

# SYMBOLA ET EMBLEMATA

*Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Symbolism*

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SYMBOLIC SCORES

*Studies in the Music of the Renaissance*



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BY

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## THE SOGGETTO OSTINATO AS A CONTEXTUAL SIGN IN MASS AND MOTET

After the use of the *cantus prius factus* as a starting-point for composition had begun to decline at the end of the fifteenth century, composers of the sixteenth century showed a certain predilection for Masses and motets involving a *soggetto ostinato*. This technique can be described as the use of "a clearly defined phrase [which] is repeated persistently, usually in immediate succession, throughout a composition or a section."<sup>1</sup> In a number of pieces the *soggetto ostinato* constitutes the chief element in the polyphonic structure. The technique then resembles the principle of isoperiodic writing in as far as the *color*, that is, the melodic pattern, forms the point of departure for the overall planning of the composition. Normally, the *soggetto ostinato* consists in a brief melodic unit that is reiterated in the same voice. The successive appearances may occur on the same pitch, be transposed stepwise, or be related by alternation between two different pitches.

It is surprising that, in theoretical treatises preceding and written during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the term *soggetto ostinato* does not occur.<sup>2</sup> Theorists obviously felt that the medieval term *color* should be used to describe this procedure. From the mid-thirteenth century to the fifteenth century this term signified embellishment and, more particularly, repetition. For our purposes it is important to point out that, according to Prosdocimus de Beldemandis, both the term and its meaning originated in rhetoric. In his *Tractatus praece cantus mensurabilis* of 1412 he says: "Rhetorical color is called repetition, and the term is applied metaphorically, since just as in rhetorical color there is frequent repetition of the same phrase, in musical color, too, there is frequent repetition."<sup>3</sup>

Since rhetoric and musical symbolism are so frequently found in each other's company, we may expect that often the composer's primary concern was the matter of a *soggetto ostinato* and its relationship to the work in which it occurred. This is particularly the case when the *soggetto ostinato* also has its own text, since the two levels of meaning sometimes appear to intentionally conceal various elements of the fascinating world of medieval Christian faith.

For the present study I collected a number of examples of the symbolic use of the *soggetto ostinato*. About half of these I discussed earlier in my *Studien zur Symbolik in der Musik der alten Niederländer*.<sup>4</sup> The ways in which the

<sup>1</sup> W. Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), p. 634.

<sup>2</sup> The term *ostinato* appears for the first time in Angelo Berardi's *Documenti armonici* of 1687. Cf. M.E. Columbro, *Ostinato Technique in the Franco-Flemish Motet: 1480-ca. 1562* (Ph.D. diss. Case Western Reserve Univ. 1974), vol. 1, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. E. de Coussemaker, *Scriptorum de musica medii aevi* 3 (Paris 1869), p. 248. The translation of the quotation is by Ernest H. Sanders; cf. NGD 4, p. 584.

<sup>4</sup> (Bilthoven 1968), pp. 75-85 and 124-8.



*soggetto ostinato* can appear are quite varied. As stated above, it can have its own text, although there are some examples in which the *ostinato* theme has the same text as that of the composition in which it figures. Quite often a series of restatements of the musical phrase or motif appears to be based on number symbolism, in which case a meaningful inner connection with the text of the composition or with its subject is intended. The number of restatements in the works under consideration varies from five to twenty-one. Perhaps the finest specimen of the symbolical application of ostinato technique is Josquin's *Missa Gaudeamus*. Elsewhere I have described how the impressive series of "Gaudeamus" motifs in this Mass functions as a sign which refers explicitly to the composer's profession of faith.<sup>5</sup> Other forms of symbolism can be found where the technical elaboration of the *soggetto ostinato* was inspired by a particular scene from the life of a saint, and in the so-called *soggetto canuto*. Finally, the ostinato reiteration of the hexachord sometimes represents a popular symbol in Christian art, namely the *scala celestis*. In the following sections I shall review 26 pieces, starting with those in which symbolic numbers are clearly in evidence.

### *The soggetto ostinato and number symbolism*

In Christian numerology one of the connotations of the number five is the passion of Christ. In discussing Christ's five wounds, Honorius refers to the five signs of the cross which the priest makes over the bread and wine during the Canon of Mass; this he performs together with a prayer that they become the Body and Blood of Christ: "...through the five orders of the crosses the five ages of the world are designated, which through the cross and the Body of Christ are saved. Whence in the Canon [of the Mass] it is said five times 'Through Christ our Lord, since the world is redeemed through the five wounds of Christ.'<sup>6</sup> The surfaces of altar-stones often show five crosses, and in the Roman Missal the five blessings are marked with a red cross. (Fig. 6) In his *Missa Pange lingua*, based on the hymn of the same name sung at the Feast of *Corpus Christi*, Josquin gives five solo statements of the opening of the Benedictus (Blessed is he ...) (Ex. 1).

This section of the Sanctus is performed either just before, during, or immediately after the elevation. Josquin's procedure is highly remarkable and unique among all his works: he must have intended to symbolize the consecration of the bread and wine. The first strophe of the *Pange lingua* hymn declares: "Sing, my tongue, the mystery of the glorious Body and the precious Blood ..."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See my study *Josquin's Mass for All Saints* ..., pp. 44-59.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. H. Meyer, *Die Zahlensymbolik im Mittelalter: Methode und Gebrauch* (Munich 1975), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> In his article *Symbol and Ritual in Josquin's Missa Di Dadi*, JAMS 42 (1989), pp. 1-22, Michael Long gives good arguments for connecting this Mass with the *Missa Pange lingua*, and refers, among other things, to the passage quoted above.

Ex. 1

Whether or not the *soggetto ostinato* in the Osanna of the *Missa Aitieu mes amours* by Andreas de Silva should also be considered as an example of number symbolism is less easy to prove. The Mass was based on Josquin's well-known chanson and is preserved in the Ms. Cappella Sistina 45. The *soggetto*, which descends stepwise from *d'-d*, has the text "Osanna in excelsis" and must be stated six times (Ex. 2):

Ex. 2

Both the simplicity of the subject – which is not derived from the chanson – as well as the direction "Dinumerabo nomen tuum in eternum" (I shall count your name in all eternity), point to an extra-musical meaning. The number six is sometimes connected with the Sanctus because of the passage in Isaiah 6:2-3. The prophet describes how two seraphs, each with six wings, sing alternately the text of the Sanctus. From the Baroque period we know of at least two composers who used six-part scoring in their setting of the



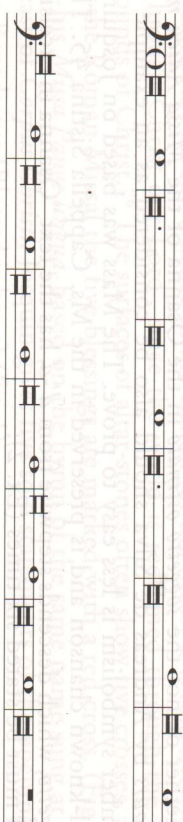
Sanctus to express this idea.<sup>8</sup> However, even if this interpretation should be considered invalid, the direction "I shall count your name in all eternity" nevertheless very appropriately justifies the persistent character of the *soggetto*.

The number seven occurs mostly in connection with the Virgin and the remission of sins. The first of these connotations originated in the commonly accepted number of Mary's joys and sorrows which, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gave rise to many private forms of devotion, evidenced in worship as well as in the arts.<sup>9</sup> It was this devotion which undoubtedly inspired Nicolas Gombert to create the musical structure of his five-part motet *Veni dilecta mea*. The tenor sings the formula "Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis" seven times. The syllabically recited *soggetto* appears alternately on *f*' and *c*'. The other voices combine two different liturgical texts from the Common of Virgins and Non-Virgins, of which the second, "Nigra sum sed formosa", is drawn from the Song of Songs. As a result of the ostinato theme, both these texts become Marian in reference.

