

*The ORB: On-line Reference Book  
for Medieval Studies*



## **The Medieval Hocket**

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## Introduction

The term hocket is used in various ways. In modern parlance it refers to a musical technique by which two or more voices or instruments sing or play in alternation. When one voice stops after one or a few notes, another begins, and so on. Singing or playing instruments in this way is found in music of various style periods and locales. According to late medieval Latin treatises a hocket is made by cutting up sound, and the term designates both that musical technique and the type of music that features it. In medieval French poetry it denotes various kinds of music in addition to learned polyphonic hockets. It is not known how the hocket technique came about in Western medieval music. That is why it is important to understand how scholars have tried to trace the origin and development of the word (etymology). Their theories can suggest where further work needs to be done.

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### 1. Etymology of the Word *Hoquetus*.

Although the etymology of a word is a matter for linguists to study, when the word is a musical term it may be also of interest to musicologists for a couple of reasons. First, as with all technical terminology, it is natural to ask why a word is apt or at least seemed so to those who coined it. Second, if we find that the origin lies with a certain culture that used it in a similar sense, it offers the possibility of being able to place the technique in a musical context that, in the absence of enough surviving literature from the time, could not have been established by the more common methods of musicologists. The word whose etymology is of interest to us here is the medieval Latin "hoquetus." In the following paragraphs we present the speculations of others on the etymology of this word and consider the most promising directions for further investigation. Although we cannot draw definite conclusions at this time, there is reason to believe that this line of inquiry is worth pursuing further.

There are several points of view about the origin of the Latin word *hoquetus*.

(a) Some, like Sanders, believe that it was derived from the Old French *hoquet*, which meant a hiccup or stutter. Most recently, however, Städtler ([DEAF](#)) has argued that the French word *hoquet*, when it signifies the musical technique, is related to the French verb *hochier*, meaning "to shake."

(b) Farmer, Schneider and Husmann (MGG1) had previously considered hoquetus to have come from the Arabic *iqā'āt* or *al-quat'*.

(c) Frobenius (HMT) has argued for a Latin source, *occare*. These points of view will be examined in turn below.

### **(a) Old French.**

One may ask why the authors of Latin treatises turned a French word into Latin. The writers of thirteenth-century Latin musical treatises on this topic knew French and many of them probably studied in Paris, where this style of music was cultivated. They wrote in Latin because it was an international scholarly language at that time and authors were expected to write in Latin no matter what their native tongue might have been. Suitable Latin terminology did not always exist or, for whatever reason, writers could not always find the appropriate Latin word. Therefore, they latinized words from the vernacular or spoken language.

The French and Latin words for hocket as a musical technique appear in writing at approximately the same time in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, although polyphonic hocketing had existed since at least the beginning of the century. One French example is Adam de la Halle's use of *hoquetant* to mean hocketing. (See 3. The French hoquet below.)

Another comes from the music theorist Lambertus, whose treatise is one of the first to use the term in Latin. He apparently latinizes the French when he says that the hocket "is called *hoket* in the vernacular" ("*hokectus vulgariter appellatur*" [CS 1:281]).

As for the French word for the musical technique, there are two theories about its origin. The most recent, proposed by Städtler (DEAF H:512-20), considers it related to the Old French *hochier* and similar words in Middle Dutch and Middle High German that mean "to shake." Städtler made this connection because of the liveliness of hockets as described by the music theorist Johannes de Grocheo.

An earlier theory, advocated by the musicologist Ernest Sanders and supported by the etymology of that time (FEW 4:450-2), derived the hocket from the Old French *hoquet*, meaning a hiccup or stutter. In this case *hoquet* and related words in Middle Dutch, Flemish and Breton were considered onomatopoeic, that is, they sounded like what they meant. The intermittent stopping and starting of each hocketing voice was thought to resemble hiccuping.

### **(b) Arabic.**

The Arabs had much contact with and influence on Europe in the Middle Ages through scholarship, invasions and trade. In connection with music, certain European instruments, such as the lute (whose name derives from the Arabic *al'ud*), were imitations of Middle Eastern ones.

In 1925 Farmer suggested that the Latin *hoquetus* was derived from the Arabic word *iqā'āt*, meaning "rhythm." Schneider (1929) accepted the derivation, but believed that it was analogous with general musical performance: just as Arabic instruments accompanied a melody by distributing the rhythm among the various players, so in Western music the notes of a melody were broken up and distributed among the voices of a polyphonic piece. Husmann (MGG1) offered a correction, suggesting the noun with its article *al-quat'*, which refers to the act of cutting. However, he never published the article on the etymology of "hoquet" and the Arabian influence on Gothic music that he had announced in MGG1, and the above hypotheses have since been abandoned.

