

Zeitschrift:	Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel
Herausgeber:	Schola Cantorum Basiliensis
Band:	14 (1990)
Artikel:	Embellishment and Urtext in the fifteenth-century song repertories
Autor:	Fallows, David
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869107

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

EMBELLISHMENT AND URTEXT IN THE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SONG REPERTORIES

by DAVID FALLOWS

When Josquin was living in Cambrai and a singer tried to add to his music *colores* or *coloratures* that he had not composed, he went into the choir and scolded him severely with everybody listening: „You idiot: Why do you add embellishment? If I had wanted it I would have put it in myself. If you wish to improve completed compositions, make your own, but leave mine unimproved.“

The famous anecdote of Josquin's fury at an over-confident singer survives only in a book published forty years after his death, in – as it happens – Basle.¹ This and Zarlino's related comments, published four years earlier,² may be the only clear statements against vocal embellishment from the years before 1600; apart, that is, from Guillaume de Machaut's passing and ambiguous remark in the *Voir-Dit* that Peronne should appreciate one of his songs „just as it stands, without adding or subtracting“.³

As concerns the reliability of the Josquin anecdote, one could note that the book's compiler, Johannes Manlius, claimed to have received most of his information from Philipp Melanchthon, who had a close association both with the music publisher Georg Rhau and apparently with that most problematic of all witnesses to Josquin's life, Adrianus Petit Coclito.⁴ As Helmuth Osthoff says, despite Coclito's demonstrable mendacity on several matters,

¹ Johannes Manlius, *Locorum communium collectanea a Johanne Manlio per multos annos, pleraque tum ex lectionibus D. Philippi Melanchthonis, tum ex aliorum doctissimorum virorum relationibus excerpta, & nuper in ordinem redacta*, Basle 1562, 542; the relevant passage is edited in Helmuth Osthoff, *Josquin Desprez*, vol. 1, Tutzing 1962, 222, with a German translation on p. 82.

² Giuseppe Zarlino, *Le istitutioni harmoniche*, Venice 1558, Terza parte, cap. 45 (p. 204): „Cantore . . . primieramente dee con ogni diligenza provedere nel suo cantare di proferire la modulatione in quel modo, che è stata composta dal Compositore; & non fare come fanno alcuni poco avveduti, i quali per farsi tenere più valenti & più savi de gli altri, fanno alle volte di suo capo alcune diminutioni tanto salvatiche (dirò cosi) & tanto fuori di ogni proposito, che non solo fanno fastidio a chi loro ascolta; ma commettono etiandio nel cantare mille errori.“ (In the widely available 1966 facsimile of the 1573 edition, it is in cap. 46, p. 239-40.) An English translation appears in Guy A. Marco and Claude V. Palisca, *Giuseppe Zarlino: The Art of Counterpoint*, New Haven 1968, 110.

³ Paulin Paris, ed., *Le livre du Voir-Dit de Guillaume de Machaut*, Paris 1875, 69; the long-announced new edition by Paul Imbs is not yet published. The relevant passage is reprinted in Friedrich Ludwig, ed., *Guillaume de Machaut: Musikalische Werke*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1928, 55*: „Si vous suppli que vous le daigniez oyr, et savoir la chose ainsi comme elle est faite, sans mettre ne oster.“

⁴ See Walter Blankenburg, „Melanchthon“ in *MGG*, Victor H. Mattfeld, „Rhau, Georg“ in *The New Grove*, and Marcus van Crevel, *Adrianus Petit Coclito*, The Hague 1940, *passim*.

there is a good case for believing that as a young boy he was indeed a pupil of Josquin.⁵ Given Coclito's birth in about 1500, this can only have been at Condé, where Josquin lived from 1504 until his death in 1521. Coclito, about whose origins we know only his claim to have been Flemish, must definitely have been a choirboy somewhere, and that could well have been at Condé. It is easy enough to imagine the name of Condé being traduced to the more familiar Cambrai in the course of the story's transmission.⁶ There seems a good chance, therefore, that the reminiscence reached Manlius from Coclito via Melanchthon and reflects an actual event.⁷

In any case, alongside its implied discouragement, it obviously offers evidence that some people did embellish polyphony in the sixteenth century. And there is plenty more, much of it relayed in the extensive secondary literature on the embellishment of sixteenth-century music. One of the most telling examples is Francisco Guerrero's ordinance for the instrumentalists at Seville Cathedral in 1586: he states that only one of the two players on the top line may embellish, but that when that line is resting the player on the next line down may „add all the glosses that he desires and knows so well how to execute on his instrument“.⁸ Evidently Guerrero was happy with embellishments from the instrumentalists, while the singers presumably sang the notes unadorned, but merely wanted them kept within certain bounds.

Most musicians today appear to have a deeply ambivalent attitude to embellishment. Whatever they may say in seminars and articles, they are noticeably reticent in practice. It is extremely uncommon to find performances or recordings that introduce embellishment as a matter of course – as

⁵ op. cit., 83f. See also Adrianus Petit Coclito, *Compendium musices*, Nuremberg 1552, fol. B3: „Puer admodum tradebar in fidem nobilissimi Musici Josquini, ex quo cum levia illa artis nostrae praecepta, obiter tantum, nullo ex libro perceperissem.“

⁶ The likelihood that Josquin ever lived in Cambrai seems minimal, even though it has recently become clear that we know considerably less about his life than was once thought, see Joshua Rifkin, „A Singer named Josquin and Josquin d'Ascanio: some problems in the biography of Josquin des Prez“, forthcoming in *JRMA* and kindly shown to me by the author in advance of publication. I would reject the other conceivable corruption, namely that the city was indeed Cambrai but that the composer was in fact Dufay. It would have been much harder for Manlius to have access to an anecdote about Dufay. Moreover, as Osthoff argues, op. cit., 82, there is indirect confirmation from Glareanus of the next reminiscence in Manlius's book, which tells how Josquin made a practice of listening carefully to the choir as it tried out a new work of his and then telling them to stop so he could make changes.

⁷ That Coclito, op. cit., fol. H3v, describes how to train a young singer in simple embellishments is no real contradiction of this hypothesis, since there is plenty of evidence that all choirboys were taught to embellish – though it could well explain why our story does not appear in Coclito's book.

