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Cuckoo and Cosmos: The Summer Canon as a Matter of Performance

Abstract

This essay presents a new interpretation of the Summer Canon, one of the best-known works of medieval song. It proposes an understanding of the song's form that emerges from a process of dynamic interaction between performer and textual object. It reconsiders the role and location of the manuscript's performance instructions, discusses the role of the Latin contrafact, and argues for an interpretation of the song's cuckoo as a recursive formal device, suggesting that the piece's use of repetition explores both the endless motions of cosmic bodies and the limitations of human ones.[1]

Keywords

Song, Music, Performance, Repetition, Form, Embodiment.

1. I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of audiences in Rome, Sewanee, and at the Stanford Workshop in Poetics, and particularly to R. D. Perry and Marisa Galvez, who gave generous responses at the latter two events. I'm also grateful to Heather Blurton and Meghan Quinlan, who read earlier drafts and offered very useful suggestions; to the anonymous reviewers, whose feedback strengthened this essay considerably; and to M. Ty and Hannah Proctor, for talking things through.

The 1972 Munich Summer Olympics, most often remembered for the notorious killings that took place in the athletes' village during the second week of competition, began (as fewer remember) with a performance of a medieval English song. In a report on the opening ceremonies published in *The New York Times*, the acclaimed sports journalist Red Smith described the spectacle as "a delightful sort of Maypole dance" accompanied by "a ditty with lyrics by England's Geoff Chaucer" (Smith S3). We can forgive Smith's mistaken attribution. Although Chaucer did not write the song performed at Munich, its evocative seasonal description of the natural world is easily confused with the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*, and probably almost as famous:

Sumer is icumen in,	*has arrived*
Lhude sing cuccu!	*loudly*
Groweth sed and bloweth med,	*meadow blooms*
And springth the wude nu –	*now*
Sing cuccu!	

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Awe bleteth after lomb,	*ewe bleats*
Lhouth after calve cu;	*lows, cow*
Bulluc sterteth, bucke verteth,	*leaps, farts* or *prances*
Murie sing cuccu!	*merrily*

Cuccu, cuccu, wel singes thu, cuccu:
Ne swike thu naver nu[.] *"don't you ever stop now"*
(Quiller-Couch 1, lines 1–11, glosses mine)

These words, quoted here in the format adopted by Arthur Quiller-Couch in his influential 1900 edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, are one part of the song-text that is the subject of this essay: the Summer Canon.[2] Along with an arrangement of its original musical setting, the song was given a prominent place in the Munich opening ceremonies, immediately after the athletes' procession into the Olympiastadion. The Munich organizing committee's report gives a detailed account: three thousand local children between ten and fourteen years old, "all approximately the same size and rhythmically gifted", had been chosen to perform an accompanying dance in "a sort of braid pattern … simple and suitable for the natural rhythm of children" (Organisationskomitee 1. 82). With hands linked, or holding homemade bows and bouquets (Organisationskomitee 1. 77), the children moved in rings around the assembled athletes while the song played over loudspeakers, its interlocking, repetitive form evoking the circular movements of the performers (Figure 1). The composer and long-term Munich resident Carl Orff had arranged the music; a prefatory editorial note to his score describes the "turning circular movement of the constantly pulsating sound … a vital, ages-old moving force in music-making" which "demands a dance-like execution" (Orff 5).[3] His orchestral arrangement intensifies this aspect of the source material through the addition of a continuous arpeggiated pulse played on xylophones (Orff measures 37–end), a deliberately anachronistic decision presumably intended to reduce any impression of solemnity or historical distance.[4] These choices of arrangement, staging and choreography produce a distinctive aesthetic, related to what the organizing committee had agreed were to be the ceremony's "principal ideas;" namely, "universal understanding, social justice, and joie de vivre" (Organisationskomitee 1. 80). At a time when memories of Nazism and the 1936 Berlin Olympics were still very fresh, the use of a non-German text had the effect of muting some of the ceremony's nationalistic overtones,

2. The text includes Latin and English words, musical notation, and a set of Latin performance instructions, and is variously known as the Summer Canon, the *Sumer* Canon, "Sumer is icumen in," the Cuckoo Song, or the Reading Rota. For discussion of the influence of Quiller-Couch's positioning of the decontextualized English words as the "first English lyric," see Taylor 76–77. Colton 13–38 provides a wide-ranging study of the text's post-medieval reception and canonicity.

3. For a study of Orff's medievalism in relation to his *Carmina Burana*, see Yri. Orff's degree of complicity with the Nazi regime is controversial: for discussion see Potter, Kater, and Yri 270.

4. The note also makes clear that Orff's instrumentation choices make a (glib) nod to musical traditions beyond those of Western art music.

Figure 1. The Munich performance, 26 August 1972 (final movement sequence), around measure 150 in Orff's score. © Popperfoto via Getty Images.

replacing them, as the prefatory note to Orff's score proudly asserts, with a sense of "European tradition" in a "living present" (Orff 5). The performance appears to have been conceived in order to avoid giving the impression of an oppressive, mechanistic mass ornament in which precisely drilled bodies move in perfect formation, given the close association between fascist aesthetics and these forms of movement.[5] And as Kay Schiller and Christopher Young have shown in their cultural history of the 1972 Games, the organizers' political anxieties were not only directed at the Nazi past: they also hoped to avoid any spectacle which might resemble "the Eastern bloc's formidably drilled gymnastics displays" (116), a form of mass ornament with its own undesirable resonances in a divided Germany.[6] As the Munich organizing committee's report notes, "avoiding absolute technical perfection had been an OC guideline" (Organisationskomitee 1. 80), surely in hope of minimizing such comparisons. The performance certainly achieved this aim. Instead of bodies disciplined into precise synchronicity, the televised performance exhibits a charming imperfection. Some of the choreographed rings are noticeably lopsided, some groups of dancers transition between movement sequences faster than others, but none of this compromises the spectacle for the viewer. The performance of this song, positioned rhetorically at a key moment in the ceremony, just after the arrival of the athletes whose own extraordinary movements will constitute the spectacle to follow, served to inaugurate the 1972 Games: both literally, in announcing the beginning of summer at the beginning of a Summer Olympics, and tonally, in its performative embodiment of the Games' officially intended aesthetic: "a joyous, relaxed atmosphere in a conscious contrast to the image of Germany in 1936" (Organisationskomitee 1. 340).

5. The concept of mass ornament originates with the cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer's earliest work on the subject ("The Mass Ornament"), written in 1927, does not discuss the mass aesthetics of fascism; however, he later considers Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) using this framework (*From Caligari to Hitler* 94–95). *Olympia*, Riefenstahl's own documentary on the 1936 Berlin Olympics, is also often cited as an example of fascist mass ornament, most influentially by Susan Sontag (91–93); but for disagreement see Mackenzie 309.

6. For Sontag, writing in 1974, Soviet-bloc gymnastics is another form of "fascist art," in that its well-drilled synchronicity "rehearses the very unity of the polity" (91–92).