The connection of the number seven with sin is based on certain Scriptural passages and on the early Christian writers.<sup>10</sup> The discovery of two examples of the sevenfold statement of a *soggetto* prompted this idea, which I discussed in my *Studien*. They are found in Guillaume Dufay's Gloria *De quaremiux* and the "Confiteor" passage in the Credo of Johannes Verbonnet's *Missa Je n'ay dueil*.<sup>11</sup>

The unique source of Dufay's Gloria is the Ms. Bologna Q 15. The piece is for three parts and is based on the following ostinato (Ex. 3):

Ex. 3

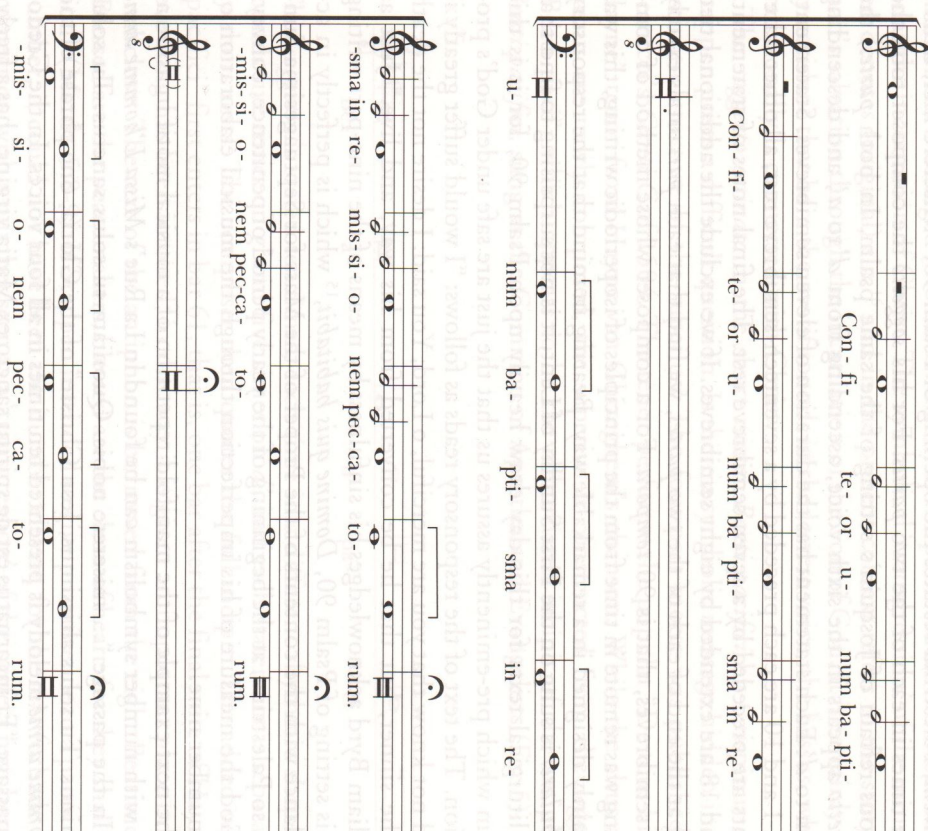


This subject is repeated under three different mensuration signs. Remarkably, it is the sixth statement that has the concluding words of the Gloria: "In gloria dei patris." The "Amen" is set to two final chords, prior to which the seventh statement of the *soggetto* appears without text. The meaning of the *soggetto* is therefore unquestionably as follows: through its title the Gloria is

connected with Lent, the time of penitence for sinners, and through the seven statements the composer refers to the *remissio peccatorum*.<sup>12</sup>

In the bassus of the Credo of Verbonnet's above-mentioned Mass, based on Alexander Agricola's chanson *Je n'ay dueil*, the composer repeats a two-note motif in the following way (Ex. 4):

Ex. 4



Surely, this is a fine example of the contravention of Tinctoris's rules for good counterpoint.<sup>13</sup> While the sevenfold repetition coincides with the arti-

<sup>8</sup> See A. Clement, "O Jesu, du alle Gabe! Studien zum Verhältnis von Text und Musik in den Chordpartiten und den Kanonischen Veränderungen von Johann Sebastian Bach (Ph.D. diss. Utrecht 1989), pp. 217-21.

<sup>9</sup> See my study *Music and Number* ..., pp. 151-7.

<sup>10</sup> See my study *Symbolic Scoring* ..., pp. 105-7.

<sup>11</sup> See fn. 4, pp. 124-5.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the liturgical purpose of Dufay's Gloria and the performance of the tenor part, see W. Elders, *Zur Aufführungspraxis der altniederländischen Musik*, in *Renaissance-Musik* 1400-1600, Donum natalicium René Bernard Lenaerts (Louvain 1969), pp. 91-3.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Liber de arte contrapuncti*, Book iii, rule 6, ed. by A. Seay, *Musicological Studies and Documents* 5 ([Rome] 1961), p. 137.



cle "I confess one baptism for the remission of sins", the composer obviously makes the forbidden *redicta* in order to express – at the most appropriate place in the Mass – his sinfulness through the number seven.

In the Middle Ages man's sinful condition was connected also with the number nine. The principal allegorical interpretation of this number was derived from the parable of the lost drachma as told by Jesus to illustrate God's mercy (Luke 15:8-10).<sup>14</sup> In his six-part responsory motet *Tribularet si nescirem*, Palestrina restates the opening of Psalm 50, "Misereere mei, deus", nine times in each of the two *partes*. For his *soggetto* the composer took the famous refrain of Josquin's setting of the same psalm. In both *partes*, the *soggetto* appears in the sixth voice, ascending from *d'* to *a'*, and descending again to *d'*. Each statement has the duration of eleven semibreves. Statements nos. 1 and 10 are each preceded by a seventeen-*semibreve* rest, all other statements are preceded by a seven *semibreve* rest. The final notes of statements 9 and 18 are extended by eight *semibreves*. If we exclude the additional tied long at the end of each of the two *partes*, we find that each *part* totals exactly 180 *semibreves*, that is 90 *tempora*. For a composer whose method of composing was remote in time from the principles of isoperiodic writing, this was certainly designed in a remarkable way. Bearing in mind that the responsory *Tribularet* is sung on the First Sunday of Lent, it is not surprising to find that the liturgical texts for this day draw heavily upon Psalm 90, for it is this psalm which pre-eminently assures us that the just are safe under God's protection. The text of the responsory reads as follows: "I would suffer greatly if I did not know that you are merciful, o Lord; You said: I desire not the death of the sinner, but that he be converted from his way, and live." Just as William Byrd acknowledges his sinfulness by means of the nine-part writing in his setting of Psalm 90, *Domine quis habitabit*,<sup>15</sup> which is perfectly in accordance with the contents of the Proper of the Mass for Septuagesima Sunday, so Palestrina, at the beginning of the yearly period of penitence, conveys to God the measure of his imperfection through the musical elaboration of the number nine.

The next example of the manifold repetition of a musical motif in association with number symbolism can be found in La Rue's *Missa L'homme armé* (I). In the passage "... misereere nobis. Quoniam tu solus sanctus. Tu solus dominus. Tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe" of the Gloria, one phrase of the *L'homme armé* melody is presented ten times in all four voices. In the Credo, the passage "Et incarnatus est de spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine" has a freely-invented motif which is set against the *cantus prius factus* and stated ten times, but which is also stated once more in the following "Et homo factus est". This time it is the Greek alphabet which forms the basis of the number symbolism. In the Greek numeral system, 'iota' – the first letter of the name

'Jesus' – signifies ten. The Greek letter 'chi', used as the first letter in the name 'Christus', is similar in form to the Roman numeral X. Since the striking repetition of motifs occurs in sections where the liturgical text deals with Jesus Christ, there is no doubt that the composer intended the number of motifs to be interpreted symbolically: the number ten is employed as a symbol for the name Jesus Christ. That it was indeed La Rue's intention to base these passages on this particular number appears from the fact that the number ten is changed into eleven exactly at the point where the Credo mentions the incarnation of Christ. The symbolical 'transgression' of the number ten denotes (original) sin,<sup>16</sup> and in the present context refers to the story of man's salvation through the incarnation of the Son of God. It is certainly not by accident that here the motif sounds in the lowest voice, the bassus, which traditionally is connected with Christ.

The *soggetto ostinato* in the short motet *Beati pacifici* by Crispinus van Stappen poses a difficult question. Is there a symbolic message hidden in the ostinato structure of the superius? The four-part motet was published in Petrucci's *Canti C* of 1504. The tenor performs the popular "De tous biens playne" tenor from Hayne van Ghizeghem's chanson. While the altus and bassus are newly composed, the superius is constructed from the *soggetto* "Beati paci", which appears to be the abbreviated incipit of the antiphon *Beati pacifici*, sung at the Common of Apostles and Evangelists (Ex. 5):

Ex. 5



This *soggetto* is stated ten times, each time in a different rhythmic shape. It sounds five times on *g'* and five times on *d'*, and each statement is separated by short rests. The composer then quotes the full incipit. The added word "pacifici" first enters in bar 61, that is, one bar after the final note of Hayne's love-song has been intoned; in this way it is given an important place in the final close. The text of the antiphon is borrowed from the eight Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God" (Matth. 5:8-9). If Stappen intended to give prominence to a particular number, it could not have been the number eleven, for the text forbade any connection with a number seen as a 'transgression' of the perfect number ten and held to be a sign of sin.<sup>17</sup> Since, however, the eleventh statement is the only one to quote the incipit "Beati pacifici" in full, it acts as a new and independent motif. If this transformation should indeed be considered significant, it seems most plausible to assume that the superius brings two numbers to the fore, namely ten and one. Both these numbers are easily related to

<sup>14</sup> Cf. H. Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn. 6), p. 142. See also V. F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism. Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York 1969), p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> See my study *Symbolic Scoring*... pp. 116-7.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hopper, *op. cit.* (fn. 14), pp. 87 and 152, and Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn. 6), p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> See fn. 16.



the idea of the antiphon. According to St Gregory the number ten symbolizes salvation.<sup>18</sup> The source of this allegorical interpretation is found in the parable of the ten virgins (Math. 25:1-13): "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like to ten virgins, who taking their lamps went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride..." Medieval exegesis took the bridegroom for Christ and the bride for Mary or the Church.

