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Wojciech Odoj
(University of Wrocław)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8487-3225

Johannes Ockeghem (c. 1420–1497) – a Mystic?[1]

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Ockeghem – a mystic?

> To characterize any artist as a "mystic" is, of course, questionable since the term "mysticism" is an extremely vague one. In a general sense, mysticism in art can be described as the more personal and more intimate approach to the representation of spiritual beliefs as opposed to the impersonal statements of dogma and doctrine. Rather than displaying a simple pictorial illustration of the facts of his/her religion or recording the unraveling of its history, the mystic artist will present a personal experience of it. (…) Mystic artist will attempt to convey situations that will seem immediate and real, not abstract and artificial, not illustrations but direct confrontations[2].

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[1] For my title I am indebted to L.F. Bernstein, *Ockeghem the Mystic. German Interpretation of the 1920s* [in:] *Johannes Ockeghem. Actes du XV Colloque international d'études humanists, 3–8 Tours février 1997,* ed. Ph. Vendrix, Paris 1998, pp. 811–41; also R.E. Fry, *Mantegna as a Mystic*, "The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs" 1905, vol. 32, pp. 87–98.

[2] J. Snyder: *Northern Renaissance: Painting, Sculpture, The Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, New Jersey 2005, pp. 167–170.

This quote refers in a direct way to Hugo van der Goes, a Netherlandish painter, who lived in Ghent in the second half of the fifteenth and at the beginning of the sixteenth century. His works, so rich in disguised symbolism, astonishing and even bizarre, make art historians assume that he was either an artist marked by his own self–searching or he was in some way related to the movement labeled mysticism (il. 1). This movement, called *devotio moderna,* so popular at the time came to the Netherlands from the Rhineland and undoubtedly affected many people[3].

Il. 1. Hugo van der Goes (c. 1440–1482), *The Vienna Diptych* (right panel – *Lamentation*, c. 1470–1479), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Public domain

[3] See *Devotio Moderna. Basic Writings*, ed. J. Van Engen, New Jersey 1988, esp. *Introduction* H. Obermana, pp. 7–35; J. Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. Devotio Moderna and the Life of the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 2008; B. McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, New York 2012; also, O. Gründler, *Devotio Moderna* [in:] *Christian Spirituality. High Middle Ages and Reformation*, vol. 2, ed. J. Raitt, New York 1987 ("World Spirituality", vol. 17), pp. 176–93.

For scholars dealing with painting and music, some works that were created at that time are hard to define and characterize. Because we still have not found a better solution to this problem, the works of such an artists as Hugo van der Goes and Johannes Ockeghem are seen as a reflection of that religious movement. Almost all musicologists who are focused on Ockeghem's style have tried to look at his music through the prism of religious fervor. Heinrich Besseler was the first who began to view Ockeghem's music as a reflection of Northern European pietism. Howard Meyer Brown states that it is more convincing to see Ockeghem as an artist whose style is a manifestation of individual searching and mysticism than to view him as a composer of works that are artificial, didactic, full of puzzles, and inaccessible[4]. Bukofzer also considers Ockeghem's music in this context, but for him it may be difficult to point out those musical characteristics and technical features that make Ockeghem a mystic[5]. One recent publication sheds a new light on the influence of mysticism on the composer of the *Missa Prolationum*. Bernstein's careful analysis of the intellectual environment at Heidelberg and Freiburg shows that Besseler's and Bukofzer's approaches to Ockeghem's works are no accidents. As a student, Bukofzer participated in seminars dealing with Cusanus's philosophy, while Besseler studied under Martin Heidegger, whose interest in mysticism was evident and dated from his earliest writings. They also seem to have been affected by German nationalism and the German antirationalist movement[6]. This rich intellectual background helped them to "resolve" the problem of irrationality in Ockeghem's music; when they did not see any other argument about what made the music unusual they appealed to mysticism[7]. Lowinsky summarized this approach thus: "Ockeghem has often been characterized as a mystic among composers, but on no evidence other than a subjective interpretation of certain

[4] H.M. Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*, New York, 1976 p. 80.