⁸ For an English translation of the entire ordinance, see Robert Stevenson, *Spanish cathedral music of the golden age*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1961, 167. The original Spanish is in Robert Stevenson, *La música en la Catedral de Sevilla: documentos para su estudio*, 2nd edition, Madrid 1985, 72.

opposed to the occasional demonstrations that follow note-for-note the written decorative versions of the late sixteenth-century instruction books. Even in the simplest homophonic dance music of a Susato or a Praetorius, decoration these days is apt to be restrained and thin on the ground, in fact rather more so than it was thirty years ago.

A more surprising case is in performances of the English lute and keyboard music of the Elizabethan-Jacobean era. Here the sources are littered with ornaments of apparently good authority, but you rarely hear a performance that is not fairly selective in observing them.

That is not meant as an accusation. It merely underlines that ambivalent attitude. It draws attention to a current set of assumptions about Renaissance music and why people bother to perform it. Thirty years ago the music was in some ways primarily a vehicle for a colourful array of instruments. Embellishment was rife. In recent years, however, musicians have tended to move away from what is now sometimes called the toy-box mentality, partly because they became uneasily aware that these performances made one piece of music sound remarkably similar to any other. It is difficult enough at the best of times to distinguish the style of Josquin from that of Mouton, but it is infinitely more difficult if everything is covered with a mist of embellishment. The need to distinguish one work from another goes hand in hand with a feeling that the performance is wasted if it is not of top-flight music: the quality of the music is the mandate for the effort put into reproducing it.

The prejudice can be stated over-simply as follows: the better the music, the more damage is done to it by embellishment. Many people would probably prefer to reformulate that as: the more *sophisticated* the music, the more damage is done to it by embellishment. In simple homophony it can do little harm, but in complex or imitative polyphony it is a menace.⁹ This is a prejudice that I share with many others, including probably most readers of this article and – if we believe the story – Josquin. Even so, comments like that in Guerrero's ordinance appear to suggest that – at least in Seville Cathedral – instrumental embellishment was normal in polyphony of some complexity, since his reference to passages where the top voice rests implies imitation of some kind. Fifteen years ago Howard Mayer Brown approached the problem by stating that many sixteenth-century elaborations were made in the worst of taste and remarking that bad taste should not be considered a prerogative of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Yet his comment needs to be seen in the context of the early 1970s, when there was a tendency among historians to try to pretend that the issue did not exist.

⁹ That view is in fact relayed in Juan Bermudo, *Declaración de instrumentos musicales*, Osuna 1555, fol. 29v (for vihuela music) and fol. 84v (for keyboard music).

¹⁰ Howard Mayer Brown, *Embellishing sixteenth-century music*, London 1976, 73.

But it cannot be ignored. From the fifteenth century we have two massive sources of elaborated keyboard intabulations: the Italian Faenza codex, perhaps from the 1420s,¹¹ and the even larger German Buxheim manuscript from around 1460.¹² These, along with a handful of smaller tablature sources, offer plenty of evidence that the music was often decorated, at least when played on keyboard instruments; and they offer hints about possible embellishment in other circumstances. It is time to try again to broach the question of when and why, to try to see what can usefully be learned from the available sources.

*

Example 1 shows a song by Binchois that happens to survive in two different forms, one more florid than the other. Many other examples could be given. Several Italian trecento songs appear in two differently embellished versions, most famously Jacopo da Bologna's *Non al suo amante*; but the investigation here concerns the fifteenth century. There is also the mid-fifteenth-century song *Aime sospiri* which recurs in a heavily decorated form in one of the Petrucci frottola books;¹³ here the chronological gap of fifty years between the two versions makes it hard to use as evidence of what the performer did or was expected to do when the song was first composed. But the Binchois song offers precious evidence, because the two versions were copied within about ten years of one another: the more florid version is in two sources copied late in the 1430s; the simpler version appears to be a decade or so earlier, to judge from its notation and its one surviving manuscript.¹⁴ The version that

¹¹ Faenza, Biblioteca Comunale, Ms. 117; ed. in Dragan Plamenac, *Keyboard music of the late middle ages in Codex Faenza 117* = Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae, ser. 57, American Institute of Musicology 1972.

¹² München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. 3725; ed. in Bertha Antonia Wallner, *Das Buxheimer Orgelbuch*, Kassel 1958-59 (Das Erbe Deutscher Musik, vols. 37-39).

¹³ Walter H. Rubsamen, „The Justiniane or Viniziane of the 15th century“, *AMI* 29 (1957) 172-84.

¹⁴ The earlier source, given in ex. 1 as „Rei“, is the final layer of the Reina Codex (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. nouv. acq. fr. 6771, fol. 96v), a group of songs possibly copied around 1430; this group is edited complete in Nigel E. Wilkins, *A 15th-century repertory from the Codex Reina*, = Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae, ser. 37, American Institute of Musicology 1966. The later, „Ox“, is in the first fascicle of that famous manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Canonici Misc. 213, fols. 9v-10) and probably written in about 1435.

provides the main text in example 1 is in the Reina codex and is in major prolation (with note-values quartered in the example). The florid version, taken from the Oxford Canonici manuscript, is in doubled note-values, that is, in perfect time with minor prolation; to make the two comparable, the notes are reduced to an eighth of their original value here. It is worth superimposing the versions, because the two separate transcriptions offered by Wolfgang Rehm in his edition of the Binchois songs rather disguise the simplicity of the relationship between them.¹⁵ Moreover, aligning them demonstrates that all the sources contain a fair number of errors which can easily be eliminated.

Here and in the other examples I have taken several steps to prune down the information to what is strictly relevant for this inquiry. Not only are source errors quietly corrected (and there is obviously a certain subjectivity in that); ligature signs are also omitted, as are most accidentals and their variants. That is not to say that these matters are uninteresting or unproblematic; merely that their relevance to this topic is minimal. More controversially, texts are omitted: they may be directly relevant in some ways,¹⁶ but they give rise to so many additional questions that they seemed better left out of the equation.

The example shows that the lower voices remain virtually the same in the two versions except at one point, in bar 17. New decoration is confined to the discantus. By and large this is a general pattern and fits curiously well with Guerrero's instructions to his instrumentalists. It is also the case in the Faenza intabulations and in all but the most heavily decorated of those in the Buxheim manuscript.

Both sources were written in the Veneto, which is to say some considerable distance from the Paris-Brussels axis in which Binchois appears to have spent these years. The other source of the later version, „Esc“ (El Escorial, Biblioteca y Archivo de Música, Ms. V. III. 24, fol. 47), contains only the song's tenor: the facing page, which would have contained the discantus, is now lost; more puzzlingly, the contratenor is not added, even though the word „Contratenor“ is entered below the first of two empty staves after the surviving tenor.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Rehm, ed., *Die Chansons von Gilles Binchois (1400-1460)* Mainz 1957 = *Musikalische Denkmäler*, vol. 2, nos. 17 and 17a.

