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Between *Cantus Firmus* and Pervasive Imitation: Features of Working with Liturgical Sources in Early Tudor Composers Motets

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Abstract. The article discusses the principles of working with a plainchant in the motets of the English composers of the second half of the 15th – early 16th century. The examination of these principles could clarify the interaction between various composition techniques, such as *cantus firmus* technique and pervasive imitation. The compositional methods could be divided into four groups. Three of them (demonstrated through Richard Davy’s *In honore summae matris*, John Browne’s *O Maria Salvatoris Mater* and Robert Fayrfax’s *Magnificat Regale*) demonstrate the same tendency, namely that the chant plays no main structural role in the composition. The principle of a fragmentary *cantus prius factus* device, when a plainchant is fractal and the cantus voice no longer serves as the base of a composition, should be particularly noted. This is an example of a transitional technique; it could have originated from John Dunstaple’s motets, while also containing some pervasive imitation characteristics. John Taverner’s four-voice *Magnificat* represents a later version of *cantus prius factus* interpretation: here pervasive imitation is combined with the cantus firmus technique, based on a clear and unflorid plainchant demonstration.

Keywords: Renaissance polyphony, *cantus firmus*, pervasive imitation, motet, Eton choirbook, compositional principles interaction

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Между *cantus firmus* и сквозным имитационным письмом: особенности работы с литургическим первоисточником в мотетах композиторов эпохи ранних Тюдоров

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются принципы работы с одноголосным первоисточником в мотетах английских композиторов второй половины XV – начала XVI века. Изучение этих принципов может прояснить взаимодействие различных композиционных приёмов, таких как техника *cantus firmus* и сквозная имитация. Классификация методов композиции состоит из четырёх групп. Три из них (на примере *In honore summae matris* Ричарда Дэйви, *O Maria Salvatoris Mater* Джона Брауна и *Magnificat Regale* Роберта Фэрфакса) объединяются общей тенденцией — утратой структурирующей роли григорианского первоисточника в композиции. Особенно показательным становится принцип фрагментарного проведения *cantus prius factus*, когда хорал дробится и уже не является стержнем композиции. В этом случае речь идёт о переходной технике, которая восходит к мотетам Джона Данстейбла и одновременно содержит черты сквозного имитационного письма. Четырёхголосный Магнификат Джона Тавернера представляет собой уже более поздний вариант многоголосной обработки литургического *cantus prius factus*: развитая сквозная имитация в песнопении соединяется с техникой *cantus firmus*, базирующейся на ясном и неколорированном проведении одноголосного первоисточника.

Ключевые слова: ренессансная полифония, *cantus firmus*, сквозное имитационное письмо, мотет, Итонская хоровая книга, взаимодействие техник композиции

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Introduction

It is well known that throughout the Middle Ages, the single-voice primary source often served as a starting point or a foundation for creating a polyphonic composition. During the Renaissance, the *cantus firmus* technique remained one of the “mainstream” ones, which was reflected in the works of a wide variety of composers. Numerous masses and motets were composed almost exclusively in this

technique, including such polyphonic device as *cantus prius factus* (further — *c. pr. f.*). At the same time, from the second half of the 15th century onward a *pervasive imitation* (another technique that was highly symptomatic of the Renaissance) began to spread. Many motets by Antoine Busnois, Josquin des Prez and their students provide solid examples thereof. As both techniques existed in the same compositional field, the pervasive imitation interacted with the *cantus firmus* technique.

Prof. Nikolai Tarasevich dutifully notes: “It [pervasive imitation. — *G.K.*] begins its development in the epoch of La Rue, Josquin, and their contemporaries: these composers, although increasingly working with its most important characteristics (such as imitation, thematic motifs and phrases extraction), still think in terms of *c. f.*” [1, p. 52] Sometimes composers used *cantus floridus*, derived from *cantus firmus*.

The English composers of the second half of the 15th century and the early 16th century were no exception: they also focused on working with liturgical sources. *Eton Choirbook* is considered the largest motet anthology in England of the early Tudor period, covering the years from approximately 1500 to 1504. Most surviving pieces¹ are assumed to be written in *cantus firmus* technique.²

The early Renaissance English motets have not yet been examined from the point of interaction between different techniques, and the compositional aspects of working with a liturgical source have not been analyzed in detail. These aspects have not been sufficiently studied in Russian musicology, compared to foreign works; however, even in foreign musical literature, despite a larger amount of work, not all compositions and parameters have been accurately considered. The novelty of the approach of the present article consists in an attempt to classify the methods of compositional approaches to a liturgical chant source and to analytically reinterpret certain motets. This classification and some renewed analytical data should allow us to draw conclusions about the specific progress of the English motet.