[5] M.F. Bukofzer, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music,* New York 1950, pp. 291–292.

[6] L.F. Bernstein, *Ockeghem the Mystic*…, pp. 811–41. The problem of mysticism in Ockeghem's music is also discussed in D. Greig, *The issue of Ockeghem*, "Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis" 1997, vol. 1/2, pp. 139–162 esp. pp. 141–142.

[7] A. Luko, *Ockeghem's aesthetics of concealment. Varietas and repetition in the Missa Quinti toni*, "Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis" 2011, vol. 1/2, pp. 3–24.

stylistic features of his music"[8]. In the latest view, Reinhard Strohm writes that "even in his most artificial creations, such as the *Mass Cuiusvis toni*, Ockeghem is surely not a northern, gothic mystic, as earlier writers have made out, but a French royal composer of the highest refinement and individuality"[9].

Questions arise. How far are we justified in linking Ockeghem's music with mysticism? Can we prove that the music represents mysticism, and that musical techniques are used as a result of mystical influence? Can we find an excuse for the "irrational" compositional procedures and "unpredictable" melodies he uses in his works? Who is Ockeghem? Is he an accomplished craftsman who just wants to show off his great talent for writing complicated canons, or is he a composer who expresses his profound faith musically and is searching for his own individual musical language?[10]

In general, Ockeghem's music is not characterized by any contrapuntal technique. The way Ockeghem creates melody gives an impression of improvisatory work in which long extended phrases overlap with each other and unfold without rational organization. The truth is that he seems to have been very reluctant to use imitation. The points of imitation either do not exist at all or there are just hints of imitation. Rather than clear imitative entries Ockeghem prefers "hidden imitation"[11] that occurs in the middle of the phrase without preparation (no rest prepares it). The texture of his works is non–imitative, and incidental imitation does not have structural functions. The rare points of imitation are usually very short and do not include more than several notes. Interestingly, many of the clearest cases of imitation appear in the

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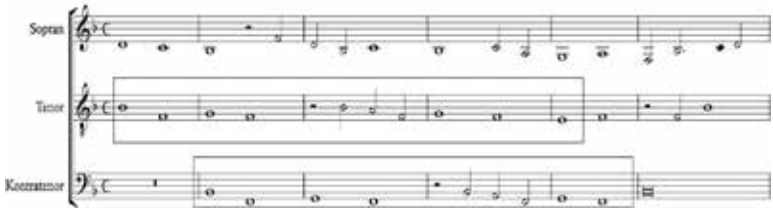
[8] E. Lowinsky, *Ockeghem's Canon for thirty–six voices: An Essay in Musical Iconography* [in:] *Essays in Musicology in Honor of Dragan Plamenac on his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. G. Reese and R. Snow, Pittsburgh 1969, pp. 155–80, esp. 178.

[9] R. Strohm, *The Rise of European Music, 1380–1500*, Cambridge 1993, p. 474.

[10] That Ockeghem's music contains some features that seem unusual does not necessarily mean that we cannot encounter similar ones in the compositions of Ockeghem's predecessors.

[11] I. Godt, *An Ockeghem Observation: Hidden Canon in the Missa Mi–Mi?*, "Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis" 1991, vol. 41, pp. 79–85; see also, J.E. Cumming, *From Variety to Repetition: The Birth of Imitative Polyphony* [in:] *Yearbook of the Alamire Foundation 6*, eds. B. Bouckaert, E. Schreurs, I. Asselman, Peer 2008, pp. 31 and 43–44; and A. Luko, *Ockeghem's aesthetics of concealment…*

Kyrie of some masses[12]. The middle section of the Kyrie of *Missa Quinti toni*, Christe, starts with a brief, nine–note canon in two lower voices. This paired arrangement is more similar to Josquin's style than the music written by Ockeghem's predecessors (Ex. 1).

