

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:	29 (2005)
Artikel:	Josquin and popular songs
Autor:	Fallows, David
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869044

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: 22.02.2026

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

JOSQUIN AND POPULAR SONGS

by DAVID FALLOWS

The theme of this conference draws attention to a group of questions that were at the top of the agenda twenty years ago but have since been dropped. The questions concerned how you can tell whether a particular line in music before about 1520 was intended for voice or instrument or a combination of the two. In the years between about 1982 and 1992 there were many who wrote and spoke about this. But temperatures quickly rose, and the intellectual level of the discussion correspondingly fell. By 1992 so many uncharitable things had been said – at public discussions and in print – that most of us moved on to other topics.¹ To use the terminology of cricket, we „retired hurt“. In doing so we left a lot of unfinished business behind us.

In retrospect it is clear that one of the problems was that we all had previously established agendas. The young turks among us wanted to blow away the cobwebs that had accumulated over the years:² we wanted to look at the evidence rather more severely; we wanted to see if there weren't other ways of reading the evidence. Others, mainly the more senior scholars, wanted to build on what was already strong, a performing tradition that had quite recently become fully professionalized and was beginning to produce recordings of astonishingly high quality.³ I wish to return to that theme today for three main reasons. The first is that after a fifteen-year silence on these matters it seems to me time for a younger generation of musicians and researchers to look at the questions again. They can come afresh to them, without as much of a debt to the earlier generation. There were many pressing questions that were left unanswered in the early 90s; and I would like others to try to confront some of them for us. There is a second reason that I would like the theme to be reopened, which is that I am beginning to feel that the current generation of performers falls into two extreme camps, neither of which leaves me happy: one camp performs absolutely everything with voices alone; and

¹ My own summary of what things looked is in „Secular polyphony in the 15th century“, in: Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, eds., *Performance practice: music before 1600*, (= The New Grove Handbooks in Music), London, 1989, 201–221. A few later thoughts were outlined in „The early history of the Tenorlied and its ensembles“, in: Jean-Michel Vaccaro, ed., *Le concert des voix et des instruments à la Renaissance* Paris 1995, 199–211.

² Those „young turks“ included Andrew Parrott, Christopher Page, Roger Bowers, and myself, soon joined by even younger turks such as Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, Dennis Slavin and Lawrence Earp.

³ Of these, the most outspoken and influential was undoubtedly Howard Mayer Brown. In addition to many reviews, particularly in *The Musical Times* and *Early Music*, there is a good summary of his position in *Performance practice: music before 1500*, op. cit., 147–166, especially 152–154.

the other seems to have returned to what I would call the 1950s view, that almost any solution would have been possible and therefore almost any solution is acceptable.

As concerns the latter viewpoint, I would like to quote what I wrote nearly a quarter of a century ago about the search for information about ensembles:⁴

Anyone who has examined the surviving sources of mediaeval music is likely to conclude that many institutions compromised; and the issue is surely not whether a particular kind of performance could have taken place in the middle ages so much as what was then considered the best performance. The social historian may be interested in all kinds of music making, but the student of the music that happens to survive needs to know what was thought to be the ideal performance, the one that is worth emulating in an attempt to revive the music today.

I am here to say that there are many matters on which agreement should have been possible twenty years ago and should be possible again now. Obviously we shall never know exactly how the music sounded: after all, we have enough trouble with music in the late nineteenth century just before the recorded era. But there are plenty of issues that can be established with a fair degree of likelihood.

A third reason for wanting to return to the theme is that I have a viewpoint that seems hardly to have been expressed back in the 1980s. That viewpoint is quite simply this: any voice can sing almost any written musical line and may well have done so in the fifteenth century. But unless that voice sings the line with text it is not really a voice so much as a musical instrument. In other words: a voice that sings text is an entirely different animal from a voice that sings textlessly.

