

1 Aspects of form in Orlando di Lasso's Magnificat settings

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The fundamental, text-generated contour of polyphonic Magnificat settings in the late sixteenth century, familiar to most students of that era's music, has recently been outlined in the first chapter of David Crook's exemplary new study of Lasso's Magnificats.¹ However, since virtually all vocal music ultimately takes its form from its text, and since form is the topic of this essay, it may be useful to review that contour before going into the specifics of form itself.

The Magnificat is the closing element at Vespers, belonging to the species of ritual lyrics of scriptural origin known in the Roman rite as "canticles." These lyrical texts, which resemble psalms in their devotional, often ecstatic, tone, also resemble psalms in having individual verses of bipartite structure – that is, each verse has two parts, generally of parallel or appositive content. Though these two parts are often of unequal length, it is customary for the sake of brevity to refer to them as "halves." The text of the Magnificat comes from Luke 1: 46–55. To these ten verses of Scripture are added, in liturgical use, the two verses of the standardized Lesser Doxology ("Gloria Patri et Filio . . . et in saecula saeculorum. Amen"), so that the text of the sixteenth-century Magnificat has, in all, twelve verses.

At Vespers on any given day an antiphon proper to the day is sung before the chanting of the Magnificat, and again after it. The antiphon's text, appointed to a particular day, is sung to its own tune in one of the eight modes of plainchant. The repertory of plainchant psalmody provides a set of eight standardized "Magnificat tones," and the twelve verses of the Magnificat are chanted to whichever of these melodic formulas corresponds to the mode of the Magnificat-antiphon proper to Vespers on that day.

¹ David Crook, *Orlando di Lasso's Imitation Magnificats for Counter-Reformation Munich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 3–14.

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Initial flourish Reciting tone Medial flourish Reciting tone Terminal flourish

9. Su - sce - pit Israel pu - e - rum su - um, recordatus misericor - di - ae su - ae.
 10. Sic - ut lo - cutus est ad pa - tres no - stros, Abraham et semini ejus in sae - cu - la.

Example 1.1: Magnificat, tone 8, verses 9 and 10

Magnificat tones consist of a single, modally characteristic pitch, called the “reciting tone,” to which most of the text in a given verse is chanted. It is notated in indeterminate length so that it can be used to sing any number of syllables. This reciting tone has an identifying tessitura characteristic of the mode with which it is associated (i.e., tone 1 with mode 1, tone 2 with mode 2 and so on). The characteristic reciting tone is preceded by an equally characteristic opening melodic flourish. A medial flourish occurs between the first appearance of the reciting tone and its continuation in the second half of the verse; and a terminating flourish closes the verse. For example, two successive verses chanted to tone 8, with its reciting tone on c' , preceded, interrupted and followed by the initial, medial and terminal flourishes, would be written as in Example 1.1.

The intimate connection between the mode of the antiphon and the Magnificat tone directly affects polyphonic settings based on them. In Lasso’s time it was already a long-standing custom that such settings would use one of the eight Magnificat tones as a *cantus firmus*. The dimensions and structure of Magnificat tones determine the form and, less directly, the dimensions of polyphonic Magnificat settings.

Relatively few polyphonic Magnificats of the period are composed as a single long motet set in polyphony throughout. More often we find *alternatim* Magnificats, i.e., those with the verses sung to chant and polyphony in regular alternation. Lasso left no settings of the odd-numbered verses; in all but four of his Magnificats he set only the even-numbered verses in polyphony, leaving the odd-numbered verses to be performed in chant or on the organ.² In doing so he followed the prevalent custom of Magnificat composition of his time. Settings of only the six even-numbered verses

² The four exceptions: Nos. 35, 64, and 65 (a8), and 102 (a10). All employ *cantus-firmus* technique. Reference to specific Lasso Magnificats, here and subsequently, is to the complete edition in *SWNR*, vols. 13–17.

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greatly outnumber those of only the odd-numbered verses in sixteenth-century Magnificat settings.³ A reason for this preference for the even-numbered verses might be that setting the even-numbered verses has two advantages: first, in intoning the first verse, the cantor and his small choir of chant singers can give the pitch at the start and reinforce the relationship to the mode of the preceding antiphon; and second, a setting that concludes in polyphony makes a more impressive close than a quieter (and possibly anticlimactic) close in plainchant. The distinction between this primarily esthetic consideration, in contrast to the routinely utilitarian purpose that the Magnificat served as accompaniment to a ritual act, is central to this study.