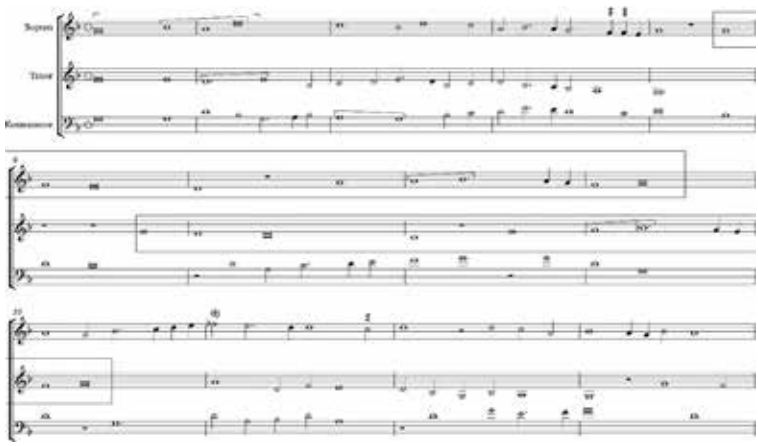


Example 1. Johannes Ockeghem– *Missa Quinti toni*, Christe (mm. 17–21)

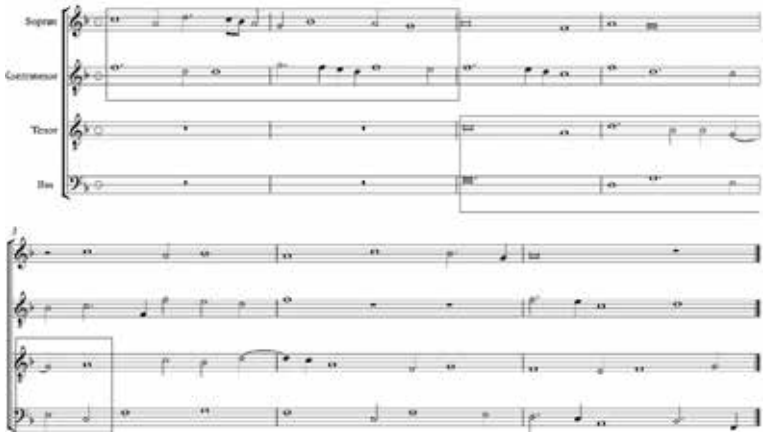
In the Kyrie of *Missa Sine nomine,* the imitation is transferred to two upper voices (Superius, Tenor). While the lowest voice is free and independent in rhythm and melody, two top voices imitate one another very strictly (11 notes) (Ex. 2). One of the late masses, *Missa Ma maistresse,* opens quite unconventionally, as all four voices take part in imitation of a three–note motif. First, it appears simultaneously in two upper voices, and then two lower parts take over. Although two voices of each of the pairs enter at the same time, lower voices seem to imitate the upper ones, as the composer changes the rhythmic scheme, either by introducing one additional note (contratenor) or by enlarging the duration of the first note (Bassus) (Ex. 3).

In *Missa Fors seulement* an imitation between two voices is obviously a result of taking over the melodic material from the model and keeping the borrowed lines in their original relationship. Other movements of some of Ockeghem's masses also contain such points of imitation, but their number is quite small. It seems that Ockeghem pays the same or even more attention to a "hidden imitation", in which entries of voices are not separated by rests and are hardly visible. The best example of this imitation can be found in the mass *Missa Mi–Mi* in which Godt finds over 20 examples of "hidden imitation". In *Agnus Dei* the number of notes taking part in imitation

[12] By distinctive imitation the author means the points of imitation preceded and prepared by the rest.



