

The Different Styles in Josquin Desprez *Chansons*

Josquin Desprez has left us a wonderful legacy of compositions in diverse styles, both sacred and profane. Nearly 70 of his French chansons have survived, with some of them only showing their initial French words, because manuscripts and editions of the period did not include complete texts (as in *Petrucchi Canti A-B-C*). In addition, some of his instrumental works have a French *incipit*.

In the excellent book written by my friend and colleague Dr. Jacques Barbier (*Josquin Desprez, bleu nui editeur, 2010, www.bne.fr*), you can find a detailed list of the works from 3 to 6 voices with texts (or just title) in French, in the same way as for his Latin and Italian profane pieces.

Composers of the 14th and 15th centuries faced the challenge of writing masses on texts that had been used countless times before, so they cleverly appealed to preexisting melodies, mainly from Gregorian Chant. This new musical material, which was used either as a *cantus firmus* or as a source for canonic treatment, gave rise to new musical ideas which emerged in order to compose a new work. Composers used a variety of techniques at their disposal, such as transposition, augmentation, diminution, inversion, retrograde, etc., with canonic writing as a very valuable resource. This widespread practice was also used in profane works.

In Josquin's French *chansons*, the poems were generally written by 15th century French *rétoriquers*, mostly in the format of a *truncate rondeau*.¹ Their general climate is that of courtly love and, mostly, unrequited love.

Josquin's *chansons* may be grouped in 4 different styles :

- ***Rustic chanson***: frequently based on a popular tune of the period with texts of scarce literary value or extracted from a polyphonic work of another composer. Mostly written for 3-4 voices, Josquin used

canonical techniques in them, which is clearly identifiable either in the upper or in the lower voices (e.g. *Baises moy*, *Dictez moy bergere*, and *En l'ombre d'ung buissonnet*, all of them with double canon S-A and TB, *Adieu mes amours*, with a T-B canon, *Belle pour l'amour*, with a TB canon in the beginning, *Comment peult avoir joye*, with a S-T canon, and *Une musque de Biscaye*, with a S-A canon)

- ***Chanson based on cantus firmus***: a *chanson* using a *cantus firmus* as main source, a technique which was quite spread out in composition of masses of the time. They were:

a) Based on Gregorian *cantus firmi* or on other Latin para-liturgical texts, or

b) Extracted from a polyphonic French work by another composer.

Josquin grants this preexistent tune to the Tenor line, usually in long rhythmic values, while the other voices dialogue in systematic imitation alternating with homophonic passages. This obviously generates polytextuality (e.g. *A la mort* and *Ce povre mendiant* in 3 voices, *Cueurs desolez**, *L'ami a tous*, *Ma bouche rit* and *Nymphes des bois*, all in 5 voices, and finally *Nymphes, nappés*, and *Fors seulement* in 6 voices).

- ***Melancholic chanson***: using lamentation-style poems (which were very appreciated by Margaret of Austria, aunt of Charles V) for 5 or 6 voices, where it is very common to find canonical texture (e.g. canon between S-A in *Je me complains** and *Plaine de dueil*).

In most of them, however, I hold that Josquin looked deliberately to “hide” the canonical voices, placing them in internal parts (for example, in works for 5 voices : T1-T3 in *Du mien amant* and *Douleur me bat*, T2- B in *Parfons regretz**, A-T2 in *Plusieurs regretz*, T1-B1 in *Incessament*, T1-T2 in *N'est pas un grand desplaisir*, S-T1 in *Cœur langoureux**; in works for 6 voices : A-T2 in *Regretz sans fin**, A-T2 in *Nymphes Nappés* a 6, T1-T3 in *Vous ne l'aurez pas*, T1-T2 in *Petite camusette*, T1-B1 in *Pour souhaitter*, T1-T3 in *Si congie prens*).

- *Chanson in extenso*: in these works, Josquin abandoned the canonical technique, aiming to unify the polyphonic content of the work in all voices, alternating imitative and homophonic texture. In these cases it is not a question of canonical vs. *cantus firmus* textures, but rather the achievement of a new style, one that avoids the hierarchy or distinction between voices. Examples in this category include one of Josquin's signature pieces, *Mille regrets* (poem by Jean Lemaire) and *Plus nulz regretz** (also poem by Jean Lemaire), both written in 4 voices. This last example was a chanson written mostly in full systematic imitation –yet beginning with a *double canon*- in 1507 to celebrate the peace between England and the Austro-Hungarian Empire signed in Calais, France. Other good examples include the well known *Je ne me puis tenir d'aimer** and *En non saichant** (both for 5 voices) and *Tenez moy en vos bras* (6 voices).

Arriving at this interesting juncture, some important questions arise:

- Did the composer write the canon at the onset of his work?
- And, if so, did he later complete the polyphony writing the other parts?
- Was, then, the canon the essential element of the work?
- Or was it simply its starting idea?

The most important point, in my opinion, is that the great Josquin Desprez, the true *Maestro* of canonical writing (a resource that he permanently used in his sacred pieces) **decided to start hiding the canon in his profane works at a specific moment in his compositional life, developing a true imitative style in all voices. In this way, Josquin incites in the listener the perception of a work in purely full imitation among all voices.**

It is at this point of my analysis that I ask, then:

wasn't this indeed the beginning of the complete abandonment of the extraordinary resource of the canon in the evolution of the French *chanson*?

This move lead to a change in compositional style that can easily be seen in the works of Franco-Flemish composers of the next generation, where all voices are matched without any distinction, alternating polyphonic imitation with homophonic passages.

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1. The “Rondeau” was a poetic-musical form based on a very long strophic poem which included the repetition of its whole first stanza. Mid to end 15th century composers (Josquin, Brumel, Perre de la Rue, Compère) abandoned that archaic form and just kept the first lines of the whole poem, what is known as the *truncate rondeau*.

*These chansons are available in this website