¹⁶ Michael Morrow, who has given me the benefit of his views on this and much else over a period of some twenty-five years, believes that many of the embellishments in Buxheim can be used to derive hints about the correct alignment of text. But that would be hard to demonstrate clearly before there is a far fuller analysis of the various procedures and layers of activity concealed behind the blandly uniform script of the Buxheim manuscript.

Example 1:

Jamais tant

Binchois

In that context it is relevant that there is just one moment where embellishment of the discantus is entirely avoided, namely in bars 14-15 where there is unison imitation of all three voices. Two possible reasons can be offered. First, that any decoration in the discantus would need to be matched in the lower voices; and if that is the case it emphasises the pattern of avoiding embellishment in the tenor and contratenor. That in its turn may even be taken to suggest that embellishment is to be avoided in all imitative material of this kind. The other explanation could be the obvious musical one that the way the three lines circulate round a triad on middle-C, as so often happens in songs of this era, would be ruined by any embellishment. Apart from anything else, passages of this kind require particular care in balance, tone colour and phrasing; repeatedly in this repertory they present a moment of contrapuntal stillness that would be severely threatened by decoration.

For most of the discantus line the embellishment is of an extremely simple kind that anyone familiar with the repertory could easily have added. Bars 11 to 13 give the basic principles. At the beginning of bar 11 the two semiquavers

bridge the gap of a third, the next added note bridges a falling leap of a third, and the last note in the bar provides an anticipation of the next note. In the next bar the opening pattern simply fleshes out the cadence with a standard pattern. At the end of bar 12 there is something slightly more complex, a dip down to the *A*, evidently made necessary by the need to avoid interruption of the florid pattern at that point. The embellishments in bar 13 are equally simple and more or less inevitable in the context. Much of the rest can be seen in the same way.

Before examining the more difficult passages in *Jamais tant* and asking some of the questions the piece poses, it is worth turning to an entirely different document, shown in figure 1, a sheet of embellishment patterns in the British Library, Ms. Add. 70516, fol. 79.¹⁷

It contains a series of three-note tenors, each followed by four appropriate discantus patterns of increasing complexity, see example 2. No other document from the fifteenth century presents the material in quite this way. The German keyboard *fundamenta* in the Lochamer Liederbuch volume and in the Buxheim manuscript give similar kinds of information; so, reaching back to the 1320s, does the theory treatise of Petrus Dictus de Palma Ociosa, though that would appear to be an instruction book for composers, not performers.¹⁸ But none of these presents a series of different patterns over the same tenor. None, in short, is quite so methodical. In fact there may be nothing comparable until Coclito (1552), Diego Ortiz (1553) and the Italian diminution manuals of the late sixteenth century.

¹⁷ Its dimensions are ca. 255 mm across and 216 mm up the right hand edge. This is an isolated leaf presumably taken from a binding in the Duke of Portland's collection, formerly at Welbeck Abbey. In 1947 the collection was deposited in the British Library (then the British Museum) as Loan 29, and this volume (devoted to early binding fragments) had the call-number Loan 29/333, under which the leaf is reported in Pamela J. Willetts, *[The British Museum:] Handlist of music manuscripts acquired 1908-67*, London 1970, 79. The collection became the British Library's property only in May 1987 and was subsequently given its present call-number. I am most grateful to Mr Francis Needham, formerly the Duke of Portland's librarian, for permission to photograph this leaf, to Dr. C. J. Wright of the British Library for assigning a foliation to the formerly unnumbered leaf, and to the British Library for permission to publish it. Additionally, I must thank Margaret Bent for checking and annotating my transcription at a time when I was many miles distant from London.

¹⁸ This important and still undervalued treatise is edited from its only known source in Johannes Wolf, „Ein Beitrag zur Diskantlehre des 14. Jahrhunderts“, *SIMG* 15 (1913-1914) 504-534.