Interestingly, the Arabic word for cotton, *al-qutun*, was the source for some Old French words that sound like hoquet, such as *auqueton*, *alqueton* and *hoqueton*, meaning cotton cloth or a padded military tunic (FEW 19:100-2). *Hoquet* was also the long robe of a Capuchin monk

(Godefroy 4:496).

### **(c) Latin.**

Because medieval music theorists writing in Latin often describe hocketing as the cutting of sound, Frobenius (HMT) prefers a Latin source word that refers to cutting. He hypothesizes that the Latin verb *occare* gave rise to the Latin musical term *hoccitatio* as used by Lambertus (CS 1:281).

The common meaning of *occare* was to harrow although, starting perhaps in the Middle Ages, it also denoted cutting or breaking off, specifically in the myth of the three Fates, who determined each person's destiny. One Fate held the distaff, another drew the thread of life and the third cut it off (TLL 9/2:359-60; Latham 320). Thus, cutting the thread of life in a figurative sense meant dying.

### **(d) Conclusions.**

There are two competing and viable hypotheses for the origin of the Latin *hoquetus*. It came either from Old French or from Latin. It is difficult to choose between these hypotheses because both the Latin and French terms denoting the musical technique appear in writing at roughly the same time. If it came from the Latin *occare*, as Frobenius argues, then the technique was named by learned church musicians, who also may have invented it. However, if it came from the French word *hoquet*, it is possible that a folk type of music already existed with that name. Indeed, interlocking polyphonic performance is common in various folk cultures. (See 4. Hockets outside the Middle Ages) Whether this was also true in the Middle Ages would be difficult to determine, but it might be suggested by a comparative study of medieval Old French, Germanic and Celtic literature.

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## **2. Polyphonic hocketing.**

Hocketing is a technique found in written polyphonic music of Paris and Notre-Dame Cathedral starting in the thirteenth century. In its simplest form it is the rapid alternation of rests and notes between two or more voices. When one voice pauses, the other sings, giving the effect of gasps or hiccups. In addition, medieval theorists also recognized hocketing within only one voice in a polyphonic piece. In this case, the melody is not sung in normal phrases. Instead, notes or short phrases alternate quickly with rests.

Theorists found ways to describe hocket-like rhythms by comparing them to the normal ones of that time. The most common rhythms, called *maneries* or modes, consisted of patterns of longs (long notes) and breves (short notes). Johannes de Garlandia and like-minded theorists recognized six rhythmic modes. First, second and sixth modes are conventional or *recti*, because their longs contain two time units and their breves only one. The third through fifth modes are called *ultra mensuram* because they exceed the normal note values, the longs having three time units and pairs of breves having one and two time units, respectively. The table below shows patterns of longs and breves, together with the number of time units for each note.

**Table 1: The Rhythmic Modes**

Modes	Note Values	Number of Time Units per Note
1.	L B, L B, L B, etc.	2 1, 2 1, 2 1, etc.
2.	B L, B L, B L, etc.	1 2, 1 2, 1 2, etc.
3.	L B B, L B B, etc.	3 1 2, 3 1 2, etc.
4.	B B L, B B L, etc.	1 2 3, 1 2 3, etc.
5.	L, L, L, etc.	3, 3, 3, etc.
6.	B B B, B B B, etc.	1 1 1, 1 1 1, etc.

Hocketing was created by alternating rests and notes within those pre-set patterns. Early in the thirteenth century it was limited to first, second and fifth modes. The following table shows normal (or perfect) rhythmic passages in each of those three modes compared with an illustration of how they might sound if they were hocketed.

**Table 2: Sample Rhythmic Passages**

Modes	Normal Phrase	Hocket
1.		
2.		
5.		

Early hocketing appeared within larger compositions, such as organa, conductus and motets.

Example 1 below quotes from a conductus. It is taken from a long melismatic setting of the syllable *-nan-* from the word *fulminante* ("threatening"). Notice that the lowest voice maintains a steady rhythm in the first mode (LB, LB). The highest of the three voices (*triplum*) has a short hocketing passage that consists of five notes. The second voice (*duplum*) also begins in first mode and then hockets so that its alternating notes and rests interlock with those of the top voice.

