

The Reading Rota and Its Editors

No piece of medieval music was printed, scored and argued over by English antiquaries as often as the six-voice rota *Sumer is icumen in*. It survives on a single leaf, fol. 11v of the miscellany that Humfrey Wanley described for the Earl of Oxford around 1709 and that is now British Library, Harley MS 978. Wanley called it the oldest piece of its kind he had seen. Between Sir John Hawkins's *General History* of 1776 and the article that William Smyth Rockstro wrote for George Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the rota went through at least five scores, each claiming to correct the last.

This chapter follows that sequence of editions and tests it at three places where the editors disagreed. The music examples are new transcriptions, and their critical apparatus stands in the notes: each entry gives the bar and the note, the reading adopted, a closing bracket, and the readings of the other witnesses.

The witnesses and this edition

Four witnesses are cited. **H** is the manuscript. **Hw** is the score in the first volume of Hawkins's *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776). **Bu** is the score in the second volume of Charles Burney's *General History of Music* (1782). **Ro** is Rockstro's solution of the canon, printed with the first part of his article in the third volume of Grove's *Dictionary*.¹

The examples follow Ro in pitch, clefs and note values, since Rockstro is the only editor of the period who explains every substitution he made. The manuscript, he writes, uses only a C clef, the *B rotundum*, square black notes

¹ W. S. Rockstro, "Sumer is icumen in", in G. Grove (ed.), *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, iii, 765–768, continued in iv, 1–3 (London: Macmillan, 1900 printing). The score, iii, 766–767, is cited from the Wikisource transcription of that printing.

with tails, one square note without a tail, and black lozenges. He renders a tailed note as a dotted semibreve when it is perfect and as a semibreve when it is imperfect, the untailed square note as a semibreve, and the lozenges as minims, under a signature of perfect time with the lesser prolation, “closely corresponding with the Signature 3-2 in modern Music”.² The readings of H, Hw and Bu below are those that Rockstro reports. This chapter has not collated the two eighteenth-century prints afresh, and where Rockstro is silent, the apparatus is silent too.

The first phrase and a corrected note

EXAMPLE 3.1 · CANTUS I, BARS 1-7, WITH THE ENGLISH AND LATIN TEXTS

Sum - er is i - cum - en in, Lhud - e
Per - spi - ce Chri - sti - co - la, que dig -

5
sing cuc - cu.
- na - ci - o.

The opening is the best-documented phrase of the rota, because Rockstro returned to the leaf itself in the second part of his article and listed the erasures he could see. The scribe corrected his own work in the same ink, and the first correction falls on the second note.³ Rockstro took the erasures as improvements made while the piece was being written down rather than as repairs of a faulty copy, and used them to support his view that the canon grew out of a popular tune that a trained musician adjusted until its phrases fitted against one another.

Two further decisions are visible in bars 2 and 4. The Latin text is printed in full where the manuscript abbreviates the name of Christ,⁴ and the single

² Ro, iii, 765. The tailed lozenge on the first note of *in* is the one exception (see the note on bar 4).

³ **b. 1, n. 2 E**] F H before correction (“The second note on Stave 1 was originally an F”, Ro, iv, 1). The reading before correction is encoded as a variant in Example 3.1.

⁴ **b. 2, n. 2 – b. 4, n. 1** *Chri-sti-co-la*] abbreviated with the Greek letters *chi* and *rho* H, Ro. Expanded as Rockstro glosses it, *Christicola* (iii, 765).

tailed lozenge under the word *in* becomes a dotted minim and a crotchet.⁵ The flat in the signature stands for the *B rotundum* of the manuscript, which Rockstro reads as a B flat throughout.⁶

The pes

EXAMPLE 3.2 · PES, BARS 1–8, AS SCORED BY ROCKSTRO

The musical score for Example 3.2 shows the Pes in bars 1–8. It is written in 3/2 time and features four voices. The lyrics are "Sing cuc - cu nu. Sing cuc -". The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains bars 1–6, and the second system contains bars 7–8. The lyrics are distributed across the voices: the top voice sings "Sing cuc - cu nu." and "Sing cuc -", while the bottom voice sings "Sing cuc - cu." and "Sing cuc -".

Below the four voices of the canon the manuscript writes two short parts to be sung as a ground, each to the words *Sing cuccu nu*. The Latin rubric opens *Hanc rotam cantare possunt quatuor socii*: four companions can sing the round, not counting those who hold the pes. Each new voice begins “at the first note after the cross”, which Ro marks over bar 5. The first pes is repeated *faciens pausacionem in fine*, the second *pausans in medio et non in fine*.⁷ Ro follows the rubric exactly: the first pes rests in bar 8, the second in bar 4, so that one of the two lower voices is always sounding.

The pes is also where the eighteenth-century scores went most visibly wrong. According to Rockstro, Hawkins misread both of its ligatures and printed the passage incorrectly at every repetition; Burney corrected the

⁵ **b. 4, nn. 1–2** dotted minim, crotchet] one lozenge with a tail *H*, the only tailed lozenge in the manuscript, which Rockstro could “scarcely conceive to be accidental” (iii, 765).

⁶ **bb. 1–7, signature** B flat] *B rotundum H*. The flat is printed in the signature, as in Ro.