In its negotiation of these pressures of image management, the Munich performance constitutes a telling and perhaps familiar act of medievalist reception. The organizers' framing of the Summer Canon presents the song as a simple, even naïve bucolic scene, evocative of a season in which the world is suddenly full of exuberant activity, and well suited for dance performance by children without exceptional technical skill. This aesthetics of imperfection indirectly suggests the Summer Canon itself as infantile, and thus as an emblem of a childlike Middle Ages more broadly.[7] Relatedly, the organizers' choices of props (homemade garlands), dance-form ("incorporating Bavarian folklore elements", Organisationskomitee 1. 82) and costuming (outdoorsy shorts and skirts in blue and yellow) locate the song in the realm of folk culture, and so associate it with another familiar, stereotypical Middle Ages of rustic simplicity. As Helen Deeming has shown in a review of the song's post-medieval reception, these resonances are not at all unusual for a song that "has come to represent the very essence of 'Merrie England'" ("English Monastic Miscellany" 116), a phrase which neatly articulates both the rural and childlike modes of its post-medieval reception.

We know to be suspicious of these forms of medievalism, which are at best nostalgic and at worst condescending. Still, it has proved difficult to dislodge the Summer Canon from the bucolic mode of reading, despite the presence of a Latin text of devotional content immediately below the Middle English in the song's one surviving manuscript, and despite this manuscript's firmly identified monastic provenance (Taylor and Coates). For Edmund Reiss, the text is simply a *reverdie*, a "song of joy in response to the glorious coming of spring" (3), and Mark Booth broadly concurs with his bucolic framing (161–62). Likewise, in John Stevens' assessment, the English song-text would have had a celebratory function, "relevant to any spring festivity" (347); and for James M. Dean, the English text "offers a depiction of something like carnival or free play" (213), only gaining further meaning when read alongside the Latin text as an image of new life in the Resurrection. Others have connected the text's "cuckoo" with "cuckold", arguing that the song makes indirect reference to adultery: either mocking cuckolds (Woolf 280), making reference to a specific monk's sexual reputation (Wulstan 8), or performing a "mock-serious injunction to warn of adultery" (Roscow 191). The Middle English text itself appears to describe nothing more than a rural scene, and this disarming straightforwardness has caused previous readings to remain in a descriptive, literal register (Reiss;

7. See Matthews 132 for discussion of the Middle Ages as the "childhood of modernity." The musical performance evokes similar ideas: Orff's arrangement was sung by the Tölz Boys' Choir (Organisationskomitee 1. 82), and although the recording also features men's voices, children's voices are more prominent in the musical texture.

Dean), or to assert the presence of a non-literal meaning which is not easily reconciled with the text's innocuous descriptive surface (Woolf; Roscow; Wulstan).

Moreover, since the vital contextual work of John Stevens, there has been a growing recognition that the Summer Canon has been overstudied in comparison to the "neglected context" (Stevens) of the other musical items collected in its sole extant manuscript.[8] Accordingly, Helen Deeming's 2015 chapter on the manuscript directs its focus elsewhere, noting the "disproportionate attention given to the manuscript's only English-language text" ("English Monastic Miscellany" 117) to the detriment of the other musical contents and thirteenth-century insular music cultures more broadly. This shift is evident elsewhere in musicological scholarship; suggestively, a song that Stevens describes as "beyond argument the most famous song of its period" (307) is only mentioned three times – each time briefly – in the monumental 2018 *Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, a work which extends to over a thousand pages (Everist and Kelly 701, 994, 1037). Without disagreeing with Stevens and Deeming, and concurring fully that the Summer Canon's musical characteristics are now well understood, I maintain that the text is not yet exhausted.[9] We still lack an account of the Summer Canon as a work of song which would integrate all of the text's various elements (English and Latin song-texts, musical notation, and performance instructions) and place them in dialogue with an inscribed context of performance.[10] To do so is the purpose of this essay.

In what follows, I will show that thinking about the Summer Canon as a matter of performance creates quite a different picture of the song from that sketched above. Most importantly, it requires us to think about the text's form as inseparable from the processes of reading, preparing and performing. In reading the text along these lines, I am indebted to Seeta Chaganti's work on dance performance, reenactment, and medieval poetic form. Chaganti approaches form not as a collection of static properties, but rather as "an experience of strange time and space" (22) in which a reader finds themselves drawn through a work, responding to its distinctive agency with their own (44).[11] As such, form is only accessible through an experience of movement, and although Chaganti's main focus is on the ways in which a habituated knowledge of dance practice conditions readerly experiences of medieval poetic form (22), her approach is equally generative in the case of notated song. The reading presented here retraces this experience of form by asking what it is like to move

8. For contextual study, see also Hohler.

9. "Musical historians have firmly related its musical techniques (*rota*, *rondellus*, and *pes*) to contemporary compositions, whilst still being able to praise it as an exuberant *tour de force*." (Stevens 344).

10. For the idea of inscribed performance, see Upton 35. Landmark work in medieval lyric studies also emphasizes performance, and its relationship with the material text, as part of a broader shift towards a materially situated set of reading practices: see for example Galvez 42–44, Nelson 31–32, Cervone and Watson 5, and Butterfield 336–39.

11. Here Chaganti engages and develops Carruthers' work on the medieval concept of *ductus*. Nelson's concept of "tactical lyric" (13–15) is also relevant here.

through the song's process, to be directed by its instructions, and to translate it from notation, text and instruction into performance. In other words, my reading attempts to reenact a form-experience generated by the song's material parameters, understood alongside a set of cultural-historical contexts.[12]

12. See Collingwood 215 for a widely-cited argument for reenactment as a form of historical thought, and Chaganti 27–36 for a broader account of the concept.

The argument of this essay has several interlocking components. First, I argue that the Summer Canon is formally perpetual, a claim which I develop not only on musical and paratextual grounds, but by considering the song's articulation of text in performance. Second and relatedly, I claim that we must understand the Middle English text as performatively self-referential: not simply a song about cuckoos, but a song about singing *as* cuckoos. This, in turn, makes it necessary to explore the cuckoo's resonances as bird, word, and form. I suggest that the song's perpetual structure, along with its use of the figure of the cuckoo, carries a set of previously unexplored cosmological implications to do with time, embodiment, and repetition. The Summer Canon is not just a song about avian bodies, or performing bodies, but also cosmic bodies, and the differing capacities of each of these to produce and sustain sound, movement, and thought. This analysis leads to a final suggestion concerning the function of the alternative Latin text, and presents an interpretation of the song which attempts to bring all of its surviving elements – musical, poetic, performative and paratextual – to bear. The song, I will argue, explores the ways in which embodiment, performance, reason, and repetition interact by drawing its performers through an experience of form that exceeds their bodily capacities.

