

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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William Mahrt is editor of *Sacred Music* and president of the CMAA. mahrt@stanford.edu

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).