**Example 1. *Dic Christi veritas* (Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana, Pluteo 29, 1, fol. 204)**

The image shows a musical score for three voices: *triplum* (top), *duplum* (middle), and *cantus* (bottom). Each staff begins with the syllable 'nan' and a rhythmic pattern of a long note followed by a short note. The *triplum* voice has a hocketing passage of five notes. The *duplum* voice hockets so its notes and rests interlock with those of the top voice. The *cantus* voice maintains a steady rhythm.

After the mid-thirteenth century, motets, as well as short, independent pieces called "hockets," began to appear with continuous hocketing throughout. Now all six modes were used, as well as a shorter note value, the semibreve, and its rest. Hocketing was classified by the presence or absence of various elements, such as a tenor (that is, a preexistent melody or melodic pattern in the lowest voice), text, and *resecatio* (the division of longs or breves by rests into smaller notes).

Also associated with hocketing was the technique of "modal transmutation," by which a piece written in one rhythmic mode was transformed into another. A famous example is *In seculum longum*, written by a Spaniard in a "long" mode (fifth mode in the tenor), and transformed by certain Parisians into a "short" mode (second mode in the tenor). See Example 2 below.

**Example 2. *In seculum longum* and *In seculum breve* (Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Lit. 115, fols. 63v, 64)**

These two pieces are important because each, in its own way, epitomizes the new rhythmic style. *In seculum longum* illustrates *resecatio*, or "cutting up." This is because at the same time that the lowest voice (*tenor*) moves in fifth mode the upper parts hocket more quickly in second mode, that is, they "cut up" the fifth-mode longs into the shorter longs and breves of second mode. *In seculum breve* is even more daring. Not only do the two upper voices "cut up" in sixth mode (compared with the tenor's second mode), but they also subdivide the breves of sixth mode into smaller semibreves and their rests. These more modern rhythms could be sung only by the most skillful singers. Those who were less trained and capable would find it too difficult, as music theorists of that time pointed out.

In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, hockets were the fastest compositions. According to Jacobus de Montibus, a conservative theorist of the early fourteenth century (Desmond), "if we talk about double and contra-double hockets and certain other measured compositions, according to the Ancients [or traditional musicians] the perfect breve has so quick a measure that three semibreves cannot be sung in place of it correctly or easily," and "the Ancients used a quick measure of breves commonly in motets or the fastest in double hockets" ("...si de hoketis loquimur duplicibus et contraduplicibus et aliis quibusdam mensuratis cantibus, brevis perfecta ita citam, secundum Antiquos, habet mensuram ut non bene vel leviter pro ea tres semibreves dici possunt.... Antiqui cita mensuratione brevium in motetis communiter vel citissima in hoketis duplicibus usi sint..." [Bragard 7:36:5 and 7]).

At this time hocketing also was combined with voice-exchange or rondellus technique, as in the English rondellus *Ave virgo mater dei*, edited in full in Wibberley, pp. 48-9.

**Example 3: *Ave virgo mater dei* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Lat. liturg. d 20, fol. 13v)**

The image shows a musical score for the Ave Maria. It consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, written in a treble clef with a common time signature (C). The lyrics are 'A - - ve vir - go ma - ter de - - i'. The middle staff is a lute or harp accompaniment, also in a treble clef with a common time signature. The bottom staff is a bass line, written in a bass clef with a common time signature. The music features a hocketing style, with notes from different parts alternating in a rhythmic pattern.

By the early fourteenth century hocketing had become so much a part of compositional style that it was excoriated along with other modern musical techniques by conservative churchmen.

Pope John XXII's *Docta sanctorum* of 1324 criticized modern composers for using hockets, as well as discant and French motets, "for they cut up chant melodies with hockets, make them slimy with discants, sometimes force upon them vernacular tripla and moteti" ("Nam melodias hoquetis intersecant, discantibus lubricant, triplis et motetis vulgaribus nonnunquam inculcant" [*Corpus juris canonici* 2:256]).

A Cistercian statute of 1320 requires that plainchant be sung in the traditional way, the modern way "with syncopations of notes and also hockets having been forbidden in our chant simply because such things smack more of looseness than of devotion" ("sincopationibus notarum et etiam hoquetis interdictis in cantu nostro simpliciter quia talia magis dissolutionem quam devotionem sapiant" [Canivez 3:349]).

Throughout the fourteenth century hocketing was used in almost all the polyphonic genres. In motets and mass movements it often highlighted the repetitive structure of isorhythm and ornamented melismatic passages, such as concluding *Amens*. A particularly clear example can be found in the Credo which has been attributed variously to Bonbarde, Prunet and Perneth, and published in PMFC, vol. 23B, p. 237.