There is obviously a rider to that, which is that a musical line that needs text is quite different from one that does not. However: with that point established, there are lots of subquestions that arise and need to be explored. I am going to explore just one of them today, namely the difference between a voice that looks as though it needs text and one that really does need text. And it is best explored through the three *Canti* volumes of Petrucci, since all the songs there lack text, though some of them quite definitely had text in their earlier incarnations. So the question is in some ways a continuation of what I presented here four years ago at the conference in honour of Petrucci.⁵

The question itself came to me at a late stage in preparing my recent edition of the four-voice songs of Josquin, published by the New Josquin Edition in August of this year.⁶ Because the volume and its commentary amount to

⁴ David Fallows, „Specific Information on the ensembles for composed polyphony, 1400–1474“, in: Stanley Boorman, ed., *Studies in the performance of late mediaeval music*, Cambridge 1983, 109–159, at p. 109.

⁵ David Fallows, „Petrucci's *Canti* volumes: scope and repertory“, *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis* 25 (2001), 39–52.

⁶ *The collected works of Josquin des Prez*, vol. 28: *Secular works for four voices*, ed. David Fallows, Utrecht 2005.

some six hundred pages, I thought it would make a certain impact on the field. Unfortunately, since then there have been two more publications on closely related topics and particularly Petrucci. In September came the report on the 2001 Venice conference on Petrucci, running to a magnificent eight hundred pages and leaving me very much in the shade.⁷ Then, just a few weeks ago, came the product of Stanley Boorman's life-work on Petrucci, his *Catalogue Raisonné* of the printer's work with a highly detailed introduction: this reaches no fewer than thirteen hundred pages, the result of some forty years spent looking at Petrucci's publications.⁸ So with over two thousand new pages about Petrucci my mere six hundred pages risk being overlooked entirely; and I take this occasion to draw attention to them, if only to say some things that I should have said there but didn't understand until it was too late.

It was only at the last moment of assembling the edition that I noticed a detail that should have been obvious earlier, namely that almost half of the pieces made use of popular songs – seventeen out of thirty-nine.

The interest of the matter within Josquin's work has three separate dimensions. One of these is just that he does appear to use popular songs more often than many of his contemporaries. This first became clear in exploring the four-voice *Dictez moy bergere*, which was better known with an ascription to Pierre de la Rue. In her 1986 dissertation about the songs of La Rue, Honey Meconi was the first to throw doubt on his authorship of the piece, firstly because the setting of popular songs was not La Rue's way.⁹ When she wrote that, Meconi was not aware that there was a contrary ascription to Josquin. And when I made that identification and saw what she had written I of course pounced on the matter of a popular song to support my own hope that the song could be by Josquin.

The second way in which it is interesting for the study of Josquin is that there seems a very good case for thinking that certain features of Josquin's music arise from his interest in popular songs. More than any of his northern contemporaries, he cultivated simple and syllabic music that communicated without artifice. Particularly in his later works, notes are cut down to a minimum; nothing lacks a clear musical purpose; everything goes towards direct expression. And I am beginning to think that his interest in popular songs fuelled that development, just as it is likely that it arose at least partly from his ambition to compose music that communicated.

And the third reason that it seems interesting to me is that this interest in popular songs is mainly confined to his secular works in four voices. So far as I can see, there are no popular songs quoted in his motets. Among the masses, only the two *L'homme armé* masses and the Mass *L'ami Baudichon*

⁷ *Venezia 1501: Petrucci e al stampa musicale*, ed. Giulio Cattin and Patrizia Dalla Vecchia, Venice 2005.

⁸ Stanley Boorman, *Ottaviano Petrucci: A Catalogue raisonné*, Oxford 2006.

⁹ Bibliographical details that are now easily accessible in the commentary to my edition are not repeated here.

use popular melodies.¹⁰ In the three-voice songs there is very little. More surprisingly still, among all those late songs in five and six voices there are only two that use popular songs: the six-voice *Se congié prens* and the five-voice *Faulte d'argent*. That is particularly surprising because these works are nearly always built around a simple melody in the middle voices, usually treated in some kind of canon. Those melodies often have the style of a popular song, but none of them appears elsewhere or in one of the collections of popular songs from those years. Nor does any of the texts appear in the innumerable little collections of popular poetry that were so favoured in the early years of the sixteenth century.¹¹ In fact, they could hardly have appeared there, because the texts Josquin used for his late songs are thoroughly courtly in their design, form, and vocabulary. It is just the melodic style that owes something to the popular song repertory.

