

Sumer is icumen in

Anonymous c. 1250

Translation and Pronunciation

/su-mrr ɪz ɪ-ku-m'n m/
Sumer is icumen in,
Summer is here

/lu-də sɪŋ ku-ku/
Llude sing cuccu,
Loudly sing cuckoo

/grau-ɪθ sɛd ant blau-ɪθ mɛd ant sprɪŋθ ðə wu-də nu/
Groweth sed and bloweth med and springth the wude nu.
Growing is seed and blooming is meadow and coming into leaf is the wood now

/sɪŋ ku-ku/
Sing cuccu!
Sing cuckoo

/au-wə blɛ-təθ af-trr lɔmb loθ af-trr kal-və ku/
Awe bleteth after lomb, Llouth after calve cu,
Ewe is bleating after lamb, lowing after calf cow,

/bul:lɔk ʃter-təθ bu-kə fer-təθ/
Bulloc sterteth, Bucke verteth,
Bullock prancing, billy-goat farting

/mur-jɛ sɪ ŋ ku-ku/
murie sing cuccu.
Merrily sing cuckoo

/ku-ku ku-ku wɛl sɪ ŋ-ɛs ðu ku-ku/
Cuccu, cuccu, wel singes thu cuccu,
Cuckoo cuckoo well sings you cuckoo,

/nɛ swɪk ðu na-vrr nu/
Ne swik thu naver nu.
Not stop you never now

IPA based on transliteration by Randal Swiggum (*Great Choral Treasure Hunt*), and the following recordings:

Lumina Vocal Ensemble: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWWEHAswpFI>

Hilliard Ensemble: <https://youtu.be/sMCA9nYnLWo>

Information in the box below comes from Wessex Parable Web Text, *Sumer is icumen in*, <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/har1978/sumertrs.htm> [accessed 6/6/2008]. The original manuscript has the singing text in Middle English, with instructions for singing in Latin.

Sumer is icumen in
London, British Library, MS Harley 978, f. 11v

Translations

Translation of Middle English text (with Latin instructions for singing, in italics)

- Summer* has arrived,
+ Sing loudly, cuckoo!
The seed is growing
And the meadow is blooming,
5 And the wood is coming into leaf now,
Sing, cuckoo!
The ewe is bleating after her lamb,
The cow is lowing after her calf;
The bullock is prancing,
10 The billy-goat farting,
Sing merrily, cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo,
You sing well, cuckoo,
Never stop now.
15 *Pes: Sing, cuckoo, now; sing, cuckoo;*
One person repeats this as often as necessary, making a rest at the end.
16 Sing, cuckoo; sing, cuckoo, now!
The other one sings this, making a rest in the middle and not at the end, but immediately repeating the beginning.

This round can be sung by four people together; however, it should not be sung by fewer than three, or at least two, not counting those who sing the 'pes'. And it is sung in this way: while the others remain silent, one person starts, together with those who are carrying the 'pes'; and when he comes to the first note after the cross, the next one begins, and so on with the others. And the individual singers should stop at the rests where they are written and not elsewhere, for the space of one long note.¹

*Notes

1. Sumer: spring or summer? The ME word extends over a longer period than the modern one (see Fischer (1994). Roscow (1999) argues that the poem describes early summer rather than spring.

10. bucke uerteth: the translation of this line is uncertain. Most editors translate bucke as

¹ Wessex Parallel WebTexts, *Sumer is icumen in*, Bella Millet, 2003, <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/har1978/sumertrs.htm#Middle>, [accessed 24 June 2019].

"stag"; MED, s.v. bukke n. 1a (a), prefers the alternative meaning "billy-goat". Uerteth is generally taken as the earliest recorded instance of the verb "fart" (from OE *feortan; see MED, s.v. ferten v.). Silverstein (1971), p. 37, suggests instead derivation from Latin *vertere*, "turn, paw up (the ground)", hence "gambol", comparing late-C16 English *vert* (see OED, s.v. *vert* v. 1); but this seems both rather late and rather learned for the context here. See also Platzner (1995), for a defence of 'cavorts'.

Latin instructions and poem

post crucem: i.e. the red cross in the manuscript above the beginning of *Lhude* (line 2 of the Middle English poem).²

Background

The rota, or round, *Sumer is icumen in* is the oldest surviving example of six-part polyphony.³

² Wessex Parallel WebTexts, *Sumer is icumen in*, Bella Millet, 2003, <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/harl978/sumernn.htm#bucke%20uerteth>, [accessed 6/6/2008].

³ Wikipedia contributors. "Sumer Is Icumen In." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 3 Jun. 2019. Web. 25 Jun. 2019.

Sumer is icumen in. Hude sing cucu. Sing sed and bloweþ
Perspicax xp̄icola que dignacio celicus agrico

med and springþ þe wde nu. Sing cucu. Ave bleteþ after
la pro uitis vicio filio non partens exposu

lomb. Houþ after calue cu. Bulluc stertep. bucke uertep
it mortis exicio Qui captiuos semiuuos

gunte sing cucu. Cucu cucu Wel singes þu cucu ne swik
a suplicio vite donat et secum coronat in ce

Pu nauer nu.
u so u o

Sing cucu nu. Sing cucu.
hoc repetit un̄ quociens op̄ est. faciens pausacionem in fine.

Sing cucu. Sing cucu nu.
hoc dicit ali. pausans in medio. Et in fine. Si immediate repetes incipit.

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Figure 1 Manuscript - Sumer is icumen in

⁴ Photo credit: Public domain.

Recordings

Lumina Vocal Ensemble: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWWEHAswpFI>

Hilliard Ensemble: <https://youtu.be/sMCA9nYnLWo>

Analysis

This English round is commonly considered the earliest example of counterpoint in existence. It is a 4 part round with a two-part ostinato bass line;

6 phrases (4+4+2+4+4); ostinato is 1 4 measure phrase

Most simple canons have even phrase lengths, which helps insure that parts line up when sung in canon. What makes this canon work is the fact that each new entrance comes in after two measures instead of 4. If it had been 4, the symmetry would be off and parts would not line up.

Strategies for learning

The midi file will be very useful; make certain to get comfortable with the round as a single melody line first. Then, try singing along with the midi file. The midi file is set up as follows:

Opening pitches

Percussion (to hear meter)

Round played in its entirety as a solo

Then:

Ostinato for 4 measures, then continuing throughout the piece (Baritone and Bass lines)

1st entrance of round in Sop 1

2nd entrance of round in Sop 2, 2 measures later

3rd entrance of round in Alto, 2 measures later

4th entrance of round in Tenor, 2 measures later

Round is sung through two times;

Performance Notes

This piece can be performed in a variety of ways;

One way –

1. Bass begins by singing the first two measures of the *pes* (the one that begins on “d”);
2. tenors enter after basses sing their first two measures, and sing their *pes*. Bass continues their *pes* as an ostinato; This forms the ostinato that supports the melody for the women;

3. After the basses have sung their *pes* twice through, the women enter in unison and sing the melody once through.
4. After the women have sung the melody once through, they divide into four equal voices, mixing sopranos and altos. Voice 1 begins, each following voice entering after two measures.
5. After each women's section has sung the melody twice (or a number to be determined) through as a round, they end.
6. The *pes* continues for 2-3x more, repeating and fading. Or repeating with a final cadence on the open fifth that results in sustaining the downbeat of measures 2 and 4.

This can be done as a three-voice canon if there are not enough singers.