Example 2. Johannes Ockeghem–*Missa Sine nomine*, Kyrie (mm. 1–13)



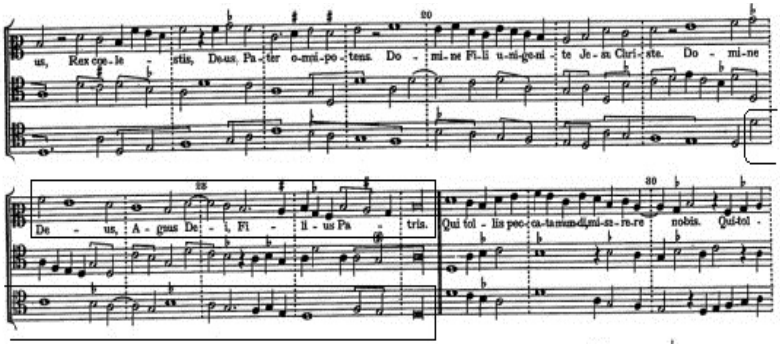
Example 3. Johannes Ockeghem– *Missa Ma maitresse*, Kyrie (mm. 1–7)

is really significant (17, 22, 25)[13]. But if we take a careful look at other sacred compositions, we will see that *Missa Mi–Mi* is not an exception. Almost all masses contain at least a couple of examples of this type of imitation. Ockeghem sometimes points out a place where a beginning of imitation might be found introducing a rest

[13] I. Godt, *An Ockeghem Observation*…, pp. 80–81 and also the table on p. 82.

before the entry of *comes*. But in most cases imitational passages are so hidden in a thicket of notes that they can pass unnoticed.

Ockeghem's use of "hidden imitation" does not seem to be a feature typical only for his music. Flemish composer Hugo de Lantins (fl. c. 1420–30), probably born in Liège, who was in some way related with Dufay, must have used that type of imitation in his works, as one of the examples of it can be found in his *Gloria* at *Deus*, *Agnus Dei*, *Filius*…, where a long passage of "hidden imitation" appears between two upper voices. (Ex. 4).



Example 4. Hugo de Lantins–Gloria, fragmentary (mm. 16–30) (from *Polyphonia sacra*, ed. Ch. Van den Borren, Burnham Wood 1932)

It must be remembered that none of Ockeghem's famous predecessors uses imitation as the constructional principle[14]. In Dufay's *oeuvre*, imitation plays an equally unimportant role. Talking about imitation in Dufay's compositions, Fallows never considers it as significant to the canon of Cambrai. In general, imitation appears to a limited extent and its occurrences can be seen just as hints. Obviously there are some compositions in which Dufay shows his predilection for imitation (e.g. in *Missa Sine Domine*, *Missa Sancti Jacobi*) but we cannot say that this is a common norm in his music. Binchois's sacred compositions also have very little imitation. There are about 60 extant sacred works by him. Most of them are rather simple, functional Mass and Vespers settings, for

[14] The author here is only considering the sacred music of Ockeghem and other composers. Imitation in secular composition in the time seems to have been used more frequently.

three voices in which a fauxbourdon style dominates. Of all sacred works just a few are rich in imitation. The Gloria[15], where almost all of the textual phrases are set to different melodic lines, starts with imitation between two different voices. Although most of the imitation takes place between two upper voices, there are also some points where other voices are involved. At the words *Domine Deus*, imitation appears between two the lowest voices (Superius II, Tenor; mm. 53–57). Although only a four–note motif is imitated strictly, the composer further follows the rhythmic pattern in both voices so that the relationship between these two voices is easily noticeable and clear. A similar use of imitation is at *in Gloria Dei* (Tenor, Superius II; mm. 105–109). Another piece with some clear points of imitation is the Sanctus[16]. At the word *terra* (mm. 56–67), two upper voices share the same melodic material and in general there is no other sacred work by Binchois that has so many notes involved in imitation. Johannes Regis (1425–1496?), a Franco–Flemish composer, a canon at the collegiate of St. Vincent, Soignies, also uses imitation to a slight extent. But again, we can come across some compositions in which imitation is used more systematically and seems to be an important constructional means. *Ave Maria… virgo serena* is a wonderful example of Regis's contrapuntal skills[17]. Surviving only in Petrucci's printed *Motetti a 5* (1508), the motet employs a few points of paired imitation. These duet passages may have later encouraged Josquin to emulate the opening of this piece in his famous *Ave Maria… virgo serena*[18] (Ex. 5).