Both the appearance of the *soggetto ostinato* and the choice of the *cantus firmus* support our explanation. As we saw above, there are five statements of the *soggetto* "Beati paci" on *g'* and five on *d'*. These statements occur in an irregular order: four times on *g'*, three times on *d'*, once on *g'* and twice on *d'*. Although the layout of the preexisting tenor may partly be the reason for this, the free rhythmic organization of the motifs would have allowed Stappen another ordering as well. It therefore seems that the two series of five statements are intentional and allude, respectively, to the five virgins that were wise and the five that were foolish. The text of the *cantus prius factus* offers additional evidence. Originally a love song, Hayne's *De tous biens plaine* could easily be adapted to a hymn that extols the qualities of the Holy Virgin:

De tous biens plaine est ma maistresse  
Chascun lui doit tribut d'onneur  
Car assouye est en valeur  
Autant que jamais fut deesse.

(My mistress is full of goodness,  
Everyone owes her homage,  
For she has every quality  
As much as ever any goddess.)

The sole statement of the whole motif "Beati pacifici" that follows on the final tone of the *cantus prius factus* acts – by illustrating the number one – as a symbol of the unity with God.

Although, under the influence of the early Christian writers, the number twelve was used in medieval number symbolism primarily to indicate the Apostles or to represent the entire Church, it was also associated with the Virgin after the 'apocalyptic woman' had become a favourite theme in medieval art. Many a composition bears witness to this particular interpretation of Revelation 12:1-2 through the use of twelve-fold statements of the *cantus prius factus*, or through twelve-part scoring.<sup>19</sup>

There exist three motets in which the incipit of the antiphon *Salve regina* serves as a *soggetto ostinato*, which – as a hidden allusion to Mary – is repeated twelve times. Foremost among these is Josquin's five-part *Salve regina*. Elsewhere in this book I have discussed the structural design of this beautiful composition, which by means of the number symbolism contained in the

fifth voice not only honours the Virgin but also makes reference to her Child (see p. 175).

Dating from the same period as Josquin's *Salve regina* is an anonymous motet based on the text "Tota pulchra es". It is preserved in the Ms. London 8 G vii, a richly illuminated parchment codex copied in Brussels or Malines in the years 1516-1522, and presented to Henry VIII of England and Catherine of Aragon. It contains motets and settings of passages from Vergil's *Aeneid*. None of the compositions bears an attribution, but on the basis of concordant sources about seven of them can be ascribed to Josquin, La Rue, and Mouton. The two *partes* of *Tota pulchra es* are a centonization of verses from the Song of Songs, taken from the poems of the bridegroom.<sup>20</sup> The anonymous composer treats the chant incipit of the antiphon *Salve regina* as a canon at the upper fourth. In the first part, the four-note motif is presented in the superius and altus, in the second part in the tenor and bassus. As with Josquin, the metrical scheme is very regular: each statement is preceded by a four-breve rest. The mensural plan of the canonic voices in the two *partes* is identical, and in each part the "Salve" is stated twelve times (Ex. 6).

Although the text of the motet might have served perfectly as an homage to Henry's first wife, the two series of twelve "Hails" are best explained as a symbol of the Virgin (see below).

About forty years after Josquin composed his five-part *Salve regina*, it was copied into one of the choirbooks of Seville cathedral. One of the singers who may have performed the motet there was Francisco Guerrero. In his five-part *Ave virgo sanctissima*, he evidently aimed to follow Josquin's example. However, instead of presenting each "Salve" in the same voice, he made a *congeries* of 'Hails' in all voices: in the course of fourteen bars (bars 21-34), the 'Salve' sounds fifteen times (SI: 3; SII: 3; A: 3; T: 2; B: 4). Since the motet's two upper voices form a canon at the unison, of which only the *dux* needs to be notated, we encounter here an example of 'eye music': the singers can hardly have failed to discover the twelve motifs of four notes, and the notation may perhaps have reminded them of the twelve pearls of Mary's heavenly crown.<sup>21</sup>

The third book of the monumental *Theatrum musicus*, published in Nuremberg in 1564, contains the six-part *Parce mihi, domine* by Philippus de Monte. The text of this prayer-motet is drawn from Job 7:16-21. In the passage quoted, the famous suffering figure of antiquity bewails the miseries of man's life, and addresses himself to God: "Spare me, oh Lord, for my days are nothing..." The tenor sings continuously: "Sana me, domine" (Heal me, oh Lord). The motif consists of six notes, and appears alternately on *d'* and *a*,

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn. 6), p. 145.

<sup>19</sup> See my study *Music and Number...*, pp. 171-9.

<sup>20</sup> Contrary to Rose Mary Columbro, *op. cit.* (fn. 2), vol. 1, pp. 170-3, I see no reason to discuss the question whether or not the *partes* should be considered as two independent motets.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of the motet see my study *Music and Number...*, pp. 176-8.



## Ex. 6

es a- mi- ca me- a et ma- cu- la

es a- mi- ca me- a et ma- cu- la

es a- mi- ca me- a et ma- cu- la

es a- mi- ca me- a et ma- cu- la

es a- mi- ca me- a et ma- cu- la

always preceded by a two-breve rest. In the *II. pars* it is sung in retrograde motion, illustrating Job's words, "Why hast thou set me opposite to thee?" The *soggetto* is stated eighteen times. Honorius divides this number into ten and eight in reference to Jesus' healing of the crippled woman on the sabbath, as described in Luke 13:10-13: he thereby interprets eighteen as the redemption of the synagogue through the (Christian) Church.<sup>22</sup> Luke writes: "And he [i.e. Jesus] was teaching in their synagogue on their sabbath. And behold there was a woman, who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years: and she was bowed together, neither could she look upwards at all. Whom when Jesus saw, he called her unto him, and said to her: Woman, thou art delivered from thy infirmity. And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn. 6), pp. 151-2.

she was made straight, and glorified God." According to Honorius, the bowed figure and the number ten refer to the Law, while the healing of the woman and the number eight designate the grace of God. This interpretation by Honorius recurs in Pietro Bongo's compendium on the mystical significance of numbers, first published in 1583; here, the number eighteen stands for *liberatio a malo*, the deliverance from evil. The way in which the *soggetto* is presented in the two *partes* of Monte's motet reflects its two numerical components: "Sana me, domine" is stated ten times in the *I. pars*, and eight times in the *II. pars*.

The last case of a symbolically conceived number of *soggetto* statements is again by Josquin. His famous five-part setting of Psalm 50, *Miserere mei, deus*, has been the subject of numerous discussions. Although several musicologists have carefully described the remarkable nature of the tenor-part, no one has thus far offered a satisfactory explanation for its wonderful structure. Josquin divided the nineteen verses of Psalm 50 into groups of seven, seven, and five verses. While each verse is followed by the opening words of the psalm, the character of the composition resembles that of a litany. In the first and second *partes*, Josquin inserts an additional "Miserere mei, deus" in the midst of verses 1 and 13, thereby increasing the number of statements in these sections to eight and eight respectively. It should be asked, of course, why the composer decided on this structural 'irregularity'.

The *soggetto* appears in the three *partes* respectively in descending, ascending, and descending form, moving stepwise between *e'-e*, *e'-e'*, and *e'-a*. Whereas the tone *e* functions as finalis in the Phrygian mode, the nature of which offered the composer the possibility of strongly emotional writing, the last statement on *a* enables him to give the psalm an 'open', plagal ending. This effect may very well have been devised to express the hope that the prayer would be answered by God. It seems therefore reasonable to assume that the addition of the two "Miserere mei, deus" statements sprang from nothing more than a purely musical reason. However, there is one aspect that, in my opinion, should not be overlooked. Josquin's *Miserere mei, deus* is his only composition that we know (from a sixteenth-century poem) to have been written at the special request of Ercole d'Este.<sup>23</sup> Possibly the Duke intended the penitential psalm to be sung at his funeral. And that he may have wanted the piece to be connected with his name is made plausible by examining the following considerations.

Ercole's name is linked also with another composition by Josquin, namely the *Missæ Hercules Dux Ferrarie*. In this work, the patron is continuously 'identified' by the rigorous repetition of the *soggetto cavato* (see below). To me it does not seem impossible that Ercole gave Josquin some particular instructions when he commissioned the Mass. My supposition is suggested by the fact that, some time before 1485, the Duke engaged the sculptor Guido Manzoni to execute the so-called *Mortorio* (the Burial of Christ), with

<sup>23</sup> Cf. L. Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara 1400-1505* (Oxford 1984), p. 261.



