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Caput Mass

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Caput Mass

One of the most popular masses of the 15th century, surviving complete or in part in seven known English and continental sources, the *Missa Caput* is now thought to be the work of an unnamed English composer writing in the later 1430s or early 1440s. It is a cyclic mass whose five movements are unified both by a motto beginning and by the use of the same melody as structural *cantus firmus* in the tenor voice. Its name is taken from that *cantus firmus*, which is derived from a lengthy melisma on the word "caput" at the end of the responsory *Venit ad Petrum*, a plainsong sung at the Mandatum Ceremony on Holy Thursday in the medieval English Sarum rite. In each movement this melody is presented in its entirety twice, first in ternary mensuration and then in binary mensuration. Long believed to be a quintessential work by the leading continental composer of the era, Guillaume Dufay (ca. 1397-1474), the *Missa Caput* is now believed to be the "lost English Caput" hypothesized by Bukofzer. The attribution to Dufay, firmly set aside in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is still encountered in some more recent works of scholarship.

The historical significance of this masterwork is threefold. First, source evidence suggests that the *Missa Caput* took pride of place among a major group of anonymous English masses that circulated together on the Continent in the later 1440s and 1450s, including *Salve sancta parens*, *Quem malignus spiritus*, *Fuit homo*, and perhaps also *Veterem hominem*. Second, in a chain of direct emulation (and perhaps homage), the English Caput was drawn on as a model for Caput masses by two of the leading continental composers of the second half of the 15th century, Johannes Ockeghem (ca. 1410-1497) and Jacob Obrecht (ca. 1450-1505). Finally, the *Missa Caput* has a structural twin in another anonymous English mass cycle, the *Missa Veterem hominem*. There are other English mass twins as well, perhaps taking their point of departure from the *Caput/Veterem* pair, and it is believed this English practice was the stimulus for similar pairings by continental mass composers after 1450.

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