Celsi tonantis, probably one of the earliest attempts to compose in five voices, opens with two parts singing simultaneously. After a brevis rest, *secundus puer* joins them imitating the top voice (6 notes are imitated strictly).

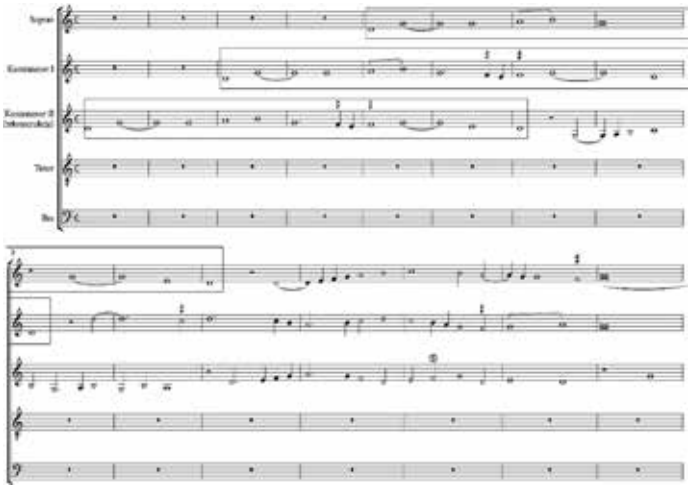
Another intriguing aspect is the very low range of some of the works. Ockeghem might have been one of the first composers who began to extend the written register of the bass part. In the most famous motet *Intemerata Dei Mater* and the masses *Sine nomine* (5vv) and *Fors seulement* (5vv), the bass part descends to C, exceeding the Guidonian hand, thus presenting a great challenge

[15] *The Sacred Music of Gilles Binchois*, ed. Ph. Kaye, New York 1992, pp. 93–97.

[16] *Ibidem*, pp. 66–70.

[17] J. Regis, *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. Lindenberg, vol. 2, American Institute of Musicology 1956, pp. 42–48.

[18] R. Strohm, *The Rise of European Music*…, p. 482.



Example 5. Johannes Regis, motet *Ave Maria…virgo serena* (mm. 1–15) (reconstruction: Theodor Dumitrescu)

to anyone who would like to perform these works. But what was the reason for the exploitation of such low registers? Just searching for new sonorities? There might be at least a few answers to these questions. Ockeghem was well known for his fine bass voice. It is possible that the works might have been meant to be performed by Ockeghem himself and by singers he knew very well. He must have had a choir that could sing such a low bass part. In the case of the motet, possibly Ockeghem's intention was also to express the lugubrious, dark, and mournful mood of the text of *Intemerata Dei mater*[19]. Undoubtedly, fifteenth–century composers noticed greater expressive potential in the setting of different texts for a motet. This change of interest resulted in exploring and searching for new texts that could give them greater inspiration. That is why the

[19] It is worth remembering that Conrad von Zabern (fl. 1470), musician, theologian, and priest, in his *De modo bene cantandi* (1474), while discussing requirements for good singing, writes that "for funeral services both in the Mass as well as in the Vigils and Vespers, one sings in a low and serious tone"; see *Readings in the History of Music in Performance*, ed. C. MacClintock, Bloomington 1979, p. 13. This remark would explain why, for example, in Pierre de la Rue's *Requiem* such extensive deep tessituras are used, but we appear still not to know why such low ranges are used in some other compositions of that time.

number of sixteenth–century motet settings of biblical texts was so considerable. The texts of the responsorium and lectio from the Night Office, the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, and even the *Song of Songs* also attracted the attention of fifteenth–century composers[20].