Ercole himself and his wife represented as the figures of Joseph of Arimathea and Mary of Cleophe (see below). Likewise, in commissioning the Mass, he may have informed the composer that his name was to be made "a part of the fabric of the Mass" and should become "a counter-subject to the liturgical text".<sup>24</sup> Indeed, at a time when artists were usually obliged to include their patrons in the representation of any religious subject whatsoever, it is hardly likely that Ercole d'Este would not have insisted upon his name being incorporated in Josquin's setting of Psalm 50.

As Lockwood has observed, the continuously repeated polyphonic *soggetto* acts "as a symbol of Ercole's personal devotion, placing him figuratively in the role of the Psalm singer."<sup>25</sup> Taking into account Josquin's love for gematric constructions,<sup>26</sup> it seems possible to me that, in his setting of Psalm 50, he 'named' Ercole esoterically in the voice that performs the "miserere" motif. We may take it for granted that Josquin's *Hercules* Mass is intended to focus on the formal name of his patron. The gematric value of "Hercules Dux Ferrarie" – the name is spelled in this way in two of the Mass's oldest sources, Petrucci's *Missarum Josquin liber secundus* of 1505 and the Ms. Cappella Sistina 45 – can be calculated as follows:

H	e	r	c	u	l	e	s	D	u	x	F	e	r	r	a	r	i	e
8	5	17	3	20	11	5	18	4	20	22	6	5	17	17	1	17	9	5
										= 210								

On account of the surprising agreement between the number 210 and the 21 "miserere" statements we can safely conclude that the interpolation of the refrain in verses 1 and 13 appears to entail more than a mere musical significance.

#### *The soggetto ostinato in music in honour of the saints*

There exists a small number of compositions in which the *soggetto ostinato* serves as a hidden allusion to the single most conspicuous event in the lives of the saints in whose honour they were written. With the exception of the *Missa Stephane gloriose* by Pierre Moulu, the *soggetto ostinato* is in the form of the litany formula "Sancte (Sancta) N., ora pro nobis." This theme can take

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249. In his paper *Ercole's Marian Mass: An Anglo-Burgundian Source for Josquin's soggetto cavato*, read at the Nineteenth Medieval and Renaissance Music Conference, Oxford 1991, Christopher Reynolds has proposed "that the famous tenor of Josquin's *Missa Hercules Dux Ferrarie* makes a compound allusion, that it refers not only to the syllables of his patron's name, but also to a segment of Walter Frye's *Missa Nobilis et pulchra*." (Quotation after Reynolds's summary.) However, notwithstanding the fact that Josquin's Mass shows some motivic similarity with that of Frye, the obvious relation between Ercole's official title and Josquin's musical theme forbids in my opinion any thematic connection with other compositions.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>26</sup> See D. Heikamp, *Zur Struktur der Messe L'homme armé super voces musicales von Josquin Desprez*, in *Mf* 19 (1966), pp. 121-41; W. Elders, *Das Symbol in der Musik von Josquin des Prez*, in *AcM* 41 (1969), pp. 164-85; W. Elders, *Josquin's Absolve*, *quaesumus*, *domine: A Tribute to Obrecht?*, in *TVNM* 37 (1987), pp. 14-24.

on various musical shapes: an *ostinato recto tono*, a *pes descendens*, a *pes ascendens*, or a *canterians*. Obviously, composers aimed to stress as realistically as possible the particular type of martyrdom of the saint involved, and 'translated' the saint's most common attribute into a musical technique. In so doing, they converted the *soggetto ostinato* into a contextual sign that was understood only by the *connoisseur*.

The earliest example known to me of the use of the *soggetto ostinato* in this way is by Loyset Compère. His five-part *Gaude prole regia* dates from the beginning of the sixteenth century. The motet is based on the text of a sequence in praise of Catherine of Alexandria, a poem that probably originated in France or Flanders, and for which, up to now, no literary source has been found.<sup>27</sup> Appended to the sequence is the line "Sancta Catharina, ora pro nobis", from the Litanies of All Saints. The first tenor sings this same formula four times, more or less as a proportionally changing *take*. As Ludwig Finscher has noted, the second statement is sung in retrograde motion,<sup>28</sup> but he does not give a reason for this. Taking the text as the starting-point, I would like to propose the following explanation.

The particular section of the motet text that deals with Catherine's martyrdom is:

Laudes erumpit annuas  
Colens passiones tuas  
Duraque supplicia.

([The Church] utters the yearly praises,  
Commemorating your sufferings  
And cruel punishments.)

Being one of the most popular early martyrs, Catherine of Alexandria was highly venerated in France, the Low Countries, and England. The *Legenda aurea* tells us that she was of noble birth and extremely learned. After she had converted to Christianity she protested against the persecution of Christians under Maxentius II, who shared the imperial crown with Constantine, and had selected Alexandria as the capital of his part of the Empire. Much impressed by Catherine's beauty, the emperor vainly sought to win her hand. He then ordered that a new instrument of torture be devised for her. According to the legend, however, the engine failed to work. Catherine was then beheaded. Jacobus de Voragine, author of the *Golden Legend*, gives the following account of the event: "Thereupon a certain prefect commended the following plan to the furious king: in three days four wheels, studded with iron saws and sharp nails, should be made ready, and by this horrible device the virgin should be cut to pieces, that the sight of so dreadful a death might deter the other Christians. It was further ordered that two of the wheels

<sup>27</sup> Cf. L. Finscher, *Loyset Compère (c. 1450-1518). Life and Works*. Musicological Studies and Documents 12 ([Rome] 1964), p. 127.

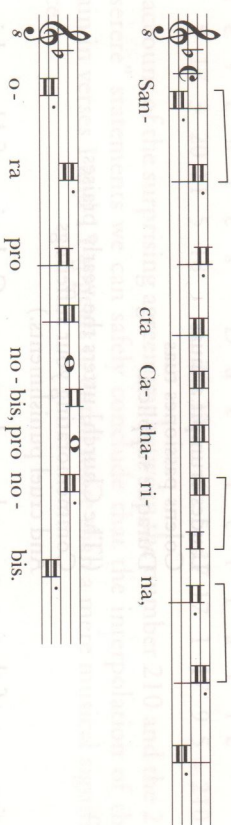
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.



should revolve in one direction, and two be driven in the opposite direction, so that grinding and drawing her at once, they might crush and devour her. But when the engine was completed, the virgin prayed the Lord that for the praise of His name and for the conversion of the people who stood by, the machine might fall to pieces. And instantly an angel of the Lord struck the monstrous mill, and broke it apart with such violence that four thousand pagans were killed by its collapse."<sup>29</sup>

There are plenty of examples of Catherine's depiction in paintings, manuscripts and ivories. Among the most beautiful is a painting by Hans Memling (Hans Memling Collection in the twelfth-century Hospital of St John, Bruges); another has been attributed to both Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus (private collection, Brussels).<sup>30</sup> A moving picture of Catherine's torture was made by Jean Fouquet in his Book of Hours for Etienne Chevalier. (Fig. 7) However, that which was so difficult to express in the miniature, namely the wheels' retrograde motion, could indeed more easily be 'painted' by the composer. Example 7 gives the first two statements of the *soggetto*:

Ex. 7



Here one can say that legend and reality are condensed into a single musical motif.

In as far as the treatment of the *soggetto ostinato* is concerned, Compère's sequence addressed to Catherine is closely related to the five-part motet *Tota pulchra es* that Jacobus Clemens non Papa dedicated to Margaret of Antioch. This should not surprise us, as, according to the *Legenda*, the life and martyrdom of Margaret was in some ways similar to that of Catherine. After her Christian conversion, Margaret was turned out of home by her father, who was a pagan priest. Thereupon she lived as a shepherdess, but was carried off to the palace of Olybrius, the governor of Antioch, who tried to seduce or to marry her because of her beauty. When she refused, she was cruelly tortured and thrown into a dungeon, where Satan appeared to her in the form of a

dragon. After he had swallowed her whole, the cross in Margaret's hand induced Satan's stomach to reject her, and let her out unharmed. She too was finally beheaded and taken up into heaven, where she was crowned.

Although her Legend was declared apocryphal by Pope Gelasius in 494, the cult of Margaret of Antioch became widespread at the time of the Crusades, and from then on, artists depicted her quite frequently. Her distinguishing attribute is the dragon. The Gruuthuse-Museum in Bruges possesses a fine sculpture from the end of the fifteenth century showing Margaret crowned and standing on the dragon. The hands, probably once holding a cross, are lost. (Fig. 8) Clemens's motet, first published in 1555 by Waelrant in Antwerp, is based on a compilation from the Song of Songs 4:7-8 and 2:13-14 that perfectly fits the Legend:

*I. pars*  
You are all beautiful, my love,  
And there is no stain on you  
Come bride, come dear one;  
Come, and you will be crowned.

*II. pars*  
Rise, my love,  
My beautiful one, my dove;  
Come, and you will be crowned.

