

## A 15th-Century Cabaret

Our program today presents a small sample of the chanson repertoire of the fifteenth century, a body of hundreds of “art songs,” mostly in French, written to entertain European nobles and courtiers—and, no doubt, the musicians in their employ. Usually in three parts, with an upper voice accompanied by two lower melodies, the best songs of the period are marvellously crafted, sophisticated, complex, and expressive, every bit the equal of the best art songs of a later era.

### Chansons and *formes fixes*

The lyrics of fifteenth-century songs are cast in the *formes fixes* of medieval French poetry, the rondeau, virelai, and ballade, and the music adopts the form of its text. The simplest form is the ballade, with one or more stanzas of the form *aab*; it is represented here by the two English songs, *Alas alas* and *So ys emprentid*. In these songs, as in most musical settings of ballades, the repeat of the *a* section extends into an extra melisma which returns to conclude the *b* section as well.

The virelai, represented here by *Helas mon dueil* and *Ma bouche rit*, takes the form *AbbaA*. (Capital letters indicate textual repeats; lower case, new text set to the same music.) Here the second *b* leads into a melismatic extension.

Most of the remaining songs on the program are rondeaux, with the asymmetrical repeating form *AB aA ab AB*. Christopher Page has written eloquently of the dynamic of rondeau form, in which an initial “proposal” (*AB*) is subjected to an “examination” through three repetitions of the first section of music (*aA a*) before the *b* section

completes the refrain musically, but with new words. The rondeau culminates in a “confirmation” when the refrain is sung entire to its original words (*AB*).<sup>1</sup> A poet might exploit the looping form of the rondeau to cast the *A* text, when repeated, in a new light: this is sometimes achieved by syntactical linking from verse to verse, as in *Le souvenir*, *Je m’esbais de vous*, and the top part of *Robinet se veult marier*. The composer for his part is required by the form to craft an *A* section that will not pall on repeated hearing but rather reveal its inner qualities gradually, and a *B* section identified by something somehow new, so that it calls attention to itself upon first hearing and creates a desire to hear it again—a desire whose gratification is delayed by the intervening *aA a*. The *B* section might be set apart by various means. In *Je ne vis onques la pareille*, for example, the voices dramatically exchange registers, with the top voice or discantus singing the bottom note of the first triad, the tenor moving up to an octave above it, and the contratenor bassus touching the highest note of its range.

The poetry of the fifteenth-century chanson may strike modern readers as undistinguished or stilted—its formal rhetoric of impossible-to-translate words like *courtoisie* and *gentillesse* difficult for us to penetrate, its endless repetition of a few bland adjectives (*beau, doux*) evoking little emotional response, its allegorical characters (*Amours, Refus, Dangier*) unfamiliar—but we should remember that, with the occasional exception like Alain Chartier’s *Tristre plaisir et douloureuse joye*, the work of a major poet, these are basically song lyrics, where sonic pleasure, playful allusiveness, and easy comprehensibility are more to the point than sophisticated syntax and imagery.

While most of the poems speak of unrequited love or the superlative qualities of the unattainable lady, there are occasional exceptions like *Qui veult mesdire*, with its cocky

dismissal of envious badmouthers. This song from the 1420s demonstrates clearly why Binchois was so successful as a song composer: the man wrote great pop tunes. The melody is catchy, the rhythms infectious, and the harmony pleasing, varied, and propulsive, filled with jaunty dissonances. Ockeghem's *L'autre d'antan*, classified by the theorist Johannes Tinctoris as a "bucolic song," is a great jumble of metaphor, nicely conveying the topsy-turvy confusion of a man still head-over-heels in love with a woman who has dumped him. And songs with multiple texts such as *L'autrier ja pieça*, *Robinet se veult marier*, and *Fites a marier* often feature suggestive or rude lyrics spoken by rustic stock characters.

### **Performance practice**

There is general agreement among scholars of fifteenth-century music that parts with texts were normally sung, and that polyphony whose sources include texted parts was also sometimes played by purely instrumental ensembles. (For songs that survive only without text, like *Malheur me bat*, this is the only option.) Beyond this there is not much about the performance of this repertoire that does not pose a question to be pondered by the present-day musician.

A lively discussion of the historically appropriate performance of the polyphonic chanson repertoire took place in the scholarly literature from the 1970s through the 1990s, with the most significant contributions being made by Howard Mayer Brown, David Fallows, and Christopher Page.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that secular songs were normally performed one to a part, and that the top part, almost invariably texted in the musical sources, would have been sung in any performance involving at least one singer (as opposed to an all-instrumental rendition); the questions concern lower, untexted parts. Were they

sung or were they played on instruments? If played, by which instruments? If sung, did the singers vocalize or add text? Brown, drawing on artistic representations and literary sources, argued for the participation of instruments as an option available throughout the period, while Fallows, examining the evidence from archives and elsewhere of ensembles specifically linked to the performance of polyphony, and Page, supported mostly by his reading of literary descriptions, put forward the idea that secular polyphony was most often performed by voices alone; they proposed wordless vocalization as a viable solution for the performance of untexted lines. Meanwhile, Dennis Slavin showed that, in the case of a song with multiple sources, one source might have an untexted tenor, while in another the part would receive text, raising the possibility of treating other untexted tenors similarly, breaking ligatures and adding repeated notes as necessary to accommodate the words, as the fifteenth-century scribes did.

Brown never claimed that instrumental participation was the rule, nor did Fallows or Page categorically rule out the possibility. Page, for his part, admits that “No contemporary theorist describes this technique [wordless vocalization], as far as I am aware, and no contemporary name for it is known; no rubric or canon in any medieval musical source can be confidently interpreted as a call for it.”<sup>3</sup> It now seems that the most responsible conclusion that may be drawn from our current knowledge of the evidence is that fifteenth-century song was probably performed in a variety of ways: by voices only, with untexted parts texted, at least partially, or perhaps vocalized; by a mixed ensemble including one or more instruments, of which the most common were harp, lute, portative organ, fiddle, recorder, and other *bas* (“soft”) instruments such as douçaine; or by an entirely instrumental ensemble. For today’s performance we avail ourselves of all of these options.

*Je ne vis onques la pareille* is that most rare musical work for which we have some specific information about how it was performed in the fifteenth century. The scene is the Banquet of the Oath of the Pheasant, held in Lille in 1454, at which Philip the Good swore the members of the Order of the Golden Fleece to a new crusade against the Turks, and the narrator is Mathieu d'Escouchy:

After the church musicians and the pastry musicians [yes, musicians *in* the pastry] had played four times each in turn, there entered a stag, wondrously large and fine, and on it was mounted a boy of twelve. And on his entry this boy began to sing the dessus of a song, most loud and clear, and the stag sang the tenor, with no one else visible except the child and the artificial stag. And the song they sang was called *Je ne vis onques la pareille*.

This is, perhaps, not exactly the sort of performance practice information one hopes for. Today we lack a boy and are missing the stag, but we do have a low contratenor, sung on this occasion by a man. (The original contratenor perhaps served as hindquarters for the “artifice du chorf.”) As for the song, it is grave and moving; one trusts the boy and stag did it justice. It is ascribed to Du Fay in one source, but scholarly opinion favors the ascription to Binchois.

—Scott Metcalfe

For more on chansons, performance practice issues, and any number of diverting topics, please visit Blue Heron's website, [www.blueheronchoir.org](http://www.blueheronchoir.org), and browse through the archive of past program notes or consult the articles under “Education.”