A dissertation by Catherine Hocking [2] was valuable for our research due to its coverage of many liturgical sources and previously unknown plainsongs. A dissertation by Anna Teplova [3] and articles by Peter Philips [4] and Julie Cumming [5] were also indispensable for our research. Cumming’s article has been especially significant as it proposes that the technique of pervasive imitation originated from *cantus firmus* and *cantus floridus* in Renaissance compositions, and Cumming’s observations are therefore relevant to our research.

The interaction between techniques or its absence may be determined by a number of factors: the completeness of a liturgical source/plainchant and a degree of “coloration” (*florid*); the rhythmic design of the source; the preservation of *c. pr. f.* mode and its reflection in a motet; the presence of imitations or imitative systems. These aspects allow us to clearly define the role of *c. pr. f.* role in the early Tudor motets.

Finally, we have attempted to classify the principal compositional approaches to a liturgical source applied by the English composers of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. This classification is based on the rhythmic design of the liturgical source/plainchant and the *c. pr. f.* completeness within a particular piece. The classification includes four categories:

1. *C. pr. f.* is used in full, but is not rhythmically distinguished (i.e., may be introduced by various note-values, including minims).
2. *C. pr. f.* is fully used by a composer and mostly introduced by large durations (semibreves at the very least).

¹ The *Eton Choirbook* inventory says the manuscript contains 93 pieces, of which 29 pieces are listed and 21 are preserved incompletely. GB-WRec MS 178 (*Eton Choirbook*). Manuscript of polyphony: c. 1500–1504. Eton College Library, Eton, England. URL: <https://www.diamm.ac.uk/sources/202/#/> (accessed: 22.12.2025).

² At the beginning of her PhD thesis, Catherine Hocking supplied a table that demonstrates correlations between motets and applied chants. [2, pp. 6–8]

3. *C. pr. f.* is used in fragments and in rhythmically indistinguishable.

4. *C. pr. f.* is introduced with significant modifications, melodic additions and is rhythmically distinguished (i.e., its rhythmic design includes large durations).

According to the proposed classification, we shall now successively examine examples for each category.

**A Full Chant Exposition:
Richard Davy's Motet
*In honore summae matris***

The first motet to consider is a piece by Richard Davy (1465–1538) *In honore summae matris*,³ in which *c. pr. f.* is preserved without substantial melodic modifications. The origin of the piece was a responsory chant *Iusti in perpetuum vivent*, of which Davy used the verse 15 and a half of the verse 16⁴ from Chapter 5 of the Book of Wisdom. Davy's polyphonic setting consists of only first part of the responsory (verse 15).⁵ It is interesting to note that in the Sarum antiphonary this responsory is sung in the seventh church tune with the final *g*, while its continental version features both sixth and seventh church tunes.⁶

In his motet, Davy fully copies a plainsong only once, splitting the chant into four fragments that are laid only in five-voice tutti sections (in Example No. 1 we mark sections by letters “a,” “b,” “c,” and “d,” with sections limits being marked by square brackets above the score).⁷ The chant is not florid, and an original tone order is preserved. Davy's arrangement does not follow the original's correspondence between music and words. In Example No. 1, we may see that Davy's fragments do not coincide with the original chant setting: the first semi-line of the responsory's ending (“eorum”) and the beginning of the second semi-line are joined together in section “b.” The main difference between the responsory and Davy's version is the repetition of the initial “a” segment after the final motet section “Amen.” This transformation results in that the entire motet ends on the final *c*, rather than *g*, and the chant mode itself is reinterpreted in this case.

This change in the final makes the motet mode unclear compared to that of the original responsory. In Davy's motet, cadential tones are *g*, *f* and *c*; and the conclusive cadences roots (cadences of three main sections) rest on the same three pitches. The emphasis on the fourth

³ The *Eton Choirbook* and other sources contain compositions with no voice designation, e.g. Davy's *In honore summae matris* and John Banester's *O Maria et Elizabeth*. Then the voice name was invented by the editor and began to vary depending on an edition. Moreover, the individual voice from a composition can be found under different names in various sources.

