

Kyrie “Cunctipotens Genitor Deus” *Alternatim*

by William Mahrt



kyrie IV, named for the Latin text to which it was once sung, “Cunctipotens Genitor Deus, Omnicreator, eleison,” is one of the most widely distributed Kyrie melodies. The inventory of manuscript sources of Kyrie melodies by Margaretha Landwehr-Melnicki¹ lists more manuscript sources for this Kyrie than for any other.² It was frequently assigned to Marian feasts, with the text “Rex virginum amator Deus,” and in its Marian assignment served as the *cantus firmus* for Guillaume de Machaut’s *Messe Notre Dame*. Machaut’s mass is the first complete mass cycle by a known composer (including Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei as a coherent set), but it stands in the context of a wide cultivation of polyphonic music for the Ordinary of the Mass. During the fourteenth century and

into the beginning of the fifteenth century, this music consisted mainly of single independent movements, unrelated to each other in melody or mode, much like the chants for the ordinary.³ Often these polyphonic movements were based upon a well-known chant, such as Kyrie IV.

One such a setting comes from the Trent Codices, a set of seven manuscripts copied 1445–75 containing an enormous repertory of sacred music.⁴ I

give it here because of its potential for use in today’s liturgy. It consists of three polyphonic sections, Kyrie, Christe, Kyrie. It is likely that these settings were originally performed just as their chant models were, as a nine-fold polyphonic

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¹ Margaretha Landwehr-Melnicki, *Das einstimmige Kyrie des lateinischen Mittelalters* (München: Mikrokopie G.m.b.H., 1954) a doctoral dissertation at the University of Erlangen cataloging all the Kyrie melodies in the extensive archive of microfilms of chant manuscripts assembled by Bruno Stäblein.

² See the table of melodies in my “Gregorian Chant as a Fundamentum of Western Musical Culture,” *Sacred Music*, 102, no. 1 (Spring 1975), 19–20; this was an address to the Sixth International Church Music Congress in Salzburg, August 1974, and this data was a basis for the selection of melodies for the *Liber Cantualis* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, 1978), pp. 17–54.

³ This repertory can be found throughout the series *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century*, 24 vols. (Monaco: Editions de l’Oiseau-Lyre, 1956–1991).

⁴ A selection of works from these manuscripts has been published in *Sechs [Sieben] Trienter Codices: Geistliche und weltliche Compositionen des XV. Jahrhunderts, 1.–7. Auswahl*, Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich, Bd. 14–15, 22, 38, 53, 61, 76, 120 (Vienna: Artaria, 1900–70).

Kyrie, that is, the single Kyrie section was sung three times, the single Christe, three times, and then the second Kyrie, three times. There are some settings, however, that indicate an *alternatim* performance—direct alternation between chant and polyphony: Kyrie (chant), Kyrie (polyphony), Kyrie (chant), Christe (polyphony), Christe, (chant), Christe (polyphony), Kyrie (chant), Kyrie (polyphony), Kyrie (chant). As is so often the case with liturgical manuscripts, well-established conventions are not indicated in the manuscript at all; thus for a Kyrie simply containing a single Kyrie, a single Christe, and a single Kyrie, the arrangement as a nine-fold Kyrie would be left to the singers, who knew well enough what to do.

The present Kyrie has such an arrangement, one Kyrie, one Christe, and another Kyrie in polyphony. Being based upon the chant melody for Kyrie IV, the second Kyrie differs from the first, as does the chant

upon which it is based. My own choir has sung this Kyrie for longer than I can remember, and alternated it with the congregation. The congregation often sings the nine-fold chant by itself and upon a

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few important occasions we then incorporate the polyphonic setting in alternation with the congregation. One might think that the congregation would resent having part of their performance co-opted by the choir, but the opposite is the case: this manner of performance incorporates them into a polyphonic performance, something they could not achieve by themselves. Their singing is most often more enthusiastic on such an occasion than it is when they sing the chant alone. They often comment on this.

