descent of a fifth in the highest voice and the remaining voices gradually joining in, expanding a texture that has alternated between three and two voice since the beginning to a full four voice sonority. The G-unison cadence is replaced by cadence on an F unison with an A and C also sounding at m. 185, which helps bring about the ending on an F sonority, as all the previous G cadences incorporate an F-sharp. Even with the most embellishments to the chant melody occurring in this final statement, it cannot be denied how structurally reliant this section is on the original chant.

Pierre de la Rue wrote one of the next earliest Requiems, likely during his employment in Courtrai. Compared to the wealth of attention received by Ockeghem’s Requiem, de la Rue’s has remained relatively devoid of scholarly interest. 1931 brought the first modern transcription by Friedrich Blume, who admits in the preface to having transposed the entire piece up a fourth from its original source to accommodate modern choirs. Fortunately, when the piece appeared in Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae in 1996, it was returned to its original pitch level. Sonically, de la Rue’s Requiem exists in a different

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world than Ockeghem’s, favoring low registers. Of the six movements he sets to music, the Introit, Kyrie and Agnus Dei don’t have a soprano voice and of those three both the Kyrie and Agnus Dei feature sections with two bass voices. The Requiem as a result exhibits a much darker sound quality than Ockeghem’s; in fact the Kyrie rarely ventures above middle C and commonly features a B-flat below the staff in the bassus. While the mass is also built off the paraphrase principle, the usage is much less reined in.

While Ockeghem’s statements of the chant were very clear cut, with different voicings and sectional divisions for each of the three “Kyrie”s, de la Rue’s frequently overlap and are much more condensed. The discantus and contratenor move in parallel thirds in the first two measures (notice the discantus sings pitches of the chant, just transposed), only to be echoed by the tenor and bassus an octave lower in the following two measures. Before this is over, the discantus has started the second statement in the fourth measure that cascades downward as staggered entrances through the voices into the bass. The opening phrase already introduces twice a rhythmic idea that pervades the entire Kyrie: a dotted half, quarter and a whole note. This syncopation recurs frequently to give a sense of motion to otherwise consistent rhythm and is commonly found at the end of text sections to emphasize cadences. While the movement’s final cadence uses a 6th-octave cadence like Ockeghem, the ones inside the work feature large leaps to the octaves (mm. 10-11) and tend to feature fully fleshed out triads.

All three statements of each text group are condensed into compact units divided by changes in mensuration, dividing the beginning of the Christe text at m.13 and the return of the Kyrie text at m. 36. The closest statement of the actual plainchant occurs in the tenor primus from mm. 38-43, still a condensed version of the original, while the rising stepwise
motion of a fourth that is characteristic of the plainchant serves as the basis for imitation throughout, most notably at the beginning. The structure of the work does follow the “expanding” principle set with Ockeghem’s Requiem: at the start two voices are paired together and gradually a full five-voice sonority is reached for the second set of Kyrie statements. While Ockeghem’s starts and ends on the same octave (F₃ to F₄) and uses the voices to fill out the middle of the interval, de la Rue begins with the interval of a third (G₃ to B-flat₃) and uses the additional voices to expand to a final interval of two octaves plus a third at the close (B-flat₁ to D₄). This idea of expansion is further illustrated by the discantus dropping to its lowest note in m. 40 and then rising by step an octave to its highest note over the next measure and a half. The lushness of this scoring is unparalleled in other Requiems of this period and remains one of the true under-appreciated gems of early Requiem settings.

If de la Rue’s Requiem represents experimentation (as his was the first to present the chant at a different pitch level than it was originally written), Antoine Brumel’s Requiem, first published in 1516, represents restraint by presenting the plainchant as undecorated as possible.¹⁰ The opening tenor states the chant note for note until m.13 when a B-flat surfaces seemingly as an embellishment, the only note different for the tenor in the entire statement of the “Kyrie”. The final statement of the “Kyrie eleison” (which would be the second Kyrie 3 in relation to Ockeghem) adapts the changed opening leap of a fifth almost verbatim. Most of the texture is homorhythmic, with a few syncopated notes added to generate movement. No voice pairings are apparent like its predecessors; there are only 6 beats of rest total in the entire movement, which creates a rather smooth,