*

The Summer Canon is extant in a single copy: London, British Library (BL), Harley 978, a well-known manuscript of miscellaneous contents dated to the third quarter of the thirteenth century, possibly between 1261 and 1265 (Taylor and Coates 24). The manuscript can be connected to the Benedictine abbey at Reading from a very early stage because of the presence of a number of identifying references, including a liturgical calendar that would only have been useful for members of the community (Deeming, "English Monastic Miscellany" 121). Although BL, Harley 978 is composed of technically separate booklets, most agree that it existed in roughly its present form from an early date, since it lacks any evidence of wear on the external leaves of its booklets that would indicate independent use and circulation (Deeming, "English Monastic Miscellany" 119; Taylor 84–88). Aside from the Summer Canon, the musical contents are for

the most part monophonic, Latin pieces describable as *lais* or sequences, and nearly all have devotional texts.[13] There are also three textless polyphonic *estampies*, and three mnemonic-pedagogical pieces on the musical intervals. The Summer Canon itself occupies the entirety of f. 11v (Figure 2). The page has seven ruled staves containing musical notation, with some revisions in a later hand (Duffin 13; Deeming, *Songs in British Sources* 207).[14] The song's melody is written across the first five staves, and two further staves, distinguished by a red bracket and label, notate the two-part *pes* (a repeated tenor line). The Middle English text is written immediately under the musical notation in black, with a Latin text just below it in red. There are three sets of instructions which explain how to realize this notation as a six-part polyphonic *rota*, with a four-part canon in the upper voices and a two-part canonic *pes* below. The page appears

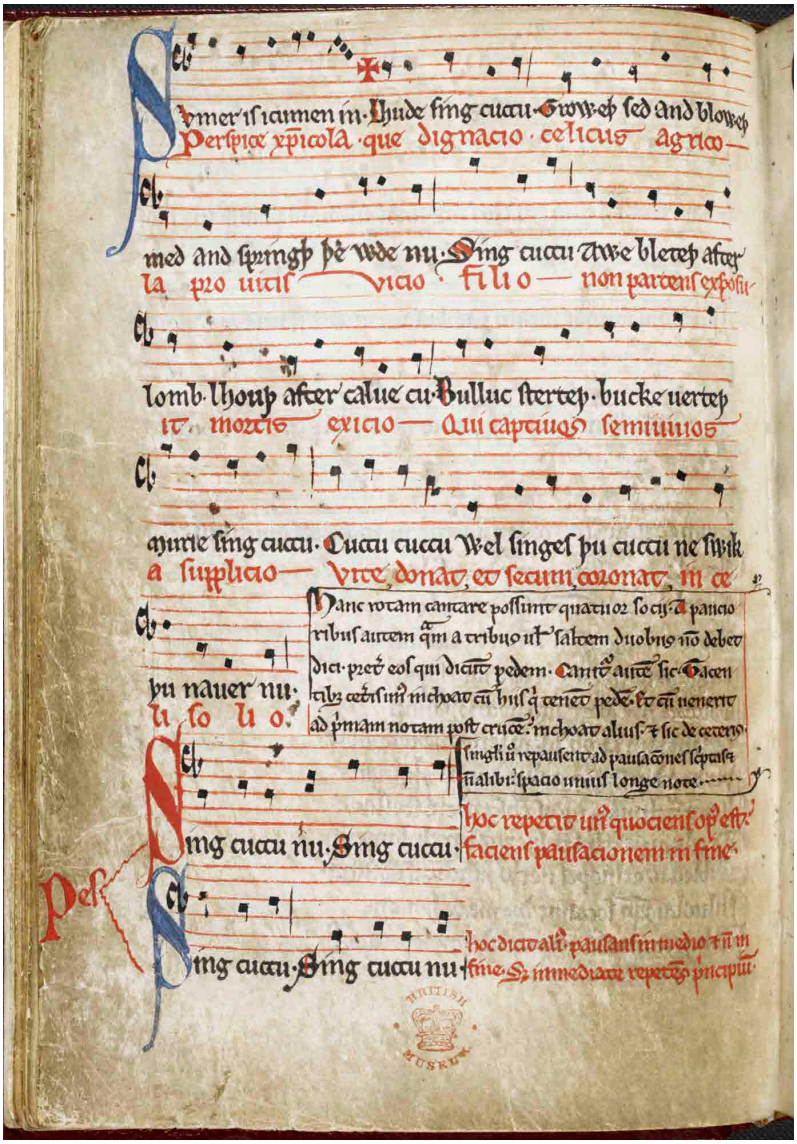

Figure 2. London, British Library, Harley 978, f. 11v. © British Library Board.

13. There is one other polyphonic song in the collection, the Marian contrafact *Ave gloriosa mater / Duce creature* (ff. 9v–10r). See Deeming, "English Monastic Miscellany" 125 for an annotated contents list; Deeming, *Songs in British Sources* 109–32 for editions of the songs; Deeming, "English Monastic Miscellany" 137–38 for an edition of *Est tonus sic* (the most substantial of the three pedagogical items); and Stevens and Handschin for further discussion of the musical contents.

14. See also Bukofzer 87–89 for a wide-ranging early study, including a reconstruction of the notation's first state.

carefully designed: the vertical space between the ruled staves is just large enough for two lines of text; and the various scripts have been sized carefully to accommodate the texts in the available space. Three of the ruled staves are also indented slightly to make space for decorative initials which mark the beginning of each of the three notated parts (upper voices, first *pes*, and second *pes*). Medieval reader-performers would have been directed in their understanding by these features of layout and page design, which suggest a well-ordered object with quite specific parameters. In other words, we can think of the page as a signifying system in which a medieval reader of BL, Harley 978 might find themselves engaged in order to assemble its constituent parts into a performance, whether real or imagined. The particular form of the song's material survival can help us develop a scene of readerly and performative encounter, suggesting how the manuscript could have been read as a prompt for performance, and the possibilities and challenges that such a performance might have generated. In what follows, I will consider how medieval reader-performers might have encountered this textual object, experienced and worked through its form, and attempted to resolve or realize it practically in performance.

But first, we must also take account of two further elements of the song which do not survive on the page: the performing body and the medieval cosmos-form. These two things are more closely related than we might think: in this specific case but also more generally, the notated musical object implies the presence and participation of various kinds of body, human and otherwise. Boethius's foundational music-theory treatise *De institutione musica* inaugurated a tripartite scheme, authoritative throughout the Middle Ages, in which the celestial motions (*musica mundana*), the order of the human soul (*musica humana*), and the audible vibrations of sounding instruments (*musica instrumentalis*) are all understood as forms of music (1. 2; Friedlein 187–89). In this scheme, a concept like harmony relates equally to the congruent motions of the cosmic machine, the well-ordered organizing principle of a human's constituent parts, and the consonant intervals of audible music, not as mere analogy but as unifying material property, as Andrew Hicks has recently emphasized (22). The relationships and tensions generated by this theoretical scheme have long been a site of rich scholarly exchange, much of which has been focused on emphasizing the central importance of materiality and embodiment over mathematical abstraction (Holsinger; Zayaruznaya; Bude). Medieval music is a matter of the body, and moreover, the body-music interface is a zone of constant

instability. Music fixes and unfixes the body in its continually shifting relation to the world.

The concept of performance is at the core of this instability. In Richard Schechner's resonant phrase, performers are those "whose special task it is to undergo a temporary *rearrangement* of their body/mind" (191). This transformative work is undertaken in response to the demands of a script, defined by Schechner as "something that pre-exists any given enactment, which persists from enactment to enactment" (68), and which specifies (textually, socially) the norms and parameters of a given performance. Performance always demands something from the performer; specifically, it demands that they become something that they are usually not. Scripts, whether written, social, or both, instruct performers; being instructed is thus fundamental to performance itself. The performance script of the Summer Canon thus consists of the set of norms, implications and direct instructions which together define the space of reasonably conforming performance events, and in doing so condition performers' experience of the song's form as articulated in performance.[15] I begin by discussing the Summer Canon's most obviously instructive elements, before exploring the other ways in which the song's performance is conditioned by the resonances of its text and musical structure – resonances which, as I argue, carry profound formal implications.

15. The questions of musical ontology surrounding the notation-performance relationship are complex: see Levinson for a prominent account of some of the issues.