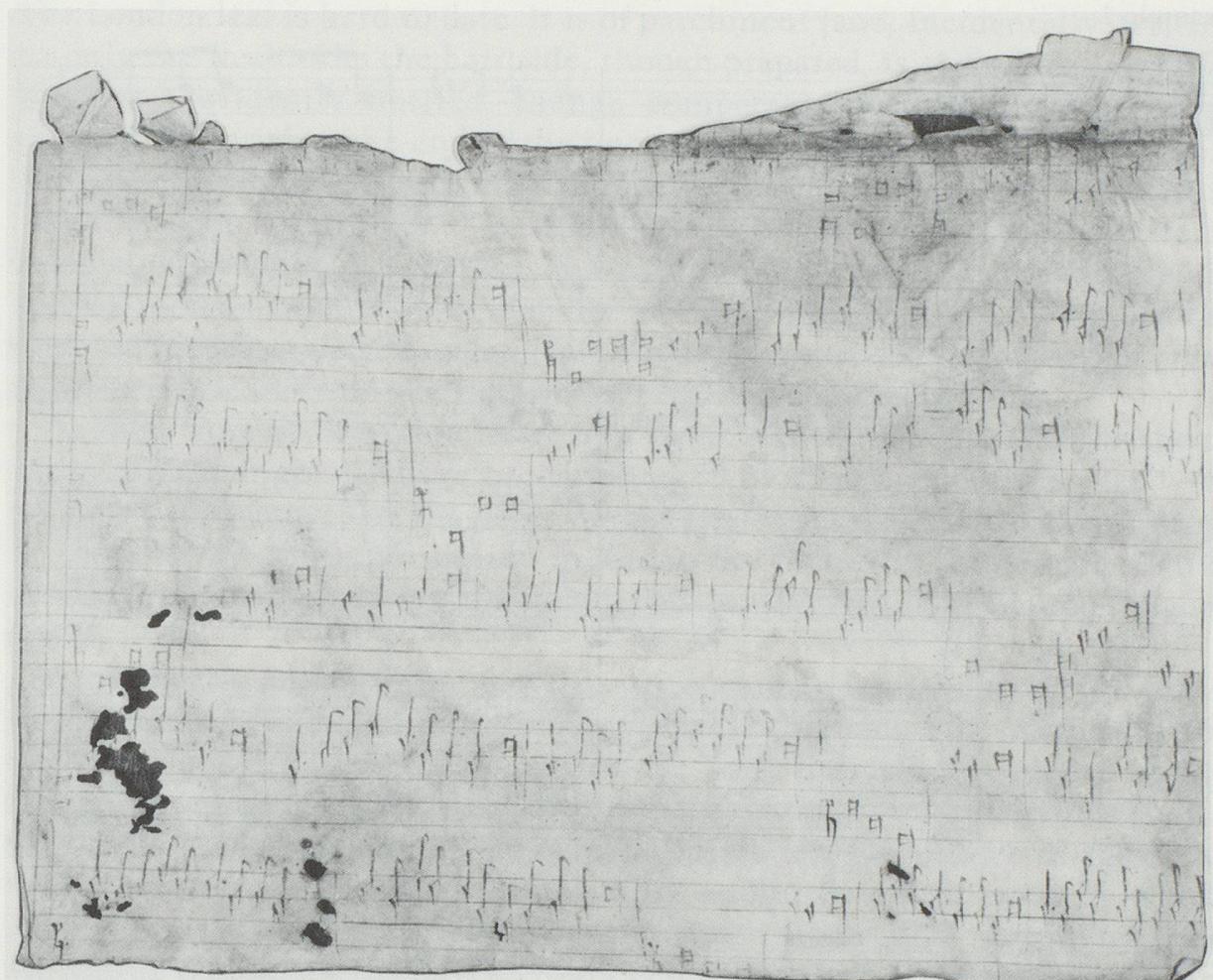


Figure 1: London, British Library, Ms. Add. 70516, fol. 79. By permission of the British Library

Example 2:

The musical score consists of two systems of music, each with eight staves. The top system begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The first measure shows a treble clef on the first staff, a bass clef on the second, an alto clef on the third, a tenor clef on the fourth, a bass clef on the fifth, an alto clef on the sixth, a tenor clef on the seventh, and a bass clef on the eighth. The second system begins with a common time signature and a bass clef on the first staff, an alto clef on the second, a tenor clef on the third, a bass clef on the fourth, an alto clef on the fifth, a tenor clef on the sixth, a bass clef on the seventh, and a bass clef on the eighth. Both systems feature eighth-note patterns, with some notes having grace marks and others having slurs. The music is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

The London leaf is hard to date. It is of parchment (and, incidentally, written on only the flesh side: the hair side, though prepared, is entirely blank). The writing is evidently hurried, though comparable with some of the void notation material at the end of the Lochamer Liederbuch volume.¹⁹ But it is written entirely in major prolation, which went out of use for normal purposes soon after 1430.²⁰ In this context it is eloquent that the florid version of Binchois' *Jamais tant*, as written in the late 1430s, is rennotated in perfect *tempus* even though it contains nothing that is more complicated than the patterns on the London leaf. And it seems reasonable to suggest that the leaf may date from the first quarter of the fifteenth century.

To judge from its dimensions, we now have only the lower half of the sheet, which would originally have been around 38 by 28 centimeters in size with perhaps twelve staves on the page. With staves just over 20 millimeters deep, it would have been rather similar in size to the Chantilly codex or the Turin French-Cypriot manuscript, though it is obviously written in a much rougher hand.

Many details among these patterns are instantly familiar from the florid version of the Binchois. But it is fairly clear that this cannot be taken as direct evidence about the embellishment of the song literature. A glance at the tenor patterns and the two-voice counterpoint of the simplest versions shows very little that is appropriate to song performance. Only three of the eight tenors here actually descend to their final resolution on the octave – which is the almost invariable practice in the surviving secular polyphony. The remaining tenor patterns have extremely few cognates in the song repertory. Moreover there is an important clue in the fact that the tenors are presented in apparently indiscriminate *brevis* and *longa* values (which are difficult to transcribe in modern terms) whereas the corresponding values in the discantus lines are of a perfect *semibrevis*. This would suggest that the sheet is a demonstration of how to improvise over a chant tenor. There is in fact a series of early fifteenth-century fragments at Bourges, discovered and soon to be described by Paula Higgins, which includes extended workings laid out in precisely this way.²¹ There the chants use the square notation current at the time; and the discantus lines are in major prolation with – precisely as in the London leaf – one perfect *semibrevis* for each note of the chant. Predictably, the three-note units of the London leaf tenors appear often in the Bourges fragments.

¹⁹ Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. Mus. 40613, p.88-92.

²⁰ Heinrich Besseler, *Bourdon und Fauxbourdon: Studien zum Ursprung der niederländischen Musik*, Leipzig 1950, revised version ed. Peter Gölke, Leipzig 1974, chapter VII; Charles E. Hamm, *A chronology of the works of Guillaume Dufay based on a study of mensural practice*, Princeton 1964.

²¹ I am most grateful to Professor Higgins for having shared them with me prior to their formal publication.

But the London leaf is nevertheless relevant to a consideration of the song repertory for several reasons. It is a reminder, first of all, that most singers and composers in the fifteenth century (and later) were trained to improvise against a tenor with various degrees of diminution; so, apparently, were instrumentalists. The London leaf is the first clear evidence of the various ways in which they did so. And it is most particularly evidence of the kinds of variety that could be introduced. Until the last years of the fifteenth century, the singers of secular polyphony seem to have been almost invariably men or boys trained in the choirschools. This was their musical bread-and-butter. The leaf shows, in fact, that many of the differences between the two versions of *Jamais tant* were almost automatic for these musicians.

*

Returning now to the florid version of *Jamais tant*, it is time to make a few more observations about the two versions and ask some of the necessary questions.

First, it should be noted that the later version is no mere embellishment of the earlier, but in several respects actually a recomposition. There are places where the florid line changes the essential shape of the melody and improves it substantially. One could look, for example, at bars 8-9. In Reina the last two notes of the discantus in bar 8, the *A* and *F*, are both dissonant; bar 9 opens with parallel fifths between discantus and contratenor, followed by a leap from the *D* up a third to the dissonant *F*. Now none of these apparent anomalies is untypical of Binchois: part of the distinctive charm in his work is the way he can include unusual contrapuntal turns that succeed because of the music's linear grace and harmonic clarity. On the other hand, the new florid line is, contrapuntally speaking, infinitely stronger, quite apart from the success with which its fall from the high *C* reflects and resolves the fall in bar 7 from the high *D*.