Essentially, then, Josquin's interest in popular songs is confined to the secular music in four voices. That in its turn links up with my view that Josquin rather tended to use the secular works in four voices as exercises for other things.¹² They were his private workshop, where he explored interesting ideas that he later incorporated into larger works. That in its turn obviously fuels my second point above: that he was using these popular songs as a way of honing his means of musical expression, making it simple and making it communicate more directly.

But the other matter that came clear very late in the assembly of the edition was more concerned with text and the placing of text in these pieces. To cut first to my conclusion, I became increasingly convinced that none of these popular song settings was intended to be performed with text: it gradually seemed to me that they used the popular song because it would be recognized, and that it is a mistake to treat them as consort songs. The importance of this – if correct – is obviously that a line that is perfectly suited to carrying the text of the popular song was never intended to be sung to that text: it was just an abstract line that would make its point because it was recognized.

Let me illustrate this with a few examples, beginning at the other end of the spectrum, namely with works where a famous polyphonic chanson is incorporated into new polyphony. We can begin with Obrecht's magnificent four-voice *J'ay pris amours* setting that appears in Petrucci's *Canti B*. In the first section (ex. 1) the discantus has the discantus of the original three-voice rondeau setting, absolutely unchanged. Theoretically one could sing it. But then the next section, on the next opening of *Canti B*, borrows only the tenor line of *J'ay pris amours*, transposed down a fifth in the bassus; the third section borrows the tenor line again, this time transposed up a fifth, in the contra;

¹⁰ In saying that I am, perhaps rashly, accepting the now widely accepted view that the Mass *Une musque de Biscaya* is not by Josquin.

¹¹ A modern edition of the entire poetic repertory is in Brian Jeffery, ed., *Chanson verse of the early Renaissance*, 2 vols., London 1971–1976.

¹² David Fallows, „Approaching a new chronology for Josquin: An interim report“, *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft*, New Ser. 19 (1999), 131–50.

and the final section yet again borrows the tenor, at its original pitch, in the tenor. Now it happens that in the original *J'ay pris amours* you can text the tenor just as well as the discantus. But it is perfectly obvious that Obrecht's large fantasy was not intended to be done in that way. Apart from anything else, the four full stanzas here are incompatible with the rondeau form of the poem: for the rondeau form the second stanza would have needed to stop half way through and repeat from the beginning. What Obrecht created was something that loosely followed the design of the rondeau, in that it is roughly the same length; but it cannot possibly have carried the rondeau text.

Ex. 1: Jacob Obrecht, *J'ay pris amours* (*Canti B numero cinquanta*, Venezia: Ottaviano Petrucci 1501, Reprint New York 1975, A III'-A III).

Another example would be the setting of *J'ay pris amours* credited in the *Odhecaton* to Busnoys (ex. 2): it carries the title *J'ay pris amours tout au rebours* because it borrows the original tenor, keeps it in the tenor, but inverts all its intervals. Again, one could text this line, because it keeps exactly the same phrases and phrase-lengths of the original tenor. But it seems most unlikely that anyone would ever have done so or even thought of doing so. What needs to be clear, though, is that the style of all four voices here is very much that of a courtly rondeau setting. There is nothing here that actually looks non-vocal or instrumental. It would be perfectly easy to perform this with four voices. But that brings us back to the questions with which I began. Whatever the style of those three voices, they cannot have been designed with text in mind; and the tenor could indeed carry text but almost certainly did not do so.

Ex. 2: Antoine Busnoys (Johannes Martini?) *J'ay pris amours*, ed. by Ross W. Duffin, in: David Fallows et alii, *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton [...]. A quincentenary performing edition*, Amherst, MA. 2001 (= Amherst Early Music Performing Editions), 78.

The musical score consists of four staves, each representing a voice: Soprano (top), Alto, Tenor, and Bassus (bottom). The key signature is one sharp. The vocal parts are labeled with their names and the lyrics "Jay pris amours" are written below each line. The music consists of several staves of notes, with some notes having stems pointing in different directions to indicate inversion. Measure 9 is shown at the bottom.