⁴ These are verses 16–17 in Clementine Vulgate.

⁵ It is fixed in *Antiphonale Salisburiense*, however some other manuscripts show both verses are sung together in the responsory part, while the Verse part includes another text. Cistercian antiphoner. F.A26v. CDN-Hsmu M2149. L4. 1554. Halifax (Canada), St. Mary's University Patrick Power Library. URL: [https://cantus.simssa.ca/manuscript/123723/?folio%5B0%5D=A26v&pageAlias=Folio%20A26v#:~:text=Halifax%20\(Canada\)%2C%20St.%20Mary%E2%80%99s%20University%20%2D%20Patrick%20Power%20Library%2C%20M2149.L4%201554](https://cantus.simssa.ca/manuscript/123723/?folio%5B0%5D=A26v&pageAlias=Folio%20A26v#:~:text=Halifax%20(Canada)%2C%20St.%20Mary%E2%80%99s%20University%20%2D%20Patrick%20Power%20Library%2C%20M2149.L4%201554) (accessed: 22.12.2025).

⁶ This information is available at “Cantus Database.” URL: https://cantusdatabase.org/chant-search/?search_bar=justi+in+perpetuum+vivent (accessed: 22.12.2025).

⁷ The exposition of *c. pr. f.* only in tutti sections was characteristic of many Eton motets. [6, p. 106] *Cantus firmus* technique still mattered for composing process even if there were free-chanted sections (without *cantus firmus*).

Example No. 1

Responsory *Justi in perpetuum*

a
Ju - - - - - sti in
per - - - - - pe - tu - um
vi - - vent
et a - pud Do - - - mi - num

b
est mer - ces e - o - - - rum;
et co - gi - ta - ti - o e -

c
o - - - - - rum; a - pud
al - tis - - - - -

d
- - - - - si - mum.

degree of mode is unusual for the seventh mode/church tune, for this *d* is the reciting tone of a mode (repercussion). At the same time, a cadential root is *f*, suggesting the fifth church tune that has pitch *c* as the repercussion.⁸ This ambiguity makes it problematic to identify the mode.

However, from the point of a compositional process, it is equally important that the chant is represented with different note-values, which include both large (breve, semibreve) and small (minim, semiminim) values. Hence, although the plainsong is not florid, it does not stand out prominently from the rest of the composition,

⁸ Is there a rationale for a “reprise” of this “a” segment? Perhaps, the explanation lies in theological field. The “a” segment finishes on the word “Dominum,” and the responsory text itself has an invocation to God. I assume that this little transformation of *c. pr. f.* was intended to maintain the meaning of the Biblical text.

as the latter is characterized by the same note-values. This indicates that the role of surrounding voices is gradually increasing, leading to establishing a functional equality of all voices in compositional process. The final section, the

“Amen,” is particularly representative.⁹ Here, Davy shapes *c. pr. f.* through very different note-values, yet most importantly, he uses *soggetto* based on the first four chant tones — the only case in the entire motet (Example No. 2).

Example No. 2

Richard Davy. *In honore summae matris.*
Exposition of *soggetto* in the conclusional “Amen”

⁹ The score is cited after the edition by Jason Smart.

URL: [https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/In_honore_summae_matris_\(Richard_Davy\)](https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/In_honore_summae_matris_(Richard_Davy)) (accessed: 22.12.2025).

John Taverner's Four Voices Magnificat as an Example of a Mixed Technique

The Magnificat for Four Voices by John Taverner (c. 1490–1545), preserved in the Gyffard partbooks manuscript, illustrates another case of a clear, unflorid, but rhythmically distinguished chant. The final piece is the one-voice Magnificat from the Sarum Rite in the sixth psalm tune (as Hocking writes, “the Sarum canticle tone”).¹⁰ It is important to note an active application of imitations,

compared to Davy's motet. The Magnificat's even-numbered verses are polyphonic, as becomes the tradition, and Taverner's composition consists of three parts, primarily according to the mensuration changes (see Table 1). However, there is one more aspect of division, at the level of compositional technique, since *cantus firmus* sections and free-chanted sections alternate in the Magnificat. The consecutive exposition of two techniques, *cantus firmus* and pervasive imitation,