As is well known, the Summer Canon is a rare example of a piece of notated medieval music that survives with a set of detailed performance instructions. Indeed, the Latin performance instructions constitute the longest text on the page, and although they are not the only part of the song which instructs, they are a useful starting point for a broader account of the way in which the Summer Canon directs its reader-performers, and in doing so shapes its own form. The first instruction reads as follows:

> Hanc rotam cantare possunt quatuor socii. A paucioribus autem quam a tribus vel saltem duobus non debet dici, preter eos qui dicunt pedem. Canitur autem sic: tacentibus ceteris unus inchoat cum hiis qui tenent pedem. Et cum venerit ad primam notam post crucem, inchoat alius, et sic de ceteris, singuli vero repausent ad pausaciones scriptas et non alibi, spacio unius longe note.[16]
>
> (Four companions can sing this *rota*. But it should not be sung by fewer than three, or two at the least, excluding those

16. Transcriptions and translations from the manuscript are mine, with abbreviations silently expanded and modern punctuation added.

> who sing the *pes*. It is sung as follows: the others keeping silent, one begins with those who hold the *pes*. And when he comes to the first note after the cross, another begins, and so for the others, with each one pausing at the written rests and not elsewhere for the space of one long note.)

Each of the two parts of the *pes* also has a corresponding instruction:

> Hoc repetit unus quociens opus est, faciens pausacionem in fine.
>
> (One repeats this as many times as necessary, making a rest at the end.)
>
> Hoc dicit alius, pausans in medio et non in fine, sed immediate repetens principium.
>
> (Another sings this, pausing in the middle and not at the end, but immediately repeating the beginning.)

These instructions are detailed and specific, giving details of acceptable personnel (minimum four, ideally six), and a specific procedure for beginning in which three parts (the two *pes*-voices and the first *rota* voice) begin together, with additional upper parts entering at the prescribed points. But despite the specificity of these directions, there is something important missing: the text offers its performers no firm indication of how they should *stop* singing it, as some previous readers have acknowledged (Deeming, *Songs in British Sources* 207; Wulstan 9). The instructions' silence on the question of repetition has generated much discussion on the topic of whether the Summer Canon can be properly described as a circular or perpetual canon. The question is complicated significantly by the fact that various notational alterations are still visible on the page, and so arguments based on the presence of parallel unisons generated by the repetition of the opening material cannot be made for all stages of revision equally.[17] There is some appeal in the point made by Jacques Handschin and David Wulstan – separately, and based on slightly different reconstructions – that the later melodic alterations resolve some of the parallel unisons in the transitional measures, and might therefore be taken as an attempt to make the song work better as a perpetual canon (Handschin 86–87; Wulstan 9–10).[18] However, Ross Duffin's view that the alterations were designed to reduce certain dissonances that had become stylistically undesirable in the decades following the manuscript's initial production is also compelling (11).

17. Polyphonic music must – more or less axiomatically – avoid parallel unisons so as to preserve the basic independence of parts.

18. There are twelve possible combinations of the four *rota* voices if each voice repeats, and only nine if each voice drops out after singing the melody once (Falck 55); the final three combinations constitute the transitional measures in which the opening is repeated over new material, and where several parallel unisons occur in the earliest visible state of revision, as well as (to a lesser degree) in the final notational state.

No argument has been decisive. Although it is the case that the song lacks a separate notated close in contrast to at least one continental example from the following century (Handschin 85), this point does not necessarily favour a claim for circular form. Robert Falck argues that the lack of an *ouvert* cadence at the end of the *rota* means that there is no obvious melodic impetus to repeat, but by the same token, this suggests that "the piece could end at any point" (Falck 56), leaving the possibility of arbitrary repetition open. And as Handschin notes in general terms, "even without anchoring the end to the beginning, the canon has a tendency to perpetual repetition" and as such "the limit between circular and non-circular canon is not so fundamental" (87). The piece's form is perhaps undecidable on musicological grounds alone: it could plausibly be repeated, but we cannot say that it must have been performed in this way.

And as we have seen, the Latin instructions do not help much in determining the Summer Canon's formal boundaries either. However, they are not the only instructions on the manuscript page. There are, of course, several quite forceful imperative verbs in the Middle English song-text itself: "sing cuccu! … sing cuccu! … ne swik þu naver nu." The question of who is addressed by these imperatives is an important one. Some previous readers have understood them as being directed towards a cuckoo in the text's bucolic scene; in this reading, the song-text's repeated imperative "sing!" would command the cuckoo to sing. However, the cuckoo's proverbial "reputation for monotonous repetition" (Roscow 189) poses a problem here, since cuckoos hardly need encouragement to begin singing, or to continue doing so. In this interpretation, we would have to recognize a distinct irony in the last line of the text, which praises the cuckoo's singing ("wel singes þu cuccu"), and encourages it – redundantly – never to stop ("ne swik þu naver nu"). If directly addressed, the cuckoo would also stand out from the song's other animals, all of which are described using third-person indicative verbs such as "bleteth" or "lhouth", rather than addressed directly in the second person. Its place in the song-text would exhibit an odd grammatical and referential separation from the other animals.

There is an alternative interpretation which I suggest is more appealing. The word "cuccu" can be taken as referring not to a bird, but to a word: not the (vocative) recipient of the imperative verb "sing", but rather its (accusative) object. In other words, the word "cuccu" would be an instance of mention rather than use, and we would understand the phrase as meaning "sing 'cuckoo'!" rather than "sing,

cuckoo!" This interpretation avoids the problem of redundant encouragement described above, but in doing so creates another: who, if not the cuckoo, is being told to sing? Roscow's assumption, drawn from Reiss (10–11), is that the word, if parsed in this way, would address a listener who is "being told to imitate the bird" (189). But another framing is possible which does not require us to imagine the presence of a non-participatory listener. As we have seen, the Latin instructions describe the song's musical personnel as *socii* (companions), a word which emphasizes their role as collaborators.[19] The music itself is self-referential in many ways, most obviously in the *rota*'s imitative structure. The musical form, the description of personnel and the Middle English text all readily suggest an inward-facing performance circumstance in which a group of singers sing a song about singing to each other and for each other, instructing each other to "sing 'cuckoo'" and "never stop." As we have seen, the musicological grounds for understanding the Summer Canon as a perpetual canon are complex, and in some respects inconclusive. The performative grounds, on the other hand, are simple: the song quite literally demands perpetual repetition from its performers. In contrast to the vague performance instructions, the Middle English text produces a surprising interpellative effect in performance: upon realizing the pertinence of the text that they are singing to the performance event in which they are engaged, the singers find themselves addressed by an immanent lyric demand to repeat, to keep singing, to never stop. Song-text becomes instruction, and no further instructions are necessary: sing cuckoo, and do not ever stop doing so.

I suggest that reading the song in this way produces a more satisfactory text-music relationship than the common editorial-performance choice in which each upper part sings the melody only once before dropping out, generating an effect of textural thickening followed by a tapered close.[20] In these reconstructions of the song's form, each of the upper-voice parts must sing the words "ne swik þu naver nu" ("don't you ever stop now") immediately before stopping. Indeed, the first appearance of these words in the polyphonic texture is, paradoxically, the moment at which this texture begins to thin, and a listener might reasonably begin to experience the song as approaching its end (Figure 3). But as I have been arguing, the words exert a strong opposing force: it is surely significant that this demand not to stop appears in the text as each musical line approaches its end, at a point when the performer is able to choose whether to repeat. Moreover, as the excerpt below shows, upon approaching the end of

19. See *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* s.v. "socius" (hereafter *DMLBS*). Given the monastic provenance of BL, Harley 978, it is worth noting that the *DMLBS* also records examples of the word being used more specifically to mean "monk" (sense 7).