Another example from the *Odhecaton* is Johannes Japart's setting of *J'ay pris amours* (ex. 3). This takes the top voice of the original song, puts it in the top voice, and adds three new voices below it. From the viewpoint of my theme here, this is an impossible case to argue. It looks exactly like a consort song, so to speak. A voice could perfectly well sing the top line; it could repeat back and forth in the manner of the rondeau; and the resulting work would not be

much longer than the original three-voice song. (It would be slightly longer because the textures are a bit fuller and need slightly slower performance to make their impact. Or at least that is the way it seems to me.) So it would be quite wrong for me to say that I know how the piece was intended to be performed. But I will say that it seems to me to belong with the category of arrangements of polyphonic song lines and therefore to be instrumental in conception.

Ex. 3: Johannes Japart, *J'ay pris amours*, ed. by Julie E. Cumming, *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton*, op. cit., 42.

The musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves represent the vocal parts: Soprano (labeled 'Soprano' and 'Jay pris amours'), Alto (labeled 'Altus' and 'Jay pris amours'), Tenor (labeled 'Tenor' and 'Jay pris amours'), and Bassus (labeled 'Bassus' and 'Jay pris amours'). The fifth staff represents the basso continuo line. The music is in common time, with a treble clef for the vocal parts and a bass clef for the continuo. The vocal parts are mostly in unison, with some harmonic movement. The continuo part provides harmonic support with sustained notes and chords. The score is divided into two systems, with a repeat sign and a bass clef in the first system, and a treble clef in the second system.

There are hundreds of these arrangements from these years. Another example is in my Josquin edition, the setting of *Fors seulement l'attente* credited both to Josquin and to Ghiselin. This takes the extraordinary contratenor from Ockeghem's three-voice rondeau setting, puts it up an octave to the top of the texture, and creates three more lines to go with it. Adding text to that contratenor would be impossible in any case. So however you look at it this is an abstract four-voice fantasy. I mention it here just as another example of the genre.

But the point about these pieces is that everything in their musical structure looks vocal. There is absolutely nothing in any of them that could not appear in a purely vocal piece; there is nothing that could not appear in a polyphonic mass cycle. But one can say that they were not intended to carry text. One can say this with more certainty about some pieces than about others. For the

Obrecht and Busnoys *J'ay pris amours* one can be fairly certain; for the Japart *J'ay pris amours* one could conceivably argue all night, but that argument would need to be in terms of genre and source context rather than style; and in the case of the Josquin or Ghiselin *Fors seulement* I would be surprised but not mortified if somebody felt differently.

Yet another kind of case is Josquin's four-voice *De tous biens plaine* setting. Here he has taken both the discantus and the tenor of Hayne van Ghizeghem's original rondeau: absolutely unchanged and absolutely singable. Below them he has put two equal low voices, both running very fast and in very close unison canon. Again it may be a case of something one could argue about all night, but I would suggest – largely from the context – that the point of the piece is Josquin's contribution, namely the lower-voice canon and that to start doing all the repeats involved in the performance of a full rondeau would defeat the point of the piece.

One last case of polyphonic borrowing could be considered here, namely the setting of *Ach hülff mich leid* credited to Josquin in only one of its sources, but elsewhere credited to La Rue, Baudeweyn, and Buchner. (Incidentally, against all earlier commentators, I do propose in the Commentary that the case for Josquin is very strong here.) The piece is based on the song *Ach hülff mich leid* by Adam von Fulda, which is an absolutely classic example of the German Tenorlied: a texted and melodic tenor voice around which the other three voices create their counterpoint. (In parentheses I should add that there is of course dispute about how these Tenorlieder were conceived and performed; but that is perhaps peripheral to my issue here.¹³ Josquin, or whoever, has taken Adam's tenor and put it down a fifth into the bassus, adding three new above it – or, more precisely, adding just two new voices for the opening *Stollen*: the fourth voice does not enter until the *Abgesang*.