Table 1. John Taverner. Four-voice Magnificat. Structure

Measure	Text	Semibreves amount in a section	Chant is full exposed	Fragmentary exposition chant (initial tones)	Cadential root	Amount of voices
Tempus perfectum, prolatio minor	Et exultavit spiritus meus:	36	+		<i>a</i>	4
	In Deo salutary meo	33	+		<i>f</i>	4
	Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens	39		+	<i>a</i>	3
	Et sanctam nomen eius	33		+	<i>f</i>	4
Tempus imperfectum, prolatio minor	Fecit potentiam in brachio suo,	42	+		<i>a</i>	4
	Dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.	54	+		<i>f</i>	4
	Esurientes implevit bonis:	42		+	<i>a</i>	3
	Et divites dimisit inanes	42			<i>f</i>	3
Tempus perfectum, prolatio minor	Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros:	34	+		<i>a</i>	4
	Abraham et semini eius in saecula	36	+		<i>f</i>	4
	Sicut erat in principio	33		+	<i>a</i>	2
	Et nunc et semper: Et in saeculorum. Amen	60	+		<i>f</i>	2-4

¹⁰ All versions of single-voice Magnificat in voice tunes are represented by Hocking: [2, pp. 143–145]. I also recall that psalm tune and church tune (mode) are very similar, but aren't the same.

was generally common for the second half of the 15th – first half of the 16th century pieces, and it was observed by a wide variety of composers in different genres, in particular, in Josquin’s masses. [1, p. 83] The plainsong is sung in Medius in *cantus firmus* sections and easily identified, as Taverner distinguishes *c. pr. f.* through equal augmented note-values (mostly semibreves). The chant is not colored, and Taverner uses the original pitch row. At the same time, the liturgical monody is decorated by imitations, or *soggetti*: therefore, strictly speaking, these *cantus firmus* sections should be identified as written in a mixed technique (pervasive imitation and *cantus firmus*).

Only initial notes of *c. pr. f.* are used in free-chanted sections, most of them being rhythmically obscure in a polyphonic texture. Moreover, free melodic development is followed in Medius later, and the imitation

has a structural function there. An example thereof is the section “Esurientes implevit”: the initial imitation between Contratenor and Medius includes the first three chant pitches (in Example No. 3 in Medius part they are marked by crosses), followed by a sequence of three-voice imitations, in which the chant literally melts.

In other compositions by John Taverner one may observe a somewhat similar pattern of work with *c. pr. f.* There is also a division into *cantus firmus* and free-chanted sections in the motet *Ave Dei Patris filia*, where composer introduces the hymn *Te Deum* as *cantus firmus*. The chant is clearly distinguished by large note-values in the polyphonic texture. The hymn is rather long and full of melodic repetitions, whereby Taverner apparently singles out individual musical verses of the hymn to provide a constructive basis of the motet (the 1st, 2nd, 5th, 14th and 29th). Nevertheless, there are some striking differences

Example No. 3

John Taverner. Four-voice Magnificat.
Imitation systems in “Esurientes implevit”¹¹

The image shows a musical score for a four-voice Magnificat by John Taverner. It features three vocal parts: Contratenor (soprano), Medius (Tenor), and Bass. The lyrics are "E - su - ri - en -". The score illustrates imitation systems in the "Esurientes implevit" section. The Medius part has 'x' marks above certain notes, indicating specific chant pitches. Dashed boxes highlight imitation systems between the voices.

¹¹ Double designation of Medius-Tenor part is explained by the fact that the first one is authentic and is set in the Partbook title, while the second designation is editorial (Jason Smart).

URL: [https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Magnificat_a_4_\(John_Taverner\)](https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Magnificat_a_4_(John_Taverner)) (accessed: 22.12.2025).

between *Ave Dei Patris filia* and Magnificat. First of all, the chant is exposed through large, but not equal note-values,¹² therefore a logical formation is determined not only by *c. pr. f.*, but also by surrounding free-chanted parts. As Hugh Behnam noted in his examination of *Ave Dei Patris filia*: “The choice of note-values appears arbitrary, unless mathematical processes as yet identified.” [7, p. 102] Imitation is an essential technical element of Magnificat, whereas it serves no constructional function in *Ave Dei Patris filia*, hence this is one more distinction between two compositions.¹³