¹⁰ Brumel. Missa pro defunctis. 1959.
uninterrupted sound. Similar to Ockeghem's, it begins and ends in the same octave range and three of the voices hold an F while the fourth voice sings the fifth above the lower F. Similar to the plainchant origins, only one Kyrie is written for the first third, intended to be repeated three times, and the same practice follows for the Christe. The Christe is set apart from the rest of the work, not based on a paraphrase of the original plainchant or other known melody. It also strongly favors C as a sonority, as opposed to the F-centric Kyrie portion, and this makes a reappearance at the start of the statement of the second Kyrie 3.

Antoine de Févin's Kyrie setting takes the opposite route of Ockeghem's, where instead of writing out three different statements and voicings for each of the three sections there are only three statements total with indications to repeat each section twice, closely in line with the original plainchant. Along with nearly note-for-note paraphrasing of the chant in the Superious, this also produces the most concise setting examined in this study. While all the settings thus far have maintained relatively smooth accompaniments in keeping with the exclusively stepwise motion of the plainchant, disjunct motion is surprisingly common here, notably in the first two measures between the contratenor and tenor as well as the contratenor's first four measures of the Christe section.

Figure 2: Deceptive Cadences in Févin's Kyrie

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An unusual feature of Févin’s Kyrie is each section contains distinctive deceptive cadences about two-thirds of the way through each section. The first one takes place in m.5 (Figure 2), where the beginning voicing is identical to the voicing for the final cadence of the section a measure later. While the superius and bass resolve as expected, the middle voices move up by step, evading the expected cadence to F. The second occurs in m. 10, where the F-E half-step motion that usually occurs in the superius leading to a cadence changes on the beat instead, which initiates a rise in parallel between the superius and bass that leads us away from F. The final deceptive cadence occurs in m. 19, where the expected resolution to G is undermined by the stepwise move in the bass from D to E-flat. The prominence of E-flat triads both immediately after or within these deceptive cadences is quite striking, and results from the key signature conflict between the bass voice (two-flats) and the rest of the voices (one-flat).

Claudin de Sermisy’s Kyrie, similarly to La Rue’s, is written for lower voices (altus, contratenor, tenor, and bassus) yet does not descend nearly as low, stopping at F\textsubscript{2}\textsuperscript{12}. Apart from the bassus, the rest of the voices are constricted to a range of a fifth with one or two exceptions of a sixth, and the two tenor parts necessitate a considerable amount of voice crossing between them. The tenor takes on the role of stating the chant and the stepwise rising motive of the Kyrie melody carries into all the voices, notably in the parallel rising motion of m.5. The first three measures of the return to the Kyrie (mm. 21-23) are identical to the first appearance with very few alterations, after which it deviates significantly. The first Kyrie section only states the text twice, with just “Eleison” set to the entire Kyrie melody in the tenor serving as the third repetition (mm. 8-11). In the second Kyrie section,

\footnote{Sermisy. Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae. 1977.}
the voices complete a second text and melodic statement with an unexpected cadence to B-flat, the first non-F cadence in the entire movement, and then proceed with a final Kyrie statement, concluding with cadential ornamentation in the altus in the penultimate measure.

By now it is very clear what the standard style of a Kyrie in the early settings of the polyphonic Requiem consisted of: paraphrase of the original chant throughout (with few exceptions), repeated statements, imitative texture, mostly conjunct accompaniment, and standard cadences. From now on, only what departs from these apparent coventions will be discussed. Johannes Prioris makes rather unique divisions within his setting through unusual cadences.13 Following true to form, we have the first three statements of the Kyrie melody, coming to a sectional division at m. 25, which is set off from the next section by a double bar.

![Figure 3: Voice leading of Prioris’s cadences. Left to right: mm. 32-34, mm. 46-48](image)

Then follow two statements of the Christe which culminate in a cadence in mm. 32-4 (Figure 3). The expected C to F cadence still appears, but it is reached by passing through a D minor sonority in m. 33, a quite unusual feature that is set off by another double bar line.