Whatever the disposition of the verses set in polyphony, the Magnificat tone determined to a significant degree their tonal dimensions (cleffing and tessitura, the appropriate tonal frame and modal final); more to the point of the present study, the text provides the backbone of the structure upon which the monophonic verses were sung, and upon which polyphonic settings were traditionally made. The tones determine the dimensions and structure of the polyphony, so to speak, as the dimensions and structure of a boat's keel determine the structure of the boat.⁴ Table 1.1 represents this outline, which constitutes the norm for almost all Lasso's Magnificat settings.

In the ninety-seven *alternatim* Magnificats credibly ascribed to Lasso, two choirs of unequal size normally performed in alternation: the *schola cantorum*, a group of four or five singers trained in plainsong, chanted the Magnificat-antiphon and sang the odd-numbered verses of the Magnificat (unless these were played on the organ – see below); the choir, made up of some twelve to twenty-four trained specialists, sang the six even-numbered polyphonic verses.⁵

Original sources for Lasso's *alternatim* Magnificats contain only the six polyphonic, even-numbered verses ascribed to him. The scribes and

³ See Winfried Kirsch, *Die Quellen der mehrstimmigen Magnificat- und Te Deum Vertonungen bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1966), p. 44.

⁴ The history of polyphonic Magnificat settings from their beginnings in the fifteenth century is summarized in *MGG*, 8, cols. 1484–5, and in *New Grove*, s.v. "Magnificat." ⁵ Cf. *SWNR*, vol. 13, pp. xi–xii.

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Table 1.1 Overall form in Lasso’s Magnificats

Verses given here in normal type are sung in plainsong (Schola cantorum)
<i>Verses given here in italics are sung in polyphony (Choir)*</i>
(A) ANTIPHON (Schola cantorum)
(B) MAGNIFICAT Schola cantorum (chant) alternating with <i>Choir (polyphony)</i>
Verse 1: Magnificat / anima mea Dominum (12)
Verse 2: <i>Et exultavit spiritus meus / in Deo salutari meo</i> (19)
Verse 3: Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae / ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes (35)
Verse 4: <i>Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est: / et sanctum nomen ejus</i> (19)
Verse 5: Et misericordia ejus a progenie in progenies / timentibus eum (25)
Verse 6: <i>Fecit potentiam in brachio suo: / dispersit superbos mente cordis sui</i> (24)
Verse 7: Deposuit potentes de sede, / et exaltavit humiles (18)
Verse 8: <i>Esurientes implevit bonis: / et divites dimisit inanes</i> (20)
Verse 9: Suscepit Israel puerum suum, / recordatus misericordiae suae (23)
Verse 10: <i>Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, / Abraham et semini ejus in saecula</i> (24)
Verse 11: Gloria Patri, et Filio, / et Spiritui Sancto. (16)
Verse 12: <i>Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, / et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.</i> (25)
(C) ANTIPHON (reprise – Schola cantorum only)

Note:
*The diagonal line in each verse shows the location of the caesura; the number in parentheses at the end of each verse gives its length in syllables.

printers who produced these sources (dating c. 1565–c. 1630) clearly took it for granted that the users would know what to do about the odd-numbered verses, and most of these users would have been professional church musicians familiar with the appropriate service books and liturgical practices. These practices (e.g., the degree of solemnity and, consequently, the number of participants at any given Vespers) varied from one parish to another even within one diocese. In addition to singing the odd-numbered verses in plainchant they certainly also included playing them on the organ, as surviving sixteenth-century manuscript collections of organ verses for the Magnificat attest. Conversely, the scarcity of polyphonic settings of Magnificat antiphon texts – even by Lasso – suggests that these were rarely if ever sung in the place of plainchant antiphons, and that, since a *schola cantorum* was available for that purpose, they also chanted the antiphons. Even when, as was quite common, local dialects of chant differed from the one

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Lasso used as cantus firmus for his settings,⁶ or even when the polyphonic part of the Magnificat was based on music from outside the plainchant repertory – that is, constituted an “imitation” or “parody” Magnificat – professional church musicians would have used their own sources to sing (or play) the odd-numbered verses to the appropriate Magnificat tone.