Another case is in bar 17. Here the florid version has a substantial change in its inclusion of the high *F*, a note that does not appear in the simple version but occurs once earlier in the florid version, thus perhaps requiring its re-statement before the final resolution of the piece. To include that note here, the reviser has added a rest – thereby establishing a parallelism between bars 16-17 and bars 1-2 (where a rest is also added). And by eliminating the falling triadic figure in bar 17 he has made it possible to replace a somewhat ugly version of the two lower voices with something that is undeniably stronger.

Or at least, it is contrapuntally more convincing, though one can easily see the attractions of the simpler version, in which both discantus and contratenor at this point echo the triadic figure already mentioned as one of the most delicate moments in the song. Perhaps it is also easy to see, however, that this was an idea that the composer could afford to lose, in view of the considerably improved strength of the climax thereby created in the rewriting of this passage.

That last sentence, of course, lets the cat out of the bag. It is very hard to resist the feeling that the more florid version of *Jamais tant* was by the composer himself, and a considered revision. It seems impossible to credit the changes in bar 17 to another hand. Or, to rephrase that, the adaptation of *Jamais tant* as a more floridly written song is so brilliantly done and so fundamental in several respects that it is difficult to imagine a lesser figure having the courage to attempt it on a work by one of the major composers of the age.

There are also changes that improve the counterpoint. At the very end of bar 18 the downwards move in the florid line may be primarily intended to continue and complete the grand fall of a tenth from the high *F*; and it may also work towards resolving the low *C* in bar 15 – that is, by including intermediate steps that help it to resolve towards the concluding *G*. But on a much more elementary level this change once again eliminates the parallel fifths between discantus and contratenor – again something that is not rare in Binchois' early works, but may well have seemed worth rewriting at a later stage.

Without wishing to prolong the detailed comparison of these two versions unduly, it is worth noticing two further points that suggest considerable refinement on the part of the rewriter. In the original, bar 11 of the discantus echoes bars 7-8 – a neat little idea that is common to the songwriters of the time, opening the *secunda pars* with material that takes off from what has just happened. In the more florid revision that echo is retained precisely. On the other hand, the discantus echo between bars 5 and 6 is now rejected. Or at least it is turned into something that still works around the same notes, and still has a hint of repetition, but turns the end of the phrase into something considerably more glorious and ambitious. And it is here that he introduces the high *F* that paves the way for the even more impressively treated high *F* mentioned earlier, the one in bar 17.

In any case, this all suggests that the rewriter was almost certainly Binchois himself. That may not initially have seemed the most likely conclusion, but in retrospect it is surely unavoidable; and it actually fits in well with other indirect evidence that Binchois had a hand in variants between the sources of some of his other works – albeit none of them quite so fundamental as in the case of *Jamais tant*. Given that a composer like Binchois is likely to have copied out little songs of this kind several times, it is easy enough to imagine him, some time after 1430, using one such occasion as an opportunity to transfer *Jamais tant* into the more current *tempus perfectum* notation: the contratenor contains many details that look fussy in the old *prolatio* notation. As he did so, he helped the discantus line to flow more easily by adding a few decorative details and at the same time tidied up a few patches that now seemed to him in want of adjustment.

This all obviously raises two questions that are interrelated. The first question may be impossible to answer but still needs asking. Namely, to

what extent are the two versions to be performed at the same tempo? Is it likely that the minima of *prolatio* notation in the 1420s is roughly equal to the semibrevis of *tempus perfectum* in the mid-1430s (assuming that to be the correct mensuration sign)?²² Cutting a very long story short, there is evidence for several different conclusions. But the related question is more directly relevant to this inquiry. How far do the embellishments of the florid version in fact reflect performance practice of the time? That is, putting aside the places where the musical substance was actually recomposed, can the remaining patterns – found also in the London leaf – be applied to other songs of the time?

A first reaction to both questions is obviously that the innocent twentieth-century ear is inclined to hear the two versions as two entirely different pieces. That is how I viewed them when I first considered the song seriously, some fifteen years ago. But repeated absorption of this repertory over the intervening years has rather changed my mind. I now believe that major prolation music of that generation is usually performed rather too quickly. In fact it seems to me musically likely that the two versions would have had approximately the same speed and that this offers more general clues to the speed of the major prolation repertory. Along with that goes the related belief that these variants need to be taken to suggest an appropriate articulation for music of this kind. Just as keyboard players have learned to modify their articulation of slightly later music in the light of the knowledge that music was conceived indiscriminately for organ, harpsichord or lute, a performer of this song may do well to sing each version in a manner that minimises its differences from the other version.

Most of the smaller decorations in the discantus line prompt fundamental questions about the nature of embellishment.²³ There are many things a singer can do to vary a line without departing literally from the written notes. So much can be done by bending rhythms a little, by varieties of articulation, by degrees of portamento, by different gradations of tone colour and dynamics in the move from one pitch to the next, even by bending pitches – all of which can be virtually unconscious parts of a singer's art and are rarely notated. From that point of view, many of the differences between these two forms of Binchois' song may be almost academic.

²² Neither of the perfect time sources has a mensuration sign, and there must always be a suspicion in such cases that the correct mensuration may be not *tempus perfectum* but *tempus perfectum diminutum*, which, by a more literal interpretation of some mensural theory, would result in a more exact equivalence of tempo between the two versions of this piece.

²³ Many of the ideas in this and the next paragraph, which represent the core of my argument, arose in the course of a discussion with Robin Hayward, at the time a second-year undergraduate in the Manchester University Music Department.

Moreover, in the course of a full rondeau performance the *prima pars* of the music will be heard five times. Most singers will introduce a certain amount of variety in any case. Perhaps this was the normal approach. The trouble with taking a literal paper view of the written variants is that it raises the question of what happens to the singer who begins with the Oxford manuscript, that is, with the more florid version. Is the singer then to add further embellishments to those already written? (Or, to turn back to one of Arnold Schering's unfashionable but fascinating ideas, perhaps the singer in fact began with something rather simpler than the written notes, incorporating the fuller version – or allowing an instrumentalist to do so – as the song progressed.)²⁴ These are questions that tend to evaporate once the matter of embellishment is viewed in a less literal way and considered merely as a hint at some different kinds of articulation.