The *soggetto*, set alternately in the *hexachordum naturale* and *durum*, is presented in the fifth voice (Ex. 8):

Ex. 8



In the *II. pars* this voice has the direction "Vade retro Satanas" (cf. Mark 4:10; Mark 8:33), which produces a retrograde version of the invocation "Ora pro nobis, sancta Margaretha". Surely, Clemens's technique reveals the story of this saint in a remarkable way.<sup>31</sup>

Our next example, Pierre Moulu's four-part *Missa Stephanie gloriose*, dates probably from the early 1520s. Stephen is the protomartyr of the Christian Church. His story is told in the sixth and seventh chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. After arousing the wrath of the Jewish legislative council in Jerusalem, he was taken out of the city and stoned to death. The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of Saul, who had consented to Stephen's death. In the Middle Ages, Stephen was the patron of innumerable churches, including several French cathedrals such as Bourges and Sens. The tympanum of

<sup>29</sup> *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*. Translated and adapted from the Latin by Granger Egan and Helmut Rippeger (New York 1969), p. 713.

<sup>30</sup> For a reproduction of this latter painting see *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization*. Catalogue of the Exhibition Masterpieces of Flemish Art: Van Eyck to Bosch (Detroit 1960), p. 100.

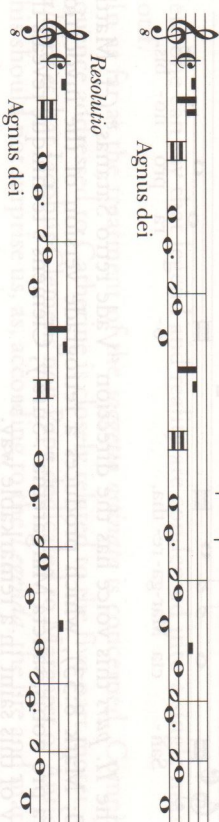
<sup>31</sup> Cf. K. Ph. Benet Kempers, *Jacobus Clemens non Papa und seine Motetten* (Augsburg 1928), pp. 41f.



Stephen's porch in Notre-Dame, Paris, depicts his torture in a very expressive way. He is also the theme of a series of frescoes by Fra Angelico in the Chapel of Pope Nicholas V, which marks the culmination of this painter's development as a Renaissance artist. Stephen's special attributes – one or more stones – are found in numerous representations. Sometimes they are stained with blood. By far the finest examples of manuscript illumination are the two miniatures in Jean Fouquet's above-mentioned – but unfortunately, subsequently dismembered – Hours of Etienne Chevalier. The double folio, that probably once formed the frontispiece, shows the donor and his patron saint praying to the Holy Virgin and the Child. In Stephen's right hand we see a large stone. The scene is a heavenly palace, with angels playing musical instruments. The same Hours also contains another miniature of the stoning of Stephen. A picture of Stephen's martyrdom that is contemporary with Moulû's Mass may be found in the Musée de la Chartreuse at Douai. (Fig. 9)

Circumstantial evidence suggests that Moulû was a singer of the French royal chapel. His Mass in honour of St Stephen may have been composed therefore in Paris. Its basic motif is a theme consisting of the first six notes of the sixth verse of the sequence *Christo inclita candida*, which was sung at the Feast of All Saints.<sup>32</sup> While these six notes form, literally, the 'corner-stones' of the musical setting, the text incipit of this verse, "Stephane gloriose", functions as the title of Moulû's Mass. As so often happens in settings of the Ordinary, the final Agnus dei is climactic: two additional voices are introduced, and they sing the six-note motif six times *recto tono* (first tenor) and six times as *pes descendens* (second tenor) (Ex. 9)

Ex. 9



Probably the earliest source of the Mass, the Ms. Cappella Sistina 55, copied during the years 1515-1527, gives not only the musical resolution but also a direction that reveals the composer's intention: "In Stephanum jactus lapis ut descendit ab alto. Hic gradibus sensus canon ad yma ruit" (As the stone that was thrown at Stephen came down from high, so this canon-part rushes down by degrees until the end).<sup>33</sup> Both the ostinato character and voice-leading of the tenor parts, as well as the visual appearance of the note-shapes,

<sup>32</sup> Cf. J.G. Chapman, *The Works of Pierre Moulû: A Stylistic Analysis* (Ph.D. diss. New York Univ. 1964), vol. 1, p. 153.

<sup>33</sup> The Ms. Rome CG XII.2 has "sensim" instead of "sensus".

must have reminded the singers of the stoning of the martyr in whose honour they were singing.

The subject of the two following compositions is Saul's conversion, the most widely represented of the Pauline themes. One famous depiction of this event is undoubtedly the fresco in the Cappella Paolina in Rome, executed by Michelangelo in 1542-1545. We have seen that the Acts of the Apostles relate how Saul officially witnessed the stoning of Stephen. Soon afterwards he committed himself to destroy the Christian community in Damascus.

The first Saul motet is by Christian Hollander, a composer of Dutch origin who, after he had been choirmaster at St Walburga in Oudenaarde from 1549-1557, joined the chapel of Ferdinand I. His six-part motet, *Saulus cum iher faceret*,<sup>34</sup> was published by Gardano in 1568 in the third book of his *Novi atque catholici thesauri musici*. The text is drawn from Acts 9:3-5, where Saul's conversion is described as follows: "And as he [i.e. Saul] went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew nigh to Damascus; and suddenly a light from heaven shined around him. And falling on the ground, he heard a voice saying to him: 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?' Who said: 'Who art thou, Lord?' And he: 'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the goad.' After being struck blind by the heavenly light, Saul's sight was restored in Damascus, where he converted to Christianity and assumed the name of Paul. The sextus sings the litany formula "Sancte Paule, ora pro nobis." The ostinato theme is presented as *pes descendens* in the *I. pars*, and as *pes ascendens* in the *II. pars*. The canonic directions are taken from Luke 14:11. In the *I. pars* it reads: "Qui se exaltat humiliabitur" (Every one that exalteth himself, shall be humbled); in the *II. pars*: "Qui se humiliat exaltabitur" (He that humbleth himself, shall be exalted). It is obvious that the voice which performs the *soggetto ostinato* should allude to the events described above: the descending motif represents Saul's humiliation; the ascending form symbolizes his conversion.<sup>35</sup>

The second motet is the six-part *Qui operatus est Petro* by Jacobus Vaet, in which the music and text should perhaps be accorded two levels of meaning. According to Milton Steinhardt, the piece could well be an expression of "the innermost thoughts and [suppressed Protestant] inclinations" of Vaet's patron, Maximilian II,<sup>36</sup> but in this present study I will deal with the motet's more obvious message only. The work uses the text for the Gradual of the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul: "He who worked in Peter for the apostleship, worked also in me among the Gentiles: and they recognized the grace that was given to me by the Lord Christ." The composer presented his motet to Maximilian in 1560. It was printed on a large parchment folio,

<sup>34</sup> There is an edition of the motet in *Collectio operum musicorum batavorum*, ed. by F. Commer, vol. 4, no. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Both Commer (see fn. 34) and Berner Kempers (cf. *op. cit.* (fn. 31), p. 42) are in error in giving only the direction: "Qui se exaltat humiliabitur".

<sup>36</sup> *A Musical Offering to Emperor Maximilian II: A Political and Religious Document of the Renaissance*, in SMw 28 (1977), p. 26.







According to Roman Catholic teaching, the Mass is, among other things, "a memorial in which the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ are sacramentally re-enacted; ... it is a sacred meal in which the community symbolically expresses its unity and dependence upon God ..."<sup>46</sup> During the Canon of the Mass the priest prays for the dead: "Be mindful also, O Lord, of Your servants and handmaids N. and N. who are gone before us with the sign of faith and repose in the sleep of peace ..."

Like so many people of the Renaissance, Ercole was proud of himself and his achievements. That he wanted to be remembered after his death is testified by the various portraits he had made.<sup>47</sup> In a painting by Dosso Dossi, the Duke is dressed in armour. In 1485 Guido Manzoni carved Ercole as one of Jesus's disciples: in the above-mentioned *Mortorio* (Ferrara, Chiesa del Gesù), the Duke and his wife are standing at the head of the tomb of Christ; he is represented as Joseph of Arimathea, she as Mary of Cleopha.<sup>48</sup> It is in particular this last representation that truly expresses his interest in Christian devotion and his vow to remain as close to his Creator as possible.