A Fragmentary Exposition of *c. pr. f.*: Robert Fayrfax’s Magnificat Regale

Now we come to focus on a technique when a liturgical source is exposed only fragmentary. One of the examples is the Magnificat Regale by Robert Fayrfax (1464–1521); the composition has been preserved in a few manuscripts, including *Caius Choirbook*¹⁴ and *Lambeth Choirbook*,¹⁵ the principal early Tudor polyphony sources, as well as *Eton*

Choirbook.¹⁶ As Catherine Hocking argues, Magnificat Regale’s liturgical source is the Magnificat counterpoint for eighth canticle (psalm) tone.¹⁷ Such counterpoints were born out of improvisation on the chant or canticle and were called *faburden*.¹⁸ A counterpoint to a liturgical source serving as the basis for a polyphonic composition is considered a peculiar feature of the English tradition.

At the beginning of every even-numbered verse of the Magnificat, the initial pitches of the aforementioned counterpoint are sung in Tenor part (or in Bass part in case of the last two verses¹⁹). Example No. 4 shows *c. pr. f.* and Tenor part melody, the latter seemingly containing the same row pitches as in the supposed liturgical source. *C. pr. f.* initial tones are obvious, but later on row pitches from Magnificat counterpoint are lost. A prolonged melismatic melody remains in Tenor part, while the *faburden* seems to disappear, having only shown up at the beginning; substantial fragments are omitted,²⁰ and last four tones are possibly transposed.²¹

¹² Indeed the *Te Deum* fragment is sung by the same note-values (semibreves) in conclusional “Amen.”

¹³ *Ave Dei Patris filia* is analyzed in detail in works of Hugh Behnam and Natalya Naumova. [7, pp. 5–104; 8, pp. 78–79]

¹⁴ GB-Llp MS 1 (Lambeth Choirbook; Arundel Choirbook). Complete MS choirbook: Late 1520’s. Lambeth Palace Library, London, England. Fol. 66v–69.

¹⁵ GB-Cgc MS 667/760 (Caius Choirbook). Manuscript of polyphony: 16th century: Late 1520’s Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, England. Fol. 118–121.

¹⁶ Fayrfax Magnificat Regale is only inventoried in the *Eton Choirbook*. Moreover, Magnificat parts have no designations either in *Caius Choirbook*, or in *Lambeth Choirbook*.

¹⁷ All Magnificat tunes and their counterpoints are presented in Hocking’s PhD dissertation. [2, pp. 149–151]

¹⁸ The term “faburden” usually means an improvisational counterpoint technique, but sometimes a lower part of the faburden is also called so. [2, p. 146] According to a treatise by a Scottish Anonymous *The Art of Music Collected [collected] out of all Ancient Doctouris of Music*, there are four kinds of faburden and all of them are built on a chant. These are described in Chapter *Heir Beginniss Faburdun*. [9, pp. 127–184]

¹⁹ Periodic exposition of initial tones in verses of Fayrfax’s Magnificat is similar on *motto* principle, which is characteristic of the early Tudor masses. [8, p. 97]

²⁰ Missed *c. pr. f.* tones and fragments are given in square brackets in this and following examples. The scores come from the Humphrey Thompson edition —

URL: [https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Magnificat_regale_\(Robert_Fayrfax\)](https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Magnificat_regale_(Robert_Fayrfax)) (accessed: 22.12.2025).

²¹ One wonders, should we qualify the four tones conclusion as a transposed *c. pr. f.* fragment, rather than an average melodic line in fourth range? Is this not an exaggeration?

Example No. 4

Robert Fayrfax. Magnificat Regale. Section "Et exultavit."
Correlation of Tenor part and *c. pr. f.*

The image displays five systems of musical notation. Each system consists of two staves: the upper staff is labeled 'c. pr. f.' (cantus firmus) and the lower staff is labeled 'Tenor'. Vertical dashed lines connect notes between the two staves to show their relationship. The lyrics are written below the Tenor staff. The first system shows the beginning of the phrase 'Et exultavit'. The second system continues the phrase. The third system shows 'Spi - ri - tus me - - - us'. The fourth system shows 'in De - - - o'. The fifth system shows 'sa - lu - ta - ri me - - - o' and includes a bracket labeled 'transposition (?)' above the Tenor staff, indicating a change in pitch for the final phrase.