20. For examples, see Deeming, *Songs in British Sources* 125–26; Dobson and Harrison 246–50; Duffin 17–21; Orff's arrangement; and in recorded performance by the Hilliard Ensemble (1:08–1:41). Sanders edits the piece as a perpetual canon (5–7), noting (amusingly) that "Despite the injunction in the last verse of the poem [i.e., to never stop], the piece may be conveniently concluded when the leading voice has sung its part twice" (239).

its phrase, the first *rota* voice finds itself hailed by several other imperatives elsewhere in the texture which demand further singing.[21] The texture – densely peppered throughout with imperative commands to sing and to never stop, and likewise with an emphatic "nu", repeated in the *pes* from the beginning of the song and taken up in the *rota* voices at the end of the melodic line – conjoins the 'now' of sung performance with the "nu" of the text's imperative prohibition, and in doing so brings the performers into even closer identification with the words that they are singing. The word "nu" has the force of reminding the performers that they are not singing about some distant event or phenomenon, but are instead performatively and experientially engaged in the very same 'now' that the text indicates and demands to perpetuate.

21. See Stone for a discussion of musical self-reflexivity and the complex relationship between the roles of composer, performer, reader and listener in the later Middle Ages.

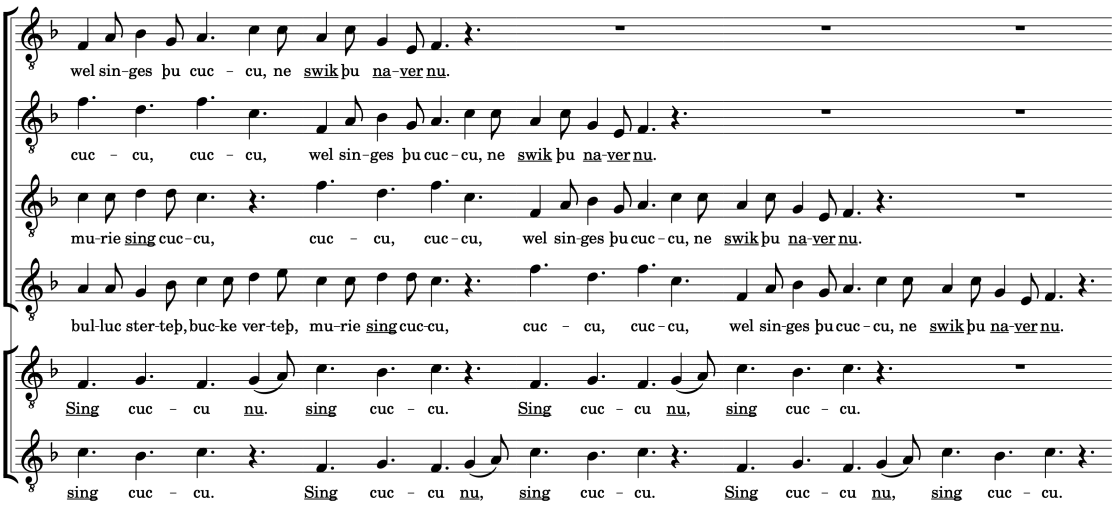

Figure 3. Transcription of the Summer Canon (final section) as edited in Deeming, *Songs from British Sources* 126, with imperative verbs and temporal adverbs underlined. © 2013 by the Musica Britannica Trust and Stainer & Bell Ltd. Reproduced with permission.

Importantly, this quality of reflexive self-reference and the idea of being instructed by other performers are not only present in the words of the song, but also in the *rota*'s staggered imitative entries. Canonic structures are fundamentally self-referential, since they only function musically if each singer repeats what they have just heard, following the implicit musical demands of the previous entry. In this way, their imitative effect is sustained by a compulsion to repeat, which we might describe using Schechner's terminology as part of the "script" that conditions performances of this musical structure (68).[22] The form-experience of the Summer Canon is one of being drawn through a structure of compelled imitation, of being hailed by imperative demands to sing and never stop, and of embodying and articulating those same demands in turn.

These same qualities of imitation, repetition, and compulsion

22. In a contemporary example of this script, I was taught as a choral singer that singers of the trailing part(s) in a canonic structure should be sure to replicate any minor errors (such as a misplaced accidental) in performance in order to preserve the imitative effect, rather than rigidly insisting on score fidelity.

will help us better account for the presence of cuckoos in the Middle English text. The cuckoo's role in the Summer Canon is much more than simply imagistic; rather, it embodies the song's formal principle in several ways. Although previous work on the Summer Canon has considered the proverbial and conventional implications of the cuckoo (Dean 210–13; Roscow 189–91), it is worth revisiting and extending them from the perspective developed above. A key dynamic of cuckoo-song, not emphasized in previous work, lies in the cuckoo's reflexive, self-referential qualities. If we understand that the cuckoo marks recursivity, then we will see that its presence is deeply relevant to the song's formal principle, as well as to the identity of the performers. This framing will make clear that in demanding that its performers repeatedly sing the song of the cuckoo, the Summer Canon effectively transforms its singers into cuckoos, and has them sing as cuckoos, in the work of performance.

The cuckoo is a highly self-referential bird. Its name is the same as its song, which is the only thing that it can sing, and the second syllable of this song doubles the first: it thus manages to repeat itself before it has even sung its song once. Although, as Elizabeth Eva Leach notes, the cuckoo's "non-bestiary status means that it lacks a stable moralization" (Leach, *Sung Birds* 156), it has a set of consistent characteristics in the surviving descriptions from proverbs, satirical and allegorical writing, and natural-philosophical texts. Medieval vocal music regularly exploits these characteristics in pieces featuring the cuckoo and its song (Leach, *Sung Birds* 122–41; Newes). The cuckoo is identified proverbially as a bird which can sing only one song, and which sings only about itself (Whiting 111). Elsewhere in BL, Harley 978, in the text of Marie de France's *Fables*, a reader could encounter the story of a cuckoo which is elected king of the birds on account of its resonant and continual song, but which falls silent after being humiliated by the smallest of the birds: it is incapable of any action except for singing (f. 52v; Spiegel 140–44). Insular Latin writing of the period also makes use of the cuckoo. Nigel of Longchamp's late twelfth-century satirical poem *Speculum Stultorum* describes the cuckoo as something which continually repeats itself without having anything new to say (lines 515–16). Alexander Neckam's *De naturis rerum*, written around the same time, presents the cuckoo as a type of avarice because of its insistent, demanding cry, which he transcribes using the imperative verb "affer, affer" ("give, give", Wright 117–18).[23] Along with these attributes of greed, vacuity, repetitiousness and stupidity, the cuckoo was well known for its habit of brood

23. *DMLBS* s.v. "afferre." The Reading monks owned a copy of Neckam's work (now Oxford, Corpus Christi College 45) which arrived at the abbey in the thirteenth century (Coates 76, 115).

parasitism, which Neckam also describes in the course of his moralizing narrative (Wright 118). Medieval readers of Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, widely circulated in the Middle Ages (Reynolds 307–16), would have been familiar with his account in which the young cuckoo, deposited in an unwitting bird's nest, deceives its foster-mother into allowing it to eat her chicks, before it grows to such a size that it is able to devour her as well (Pliny 10.11, 308–09).[24] Odo of Cheriton's *Fables*, a collection written in the first half of the thirteenth century, contains two stories about cuckoos: in the first, the cuckoo eats its foster-mother, an act which is moralized as an illustration of the tendency of clerks to turn upon their mentors when raised to high office (Hervieux 181–82; Jacobs 76). In the second, an eagle asks the assembled birds which bird is the noblest, the most beautiful, and the best singer, and the cuckoo replies to each question with the words "kuk, kuk" (Hervieux 251–52; Jacobs 159–60). Frustrated at the cuckoo's apparent vanity – which is in fact stupidity, since the cuckoo is incapable of giving any other answer – the eagle curses it to an itinerant life, banning it from possessing any nest, and thus forcing it to adopt its parasitic habit.