*

Plainly the question of *Urtext* raises its head here. It has been debated many times in the past but needs to be reconsidered for fifteenth-century music. In the case of nineteenth-century music, the word *Urtext* was first used merely to denote an edition that returned to the original sources and refrained from the editorial additions and changes that had once been thought part of the editor's task. Yet it soon became clear that the notion of an „original“ text was in most cases extremely misleading, not to say naive. Composers rarely left a work untouched after its first drafting; pieces often remained „work in progress“ until the composer's death. For many nineteenth-century works, especially operas, it is now customary to accept several different versions of the work as equally „authentic“, merely representing the composer's view of it at a particular stage in his life.

With medieval music the problem is far more difficult, mainly because we are dealing with an era in which aural transmission was as important as written. In literature, as in music, the sources are filled with errors that are most easily understood if we accept that the ear played a rather stronger role than the eye in the preparation of manuscripts. It was an age when literacy was still fairly rare (and in any case quite different from our own), an age in which even the most erudite retained the habits of listening and memory formed by centuries of unwritten culture.

²⁴ See, for example, Arnold Schering, *Studien zur Musikgeschichte der Frührenaissance*, Leipzig 1914, 70-81.

That is why, in the case of *Jamais tant*, it was necessary to separate two distinct features of the differences between the two surviving versions: actual recomposition of the work's substance; and the addition of florid elements. It is also why it is necessary to consider how far the fifteenth-century song repertory has a fixed text, and how far it must be thought subject to the freedoms that accompany the notion of an aural culture. Obviously, if it is really a mainly aural repertory without established texts, that could imply that the performer has a certain implicit invitation (or even an obligation) to decorate at will.²⁵

Several early fifteenth-century works come to us in radically different versions. One particularly intriguing case is the anonymous rondeau *Une fois avant que morir*, which survives in two staff-notation versions that are radically different from one another, as well as a dozen copies, either incomplete or in tablature, which suggest that it circulated in several other discrete versions.²⁶ This is one of many songs with an apparently fluid identity, a song that hovers on the borderline between written and aural transmission.

Other works plainly did not, however. From the main body of the fifteenth century there is a very large number of songs that offer clear evidence of having had – in certain respects – a considered and definitive *Urtext*.

A case in point might be Dufay's rondeau *Le serviteur hault guerdonné*, which survives in fourteen staff-notation sources and is therefore the most widely distributed polyphonic song prior to the astonishing success of *De tous biens plaine*. *Le serviteur* was composed in the 1450s, and its sources come from various parts of France and Italy over the next forty years.

²⁵ See Howard Mayer Brown, „Improvised ornamentation in the fifteenth-century chanson“, *Quadrivium* 12 (1971) 238-58. To a certain extent the argument that follows is an attempt to modify that view.

²⁶ This rondeau survives in a two-voice version in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. nouv. acq. fr. 10660, fol. 47, and in a rather different three-voice version in London, British Library, Ms. Cotton Titus A.xxvi, fols. 4v-5; the tenor alone, in yet another version, appears in the Rostocker Liederbuch, fol. 22v (no. 23), see the edition and facsimile in F. Ranke and J. M. Müller-Blattau, eds. *Das Rostocker Liederbuch*, expanded reprint, Kassel 1987. To the nine intabulations in the Buxheim manuscript and the one in the Lochamer Liederbuch can now be added the incomplete intabulation in München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 29775/6, fol. 1v, described (with facsimile) in Martin Staehelin, „Münchner Fragmente mit mehrstimmiger Musik des späten Mittelalters“, *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen: I. philologisch-historische Klasse* Jahrgang 1988, no.6.

The main text in example 3 comes, bar one correction, from the Oporto Ms. 714, copied probably in Ferrara soon after 1460. The variants noted above and below ignore the differences in key-signature and accidentals, of which there are several, and they silently correct the fair number of obvious mistakes in the sources.²⁷ But they omit nothing in the way of decoration or essential musical differences apart from a wildly confusing passage in the Pavia manuscript at the end of the Contratenor. (Incidentally, it is a curious reflection on copying habits that very much the majority of source errors and of incomprehensible variants tend to come at the end of contratenor lines, at the point where the copyist's concentration evidently falls off.)

A casual glance at the sources rather tends to give the impression that there is an enormous variety of readings, particularly at cadences. But a diagram like this, once critically evaluated, tends to simplify the pattern enormously. If *Le serviteur* is a slightly special case in the consistency of its various readings, the results of an investigation of this kind are clear enough. They really do seem to confirm the view that many of the variants in other songs could stem from the composer but that Dufay at this stage in his life was inclined to regard a work as finished once it had been composed. After all, this work contains many details that copyists could, in a casual world, have been inclined to alter.

²⁷ Main source: Porto, Biblioteca Pública Municipal, Ms. 714, fols. 64v-65. Abbreviations used for the variants are mostly those found in the complete edition, Heinrich Besseler, ed., *Guillaume Dufay: cantiones* = Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae, ser. 1, vol. 6 (Rome, 1964), no. 92. Two sources are overlooked there: CG = Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Cappella Giulia XIII. 27, fols. 77v-78; and Pix = Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. f. fr. 15123 (Chansonnier Pixérécourt), fols. 92v-93. In writing a new commentary for a revised and corrected reprint of Besseler's volume (in press), I have tried to categorise the source variants so that the apparent scribal slips, the ligature variants, the accidentals, and the actual different musical readings appear separately. There are no musical variants from Porto in two of the sources (BlnK and EscB). Perhaps I should add in passing that I find no virtue in Besseler's widely shared view that *Le serviteur* cannot be by Dufay; some reasons for accepting the song as authentic are stated in the new commentary to his edition.

Example 3:

Le Serviteur

Dufay

Discantus

Tenor

Contra

Cord

Pav

Cord
Per
Ricc
Sev

CG
Pav
Per
Sev

Cord
Ricc

Ricc

MC

Pav

Ricc

CG
Pav

Sev

Cord
Dij
Sev
Wo
Per
Pix
Ricc

CG

S

S

MC

20

CG Pav

Sev

Sev

25

Tr90 Wo

Tr90 MC

CG Pav

Pix

Sev

Tr90

30

Pav

Pav

Sev

1. There are many extremely simple sections in long notes which could have been subdivided; but the only variants here are in bars 20-21 where two manuscripts divide up notes in the tenor and two others divide a note in the contratenor, and in bars 5 and 7 where just one manuscript divides a note.

2. There are several intricate rhythms, such as the one in the last bar, followed identically by thirteen of the fourteen sources.