Could it be so that the whole row of tones was somehow hidden in one of the next sections of the Magnificat? This does not seem plausible. One of the features of the *cantus firmus* technique is that the chant is exposed through longer note-values compared to the surrounding parts. Such is the beginning of the Tenor part of the Magnificat section "Fecit potentiam," so could one trace *c. pr. f.* there? The analysis demonstrates no such note sequence. The initial pitches row (see Example No. 5) are given in

breves and semibreves, but the further melody turns into a pervasive imitation with *soggetti* — exactly as it was previously seen in Taverner's Magnificat.

What kind of composition technique was used in such cases? The Magnificat counterpoint is not the logical composition center: *c. pr. f.* is almost dissolved in melismas and imitations. This is how Peter Philips describes the compositional technique of the *Eton Choirbook* motets: "The character

Example No. 5

Robert Fayrfax. Magnificat. Section "Fecit potentiam"

C. pr. t.

Tenor

Fe - cit po - ten - ti - am in bra - chi - o su -

Contra-tenor

dis - per

C. pr. t.

T.

- o - dis - per

B.

of the pieces in the *Eton Choirbook*, alongside those in Caius and Lambeth, fully justifies the term often applied to it: ‘florid.’ Although the degree of floridity varies, almost every piece in the repertoire is more florid than anything that went before it or came after it in the English repertoire.” [4, p. 5] Philips does not speak clearly about *cantus floridus*, but certainly hints at it. The *Eton Choirbook* illustrates a saying popular at the beginning of 16th century, “Anglici vulgariter jubulare,

Gallici vero cantare dicuntur,” so two manners — a more embellished melismatic English manner and a “syllabic ‘modern’” continental one — are opposed, as Harrison states. [9, p. 258] At the same time, one would make an unfounded claim that Fayrfax’s Magnificat, as well as some other compositions of that period, were created in the *cantus floridus* technique. To make such a claim one would need to expose necessary row of tones at least once to identify a “colored” chant.²²

²² It is a prerequisite condition for determination of *cantus firmus* technique and *cantus floridus* as derived from the first one. Julia Yevdokimova was one of the first musicologists who described a coloration (floridity) as an artistic method. The term was first applied to compositions of the English musicians of the first half 15th century, in particular John Dunstaple and Guillaume Du Fay. Yevdokimova explains a colored chant or *cantus floridus* as “a free melodic outline.” She states: “If we do not know the chant melody, on which the piece is built, it is impossible to discern it in relative voices texture or to recognize by some features. A chant is often fully used, neither split up, nor repeated, its structure remaining unaltered, except for a free rhythmization. <...> Free rhythmization of *c. pr. f.* naturally leads to a melodic colorization of the chant.” [10, pp. 21–22]

The Magnificat is also different from *c. pr. f.* in the mode aspect. The faburden mode could be attributed as eighth psalm tune according to its genesis from the Magnificat tune. In all sections, final cadences end on final *f* in the Magnificat (except one, which ends on *d*). The mode attribution is still uncertain and debatable (as Hocking writes, “conflicting canticle tone assignment” [2, p. 180]). Scholars express varying views, and the Magnificat Regale tune is determined both as sixth and eighth church tune. [Ibid., pp. 140–141] It could be possible to call the Magnificat Regale tune as the transposed eighth church tune with confinal *f*, but a weak final *c* and the lack of a clear *c. pr. f.* exposition do not help to solve the mode issue. Cadences are one of the main manifestations of the harmonic system in music (in particular, Renaissance music), and they are one of the key elements of the mode demonstration, even if tonality is not concerned. At the same time, Fayrfax’s Magnificat is not the only example of such problem: similar contradictions between the cadence system as the mode base points and the actual mode liturgical source, the Magnificat counterpoint, are found in other English composers’ motets. [Ibid., p. 180]

As a result, it is difficult to discuss the application of the *cantus firmus* technique in the case of Robert Fayrfax’s Magnificat, since *c. pr. f.* does not provide a logical core to the composition. The faburden is not

rhythmically distinguished, its intonations are also very fragmentary, and the mode characteristics are also different. The same may be observed in other motets from the *Eton Choirbook*, for example, in John Banester’s *O Maria et Elizabeth*.