Overall form

The term “overall form,” as used here, refers to relationships among the twelve verses of Lasso's *alternatim* Magnificats. These relationships are many-sided, but one can discern recurrent patterns. The first has to do with length. In Lasso's huge output of Magnificats the length of individual works varies considerably, and of course one wonders why. In his notes to Breitkopf's Palestrina edition, Franz Xaver Haberl notes that at solemn Vespers while Palestrina was choirmaster at St. Peter's in Rome, each participant was individually censured during the singing of the Magnificat, and since at solemn Vespers in so important a church there were many participants, the Magnificat needed to be a quarter of an hour long. The censoring requirement, he says, explains the grandiose dimensions of Palestrina's third and fourth sets of Magnificats (200–75 measures for the six polyphonic verses alone).⁷ Investigation into relationships between Bavarian liturgies and musical style in Lasso's liturgical music, called for years ago by James Haar and now under way,⁸ may lead to reasonable explanations of the great range in the dimensions of Lasso's Magnificats: from barely more than 40 measures to well over 200.

Such external factors as Haberl mentions were surely fundamental to the musical form of much liturgical music of Lasso's time; but other factors less objective and more esthetic in nature appear to have been equally

⁶ See *SWNR*, vol. 13, p. xv, n. 9.

⁷ Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, *Werke: Erste kritisch durchgesehene Gesamtausgabe*, 33 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1862–1907), vol. 17, p. i. Reference is to Nos. 17–32 in that edition (pp. 79–237).

⁸ *New Grove*, vol. 10, s.v. “Lassus [Lasso]. Franco-Flemish Family of Composers,” pp. 480–502, esp. p. 487b. David Crook's chapter on vespers polyphony for the Bavarian court and the local usages in the time of the Council of Trent, *Imitation Magnificats*, pp. 33–64, makes a substantial contribution in this direction.

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important. This study proposes that demonstrable features of structure in Lasso's Magnificat settings show that, while composing music to existing formulas and patterns for the Bavarian court chapel, he also followed principles that were purely musical.

The article on musical form in the old *Harvard Dictionary of Music* makes a useful distinction between the form *of* a piece of music on the one side and, on the other side, the form *in* it (i.e., the shape of the events that take place within the fixed elements of that outline).⁹ Table 1.1 above diagrams the form *of* a Lasso Magnificat, its six plainsong verses alternating with Lasso's six polyphonic verses. The overall form *in* such a piece is evident in the manner in which Lasso arranged relationships between the six polyphonic verses so as to create, in the succession from one to the next, unified and yet remarkably varied designs of musically satisfying proportions. No one can claim that Lasso was unique in this respect, but I hope to provide a glimpse of his manipulation of formal units, both within the overall frame and within the frame of individual verses, so that we can then compare his practices to those of his contemporaries and deepen our perspective on the nature of form in all the music of his time.

The basic traits of overall form in Lasso's Magnificats are consistency of style and length between the several verses, regular reduction of the number of voices in certain verses, and a tendency to treat the thematic material more freely in the inner verses than in opening and closing verses. These three traits, though strongly influenced by ritually conditioned externals like providing music for a procession or for the censuring of participants, are primarily esthetic (as distinct from utilitarian) in nature.

Like Magnificats by Morales, Gombert, Clemens, Senfl, and Palestrina, Lasso's settings display among their constituent verses a consistency both of dimension and of style. Requirements of a particular Vespers may have determined whether the Magnificat as a whole was to be long or short; but a composer's care for its proportions within that desired length will have been a matter of musical judgment alone, affected only tangentially by external considerations. It is true, of course, that in the six even-numbered verses which normally make up a Lasso Magnificat the lengths of

⁹ Willi Apel, ed., *Harvard Dictionary of Music. Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 326–8.

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texts do not cover a wide range: the final verse is longest with twenty-five syllables, and the two shortest each have nineteen syllables (see Table 1.1). Lasso's settings of these verses might therefore be expected to have similar dimensions, and generally they do. Even so, the first and last verses tend to be a little longer than the others, the last verse so regularly that its greater length constitutes a norm. Its longer text doubtless contributes to this status, but in most Lasso Magnificats the nature and structure of the final verse reflects as much a need to create an impressive close as to accommodate the longest text. Lasso always uses all the voices in the opening and final verses (and nearly always in verse 4). In a few earlier Magnificats he even increases the number of voices in the last verse, a fact that strengthens the impression of a conscious effort to compose an effective close.