Hocketing appeared also in French chansons, chaces and canons, as well as Italian madrigals and caccias. Occasionally it served a mimetic function, representing a lover's sobs, cries and shouts, the sound of instruments, rustic Italian stuttering or the bleating of sheep. Wessely claims that in three madrigals hocketing was used to emphasize and isolate a woman's name "hidden" within a longer word, for example, *ANNAmorar* and *ANNAve*. It depicts trumpeting in the canon "Tres dous compains" (PMFC 20:228-31) and in the tenor and contratenor of Dufay's Gloria *Ad modum tubae*. (A score of the Dufay Gloria can be found in Dufay vol. 4, pp. 79-80.)

Hockets as self-contained compositions (such as the *In seculum* hockets of Example 2) died out in the fourteenth century, with the exception of Machaut's hocket *David* (PMFC 3:65-7) and Pycard's Sanctus (Old Hall 1/2:373-5). Hocketing in general fell out of use as fifteenth-century composers adopted a smoother, more flowing rhythmic style, abandoned isorhythmic structure

and lost a taste for rapid contrasts in small note values. However, hocketing in short phrases contributed to the imitative style of Renaissance music. A good example can be found in the anonymous Gloria published in Hoppin, vol. 1, p. 80.

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### 3. The *hoquet* in Old French poetry.

Late medieval French poetry refers to polyphonic *hoques* and *double hoques* along with other types of music-making. Gace de la Buigne, in *Le roman des deduis*, compares the striking of anvils of various pitches and the baying of hounds to hocketing (375:8080-8, 462:10589-95; 463:106303-10).

Lyrical poems refer to *hoquets* sung alone by the narrator:

- "Closing with a latch the walled enclosure, while singing a new hocket, I went off to play" ("Clos des murs, fermant a loquet, En chantent .i. nouviau hoquet, M'alai jouer" [Wilkins, p. 28]);
- "Then I will sing, `Ai! Ai!' And so I will invent little songs, hockets and new airs, and so I will dance" ("A donc chanterai Ai! Ai! Et si troverai Chansonettes, hokés et notes nouvelles Et si danceraï" [Streng-Renkonen, p.13]).

Adam de la Halle uses the term in the highest voice of a polyphonic motet. He relates how four young fellows, when they hocket, make percussive sounds faster than the panpipes. They also dance together, beating on the floor while hocketing. ("Quant il hoquetent Plus tost clapetent Que frestel Li damoisel... Et quant il font le moulin Ensemble tout quatre Et au plastre batre En hoquetant" [Tischler, 3:74-6, 4:83-4; Adam de la Halle p. 202-5].)

The above references to French hockets sung by a single person, as well as by rowdy young men, dancing and beating on the floor, indicate that hockets were not performed solely by learned clerics. They were sung by lay people, too. There is otherwise little known about such singing in the folk tradition. More understanding might be gained by a comparative study of medieval vernacular literature.

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### 4. Hockets outside the Middle Ages.

Hocket-like effects are found in various types of folk music and in European classical music of later centuries. They are produced in the flute and trumpet ensembles, xylophones, drums, whistles and horns of sub-Saharan Africa, the flute dance music of New Guinea, the panpipe playing of the Andes and the polyphonic singing of the Swiss Alps and the Georgian Caucasus. Special effects in sixteenth-century English lute music, eighteenth-century French *opéra comique*, and in the fifth of Mozart's twelve piano variations on *Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman* can be described as hocketing.

In the twentieth century, composers such as Sofia Gubaidulina, Harrison Birtwistle, Naji Hakim and Osvaldas Balakauskas have borrowed medieval techniques and genres, including hocketing. Arvo Pärt's use of tintinnabulation (the sound of ringing bells) can sound like hocketing, as in his choral piece "...which was the son of..." (2000).

Recent research indicates that we perceive the octave in a hocket-like way. If two notes an octave apart are alternated, each half of the brain hears only the high or low pitch, respectively. Each half, therefore, hears alternating notes and rests, like a hocket (Carapezza).

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## 5. Sources.

### General remarks

For general descriptions of the medieval hocket in English, see Dalglish, Sanders and NG2. For musical scores of medieval hockets and hocketing, many examples can be found from the thirteenth century in Anderson (especially vols. 1, 2 and 3), Roesner, and Tischler, and from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Dufay (vol. 4), Hoppin, Old Hall, and PMFC.

For discussions in English of hocketing in non-Western music, see Baumann, Donohoe, Koetting, Nketia, and Schmidt. On hocketing in Western contemporary music, see Arias, Davidson, Davis, and Hall.

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