3. There are places where people may have wished to embellish a cadence, such as the peak in bar 28-29, where only the very late Chansonnier Pixérécourt has a variant that could have seemed more or less obvious to any reader or copyist: I imagine that its plain shape may have seemed important as echoing a similar shape at bar 11-12, a fourth lower but with similar counterpoints and a similar musical context. That kind of balancing is repeatedly important especially in Dufay's mature music.

4. There are also points where, on the principle of the Binchois *Jamais tant*, a copyist could have bridged a third or added an anticipation; but there are astonishingly few where any of the fourteen copyists involved here did so. In bar 7 just the Pavia manuscript adds one such in the discantus and one in the contratenor; in bar 8 just the Riccardiana manuscript does so in the contratenor; in bar 18 just the Seville manuscript bridges a gap; and in bar 20 two manuscripts do so.

5. Note values shortened to include a rest appear but they are few, very few, as in bar 9, tenor (leaving a nasty unsupported 4th, therefore presumably an error) and contratenor. A variant like that in the tenor at bar 6 must surely go back to scribal negligence. In the contratenor at bar 2 there are two variant readings, in one source each; and those do of course count as true embellishments. As for the three places where even quavers are replaced by dotted rhythms, all three must surely be scribal slips: the one in a single source at bar 11 contradicts the direct imitation in a passage that has three voices winding around a triadic figure, like the one in *Jamais tant* and many other songs, but more unusually based on *G* rather than *C*; the ones at bar 23 (one source for the tenor and two others for the discantus) are perhaps not so easily dismissed, since there are occasional hints of written-out *inégalité* elsewhere in the song repertory, but it is all the same difficult to take them seriously as alternative readings.

Actual variants, therefore, are confined to the cadential approaches in bar 8 and bar 14. These are obviously of the kind that look random and seem to support the case for free embellishment at such places. Equally, however, the bald figures tend to support the main text here – that is, at bar 8, eight sources as against two with one reading and four with another, and, at bar 14, six sources as against four with one reading, three with another and a single further version. But the search for musical reasons in support of that reading is always tempting and occasionally invigorating.

Starting with the second half of bar 8, it is easy to see that the main reading is unusual within the style, the kind of thing an unaware scribe would be

tempted to change in precisely the ways found in the two variants, and the kind of thing that an editor ought to be inclined to accept on the principle of *difficilior lectio praestat*. I believe it is also relatively easy to agree that Dufay would prefer simple quavers here so as to let through the contratenor line, wth its neat little 6/16 figure: the dotted figure in *Cordiforme* and *Riccardiana* simply confuses the texture; and the simpler crotchet in four other sources draws attention to itself by virtue of the suspension created. The majority version here has no dissonance until the final semiquaver. In bars 5-6, the earlier use of a 6/16 figure in the contratenor has similar rhythmic support, similarly dissonance-free.

If three quavers are the correct reading here, it seems necessary to have the two semiquavers on the previous note rather than the single quaver of four variant sources, because the anticipation of the *C* would put a stress on the second *C*, therefore encouraging performance of these last notes as a 3/8 group to support the 6/16 in the contratenor.

Turning to bar 14, the main point is of course that the majority version matches the final cadence of the piece in bar 32. It is less easy to offer purely musical reasons for rejecting the other three versions; that is to say, they would be so tentative as to be easily contradictable – after all, one could just as well argue that in bar 8 the reading in *Perugia* and *Seville* is the best in that it pre-echoes the imitated passage of bars 24-26.

But this discussion of the remarkably few visible variants among the large number of sources for *Le serviteur* has two main aims. The first is to suggest that the variants leave an almost unanswerable case for there really being an *Urtext* of this song. It concerns only the written notes, of course. Any decision about a „correct“ reading for the accidentals, the ligatures and most particularly the text-underlay would be far harder to support in this way; and it is easy to agree with the growing number of musicologists who believe that those features of much music from the second half of the fifteenth century were indeed considered „accidental“ by the composers of the time.²⁸ Particularly in that context, the relative fixity of the written notes is impressive.

Of course the second aim was to point, however sketchily, to a few of the ways in which every detail of this astonishing work is important. To start embellishing it seems almost sacrilege – which is of course the position from which we began, though the case here is based rather more on musical logic.

*

²⁸ For some of the considerations, as derived from probably autograph or near-autograph sources, see Joshua Rifkin, „Pietrequin Bonnel and Ms. 2794 of the Biblioteca Riccardiana“, *JAMS* 29 (1976) 284-96, and Barton Hudson, „On the texting of Obrecht’s Masses“, *MD* 42 (1988) 101-27.

It is now time to turn to that most contentious of all fifteenth-century embellishment sources, the Buxheim keyboard manuscript. This extremely complicated source contains many different kinds of intabulation. Some are entirely undecorated, merely transferring into tablature the notes of the staff-notation version. Others bury the original discantus line under a welter of brilliant runs and flurries that are relevant to the performance of these songs on a keyboard instrument – or indeed any other instrumental ensemble, *mutatis mutandis* – but give no information that is likely to be relevant to how the songs were performed by vocalists. But there is an important middle category, with relatively sparse embellishment. It may well contain some of the clues about vocal embellishment that are so signally lacking elsewhere.

Another mature Dufay song can illustrate this. *Par le regard de vos beaux yeux* has twelve staff-notation sources and one for the contratenor line only. Among Dufay's songs, it is second only to *Le serviteur* in its wide source distribution. As with *Le serviteur*, the large number of sources makes it particularly suitable for this kind of inquiry.

Example 4 is rather more complicated than the other musical examples and may take a few moments to unpick. It again shows all the essential variants in the staff-notation sources. There are slightly more of these than in *Le serviteur*. But the diagram looks full because it seemed worth adding all details of the two Buxheim settings, including the surprisingly few differences in their intabulation of the lower voices.²⁹

Example 4:

Par le regard

Dufay

The musical score for 'Par le regard' by Dufay consists of four staves. The top staff is the Discantus, written in staff notation with various sources labeled: Bux 31 + 31, Mü Sev, Mel Tr93, Pix, and Bux 31. The other three staves are in tablature: Tenor, Contra, and Bux. The Bux staff includes labels for Pix Mel Tr93 Bux, Pix Mü Bux, and Bux 31. The score is numbered 30 and 31.

²⁹ Again the main source is Porto, Biblioteca Pública Municipal, Ms. 714, fols. 61v-62. To the sources listed by Besseler (see note 27), no. 73, should be added Mü = München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Mus. Ms. 9659, fols. 2v-3.