It is further important to realize that Josquin, in creating Ercole's Mass, devised a technique that was unprecedented in the history of music. The probably oldest source of the Mass, Librone 3 of the Duomo in Milan, gives at the tenor part a direction ("Fingito vocales: sequentibus signis") that tells the singers how they must derive their notes from the phrase associated with the part ("Hercules dux feraie"). The musical resolution that follows this direction is preceded by the words "Dilucidatio enigmatis" (The riddle will come to light). The scribe, thus, seems to stress that a performance of the Mass is made possible only after the dedicatee has been 'identified'. If we take into account the repeat of the Hosanna, the *soggetto* is stated altogether 47 times. It appears mostly in the tenor, but occurs also in the superius – at the very beginning of Kyrie I and Agnus dei III – and once in the altus at the beginning of the Sanctus; it is always stated in breves.<sup>49</sup> Attempts to sing the subject with the liturgical text do not produce a satisfactory result. Lockwood calls instrumental performance of the subject "a familiar alternative"; as "the most suitable alternative" he proposes that the tenor sing the words "Hercules Dux Ferrarie" throughout the Mass against the liturgical text. However, both these performance suggestions share certain disadvantages: an instrumental rendering of the *soggetto* would imply the uneconomical situation of engaging an extra musician to play the superius and altus parts

just for a few statements of the subject; allocating the words "Hercules Dux Ferrarie" to the *soggetto canuto* would cause an anomaly where it is used in retrograde form, as occurs three times in the Credo and three times in Agnus dei I. There is, however, a third possibility which is prompted by two of Josquin's motets, *Illibata dei virgo* and *Ut Phebi radis*. In these works, the tenor parts are constructed from solmization syllables; in the former motet these are "la-mi-la", in the latter "ut, ut re, ut re mi", etc. There can be little doubt that only a vocal rendering of the Guidonian note names in these works fulfills the composer's intention and contributes to the symbolic meaning of these parts.<sup>50</sup> If this same procedure were followed in the present Mass, the composition would include a hidden 'message' that was understood by the initiated, and, as the Duke also firmly believed, by God.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the conclusion seems inescapable that Ercole commissioned Josquin to write the Mass not merely to serve the glory of God, but also for his own glorification.<sup>52</sup> What is more, if, as I assume, he founded a private endowment to have his 'own' Mass sung as a memorial after his death, Josquin's music continued to confer on him an earthly 'immortality' as well as expressing a prayer for his soul. Considering what has been said above about the same composer's *Miserere*, my thesis fits perfectly with Ercole's presumed ideals.

Apart from Josquin's *Illibata dei virgo*, there are only two motets in which a *soggetto canuto* appears for reasons other than that of praise. These are by Lhéritier and Willaert, and both are preserved in the Ms. Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana, S' 35-40. Contrary to the motets and the Mass ordinary in which, as we have seen, this particular type of *soggetto ostinato* is introduced to identify the dedicatee, in Lhéritier's and Willaert's motets the themes that emerge from the text seem to have a primarily musical significance.

The text of Jean Lhéritier's six-part motet *Redde mihi letitiam* is taken from Psalm 50, verse 14: "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and strengthen me with a perfect spirit." The combination of this psalm verse with the *soggetto* "Nigra sum sed formosa" from the Song of Songs 1:4 may indeed be

<sup>46</sup> The New Encyclopedia Britannica. Micropædia 6, p. 672: 'mass'.

<sup>47</sup> See Lockwood, *op. cit.* (fn. 23), plate 7.

<sup>48</sup> For a reproduction see L. Chiappini, *Ferrara: Guida artistica illustrata* (s.l., s.d.), p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Lockwood has suggested that the twelve complete threefold expostions on *d*, *a* and *d'* may allude to the twelve labours of the mythological hero Hercules (p. 243). One might ask, however, why Josquin, if he indeed intended to evoke an association between the number of Hercules's labours and the restatements of his *cantus firmus*, 'interfere' with the regular threefold presentation of the *soggetto*, while inserting in the tenor part of the Sanctus (bars 9-16) an extra single statement of the *soggetto* on *d*.

<sup>50</sup> For *Ut Phebi radis*, see below, p. 86; for *Illibata*, see W. Elders, *Composers of the Low Countries* (Oxford 1991), pp. 80-1. In its recording of the Mass (EMI 7499602), the Hilliard Ensemble has partially adopted the suggestion given above: in the Credo the singers perform the tenor part while practising *solfeggio*.

<sup>51</sup> A diplomatic dispatch sent to Mantua on 7 December 1481 testifies to the practice of solmizing vocal parts in sacred music at the court of Ercole d'Este. The official report states the following: "While I was writing this, there arrived the messenger with letters from Your Excellency. On reading them, I dropped my own letter and went off to His Excellency the Duke [i.e. Ercole]. I found him together with some of his singers; and when they had sung for his pleasure quite a while, not a song but solmization syllables in a book of Masses, he drew me over to the window and leaned from me what Your Excellency has written to me ..."; see Lockwood, *op. cit.* (fn. 23), p. 136, where also the original Italian text is printed.

<sup>52</sup> In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford 1985), p. 2, Michael Baxandall gives evidence to show that, in Ercole's time, this was a common motive in patronage.



called "strange".<sup>53</sup> In trying to find an explanation for the use of the *soggetto* in the fifth voice, Rose Mary Columbro has suggested that it may refer to Savonarola. After his death, the Dominican friar was widely regarded as a martyr and a saint. Columbro's view suggests that the motet's main text should be considered as a prayer for "the joy which comes from a reformed world", and the *soggetto ostinato* as a reference to Savonarola "as the new messiah to bring this about."<sup>54</sup>

Interesting though this interpretation may be, it is, in my view, quite speculative. To be sure, Leeman Perkins suggests that Lhéritier may have had connections with Florence in the late 1520s because seven of his motets are included in the Vallicelliana manuscript.<sup>55</sup> But it must also be asked whether the inclusion of seven works can indeed prove such a relationship. As is well known from Edward Lowinsky's study on the historical position and origin of the manuscript, a number of the Vallicelliana motets "feature some of the most important political events of the time".<sup>56</sup> However, Lowinsky did not aim to give a full account of the artistic significance of the manuscript; consequently, the fact is easily overlooked that, of the 90 motets in the manuscript, 25 are devoted to the Virgin. In any case, the number of motets that may have been composed in connection with Savonarola's activities is rather small. Significantly, the manuscript also contains fifteen motets by Willaert and seven motets by Jachet of Mantua, two composers whose biographies have as yet shown no trace of a link with the city of Florence.

I believe that the deeper meaning of the *soggetto cavato* in *Redde mihi letitiam* cannot be found without taking into account the fact that the same composer used the text "Nigra sum sed formosa" for three other motets. The motet for four voices has no special elements that point to its dedicatee, but since medieval liturgy saw the bride of the Song of Songs as a symbolic representation of the Virgin, it may indeed have been composed in her honour. The settings for five and six voices should also be seen as paying homage to the Virgin: in the five-part motet the 44 statements of the words "et introduxit me [in cubiculum suum]" were probably inspired by Psalm 44, which, because of its Royal wedding-song character, according to Christological exegesis stresses the 'marriage' of Christ and Mary; the tenor of the six-part motet quotes the verse from the Introit of Septuagesima Sunday, and hereby introduces the allegory of Mary as the Second Eve.<sup>57</sup>

The question which now requires answering is why Lhéritier should have used a text from the Song of Songs – its liturgical function being that of an antiphon connected with the Common of the Virgin – as a contextual sign to refer to Savonarola. Had the composer really wished to devote his motet to

Savonarola, the incipit of Psalm 132, "Ecce quam bonum", would have provided a far more appropriate *soggetto*: it is told by one of Savonarola's early sixteenth-century biographers that the reformer invented a special tune for singing the words "ecce quam bonum"; they occur in many of his sermons and became the motto of his followers. Several other composers, including Verdelot, Richafort, Mouton and Gombert, used this tune in their compositions.<sup>58</sup> The motet's main text works perfectly as a prayer to the Holy Virgin, since she intercedes for the souls of the faithful. A second argument in favour of my interpretation is derived from the number of repetitions of the words "Nigra sum sed formosa". After the *soggetto cavato* has been stated six times in the fifth voice, this same voice continues with a free melodic elaboration of the theme, thus creating a musical transition to the end of the motet, where it joins the other voices in the final "alleluia". The transition from the persistently repeated pattern in an ostinato part to new melodic material is so unusual that it can best be explained in the context of number symbolism: the seven statements of the words "Nigra sum sed formosa" may well symbolize the Marian number seven.

The other motet based on a *soggetto cavato* is Adrian Willaert's five-part *Peccavi supra numerum*, the text of which was a responsory at that time. The *II. pars* quotes Psalm 50, verse 5, and takes its *soggetto* from verse 6 of the same psalm: "Tibi soli peccavi, et malum coram te feci" ("To thee only have I sinned, and have done evil before thee"). It is tempting to assume that the composer chose this particular psalm verse not only because it offered him the possibility of strengthening textually his musical 'prayer' for forgiveness of sins, but also for its numerical potential. The fifteen syllables and vowels of verse 5 produce fifteen notes, a number that should perhaps be associated with the rungs of Jacob's ladder. Genesis 28:12 relates Jacob's dream: "A ladder standing upon the earth, and the top thereof touching heaven; the angels also of God ascending and descending by it." The subject of Jacob's ladder appeared in early Christian art and was widely represented thereafter. Honorius associates the rungs of the ladder with the ascension of the fifteen virtues.<sup>59</sup> The text of the *I. pars* states: "I am not worthy to look to the heights of heaven because of the multitude of my iniquities." As Willaert's motet contains the word "numerum" (number) in the opening line, it seems worthwhile to look for some form of more disguised number symbolism and to study the motet's arithmetical design. In each *pars*, the *soggetto* is stated two and a half times. Remarkably enough, the note-values of the last *soggetto* are halved, obviously for an arithmetical reason: the *I. pars* is 77 bars long; the end of the last statement of the *soggetto* coincides with the 126th breve.<sup>60</sup> The number 77 can easily be explained with the help of the

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Columbro, *op. cit.* (fn. 2), vol. 1, p. 299.