There are several ways to arrange the alternation; among them: (1) direct alternation beginning and ending with the chant; (2) direct alternation beginning and ending with polyphony; (3) three-fold alternation, i.e., cantors singing the first chant versicle, congregation singing the second, and choir singing the polyphonic versicle; (4) direct alternation between choir and three soloists, using either of the schemes above. I have given the first arrangement here, though from what I have given, the others could also be done. (In order to make the alternation as clear as possible, I have written out the repeat of the polyphonic Christe versicle.)

The chant begins with a characteristic contour for a Kyrie—a prevalence of generally descending motion, appropriate for Kyrie melodies, since it suggests a gesture of deference and humility. The initial melody begins around the reciting tone, *a*,⁵ and after a gentle rise to *c*, begins a systematic descent to the final, *D*. The Christe has an even more consistently descending contour, moving downward directly from the reciting note *a*. The final Kyrie, however, takes a surprising turn: begin-

⁵ Pitches are here designated by the Guidonian system, i.e., upper case for the octave *A–G* completely below middle *c*, lower case for the octave *a–g* surrounding middle *c*, and double lower case for the fifth *aa–ee*, completely above middle *c*.

ning on the final, *D*, it rises a fifth, makes an additional rise to *c*, recalling the similar rise at the beginning of the first Kyrie, and, after dipping down to *E*, rises and ends upon the reciting note *a*. One might think this to represent a more hopeful turn after the deference of the first versicles, but it is an unusual turn, since it leaves the cadence on the reciting note, not the final. Theorists have designated such a note a confinal, to indicate its affinity with the actual final.

The polyphony is for two sopranos and one tenor. Their ranges are quite moderate, almost exactly the same as that of the chant—the two soprano parts have identical ranges, including one note below the chant range; the tenor includes one note above the chant range. Thus any singer who can accomplish the range of the chant can also sing the polyphony. A distinctive characteristic of the polyphony is that the two soprano voices cross frequently; this gives the texture an interesting variety, because even equal voices invariably differ slightly in timbre.

The chant melody is incorporated directly into the polyphony, but with some variety. It is carried by the first soprano in the first and last Kyrie versicles, but by the tenor in the *Christe*. It is polyphony only in the most general sense of the word, since the texture is completely note-against-note, accompanying the chant melody exactly, even without a suspension at the cadence. Still, the

crossing of the upper voices allows the incorporation of some contrary motion into the texture, e.g., in mm. 5–7 of the *Christe*, an element of polyphony.

As always the alternation of chant with polyphony, the striking contrast between the two is an advantage to both.

The theory of counterpoint in the fifteenth century prescribes beginning and ending with perfect intervals, and moving through imperfect intervals; it prohibits parallel perfect intervals, but permits parallel imperfect intervals.

Fifteenth-century compositions, such as the works of Dufay, show mainly imperfect intervals between the perfect beginning and ending notes of a phrase, with plenty of parallel sixths and tenths. Calculating the intervals between the outermost sounding voices of the present Kyrie shows a different pattern—nearly equal use of perfect (octaves and twelfths) and imperfect intervals (tenths, sixths, and thirds), more characteristic of the fourteenth century than the fifteenth. This suggests that by the time of the copying of the Trent Codices, this piece was quite old, or else in a notably archaic style.

The tempo of the polyphony should be commensurate with that of the chant. A quarter note of the polyphony should be roughly equal to the single notes of the chant. Tuning is crucial, especially of the perfect intervals, which do not tolerate inexact tuning. The sonority and the tuning of the piece are helped by singing fairly bright vowels. It is useful to rehearse two voices at a time, the chant-bearing voice with each of the other two voices. If a good balance between the voices in terms of both volume and tuning can be achieved for each of these pairs, then the sonority of the whole piece will be very good.

As always in the alternation of chant with polyphony, the striking contrast between the two is an advantage to both; as a listener told me after such a performance (of somewhat later music), the chant makes the polyphony sound so rich, and the polyphony makes the chant sound so pure. ♪