The second trait of style in overall form is that Lasso, like other composers of his time, reduces the number of voices in certain verses of the Magnificat (as also in his masses and larger motets); for instance, in a five-voice Magnificat he will set one or more of the three inner verses (6, 8, or 10) for only three voices. These verses were perhaps meant for soloists, but in the Munich manuscript sources for Lasso's masses and Magnificats the application of *divisi* notation to individual voice-parts at cadential points suggests that this may not always have been the practice.

Such reductions of the number of voices rarely occur more than twice in any one Magnificat. Reduction of voices in verse 4 occurs only in Magnificats 62, 80 and 94. Item 3 in Table 1.3 below represents one of them, showing how Magnificat 80 repeats a pattern of upper-voice trios in each of the four inner verses. These trios in verses 4, 6, 8 and 10 of Magnificat 80 may obliquely refer to angelic choirs of treble voices, evoked by its model, Cipriano de Rore's setting of Petrarch's "Vergine bella" (Canzone 366, first stanza). The two other works named display comparably symmetrical patterns, but offer no such reasons for Lasso's having made them: Magnificat 62 (SWNR, vol. 15, pp. 126–37) is configured SSATTB–BBB–TTT–AAA–SSS–SSATTB, and Magnificat 94 (SWNR, vol. 17, pp. 14–30) SAATBB–TB–SAA–SATB–SAATBB–SSAATTBB. It will be noted that the thinning of texture in verse 4 is peculiar to these three works, in which the overall formal plan evidently took precedence over Lasso's otherwise consistent practice of setting verse 4 for the full complement. A reduced combination involving the same voices may occur more than once in a Magnificat

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(see Table 1.3, No. 3, verses 4, 6, 8, 10), but never in two successive verses. Its purpose is clearly not only to illustrate the text on occasion, but equally to offer variety of sonic texture.

The third trait of overall form is that borrowed monophonic or polyphonic themes regularly receive freer treatment in certain verses. This trait is linked to the reduction of the number of voices, because wherever such thinning-out occurs, free use of the model unavoidably and thus characteristically occurs along with it. The expression “free use of the model” here distinguishes between strict and unembellished quotation from whatever piece supplied the thematic material, be it a plainsong Magnificat tone serving as the cantus firmus, or a polyphonic model. For instance, in verse 2 of Magnificat 16, tone 8 is clearly quoted in the tenor;¹⁰ but if one compares it to the standard chant formula, a modest degree of variation on it is apparent.

In four-, five- or six-voice Magnificats derived from comparable polyphonic models, verses scored for fewer voices than the model typically treat the borrowed material, as noted above, with greater freedom. In both cantus-firmus and parody Magnificats free treatment of the model also occurs in verses employing all the voices; but among all the Magnificats this free treatment is more consistently characteristic of verses 6, 8 or 10 than it is of verses scored for the full complement.¹¹

Winfried Kirsch and Gustave Reese, writing of sixteenth-century Magnificats as a whole, attach text-illustrative significance to the frequent thinning of texture in verse 8 in polyphonic Magnificats (“Esurientes implevit bonis”), suggesting that it symbolized the “hungry ones” referred to in the first half of the verse.¹² Lasso often used such obvious opportunities for text-illustration as well, of course; but even so, the Magnificat verse in which he most often reduces the number of voices is not verse 8, but verse 10 (“Sicut locutus est”), where opportunity for text-illustration through a palpable change in texture is less obvious. This fact suggests that

¹⁰ *SWNR*, vol. 13, pp. 227–9.

¹¹ Analysis of four parody masses selected from the whole chronological range of Lasso’s mass output yielded a correlation between reduction of voice-parts and free treatment of the model comparable to that observed in the Magnificats.

¹² Winfried Kirsch, *Quellen*, pp. 49–50; Gustave Reese, “The Polyphonic Magnificat of the Renaissance as a Design in Tonal Centers,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 13 (1960), p. 77.