<sup>54</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *Johannes Lhéritier Opera omnia* 1, p. xvii.

<sup>56</sup> E.E. Lowinsky, *A Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century Motet Manuscript at the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome*, in JAMS 3 (1950), p. 175.

<sup>57</sup> See my study *Musik und Number ...*, pp. 163-5.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. P. Macey, *Savonarola and the Sixteenth-Century Motet*, in JAMS 36 (1983), pp. 426-34.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn. 6), p. 150.

<sup>60</sup> For my argumentation in support of this calculation, see Elders, *Studien zur Symbolik ...* (fn. 4), p. 139.



Scriptures. In Genesis 4:24, Lamech says to his two wives: "Sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for Cain, but for Lamech seventy times sevenfold." The number recurs in the New Testament. In the Gospel according to Luke (3:23-38), the genealogy of Jesus contains 77 names, symbolizing the fact that mankind continued in sinfulness for 77 generations before the Redeemer appeared.<sup>61</sup> Finally, in Matthew 18:21-22, Peter's question: "Lord, how often shall my brother offend against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" is answered by Jesus as follows: "I say not to thee, till seven times; but till seventy times seven times." In view of the esoteric play with numbers in the *I. pars*, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that the truncation of the *soggetto* at the end of the motet was made to obtain the number 126. If this number is divided by seven, the result is eighteen. These two factors symbolize respectively the seven mortal sins and the deliverance from evil.<sup>62</sup> Luke 13:10-13 relates how Jesus healed a woman who for eighteen years had been possessed by a spirit. As we have seen above, the number eighteen in Pietro Bongo's *De mystica numerorum significatione* (Venice 1583) is interpreted as the deliverance from evil.

#### *The Hexachord as Soggetto ostinato*

The last symbolical form of the *soggetto ostinato* to be discussed is the reiteration of the hexachord pattern. There exist four motets in which the role of the hexachord is much more than simply that of the principal structural element of the composition. It will be shown that in these works the association of the hexachord with the *scala celestis* is the most obvious symbolic link a composer could use whenever he wanted to realistically represent the ladder motif or a related topic in the arts. He thus made the theme of the hexachord central to the textual meaning of his work.

In 1984, James W. McKinnon drew attention to a miniature in the Isabella Breviary painted by a Flemish artist at the end of the fifteenth century, and which has frequently been used today to illustrate works on music history, without, however, bearing the correct caption.<sup>63</sup> His study concerns the illustration of Psalm 119, *Ad dominum cum tribulaveris*, which shows, as Robert Wangermée puts it, musicians in the square before a church. By means of an investigation of some seemingly minor details, McKinnon came to the convincing conclusion that what we actually "observe in the picture [are] Levite musicians on the fifteen steps of the Temple at Jerusalem."<sup>64</sup> Clearly, the miniature exemplifies the way in which the medieval fifteen-step motif is connected with the fifteen so-called Psalms of Ascents, a series that begins with Psalm 119. As such it demonstrates one of the numerous means by which Netherlandish artists were capable of transferring either legend or

reality into symbolism.<sup>65</sup> Stair symbolism occurs, however, also in other forms.

As we have seen in the discussion of Willaert's motet *Peccavi supra numerum*, the ladder motif is first found in Genesis 28:12. Medieval mysticism developed Jacob's vision into a theory which stated that everyone who wanted to reach the summit of humility, and heavenly salvation, through asceticism here on earth, had to 'raise a ladder' by means of his good deeds. Thus the idea of 'the ladder of virtue' came into being. Since early Christianity could conceive of the way to heaven in no other form than that of an ascension, this motif soon appeared in works of art. In several Roman catacombs, frescoes depict the ladder as a sign of the ascension of the soul to heaven. Dante uses the motif in his *Divine Comedy*: "Within the crystal I saw a ladder set up, so far above, my eyes could not follow it."<sup>66</sup>

In Byzantine as well as in Western art the ladder of Jacob was transformed into a Marian symbol. One of the invocations in the *Lianna Lauretana* – the prototype of which, incidentally, was the great akathistos hymn of the Byzantine Church<sup>67</sup> – reads: "Scala Jacob, ora pro nobis." It occurs, for example, in Monté's seven-part setting of the litany. The symbolic modification of this sign is not surprising if one realizes that, according to the theologian Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-532), Mary herself "has become a ladder to heaven, since God through her descended to earth and men through her may ascend to heaven."<sup>68</sup> The *Scala celestis* is also found in fifteenth-century Italian poetry. Leonardo Giustiniani describes the Virgin as follows: "Maria Vergine bella, Scala: che ascendi, e guidi a l'alto cielo" (Mary, Beautiful Virgin, the Ladder: which one climbs and directs toward the highest heaven).<sup>69</sup> In 1495, Domenico Benivieni's study *La scala spirituale sopra el nome di Maria* appeared in Florence; it is an investigation into the mystical inferences resulting from his analyses of Mary's name. At about the same time the young Michelangelo – then a member of the Medici household – completed his *Madonna della scala*. (Fig. 11) Perhaps the first composition in which the hexachord pattern symbolizes the Virgin as the *scala celestis* is Josquin des Prez's *Ut Phebi raditis*.

The association of the hexachord with the *Scala regni celesti* may have been supported firstly by the fact that late medieval devotion to Mary recognized six upward steps towards the blissful throne of the Virgin,<sup>70</sup> and secondly by the normal practice of describing the Guidonian gamut in Latin as *scala*. In

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Meyer, *op. cit.* (fn. 6), p. 169.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 135 and 152.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *The Fifteen Temple Steps and the Gradual Psalms*, in IM 1 (1984), pp. 29-49.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), chapter 5: "Reality and Symbol".

<sup>66</sup> *Paradiso* XXI, 25-30.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. NGD 11, p. 74.

<sup>68</sup> G. Heinz-Möhr, *Lexikon der Symbole. Bilder und Zeichen der christlichen Kunst* (Düsseldorf/Cologne 1976), pp. 185-6.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Ottaviano Petrucci Caniti B*, ed. by H. Hewitt, MRM 2, p. xvi.

<sup>70</sup> See, for instance, the description of these six steps by Thomas de Villanova (1488-1553), preacher at the court of Charles V, in B. Schneycer, *Mariale. Ein Werkbuch für Marienpredigten* (Würzburg 1954), p. 129.



his explanation of the canonic directions for Ockeghem's motet *Ut heremita solus*, the German theorist Hermann Finck writes: "Then you examine each note and add to it the remaining *voces* [solimisation syllables] which are assigned to it in the scale."<sup>71</sup> A Latin epitaph on the death of Palestrina in 1594 even uses the Guidonian pitch-names as an example to describe how the composer's name ascends to the height of the stars: "Ut re mi fa sol la ascendunt, sic pervia coelos Transcendit volitans nomen ad astra tuum o Prenesino" (Ut re mi fa sol la ascend, in the same way your flying name, oh Prenestino, transcends heavens into the stars).<sup>72</sup>

Josquin's four-part *Ut Phebi radiis* has been the subject of studies by Virginia Woods Callahan, William Prizer, and Jaap van Benthem. Whereas Callahan primarily attempted to solve the "riddle" of the text,<sup>73</sup> Prizer<sup>74</sup> gave evidence that the composition should be associated with the Order of the Golden Fleece: in the third line the poem refers to Jason's quest for the golden fleece, and in line 13 mention is made of Gideon's test of the woollen fleece. Van Benthem made a numerical analysis to try to find an answer to the question of whether or not the motet was written for some particular meeting of the Order; he connects the piece with the sovereign Duchess Mary of Burgundy and the birth of Philip the Good in 1478.<sup>75</sup> Apart from uncovering the gematric values of the Order's emblem in some structural aspects of the text and music, Van Benthem also extracts the number 100 from the motet's 'low voice', which, since it symbolizes 'totality', is claimed to stress the special relationship between *Ut Phebi radiis* and the Order of the Golden Fleece.<sup>76</sup> In some respects his analysis is ingenious. However, as I will show in the following paragraph, the primary significance of Josquin's ostinato voice-parts is none the less the fact that they are connected with private worship.