A Transformed Chant:

John Browne’s *O Maria Salvatoris Mater*

John Browne’s (c. 1480–1505)²³ *O Maria Salvatoris Mater* is another controversial motet from the *Eton Choirbook*. The eight-voice composition is a “preface” motet in the Eton anthology. As many English votive antiphons, *O Maria Salvatoris Mater* consists of two sections that differ by measures (Tempus perfectus, prolatio minor; Tempus perfectus, prolatio major). Hocking points out at the Office antiphon *Venit dilectus meus* [2, pp. 66–67] as a liturgical source for the motet. Indeed, in the Tenor part some melodic lines correspond to the assumed *c. pr. f.*, but the final one is not exposed entirely. The first chant segment is sung in the opening section “O Maria.” It includes the following tones: 1st and 7–20th tones, while tones 2–6 are omitted, as well as some others. In Hocking’s opinion, various *c. pr. f.* pieces are transposed (by a fifth lower), including initial *c. pr. f.* pitches (7–17th tones, omitting tones 9–13th) in “Cunctaque peccamina Parit.” The entire Tenor part and assumed chant are juxtaposed in Example No. 6.²⁴

²³ John Browne is “perhaps the greatest English composer between Dunstaple and Taverner.” [4, p. 25] His heritage far outnumbers other musicians’ pieces in the *Eton Choirbook*: fifteen compositions are noted in the anthology, although only seven have been preserved completely.

²⁴ The cited example is based on the Charles H. Giffen edition —
URL: [https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/O_Maria_salvatoris_Mater_\(John_Browne\)](https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/O_Maria_salvatoris_Mater_(John_Browne)) (accessed: 22.12.2025).

Example No. 6

John Browne. *O Maria Salvatoris Mater.*
The Tenor part and its correlation with *c. pr. f.*

The musical score consists of ten systems, each showing the correlation between the Tenor part and the C. pr. f. part. The lyrics are: O Ma - ri - a cun - eta - que pec - ca - mi - na. pa - rit christum vir - go ma - nens; Il - lam re - co - la - mus, cae - le - sti - a. Ad - est sem - per Ma - ri - a. his iam sanc - tis iu - bi - le - mus vo - ce, cor - de de - can - te - mus hac. no - stra me - lo - di - a.

Conclusion

Here the same pitch row is repeated with little changes²⁵ in two sections: the first begins with “Cunctaque peccamina Parit,” and the second starts with “Ad est semper Maria.”²⁶ Such accurate repetitions indicate that Browne consciously constructed the tones row, especially since its melody differs significantly from *Venit dilectus meus*.²⁷ Browne therefore offers his own chant *version* and leaves only some *c. pr. f.* fragments unchanged. How should we call this kind of technique? There are considerable differences between Browne’s *version* and the chant, which contradict both *cantus floridus* and *cantus firmus* techniques. It is for this reason Fabrice Fitch disagrees with Hocking and does not accept an exact identification of *c. pr. f.* [11, p. 36, 40] He applies the term “‘pre-intoned’ incipit” [Ibid.] to the initial chant fragment in the opening “O Maria.” It is there that Browne’s repetition of tones row begins,²⁸ yet Fitch avoids commenting on the repetition in the Tenor part. In such case as this, an attribution of the motet to a particular technique should be relative. A double repetition of tones and pitches (since rhythm is not preserved) allows to point out at the similarity to the ostinato technique in the work of Josquin, Obrecht and other composers.

It is also interesting that Browne applies these imitations only in three-to-four voices sections in *O Maria Salvatoris Mater* (for example, in *Superans nascentia*), although imitations themselves are commonly used in his other motets. As Fitch states, a “far more purposeful” imitation is what distinguishes Browne from his contemporaries and predecessors. [Ibid., p. 25]

Methods of treating liturgical sources in the early Tudors motets vary greatly, and a different compositional process unfolds in each new work. Moreover, it is not always possible to define a technique. Many motets (apart from those by Taverner) share a decline of a structural chant role as a feature. This is true of compositions where *c. pr. f.* is applied entirely with little changes to a polyphonic texture, yet is not rhythmically distinguished and exposed by different note-values, as in Davy’s *In honore summae matris*. Some examples demonstrate that the basic compositional element is no longer the chant itself, but its transformed version, hence turning into a pseudocantus.

Another group of motets consists of compositions where *c. pr. f.* is applied but in fragments and is barely maintained rhythmically. A composer pays attention only to individual intonations and melodic segments, combining and revising them in a specific manner. The result is a functional equality of voices and a transition of the logical base from the liturgical source to the rest of the voices. These principles make this compositional technique close to the pervasive imitation. The latter derives the logic of composition from the *soggetti* exposition which is often based on the chant. Fayrfax’s and his contemporaries’ motets could be described as created in *transitional technique*, when *points/soggetti* did not yet become the focus of the authors’ attention, but the *c. pr. f.* is no longer the logical

²⁵ In this repetition Browne missed and added a few tones. These changings are insignificant, so there is no profound influence on the main tone sequence (row). All basic melodic leaps and lines are repeated.