Importantly, the various characteristics described and moralized in these texts are not independent, but co-constituting. The cuckoo's repetitive singing indicates both its stupidity and its vanity, since it is unable to say anything other than its own name: in several senses, it is incapable of thinking beyond itself. Avarice is a vice with a similarly self-centered structure. Marie's fable turns the cuckoo's vocal limitation into a symbol of ineffectual governance – all talk and no action – and in doing so suggests that the cuckoo fails to understand the relationship between language and political sovereignty. The cuckoo's speech acts fail to act felicitously in the world; they produce nothing more than linguistic performance. Language is a crucial aspect of the cuckoo's characteristic shortcomings, as Odo of Cheriton's second fable demonstrates. Having asked the assembled birds who among them is the best, the eagle parses the cuckoo's utterance "kuk, kuk" as an act of self-naming. For this reason, he condemns the cuckoo as vain and selfish. Following what we would now call a Gricean maxim, in which communicative exchanges are understood to be implicitly relevant to each other, the eagle parses "kuk, kuk" as an answer to his questions.[25] But of course we know that "kuk, kuk" is not an answer: the cuckoo is not responding to the eagle, but just making noise in its customary way. Still, we might think further that the eagle is not so wrong after all, since the cuckoo is in a certain

24. Alan of Lille's *De planctu Naturae* also makes a brief reference to this practice (prose 1.xxiii; Wetherbee 44–45).

25. Grice's example of the "maxim of relation," which he takes to be one of the fundamental features of sincere communication, is the exchange "A: *I am out of petrol*. B: *There is a garage round the corner*" (51). Despite the absence of a direct logical connection, statement B implicates its own relevance to statement A, and the speaker of A understands that B is offering a solution to their problem.

sense naming itself, even if it does not do so knowingly in response to the eagle's question. This linguistic accident, in which the eagle misunderstands a meaningless utterance as an act of self-naming, is a special case of a more general principle for the cuckoo. As Leach notes, the cuckoo's song was one of the paradigmatic examples of a type of sonic production called *vox literata inarticulata* (a kind of *vox* that can be spelled, but which does not have any referential meaning) in Marchetto of Padua's influential fourteenth-century music theory treatise (*Sung Birds* 36).[26] But if we understand the cuckoo's song as an act of self-naming, as the proverbial descriptions invariably do, then it surely would not count as an example of this kind of *vox*, since names (like Marchetto or Socrates) refer coherently to particular entities.[27] These two accounts of the cuckoo's vocal production – as either an act of self-naming or an inarticulate, non-referential form of *vox* – seem hard to reconcile. If the cuckoo is saying nothing, then it can hardly be naming itself.

26. See also Kirk 27–34 for discussion of the various categories of *vox*, including *vox literata inarticulata*.

27. Likewise, species-names such as "dog" or "nightingale" refer coherently to particular members of that species.

What, then (if anything) does the cuckoo's song name? In the examples given above, the cuckoo's vocal production is entirely indifferent to circumstance or stimulus. It sings about itself only by accident, because others have named it after the song that it happens to sing. Lacking any apparent referential meaning, whether conceptual or environmental, "kuk kuk" can thus refer only to one thing: itself as a word. Medieval grammatical theory called this form of reference *suppositio materialis*, described by Jordan Kirk as "the use of a word to refer to itself, as in a proposition such as *human has two syllables*" (54). As Kirk points out, a word that refers to itself as a word has a strange relationship to signification in medieval grammatical theory, in that it "appears to cease signifying" when used as a term of self-reference (59). In the circular act of self-naming, the word loses its connection to an external concept. Grammatical self-naming removes words from the realm of signification, generating instead a kind of recursive emptiness. I suggest that thinking in these terms can help us reconcile the two apparently contradictory accounts of the cuckoo's vocal production. The self-referential quality of "kuk kuk" – alongside its insistent repetition which disintegrates the possibility of assigning it any contextual meaning or relating it to a particular stimulus – means that the utterance can refer only to itself. But this self-naming cannot be conceptual because it never moves from recursivity to referentiality. The cuckoo does speak about itself when it sings, but only in the form of empty grammatical self-naming. In other words, it speaks about an empty self – a self which is nothing.

Read alongside these contexts, the Summer Canon's repeated demand that its performers "sing [the word] 'cuccu'" takes on a new dimension. In particular, we can see that because of the cuckoo-song's recursive qualities, the performers in a sense transform themselves into cuckoos through the very act of singing the word. If the cuckoo's song marks the form of empty self-reference, then in repeating the word "cuccu" the singers name themselves as cuckoos, make themselves cuckoos, and also make themselves nothing – a form without a content. We might think, relatedly, that the Middle English text commands its performers to "sing cuccu" not because it is the right season or because it has some other meaningful symbolic function, but for precisely no reason. In this light, it is perhaps significant that the syntax and argument of the Middle English text lack direct logical connectives, but instead depend upon a series of Gricean implicatures generated by their sequential, paratactic organization:

> Sumer is icumen in. [*therefore*] Lhude sing cuccu. Groweþ sed and bloweþ med and springþ the wude nu. [*therefore*] Sing cuccu.

But as discussed above, the text's use of person and mood divides it into two starkly distinct grammatical realms: one of bucolic description ("Groweþ sed and bloweþ med") and another of performative demand ("Lhude sing cuccu"). This gap is only bridged by a set of unstated logical connectives which we do not have to insist as being present. Indeed, reading the Middle English text in this way – as a series of unreasonable demands that cut across, and have little connection to, a narrated rural scene – sharpens its imperative thrust considerably. The text's refusal to tell its performers exactly why they must sing and never stop implicates them even more strongly in the dynamic of compelled repetition visible in other aspects of the song's form. The vicious circle of repetitive self-reference neither requires nor allows for justification.