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Table 1.2 Pattern of altered scoring and treatment of themes in Lasso’s Magnificats

Alteration of number of voice-parts:		Treatment of themes:*
↓		↓
Absent or rare → Vs 2 Vs 4		Vs 12 ← Usually strict
↓		
Frequent →	Vs 6 Vs 8 Vs 10	← Usually free

Note:
* “Strict treatment” of borrowed themes here indicates that in which the borrowed material is quoted without substantial change (e.g., an unembellished cantus firmus in long notes in the tenor, or a nearly direct quotation from a polyphonic model); “free treatment” designates degrees of metamorphosis in which the borrowed material is only perceptible or is only present as a structural principle (e.g., as an altered harmonic progression or as a mutant succession of intervals drawn from the model).

Lasso may have desired the change in texture near the end of the piece merely to enhance the effect of the upcoming final verse, and that a juxtaposition of textures may have mattered as much to him as would the occasion to practice the text-illustration for which he was repeatedly praised in his own time.

Table 1.2 represents the typical pattern of the relationships between the number of voices in a given verse and the degree of assimilation or free treatment of the borrowed material. No single Lasso Magnificat conforms to this scheme in all particulars, of course; but traces of it do appear in all of them regardless of chronology and style, and regardless of whether the model is monophonic or polyphonic. Nor does it appear in either of the two Lasso Magnificats that seem to be freely composed on invented themes.¹³ For the sake of illustration, Table 1.3 shows, in five representative Magnificats, the range and degree of conformity to the prototype described above.

A survey of all 101 authentic Lasso Magnificats shows the proportion

¹³ Of the authentic Lasso Magnificats, this applies only to Nos. 72 and 94 (SWNR, vol. 16, pp. 14–24, and SWNR, vol. 17, pp. 14–30, respectively). Magnificat 67 (SWNR, vol. 15, pp. 201–11) seems also to be freely composed, but is not considered here because it is spurious (see *ibid.*, pp. xi–xii).

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Table 1.3* Overall form in five Lasso Magnificats

(1) *SWNR*, vol. 13, pp. 106–21: Magnificat 7 (c. 1565), a6, cantus-firmus setting of tone 7

	Verse: 2	4	6	8	10	12
Length in breves C:	27	24	27	25	23	32
Treatment of model:	x	x	(x)	(x)	x	x
Voices employed	all	all	all	SSAT	ATTB	all

(2) *SWNR*, vol. 14, pp. 126–32: Magnificat 37, tone 1 (14 October 1583), a4, parody on *Si par souhait* (model: Lasso, a4)

	Verse: 2	4	6	8	10	12
Length in breves C:	12	10	17	15	18	16
Treatment of model:	x	x	(x)	(x)	x	x
Voices employed	all	all	TB	all	SA	all

(3) *SWNR*, vol. 16, pp. 108–19: Magnificat 80, tone 1 (1585–90), a5, parody on *Vergine bella* (model: Rore, a5)

	Verse: 2	4	6	8	10	12
Length in breves C:	22	20	22	21	20	20
Treatment of model:	<u>x</u>	(x)	(x)	(x)	(x)	x
Voices employed	all	SSA	SST	SSA	SST	all

(4) *SWNR*, vol. 14, pp. 49–60: Magnificat 30 (c. 1565), a4, cantus-firmus setting of tone 6

	Verse: 2	4	6	8	10	12
Length in breves C:	29	29	25	27	29	39
Treatment of model:	<u>x</u>	<u>x</u>	x	–	x	<u>x</u>
Voices employed	all	all	SA	all	ATB	SSATB[!]

(5) *SWNR*, vol. 15, pp. 212–27: Magnificat 68, tone 6 (c. 1585), a6, cantus-firmus setting on *Dies est laetitiae* (model: anonymous *cantio*)

	Verse: 2	4	6	8	10	12
Length in breves C:	15	21	27	17	21	26
Treatment of model:	<u>x</u>	x	(x)	x	x	<u>x</u>
Voices employed	all	all	SS	all	SAT	all

Note:

* The sign “x” (underlined) stands here for strict quotation of a complete psalmodic cantus firmus, or, in the parodies, for nearly direct quotation of at least half a verse from a polyphonic model; “x” (not underlined) stands for incomplete reference to a cantus firmus, or for substantially altered quotation of polyphony; “(x)” in parentheses stands for indirect, barely perceptible, reference to borrowed material, be it monophonic (from a plainsong cantus firmus or a single identifiable melodic strand from a polyphonic model); a dash stands for absence of reference to the model, thus for free composition on invented themes. Upper-case letters indicate voice parts: S: Superius; A: Altus; T: Tenor; B: Bassus.