²⁶ The pitch row and its repetition are marked by an asterisk.

²⁷ It is noteworthy to pay attention to the melodic line *g-f-b-g-a-c'-f*, which does not seem to link to *c. pr. f.*

²⁸ There is the incipit at the end of the Tenor part: Browne makes a melodic arch from the end to the motet’s beginning “O Maria,” adding to the pitch row two tones, *d* and *g*. Hocking explains that the composer intended to preserve the balance and symmetry. [2, p. 71]

starting point of the composition, which leads to its splitting into parts and (or) dissolving in melismas.

In some way, the above observations prove a thesis about the pervasive imitation genesis from *cantus firmus* and *cantus floridus*. Julie Cumming demonstrates an unknown author's motet *Ave beatissima* from *Trent 89* to justify her argument.²⁹ The discant part has a colored chant, while the remaining parts are built on imitations of *c. pr. f.* extracts. [5, pp. 38–41] Indeed, Cumming's example illustrates a solid pervasive imitation, rather than a transition from one technique to another. In fact, the establishing of pervasive imitation was never linear or straightforward: *soggetti* were based both on *c. pr. f.* (section "Amen" from Davy's *In honore summae matris*, non-*cantus firmus* sections in Taverner's Magnificat) and *a composer's own melody* ("Fecit potentiam" in Fayrfax's Magnificat).

Therefore, it is highly possible that John Dunstaple's motets were "predecessors" of transitional technique motets. The growing melismas lead to *c. pr. f.* losing its dominant structural position. The *Regina celi* is an example: Dunstaple changes chant melody to such extent that *c. pr. f.* turns into "free paraphrase." [3, p. 146] Frank Harrison suggests the term *cantus fractus* for such cases. [9, p. 231] However, *Descendi in ortum meum* is the closest to transitional motets. It includes a short citation of antiphon *Descendi*, found only in the motet's beginning. Further on, it is no longer possible

to find the chant, and this type of composition reminds one of Fayrfax's Magnificat. Anna Teplova suggests that Dunstaple could have conceived *Descendi in ortum meum* as "absolutely free from borrowings," [3, p. 174] If so, it means that early Tudor composers adopted and developed those compositional tendencies that were present in Dunstaple's motets. Browne's and Davy's motets are less exemplary, but can be still associated with those works.

Finally, Taverner was of younger generation compared the *Eton Choirbook* authors, and his four-voice Magnificat is distinctive by two unequal types of logical composition formation: there are *cantus firmus* sections based on a clear and complete *c. pr. f.* representation and the sections with a paraphrased chant. The texture is full of imitations of both types, so the *soggetti* systems are created. In *cantus firmus* sections Taverner actually mixes two techniques, *cantus firmus* and, as a sort of "framing," the pervasive imitation. The composer makes a liturgical source the compositional centre, largely exposing it by same large note-values (like *cantus planus*) yet leaving the chant pitch row³⁰ unchangeable. Such obvious technique "calculations" with imitation development will be found in *cantus firmus* motets of Taverner's successors, John Sheppard, Tomas Tallis, and William Byrd. Byrd's *Miserere mihi Domine* may be considered as a model that was further complicated by introduction of a double canon. [13, p. 41]

²⁹ This musicologist points out to two "paths" of the pervasive imitation genesis: through a chanson and two "low" kinds of motet (a song motet and a chant-paraphrase motet); the imitation is intended to highlight every beginning of a new section in both cases. The chant-paraphrase motet is a motet with florid (colored) chant application, while the song motet is a "three-voice work with Latin text," close to chanson and using some imitation fragments (actually, many of them are canonic). [5, pp. 32–33, 37–38]

³⁰ It's noteworthy that forth kind of faburden examples demonstrate such principle of full equal note-values *c. pr. f.* exposition in Scottish Anonymous's treatise *Art of Music Collected [Collected] out of all Ancient Doctouris of Music*. Actually, imitations and *soggetti* are lacking in most of the examples. [12, pp. 159–184]

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