⁷ The rubric is quoted from the transcription and translation in the Wikipedia article “Sumer is icumen in”, which also gives the folio. Rockstro scores the canon “in exact accordance with the Latin directions” (iii, 765) but does not print them.

mistake.⁸ Neither ligature can be shown in a modern score, and Example 3.2 resolves both into separate notes, as Ro does.

Rockstro's own analysis of the part-writing begins from this score. The fourth, sixth, seventh, eighth and twenty-fourth bars, he observes, are in strict two-part counterpoint "of irreproachable purity", while the passage from bar 9 to bar 10 gives consecutive fifths between the first and third voices of the canon, and bars 37 to 39 three consecutive fifths between the first cantus and the second voice of the pes.⁹ For Rockstro the mixture of styles was the strongest argument for a melody older than its harmony.

The question of date

The dates proposed for the leaf say as much about the editors as about the manuscript. Hawkins placed it in the middle of the fifteenth century, arguing that its notation was the *cantus figuratus* he credited to John Dunstable, who, Hawkins wrote, died in 1455; Rockstro called the reasoning an anachronism "absolutely worthless".¹⁰ Burney thought the piece not much later than the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Joseph Ritson referred the manuscript to the middle of the thirteenth, and Thomas Busby, reprinting Burney's score note for note in 1819, returned it to the fifteenth.

The decisive arguments came from palaeography. In 1855 William Chappell published a coloured facsimile in *Popular Music of the Olden Time* and later argued that the leaf was written at Reading Abbey by a monk named John of Fornsete around 1226. In April 1862 Sir Frederick Madden noted on a flyleaf of the volume that the whole was of the thirteenth century and that its earlier part had been written at Reading about 1240, a date the Palaeographical Society adopted for its facsimile of 1878. On the Continent, Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1788), August Wilhelm Ambros (1862 and 1868) and Edmond de Coussemaker (1865) all wrote on the rota without seeing the

⁸ **Pes, bb. 1–8** both ligatures misread at every statement *Hw*; corrected *Bu* (Ro, iii, 765). Rockstro does not say how Hawkins read them, so no variant is encoded.

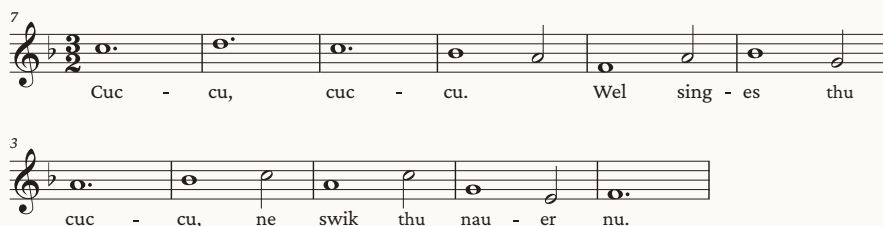
⁹ Ro, iv, 2. The bar numbers refer to Rockstro's score and to the examples of this chapter.

¹⁰ Ro, iii, 765. Rockstro dates Hawkins's first volume 1770; the *General History* appeared in 1776.

manuscript, a point Rockstro makes against each of them in turn.¹¹ A more recent study puts the copying between 1261 and 1264.¹²

“Cuccu” in bar 40

EXAMPLE 3.3 · CANTUS I, BARS 37–47



The last passage of the tune shows how an error could travel. Hawkins and Burney, Rockstro reports, both print a G where the manuscript has an A in bar 40, on the second syllable of *cuccu*, and they do so each time the phrase returns in a new voice.¹³ Against Hawkins’s faulty pes the G passes; against Burney’s corrected pes it makes what Rockstro calls “a horrible discord”. The variant is encoded in the source of Example 3.3 as a reading of Hw and Bu, while the engraved staff shows the lemma.

Both historians also fitted the words to the notes differently from the manuscript from bar 41 onwards, at *Wel singes thu cuccu, ne swik thu nau er nu*.¹⁴ Rockstro gives no details of their underlay, and the example therefore records only the fact. The one modern copy Rockstro knew went further and left out the pes, reducing the rota to four parts.

Set in Crimson Pro, Cormorant Garamond and Source Sans 3 (SIL OFL); music in Leipzig, engraved by Verovio · Text: original, CC BY 4.0 · Music: *Sumer is icumen in* (13th century), after W. S. Rockstro’s score in *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, iii, 766–767 (public domain)

¹¹ Ro, iii, 768, and iv, 1, citing Forkel, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik*, ii, 490–500; Ambros, *Geschichte der Musik*, ii, 473–475; Coussemaker, *L’Art harmonique*, 144.

¹² D. Wulstan, “‘Sumer is icumen in’: A Perpetual Puzzle-Canon?”, *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 9 (2000), 1–17, at 8. Wulstan proposes W. de Wycombe as the scribe.

¹³ **b. 40, n. 2 A**] G Hw, Bu (and Busby 1819, after Bu), at every entry of the phrase (Ro, iii, 765). Encoded as a variant in Example 3.3.

¹⁴ **bb. 41–47, underlay** as H] text placed otherwise under the notes Hw, Bu (Ro, iii, 765).