Ockeghem might have been the first, but he was not the only composer whose works show an interest in such a low register. Kreitner mentions some other of Ockeghem's contemporaries who were interested in exploring the low range of bass. In some cases, such a low exploration of the bass voice seems to have been accidental, but this does not refer to Johannes Regis's works of which three motets are worth mentioning here. Johannes Regis's music, somewhat neglected, is no less interesting than Ockeghem's. He seems to have been a pioneer in writing in five parts. He also showed an interest in the careful spacing of vertical sonorities, and in frequent and sharp textural contrasts. In *Ave Maria… virgo serena*, as has been noted above, he employs paired imitation very systematically. But probably the most innovative are his three motets (*Lauda Sion, Clangat plebs, Lux solempnis adest*) in which a bass voice goes down to D. All these motets are in five parts. In *Lauda Sion salvatorem* and *Clangat plebs*, the composer uses the wide range of D–c. In each of these motets the number of points where the bass reaches D is significant, and it is clear that none of the occurrences are accidental. Very often new melodic phrases in the bass part start with D, emphasising and underlying the low register of this vocal line[21].

Any answer to the questions put above seems rational but does not solve the whole problem, as we still do not know how to perform that kind of music. Kreitner, in his already classic article about low ranges in Ockeghem's sacred works, points out that the wide range of *Missa Fors seulement* does not enable any transposition up, as raising pitch makes the sopranos' singing inconvenient[22].

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[20] Sh. Burstyn, *Early 15th–Century Polyphonic Settings of Song of Songs Antiphons*, "Acta Musicologica" 1977, vol. 49, pp. 200–227.

[21] For very detailed analysis of Regis's motets' style, see S. Gallagher, *Models of Varietas. Studies in style and attribution in the motets of Johannes Regis and his contemporaries* [doctoral dissertation], Harvard University 1998; see also *idem*, *Johannes Regis*, Turnhout 2010.

[22] K. Kreitner, *Very Low Ranges in the Sacred Music of Ockeghem and Tinctoris*, "Early Music" 1986, vol. 14, pp.467–479 at 473.

What made Ockeghem write *Missa prolationum* and *Missa cuiusvis toni*? These compositions are still the subject of considerable disagreement among musicologists, as we do not know for what purpose they were composed and how to solve the technical problems to which they are dedicated. The first piece, written in all four prolations, is a series of canons; the second can be sung in all modes. One of the reasons why they may have been written may be didactic. The tradition of writing such compositions was rich in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Forms like *bicinium* and *tricinium*, very simple two and three part compositions, were written for teaching and practicing contrapuntal music in all clefs and church modes. Most of these works, sometimes written by such masters of counterpoint as Obrecht, La Rue, and Josquin, provided good pedagogical material. Although the term *bicinium* appeared for the first time in manuscript (*Jan of Lublin's tablature*) around 1540, many of these works were composed much earlier[23]. Obviously Ockeghem's masses are real marvels and stand out from these simple compositions, and their artistic value cannot be denied, but since we still do not know what they were composed for, they can be freely put in this context as the most sophisticated and unusual works of this type.

A very important problem that should be considered beyond musical ones is the chronology of Ockeghem's works and their attribution. Of all the works ascribed to Ockeghem, several still have the status of dubious work and their authorship is still unknown. Some scholars suggest a more or less convincing chronology, but they also admit that any propositions have only hypothetical and speculative validity[24].

Was Ockeghem a mystic? This question might remain unanswered. To call him so we would have to have more proof. The opening quote describing an artist as a mystic obviously tells us more about a painter or sculptor than a composer. While a painting

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[23] B.A. Bellingham, *Bicinium* [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. S. Sadie, London 2001, vol. 3, pp. 552–553.