30

31

5

EscB
Por

Wo
Pav
Pav Pix
Sev Wo

Bux 30
Bux 31

Por
Bux Por Sev Tr 93

Pix
Wo

Pix Bux 30

Pix
Mel
Lab

8

8

8

8

(30 31) w

Bux 31 Bux Lab

10

Pav Pix
Sev Wo

Mc
Tr90

Tr93

Wo

Pav Bux30

Bux 31

Bux

Lab

Pix

8

8

8

8

30 

Bux 30 

EscB Mel Bux 30 Lab Wo Pix Lab Bux Bux 30

Bux 31

BerK Pix Bux

15 

Lab Bux

Mel Sev Tr93

Cop17 

T Bux Ct

20 

EscB Mel Tr93 Bux

Lab Pix Lab Wo Bux Cop17

Bux

Cop17 Mel Pav Tr90 Bux (BerK Wolf)

Bux Cop17

Bux Mel

31 

Cop17 Tr93 Sev

It shows that the two Buxheim settings are in fact almost identical – perplexingly enough. The line above the main discantus line represents the versions in both Buxheim no. 30 and no. 31 except where it is annotated with one of those numbers; where there is nothing on that line the Buxheim version is unadorned. The only real differences between the two are in bars 2-4; and these differences are, in all conscience, extremely slight. Later in the song there are two places where one Buxheim setting has embellishments while the other simply follows the undecorated form of the line.

A few points should be made about the staff-notation versions. Bar 1 is particularly interesting when seen after *Le serviteur*. In general it seems wise to view the division or tying of notes in fifteenth-century music as inessential. Notes are often divided to help the application of text, for example; there are innumerable cases similar to bar 1 of *Par le regard* and many later points in the song (though the larger number of sources in *Par le regard* makes the picture here more elaborate). Apparently these differences were perceived as having virtually no impact on the way the music was heard. That of course is another feature that may be directly relevant to how one should articulate the music.

The other variants are slightly more numerous than in *Le serviteur*, but not enormously so except in the sense that it would be rather more difficult to argue a purely musical case for the main version presented here being a defensible *Urtext*. That case would need to be mainly statistical, pointing out that most of the variants noted survive in only one source out of fourteen.

But there is one eloquent detail: the final cadence has identical readings in all sources apart from one of the Buxheim versions, and even that is unusually restrained. The reason is surely that the preceding two bars are so intricate that embellishment here would merely add confusion. Many similar cases can be explained on similar musical grounds. That is to say that examination of the variants and embellishments in Buxheim appears to suggest, at the very least, a strong and sensitive musical awareness in the intabulator. We may follow Howard Mayer Brown's attitude to the sixteenth-century embellishment literature in deplored its taste; but we also have to concede that the intabulator here reacted to the music as a musician.

It is almost certainly significant that bars 16-17 show no variants whatsoever, since this is again a point at which the three voices imitate and overlap, rather as they had done at the undecorated moment in *Jamais tant*. Of course it would also be more difficult for an organist to play a florid version of the discantus when the other two voices are overlapping it in the same range. But this is merely difficult, not impossible. Moreover, the Buxheim variant of the lower voices here in fact makes it easier to embellish the low *A* in the discantus, should the intabulator have wanted it. I suggest that in this case the musical context took precedence over the instincts prompted by digital technique.

I would think too that the relatively few embellishments found in the Buxheim versions are distinctively instrumental in nature, even digital.³⁰ Most of them could fairly easily be sung, of course: that is particularly true of the falling lines in bars 5, 10 and 19; but it is surely also just true of figures like those in bar 7, bar 12, bars 14-15, bar 18 and bar 22 – depending rather on how one proposes to interpret and articulate the ornament signs in Buxheim.

Returning to the discussion of the Binchois song in example 1, where many of the variants appeared to be merely elaborations of the bending, portamentos, articulations and gradations any singer might apply, it may be possible to go a little further. It is likely, for example, that the intabulated versions of *Par le regard* transfer a few of those details to a rather different medium, that of the keyboard which has so many fewer ways of varying the sound and the nature of the line. A sung performance of the literal details in Buxheim could be extremely exciting, though on balance it hardly seems sensible. But the broad picture does suggest that these details are likely to give some clue to the ways in which a singer could approach the art of bringing the line to life. If the more florid version of *Jamais tant* is to be considered an index of what happened, then the details of these two intabulations, and many like them, may be important for the interpretation of the repertory. But comparison of the surviving staff-notation sources emphatically confirms the view that literally elaborated singing is out of place.

So this all rather seems to lead to the conclusion that I originally offered as a mere prejudice. Particularly with a carefully crafted work, literal embellishment can only impede the communication of a song. Examination of the variants between staff-notation sources indicates that there was indeed a firm *Urtext* in many cases, that several of the differences between sources may stem from composers' second thoughts, and that for this repertory literal embellishment is to be avoided. That singers did often embellish may be seen as a consequence of a tradition in which they were trained, and which was part of their day-to-day practice, namely improvising counterpoints against a tenor. But there is little in the sources to justify actual interpolation in the written notes of the composed polyphonic repertory between about 1430 and the end of the century.

³⁰ Brown, „Improvised ornamentation in the fifteenth-century chanson“ (see note 25 above), 248-50, offers a useful vocabulary of the simpler melodic embellishment figures in Buxheim.

That a few sources appear to suggest otherwise can be understood in the wider context of fifteenth-century music-making. When a song was adapted for purely instrumental performance the generating power and interest of the words and the inherent flexibility of the voice were no longer there; and adaptation inevitably followed. Here there was every opportunity for the musician to add – returning to Guerrero's words a century later – „all the glosses that he desires and knows so well how to execute on his instrument“. Moreover, the polyphonic settings and adaptations of song tenors later in the century plainly show that it was becoming common, as an independent instrumental repertory emerged, to devise elaborate creations on the basis of received material. But as concerns the sung repertory of the polyphonic chanson, the evidence indicates that the written notes were what the composer expected to hear, albeit, perhaps, with a somewhat wider range of articulation than we normally hear today.³¹

³¹ In addition to the help mentioned in notes 16-17, 21 and 23 above, I would like to record my thanks to Wulf Arlt and Alejandro Enrique Planchart, who offered perceptive comments after an earlier version of this paper was delivered in Basle in March 1989, as well as to Peter Reidemeister and Robert Crawford Young, who by inviting me to Basle on that occasion prompted me to examine and attempt to pin down an issue about which I had felt uncomfortable for some years.