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after m. 34, even though the Christe section has yet to be completed. This is followed by the third Christe statement and the first statement of the second Kyrie section, which culminates in a cadence from C to B-flat. This alone would be interesting enough, as this cadence from C to B-flat also concluded the first Kyrie section, but this time it also has the inclusion of a D minor triad between the two and is followed by a double bar, similar to the last unusual cadence. Also, the final statement of the second Kyrie section makes use of double cantus-firmus technique, with a variation on the regular Kyrie plainchant presented in the superius and the rather distinct closing Kyrie melody (see the end of Example 1) simultaneously in the tenor at m. 56.

![Figure 4: Josquin's Circumdederunt me, with phrases marked](image)

Jean Richafort manages a rather unique feat in his setting: the incorporation of a non-liturgical melody into every part the Requiem as a whole\(^{14}\). Richafort uses Josquin's

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setting of *Circumdederunt me* (Figure 4)\textsuperscript{15} throughout the work and as a result some speculation exists whether it was written for Josquin’s funeral service in 1521. While the plainchant paraphrase can be made out at the very start of each of the three sections in the Superius, the chant is rarely, if ever, discernable afterwards, likely in favor of Josquin’s melody. The four outer voices sing the Kyrie text (Superius, Altus, Tenor and Bassus), while the inner voices (Canon I and Canon II) sing *Circumdederunt me*. Canon II begins the melody in m.5 and Canon I joins in a fifth higher four measures later. Josquin’s melody is made of four phrases, which proceed in order, with a repeat of the fourth phrase at the end of the Christe section. Then as the second Kyrie section begins the canon starts from the third phrase, followed by two statements of the fourth. While this may not seem remarkable in the larger mass tradition, Richafort manages to achieve something truly unique for these settings, and it may have been innovations like this that inspired the strict reforms placed on the Requiem Mass at the Council of Trent only a handful of decades later.

The Requiem masses discussed above are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg for Renaissance settings of Requiem cycles; Fox alone managed to count forty-five prior to 1615 and it is likely several more have surfaced since that article was published.\textsuperscript{16} Many likely still exist in manuscript form and have not been given any attention, which raises the question why seemingly nobody interested in them. This brings a return of the rather blanket dismissal Wexler gave to Brumel (and other Requiems of “lesser” provenance than the folios of Ockeghem). He is not without a valid point: during his article, he provides the opening excerpt of various Agnus Dei movements from Requiems by Juan Garcia de Basurto, Antoine Brumel, Antoine de Févin(?)/Antonius Divitis(?), Pierre de la Rue and

\textsuperscript{15} Luce, *The Requiem Mass*, 179.
Johannes Prioris, directly comparing them to not only the original chant source but to each other.

He then continues to use this exercise to try to extrapolate what source of chant Ockeghem would have used were the presumed final three movements to exist. In the process he implies that other composers after Ockeghem were merely composing no more than what a skilled choir could improvise on their own.\(^{17}\) However, Wexler’s choice of the Agnus Dei as the subject of his analysis may be misleading. The Agnus Dei is one of the most serious parts of the liturgy, consisting of a prayer of meditation and faith and, of all the movements included in the Requiem during the years leading up to the Council of Trent, would have benefited the most by remaining the most clear and tranquil of the settings. This study of Kyrie settings of seven early Requiems shows similar underlying patterns of construction shared by the composers, but also firmly establishes the different outcomes attained. If Ockeghem’s Kyrie had been missing instead of one of the latter movements, the same sort of “approximation” would not be possible, and would be wildly misleading if attempted.

Similar to biological evolution, there is a tendency in music history to see only the narrative of celebrated outliers: Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*, Beethoven’s *Eroica*, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. With Requiems, there appears to be a leap in the scholarly literature from Ockeghem straight to Mozart, discounting much of the interim. Even if those Requiems composed after Ockeghem’s are not seen as revolutionary, just a glance at these seven subsequent Kyries shows there is much that can still be learned and valued from these long neglected works. With all the pressure to stick as close to the plainchant as possible, it

\(^{17}\) Wexler, “In Search of the Missing Movements,” 68.
makes the deviations and liberties these composers took all the more significant and can shed more light into the world of improvised polyphonic practice.
Works Cited