One further set of resonances emerges from the Summer Canon's perpetual form. If the song indeed commands its performers never to stop as they move through the circular, repetitive form of the *rota* – in other words, if it tells them to engage in perpetual circular motion – then the performance comes to resemble an attempted embodiment, in the register of audible music or *musica instrumentalis,* of the harmonious orbits of the celestial bodies. These orbits share many of the same formal features as the canon's interlocking melodic lines: they also have a repetitive periodicity, and fit together in a

way which at least in theory suggests a mathematical harmony and consonance. In fact, as Leach (*Sung Birds* 126–27; "Gendering the Semitone" 16) and Hicks (253) have both noted, there is at least one indication in medieval writing that the repetitive – and, I would add, implicitly canonic – song of the cuckoo was a potential point of reference for thinking about celestial orbits and cosmic harmony. In a treatise dated between 1340 and 1377, the philosopher Nicole Oresme sets out to discover whether the orbital periods of the celestial bodies are commensurable or incommensurable; if the latter is the case, then any given celestial configuration will never recur, and if the former, the cosmos will eventually return to a prior configuration (Grant 4–5).[28] In the course of an allegorical debate, the character of Geometry, arguing in favour of incommensurability, makes reference to the cuckoo as a metaphor for bad musicianship in order to assert the aesthetic failings of the commensurable cosmos:

> Que est ista cantilena que placeret sepe aut multotiens repetita? Nonne talis uniformitas gignit fastidium? Ymo certe, et novitas plus delectat. Nec esset reputatus cantor optimus sed cuculus, qui non posset modulos musicos variare qui sunt variabiles in infinitum. Nunc vero si omnes motus celi sunt commensurabiles necesse est eosdem, vel similes, motus et effectus infinities iterari, si mundus semper duraret.
>
> (What song would please that is frequently or oft repeated? Would not such uniformity and repetition produce disgust? It surely would, for novelty is more delightful. A singer who is unable to produce musical sounds, which are infinitely variable, would no longer be thought best, but would be taken for a cuckoo. Now if all the celestial motions are commensurable, and if the world were eternal, the same, or similar, motions and effects would necessarily be repeated. (Grant 316)

The song ("cantilena") that Oresme's speaker rhetorically deplores has a marked resemblance to the Summer Canon in both form and content. Just like the repetitive harmonic relations of Oresme's commensurable cosmos, the song is commensurable on a basic, definitional level by virtue of its canonic structure, since canons must have a commensurable periodicity in order to function musically as canons. When fully built up, the *rota*'s texture produces a distinct sense of sonic "uniformitas", with its simple, repetitive harmonic progres-

28. Commensurability was often taken to imply the existence of circular time, and the Pythagorean "Great Year" (Grant 103); this was one of the opinions condemned by Tempier in 1277 (Grant 109–10). Oresme's treatise is not explicitly conclusive, but he appears to favour incommensurability as more probable (Grant 110).

sion built on an *F-G-F-G* ground that becomes more and more apparent as the music continues to repeat. The melody itself is full of figures of palindromic return and self-reference, and this appears to have been true for all of the stages of musical revision identified by Duffin and (more speculatively) Wulstan.[29] Like the orbits of a tediously commensurable cosmos, the Summer Canon moves round and round in circles, perpetually interlocking and self-harmonizing, tracing movement without change.

Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, this analogy between musical repetition and cosmic orbits does not suggest a reading in which we imagine the performers of the Summer Canon as celestial bodies moving in perfect, harmonious relation: it is not a simple or straight evocation of cosmic order of the kind that Bruce Holsinger and Andrew Hicks both warn against finding in medieval musical cultures. The piece's formal endlessness produces, if anything, the opposite effect, with its performers confronted by the fact that they are precisely not celestial bodies, but rather fleshy, heavy creatures incapable of making music in the way that the song demands. As such, we might even describe the Summer Canon as an unperformable work, with an implied performance direction of 'repeat perpetually', unachievable for any performer susceptible to conditions like hunger, exhaustion, or death. In Wesley Cray's philosophical taxonomy of musical unperformability, the song would count as "medically unperformable", a category which includes works whose temporal duration exceeds the capacity of human individuals (69).[30] The song's unperformable quality would remind its (aspiring) performer that the human-cosmological analogue is inexact, or incomplete: sublunary bodies are, after all, unavoidably finite, imbricated in natural structures of generation and corruption. As Boethius points out in the *De institutione musica*, breath and vocal range place natural limitations on human vocal production which cannot be exceeded, even though duration and pitch are not themselves delimited phenomena (I. 13; Friedlein 199). The Summer Canon, in making an impossible demand for perpetual repetition ("ne swik þu naver nu"), asks its singers to confront their incapacity to perform it, and to exit it not with a neat coda, but necessarily by means of abandonment, admitting their failure to follow the instructions, or embody the cosmos in performance; admitting, in other words, that humans access ordered cosmic forms only via practices of degraded repetition. Any serious attempt to embody the form of cosmic repetition in the sublunary world would result instead in the monstrous form of the cuckoo –

29. For instance, the *F-D-F* of the second "sing cuccu" (both states), or the *F-E-D-E-F* of "murie sing cuccu" (second state); examples could be multiplied.

30. Cray's examples are drawn from modern and contemporary experimental music, but we might recall that medieval music theory offers at least one definite example of music unperformable by humans: the cosmic *musica mundana* – which, as Hicks argues, must be understood as material sonic production, rather than an abstract arithmetical harmony (20–23).

insatiable, greedy, empty – with the human scale of vocal performance brought into horrifying contrast by the impossible prospect of perpetual extension through time.

*

Of course, this is all only a joke. No Reading monks were harmed in the performance of the Summer Canon; I am not suggesting that this text was genuinely performed as a thirteenth-century analogue to contemporary movement practices such as rave culture, with the bodily limits of participants genuinely tested by repetition to the point of exhaustion.[31] The pleasure of this text as I am reading it lies rather in the fiction of compulsion that it generates – in the way that it suggests an experience of form in excess of bodily limitations, an experience which does not depend on abstract contemplation of the infinite, but rather a speculative tracing of what would be impossible. It also offers the possibility of imagining a performance act unconditioned by reason, and as such might be taken as a playful inhabitation of a kind of choreomania, a state of compulsively repeated movement known in the Middle Ages through a widely circulated group of dancing mania narratives.[32] The song, as articulated through the Middle English text, allows its performers to experience something of what it would be like to lose their reasonable faculties, and the kinds of strange and inhospitable forms that would result from such a loss. Taking the Middle English text in this way – as a playful temporary inhabitation of unreason, and with the cuckoo's unthinkingly repetitive song indicating the form of that unreason – allows us in turn to consider how the Latin text offers itself as a different type of form-experience, one which provides a solution to the Middle English text's endless iterability.

As Elizabeth Eva Leach has shown, medieval musical and natural-philosophical discourses define birdsong as "the production of an irrational animal, spurred only by natural instinct" (*Sung Birds* 1), and therefore not as a kind of sound which counts as music. Reason is the necessary condition which separates music from mere noise, and birds do not possess it. As Leach further argues, the differences between music and non-music cannot be registered only on the sonic level: in medieval music theory, the mere sound of music "does not differentiate the bird-brained imitator from the rational, thinking artist", a distinction which only the "ability to *understand* the measure and number of music" can register (*Sung Birds* 43). The irrational quality of birdsong is perhaps no clearer than in the case of the cuckoo, which as we have seen is understood to be almost paradigmati-

31. Work on rave and related dance cultures has regularly explored these characteristics: for instance, see Wark 5 and Fink 25–61. For some medieval examples of dancing to exhaustion, see Gotman 52–55.