[24] An attempt to confirm the ascriptions and to establish a chronology of some of Ockeghem's songs is made in D. Fallows, *Johannes Ockeghem. The changing image, the songs and a new source*, "Early Music" 1984, vol. 12, pp. 218–230. See also one of the most important publications dealing with the chronology of Ockeghem's works: F. Fitch, *Johannes Ockeghem. Masses and Models*, Paris 1997, esp. pp. 7–8.

may be a visual and personal representation of spiritual beliefs and experiences, a musical work may be also so, but its perception by each of the listeners can be diametrically different. The representation of a painting is always direct; its general meaning is a reflection of an artist's vision and is an illustration of an artist's thoughts. The interpretation of the meaning of music is always ambiguous. Understanding musical works is more or less subjective and dependent on the individual listener. Every time we encounter a work of art whose meaning is not clear and obvious, we try to find a classificatory drawer into which this work might fit. This is probably because the meaning of "the term mysticism has been a much abused and misunderstood, and it has in consequence become synonymous with vagueness or mysteriousness"[25]. Thus, it is not surprising that Ockeghem's music arouses a lot of controversy. Many renowned musicologists have described Ockeghem's compositions as irrational, mysterious, and enigmatic, and have seen him as a mystic[26]. The reasons they did so were mainly speculative and hypothetical, not rational and based on facts. Perhaps it would be more prudent to perceive Ockeghem's music as a simple attempt of experimentation, a result of his own musical invention, and as a way of searching for an individual style, and *Missa prolationum* and *Missa cuiusvis toni* should be simply considered as a kind of riddle and surprise for performers as well as listeners. Katelijne Schiltz writes that musical riddles were inscribed in the general taste for the enigmatic in Renaissance culture. "Composers reveled in wrapping their music in an enigmatic guise and leaving it up to the performers to figure out how to interpret it. They deliberately complicated their musical texts in order to engage the performer in an insiders' intellectual game, process of obfuscation, discovery and delight"[27]. Ockeghem might have been a mystic, but first of all he was a composer and singer who also attempted to introduce some of his own

[25] A.E. Bye, *The Mystical Interpretation of Art*, "The Sewanee Review" 1916, vol. 2, pp. 177–192. Words like strange, mysterious, vague or remote are often used to describe works of art deemed as being created under the influence of such recondite ideas as mysticism; see for instance R.E. Fry, *Mantegna as a Mystic*…, pp. 87–98.

[26] See for example, A. Atlas, *Renaissance Music*, New York 1998, p. 156, and H.M. Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*…, p. 73.

[27] K. Schiltz, *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance,* Cambridge 2015, pp. 2–3.

individual features into music. As we have seen, Ockeghem was not always the only one to introduce changes or innovations unknown in the works of other composers. Looking at him through the prism of these composers, Ockeghem's music emerges as a good example of all those changes that were characteristic for the time.

Streszczenie

Johannes Ockeghem (ok. 1420–1497) – mistykiem?

Bardzo często sugerowano, że wyjątkowa twórczości Johannesa Ockeghema była być może odbiciem mistycyzmu łączonego w XV w. z ruchem religijnym znanym jako *devotio moderna*. Ponieważ jednak trudno to twierdzenie udowodnić, bardzo często zgłaszano do tej teorii zastrzeżenia. Artykuł jest próbą ukazania, że muzyka Ockeghema – mimo swojej oryginalności – ma również wiele cech występujących w utworach innych kompozytorów działających w XV w. Podobnie jak jego rówieśnicy Ockeghem hołdował idei różnorodności jako wiodącej w tamtym czasie zasadzie estetycznej. Stosował także tzw. ukrytą imitację i eksperymentował z niskim rejestrem głosu basowego. Patrząc zatem na twórczość Ockeghema przez pryzmat dzieł innych kompozytorów działających w XV w., jego twórczość wydaje się być dobrym przykładem wszystkich ważnych tendencji i zmian, które były tak charakterystyczne dla kultury muzycznej tamtych czasów.