

# I Hear the Sound of Canons

by Carole Truitt

What we know as the "canon" form in music has its roots in early improvised singing and playing and in the development of medieval polyphony, though the term itself didn't come into use until the fifteenth century. It is a kind of music that uses one melody sung by two or more voices to create harmony and other forms of polyphonic sound, in which one voice begins the melody, and a second (and, sometimes, a third and fourth voice) repeats it at a set rhythmic interval. Such music came to be called by various colorful titles, each of which described what this kind of music sounded like. In fourteenth century France, for instance, such music was called a "chace" because two voices "chased" each other through the composition. In England it was called a "round" (from the French "rondeau" and the Latin "rondellus" or "rota") because the voices kept circling back to the beginning of the melody to start again. Another name for a more elaborate version of this kind of music came from the Latin "fuga," meaning "flight" or "race"--brought over into French as "fugue."

As musical theory developed, this kind of music was named a "canon" (from the Latin word for "rule" or "standard"), because the harmonic sound was created from the set melody through strict ("canonic") imitation. One of the earliest preserved canonic compositions is a somewhat complex round named "Sumer is icumen in," probably composed about the year 1250 in Reading, England. A Latin explanation that accompanies this music in the manuscript explains how it is to be sung: "This round can be sung by four voices, but must not be performed by fewer than three, or at least two . . . It is sung as follows: While the other voices remain silent, one begins . . ., and when he shall have come to the first note after the cross [a mark in the manuscript to indicate where the next voice enters], another enters, and so on with the rest. But each shall pause at the written rests, and not elsewhere, for the duration of one long note . . ."

This kind of music appears frequently in folk music in many countries. Often the compositions appear simple in construction, yet when several voices join in singing a round/canon, they can create wonderful polyphonic sounds that delight the singers. It is also a form of music that has found a rich source for texts and creative composers in the liturgy of the Church. For this reason, and because canonic singing is being re-introduced into our worship, it is an important musical form to teach your students, and it is also one that they will find enjoyable.

## Teaching Canons

STEP ONE: When you are ready to teach canon form, you should begin simply, with what is called "partner singing," an easy form of polyphony. The song "Orchestra," which is a folk song from Estonia, consists of three separate melodies sung against each other. Although it is not a canon/round, it is a useful way to get children to hold their own part as the song is repeated several times.

**Orchestra** Estonia

The musical score is written on three staves. The top staff is for the Drum, with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The notes are quarter notes, and the lyrics below are "Drum, drum, drum, drum, drum, drum, drum, drum, drum,". The middle staff is for the Trumpets, with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are quarter notes, and the lyrics below are "Yeh, oh, yeh, oh, yeh, oh, yeh, oh, yeh, oh,". The bottom staff is for the Clarinet, with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are quarter notes, and the lyrics below are "La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la,". A small asterisk at the bottom left indicates "\*Use small note on repeat."

Divide the class into three parts, and practice each part individually. Then, when each group knows its own part, put part one with part two, and then add part three.

STEP TWO: Once your class has mastered "Orchestra," move on to a true round, beginning with the class divided into two parts, and then into three parts. One way to teach the canon form would be with drums or sticks to accompany a chanted text, so that the children are engaged in action as well as speaking. Use the following rhythm pattern to speak the text [/ = accented or stressed syllable or word; - = unaccented or unstressed syllable or word]:

/// - - /  
/ - / - / - / - /

Here's the text:

DRUM, DRUM, COME play the DRUM.  
YOU will SEE that DRUM-ming CAN be FUN!

A second group, using sticks, might chant to the same rhythm:

STICKS, STICKS, COME play the STICKS.  
YOU will SEE the STICKS can GIVE you KICKS!

Once each group learns its part, then have the second voice begin when the first group reaches the third stressed syllable (that is, COME).

If you want to add a third voice, have a group clap on each of the stressed words/syllables, as they chant:

SING, SING, WE like to SING.  
YOU will HEAR that SING-ing IS our THING!

STEP THREE: Now you are ready to move on to a vocal sound that is sung. Teach a familiar round such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" or "Frere Jacques." Divide the class into two groups first, then, when they have mastered the round in two voices, move on to three voices.

### **A Canon for the November Feasts**

You can use what the children learn about canon form to teach "May Saints and Angels," a song that could be used in church during November, when we remember those who have gone before us "marked with the sign of faith"--the saints, and members of our own families, and all who have died. Since this is a text that is to be used especially at funerals, this song might become part of the school's (and parish's) repertoire, to be used during the final commendation at funerals or at any time that the community remembers someone who has died. The text as given below is an adapted form of the ancient song "In paradisum," and the music is the Tallis Canon. (You may also find this setting in *Worship*, Third Edition [Chicago: GIA Publications, 1986] and in *RitualSong* [GIA, 1996].)

*In Paradisum*  
ICEL, 1983

TALLIS CANON, LM  
Thomas Tallis, c.1520-1585

1. May saints and an - gels lead you on,  
2. Come to the peace of A - bra - ham

Es - cort - ing you where Christ has gone.  
And to the sup - per of the Lamb:

Now he has called you, come to him  
Come to the glo - ry of the blessed,

Who sits a - bove the ser - a - phim.  
And to per - pet - ual light and rest.

TEXT: The ancient Latin text of the "In paradisum" is a prayer that the one who has died will be escorted to heaven by the angels and the saints. Here is a literal translation of the text:

May the angels escort you into paradise;  
when you arrive, may the martyrs welcome you  
and lead you into the holy city, Jerusalem.

May choirs of angels welcome you,  
and, with Lazarus who was once poor,  
may you have unending rest.

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TUNE: Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-1585) was an English composer and organist who lived through the years of the Reformation in England, serving several churches and abbeys until he was named a "gentleman of the Chapel Royal," where he worked as an organist and a composer for Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I. He wrote music for Latin and English texts, and for Catholic and Anglican services. One of his simpler compositions was a set of tunes based on the modal tones used in Western church music, which were to be used with a metered English translation of the Psalter. The best known of these is the "Eighth Tune," also called the "Tallis Canon." It was composed during the 1560s.

TEACHING THE SONG: Begin with the words. Divide your class into two groups, and try to get the children to say the words in canon, first. The second voice enters when the first group says "-gels" of "an-gels." Once they have mastered the words, then try the music. When they are able to sing the whole composition through in two voices, then try it with three.

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