32. Gotman offers a remarkable transhistorical and cross-cultural study of the phenomenon of choreomania; for medieval dance manias specifically, see Gotman 41–69 and Rohmann 363–493. Wilton Abbey, a prominent Benedictine nunnery around fifty miles away from Reading, included a story about dancing mania in their patron saint's *vita*: see Clark.

cally stupid on account of its tedious, repetitive and solipsistically self-referential song. Accordingly, the Middle English text, in its demand that its performers must sing as cuckoos, has effectively asked them to abandon their faculty of reason. This abandonment of reason, in turn, would be a necessary condition for attempting the absurd task of extending the song's form perpetually in performance.[33] The song can attain its monstrous cuckoo form only if its performers behave like unthinking cuckoos, without the faculty of reason, and engage in a form of non-musicianship in which they only repeat what is written on the page, instead of using their reasonable faculties to develop a solution to the problem of performance.[34] In this way, the song's inconclusive instructional form first draws its performers into a vicious circle of unending imitation, before spitting them out again, either through the exercise of reason, or perhaps – for the most determined or foolish imitators – physical necessity.[35] If we do exactly what the page tells us to do and no more, then we will be stuck in the text until we start thinking, prompted by the exhausting possibility of continual repetition. Exiting the Summer Canon's round form is certainly a bodily necessity, but it is also a rational one. We must think in order to leave.

I suggest that the Latin text plays an important role in this process of form-experience by offering the thoughtful singer a way out of the song's apparently endless form. The Latin begins with its own imperative: "Perspice!" (perceive, see clearly, understand, know), a command which stands in stark contrast to the bare, unreasonable, and indeed perhaps even meaningless imperative demands of the Middle English text.[36]

> Perspice Christicola, que dignacio,
> celicus agricola pro vitis vicio,
> filio non parcens exposuit mortis exicio,
> qui captivos semivivos a supplicio
> vite donat et secum coronat in celi solio.
>
> (See, Christian, what graciousness: the heavenly farmer,
> because of a defect in the vine, not sparing his son, exposed
> him to death's destruction: he who gives barely-living
> captives life from torment and crowns them with him on
> heaven's throne.)

As previous readers have noted, the Latin text shares its agricultural, rural setting with the Middle English, and these similarities ground a

33. Bad musicianship is regularly depicted using images of animal transformation; for examples, see Bude 1 and Holsinger 160.

34. On the collaborative aspects of medieval musical performance, see Leach, "Nature's Forge" 77–79.

35. It is perhaps significant here that the song never sets the syllables "cu cu" to a descending major or minor third: in this sense, the performers never directly imitate the cuckoo's call, and recognizing this might offer a way out of the song's apparent mimetic demands (I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this point).

36. *DMLBS* s.v. "perspicari." The Latin text is very likely to be a contrafact, rather than a second verse, because the other instances of text-stacking in the manuscript appear to use colour to distinguish between versicles (all black) and contrafacts (black and red). For example, *Ave gloriosa mater / Duce creature* (Latin in black, French in red) on ff. 9v–10r; *Ante thronum regentis omnia* (f. 13r, stacked verses, all black). On the latter technique, unusual for this time and place, see Deeming, "English Monastic Miscellany" 127–31. For the issue of contrafacture generally, see Obst.

range of telling contrasts. James M. Dean has shown that it has a sense of directionality absent from the vernacular: rather than depicting nature's neverending flux, the Latin text displays "purposeful, celebratory activity" (215). The agricultural lexicon remains, but instead of cavorting animals engaged in their instinctual behaviours, apparently undisturbed by humans, the Latin text offers a narrative of purposeful action: first in the farmer's prudent husbandry (allowing his son to die, presumably in order to save the vine), and then in the son's own actions, which shifts the text quickly from its metaphorical register to a literal description of the Redemption. The Latin terms of description for humans ("captivos semivivos", half-alive prisoners) are perhaps suggestively pertinent to the Middle English text since the song's performers, in the argument presented here, are in a sense captured by its repetitive form as they strive to embody something beyond the temporality of natural generation and corruption. Sublunary nature whirls around, in hopeless, defective imitation of the celestial spheres: in this rhetoric, life on earth is only half a life, just as the turning seasons (or audible music) echo the ordered music of the cosmic machine without ever embodying it. The Latin text replaces this endless flux with a narrative of an event – the Redemption – which is both singular and eternal. Accordingly, it uses the perfect-tense verb ("exposuit" to indicate the Crucifixion as a singular historical event, and present-tense verbs ("donat" and "coronat") to refer to the Redemption as a perpetually continuing state. We might think, then, of the Latin song, in its formal directionality and its reassuring assertion that the condition of half-alive captivity is not eternal, as offering an implicit solution to the problem of performance generated by the Middle English text's formal openness. Dean argues that the Latin text "completes" the Middle English text thematically (208); we might say further that it also completes it formally, by offering a text which no longer compels its performers to repeat, but instead commands them to know, and as such implicitly asks them to think collaboratively about how to bring the piece to its close.

All of this suggests that the Summer Canon, understood as a composite whole, could have had a broadly pedagogical force for the users of BL, Harley 978. The song presents not only a remarkable specimen of canonic technique and a demonstration of the compositional possibilities of such a technique, but also serves as a reminder – perhaps an important one for a community whose interest in music theory and composition is apparent from the manuscript's other contents – that structural virtuosity is not in itself music, and that good

musicianship involves more than just stylistic and technical imitation.[37] Understanding it in this way would make sense given the presence of other (admittedly much more elementary and technical) pedagogical songs among the manuscript's musical items. Given Leach's suggestion (*Sung Birds* 160) that the fourteenth-century continental cuckoo-canon *Talent m'a pris* could have had a pedagogical function, we might also consider the possibility that the mindlessly repetitive cuckoo was understood as a figure of bad learning in medieval cultures more broadly. In this text at least, reason and purposeful thought offer the performers a way out from the cuckoo's formal condition.[38]

At this point, let us return to the beginning as a way of ending. The 1972 Munich performance of the Summer Canon took place quite literally on the rubble of history, in a stadium built on the detritus of a city destroyed by war, its form determined by the contours of that landscape (Schiller and Young 107). Like many performances – and indeed, like historical thought in general – it was delicately poised between the past and present, between the reproduction of a received script and the enactment of something new in the performative now. For the organizers, the Summer Canon appeared as an appropriate vehicle for negotiating the tensions of memory and historical presence in the course of a mass event which needed to suppress its own precise logistical synchronicity, haunted as it was by the rejection of the human scale inherent in fascist mass ornament. By contrast, the interpretation proposed above, although founded on the same philological object, finds in the song a latent formal tendency towards perpetual extension, a scale which is inhospitable to human performance. These two reenactments attest, then, to the generative possibilities of performance as a practice of interpretation, and the ways in which meaning emerges through experiences of textual form. They also suggest the ways in which performance must negotiate, directly or indirectly, the question of bodily limits. The Munich performance offered a decorously bounded celebration in which the collective, committed movements of non-specialist dancers served to welcome the audience to the Olympic spectacle, leaving all direct tests of bodily limits to the athletic performances of the following days. It traced one way of placing the self in relation to the rubble of the past – and not an illegitimate one. But we must remember nonetheless that its formal boundaries, directed by a score whose extent was determined by the schedule and required contents of the opening ceremonies, depended on a set of quite arbitrary, even if reasonable, demands. This kind of form-experience is not the only kind

37. Deeming concludes that the collection as a whole "seems to have been the product of a small group of educated enthusiasts" who had access to international networks of literary and musical exchange, and whose notational revisions attest to their "continued, practical use" of the musical items ("English Monastic Miscellany" 139).

38. See Günther for examples of later medieval music that cannot be performed without the exercise of thought.

made possible by the Summer Canon's surviving elements. Once the possibility of perpetual repetition has been broached, the arbitrariness of the song's formal boundaries becomes clear. If the cuckoo's meaningless and repetitive song reminds us of anything, it is that performance does not always have to be reasonable.

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