The devotional character of this composition can be deduced from the nature of the tenor and bassus. These voices sing in canon the solimisation syllables ut, ut re, ut re mi, etc., until the whole hexachord is included, performing the tones as a *pes ascendens* in the *I. pars* and as a *pes descendens* in the *II. pars*. These groups of syllables are separated by rests of seven breves. The central themes of the text in the first and second *partes* of the motet focus respectively on the Virgin Mary who "rules over all that exists" (line 7) and on Jesus Christ, who was born of Mary without her "being violated" (line

<sup>71</sup> See F.E. Kirby, *Hermann Finck's 'Practica Musica'* (Ph.D. diss. Yale Univ. 1957), p. 206.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. R. Casimiri, *Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. Nuovi documenti biografici* (Rome 1918), p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Ut Phebi radiis: *The Riddle of the Text Resolved*, in Josquin des Prez. Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival-Conference New York 1971, ed. by E.E. Lowinsky (London 1976), pp. 560-3.

<sup>74</sup> *Music and Ceremony in the Low Countries: Philip the Fair and the Order of the Golden Fleece*, in *EMH* 5 (1985), pp. 113-53.

<sup>75</sup> *A Wife, a Wedding and a Worshipped Child: Josquin's Ut Phebi radiis and the Order of the Golden Fleece*, in *TVNM* 37 (1987), pp. 64-81.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 71-2.

12). Of course, the allegory of the dew on Gideon's fleece (line 13) should be seen as a "prefiguration of the Virgin impregnated by the Holy Ghost".<sup>77</sup> It is essential that, in interpreting the two lower voices, we call to mind the words of St Fulgentius, who, as we saw, compares the Virgin with a ladder. His allegory fits perfectly with Josquin's technique of the *pes ascendens* – underlining the text of the *I. pars*, which is a prayer to the Virgin in heaven – and the *pes descendens*, symbolizing that "God through [Mary] descended to earth", which forms the central theme of the *II. pars*. If *Ut Phebi radiis* can nevertheless be shown to refer to a particular event in the history of the House of Burgundy, it appears that Josquin, while conceiving the lower voice-parts of his motet, actually pursued two levels of significance, the first connected with the Virgin and Child, the second with the Order of the Golden Fleece.

Petrucchi's *Motetti libro quarto* of 1505 is the unique source for Josquin's *Ut Phebi radiis*. The motet is, however, generally considered an early work. It has its counterpart in Heinrich Isaac's five-part *O decus ecclesie* that Petrucci published without text in his *Motetti a cinque* of 1508. Two earlier sources of Isaac's composition are the Apel Codex (ca. 1490-1504) and the Ms. Berlin 40021 (ca. 1485-1500). The text is an ode to the Virgin, who is praised as an ornament of the Church and a pillar of God. Remarkably enough, the scalar structure is similar to that in *Ut Phebi radiis*; that is, the hexachord is stated with its syllables in additive fashion, first ascending and then descending, while each syllable group is followed by the equivalent of its own mensural duration in rests. Instead of Josquin's canonic imitation, we find that Isaac repeats the whole row. Here too, the tenor voice solmizes the hexachord in ladder figuration, thus evoking a symbol of the Virgin. This cantus firmus-like voice is set between four other parts that perform florid counterpoint. The texture as a whole gives the impression that the composer wanted to 'paint' the Virgin standing in the midst of colourful flowers. It is tempting to think of Isaac having written *Ut decus ecclesie* in emulation of Josquin's *Ut Phebi radiis*.<sup>78</sup>

Any doubt about the correctness of the foregoing interpretation regarding the hexachord's symbolic function is eliminated by considering another piece

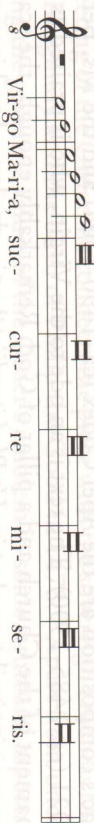
<sup>77</sup> Hall, *op. cit.* (fn. 38), p. 138. In the Middle Ages the theme of the dew on the fleece was associated with the Annunciation; see also J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London 1976), p. 86.

<sup>78</sup> There are two other motets that suggest some kind of rivalry between the two composers, namely Isaac's *Rogamus te, piissima virgo Maria* and Josquin's *Ilhbata dei virgo*. The first of these is mentioned in Gian de Artigianova's well-known letter of 1502 to Ercole d'Este, in which the agent recommended that Isaac be brought to Ferrara. It also states, among other things, that Isaac "made a motet on the motif 'la mi la so la so la mi' in only two days". Both works, published by Petrucci in 1504 and 1508 respectively, are devoted to the Virgin and are based on a solimisation theme. However, the text of Isaac's motet as presented in Petrucci's *Motetti* is certainly a contrafact. The incipit of the original text was probably "O praecleara"; see W. Elders, *Zur Frage der Vorlage von Isaacs Messe 'La mi la sol' oder 'O praecleara'*, in *Von Isaac bis Bach. Studien zur älteren deutschen Musikgeschichte* (Festschrift Martin Just zum 60. Geburtstag), ed. by F. Heidberger, W. Osthoff and R. Wiesend (Kassel 1991), pp. 9-13.



in Petrucci's *Motetti a cinque*, namely *Exaudi nos filia Syon* by Crispinus van Stappen. Only eight compositions by this musician have been preserved. In 1492 he was registered as *magister cantus figurati* of Padua Cathedral, and in 1506 his name appeared in the accounts of the *Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap* in 's-Hertogenbosch as priest and canon of Cambrai. Of the original five parts of *Exaudi nos*, only four are extant. The text is a prayer to "the daughter of Syon" who is extolled as a "fragrant blossom" and a "red hyacinth". She is asked to pray to her Son for all Christians and especially for the "illustrious dominion" of the Venetians. The tenor, which is silent for the first 34 bars, enters with the invocation "Virgo Maria", set as an ascending hexachord in breves. The six statements of the *soggetto* are equally divided over the two *partes* and have the following proportional structure – 3:2:1:3:2:1. The third and sixth statements are musically and textually extended so as to become an ascending hexachord and a descending one which accompany the text: "Virgo Maria, succurre miseris." (Ex. 11)

Ex. 11



Stappen thus produces the effect of a singer in the act of prayer, expectantly awaiting a propitious answer from the Virgin.

The fourth example of the hexachord as a reference to the *scala celestis* is found in Petrucci's *Motetti B* of 1502. It is the five-part *Virgo celestis* by Loyset Compère. In the text, Mary is beseeched to "look down upon" her dedicated servants. Helen Hewitt assumes that Petrucci intended this motet to open his second collection of polyphonic music.<sup>79</sup> The first tenor quotes the melody which was also sung to "Ut queant laxis", the hymn in honour of St John, and famous in the history of musical notation. Furthermore, this *cantus prius factus* must also be seen as an allusion to the important role which the hexachord plays in the second tenor of the same motet: the hymn "Ut queant laxis" designates the six tones of the hexachord by means of the initial syllables of the first words of its six lines. The *soggetto ostinato* is presented three times, and on each occasion in smaller note-values. The context described above shows that Edward Lowinsky had good reason to suggest a connection between the hexachord and the *scala regni celestis*.<sup>80</sup> In Compère's *Virgo celesti*, the hexachord recalls the image of the ladder along which the musicians, as Mary's servants, endeavour to climb to heaven.

Just how strongly the symbolic relationship between the ascending hexachord and the ladder appealed to the musical imagination becomes manifest when we study the source situation regarding an instrumental

piece, attributed to both Isaac and Alexander Agricola, although probably composed by the latter.<sup>81</sup> Eight sources are known of this long fantasia *a tre*, and most bear the indication "Cecus non judicat de coloribus", which refers to the use of coloration, and the 'blind' player's inability to discern it. Beginning in bar 42, the tenor performs the hexachord in the same way as in Isaac's motet *O deus ecclesie*, that is, according to the principle of addition: ut, ut re, ut re mi, etc. It is amazing that this piece, though intended to be played instrumentally, was transformed into a motet in four of the sources. In the Ms. Berlin 40021, the text is "Regali quam decet"; in the Bohemian Codex Speciahnk, it is "Ave ancilla trinitatis"; in the Ms. Leipzig 1494, it is "Gaude virgo singularis"; and in the Ms. Munich 3154, it is "Gaudent in celis". Since all these texts are devoted to the Virgin, the sole explanation for their presence must be sought in the fact that the hexachord reminded these musicians of the *scala celestis*.

<sup>81</sup> I am grateful to Martin Just for having brought this piece to my attention.

<sup>79</sup> See the edition of *Canti B* (fn. 69), p. 25.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. XVI.



IACOBVS VAET SÆ VOCVM.

Canon.

Iratus Petrus, Paulo contrarius exit,  
Sed Paulus Petri clauem, tandem obtinet enf.

Sanc̃e Petre ora pro nobis

Sanc̃e Petre ora pro nobis Sanc̃e Paule ora pro nobis

Sanc̃e Paule ora pro nobis

In

Qui operatus est

Fig. 10. The soggetto ostinato in Jacob Vaet's motet *Qui operatus est Petrus* (Vienna, Raphael Hofhalter, 1560).  
Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.



Fig. 11. Michelangelo, *Madonna of the Stairs* (ca. 1492).  
Florence, Casa Buonarroti.