Once again it would be perfectly possible to sing text to the bottom voice, so I have added it in the edition. It then becomes a bass consort song. There are another twelve later settings of this melody, the last – or at least the last known to me and included in my commentary on the song – being the setting by Michael Praetorius published in 1609. None of them takes anything other than the tenor of Adam's original; none of them puts it upside down or backwards. All could perfectly well be consort songs for a voice and instruments. My suspicion is that they may not be. But here I am even more uncertain than in the case of Japart's *J'ay pris amours*. What does seem important, though, is to register that it is not necessarily that way. The „Josquin“ setting could perfectly well be a purely instrumental piece, using the famous melody as a basis.

Now is the time to move to popular songs. And the first exhibit is Obrecht's setting of the song *T'Andernaken op den rijn* (ex. 4). As with the many other settings of that song, the melody is put into the tenor and the other voices weave a joyful fantasy around it. The original song seems to have six stanzas,

¹³ The case is most clearly presented in Stephen Keyl, „Tenorlied, Discantlied, polyphonic Lied: voices and instruments in German secular polyphony of the Renaissance“, *Early Music* 20 (1992), 434–445.

so a sung performance would need to take the music through six times, which I suggest would make little sense. At least here, there is not much room for argument. The tenor can easily take the text of any of those six stanzas; but it hardly seems likely that Obrecht would have expected to hear it in that way.

Ex. 4: Jacob Obrecht, *T'Andernaken*, ed. by Adam K. Gilbert, *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton*, op. cit., 138.

1

Tander naken

8 Tenor Tander naken

Contra Tander naken

6

11

15

The same can be said about Josquin's little four-voice setting of the *L'homme armé* melody at the beginning of Petrucci's *Canti B*. There is no possibility at all of setting the text to the borrowed tenor here, for several reasons. First, Josquin has used only two-thirds of the melody. Second, the rhythms of the melody have been smoothed out so that lots of notes would need subdividing

to create a textable version. And in fact he has adapted the rhythms to become sixteen *semibreves* followed by eight *minime* and then four *breves*. Of course one of the magical features of the *L'homme armé* melody is that it remains instantly recognisable even without its rhythms. But, whatever the purpose of this little exercise may have been, it is hard to think that it was intended as a medium for projecting the famous poem.

We can move on from there to Josquin's famous four-out-of-two canon *Baisiez moy*. The two lower canonic voices concord exactly with the form of the melody in one of the monophonic chansonniers in Paris, the chansonnier „de Bayeux“. I have accordingly added text to them as in that chansonnier. The top voices could easily be texted, as they are in most other editions of the song; but the examination of all the sources convinced me that the best reading was one that could carry the text really rather badly, particularly in bars 4–5. I preferred to follow the logic of the stemmatics rather than that of texting; and eventually decided – for this and various other reasons – to omit text from the two upper voices. In fact both Jaap van Benthem and Louise Litterick had already concluded that text could not be added to the top voices without creating some very uncharacteristic moments.¹⁴ On further thought I suggested that none of the voices needs to carry text.

That viewpoint in fact arose from listening to some summer-school students playing Josquin's *Bergerette savoysienne* on recorders. It sounded so much more convincing that way than with a voice and instruments. The same is the case with another well known and often recorded Josquin song, *Comment peult avoir joye*. But I am not going to argue the case, partly because it was that kind of thinking that, in my view, led everybody astray all those years ago: saying „Oh yes, it seems to me better that way“ and „Of course Josquin must have thought it that way“. I do wish to say, though, that there is – as with the other pieces – no compelling reason for thinking that the familiar melodies should be sung with their familiar texts. They work perfectly well without them and in my view sound better that way.

Similarly, I cannot argue the case about his brilliant Italian song, *Scaramella*, partly because the three surviving sources are all fully texted. All I can say about that song is that editing would have been enormously easier if I had concluded that it was just an instrumental fantasy that uses the popular melody twice through, once on C and then once a fifth lower on F. Certainly the sources all contain eccentricities that are best explained by hypothesizing that the music was never intended to carry text. Again, though, the hard logical argument cannot be made. Like a good boy I followed the sources rather than turning Josquin's music into something that I think he ought to have composed.

¹⁴ Jaap van Benthem, „The scoring of Josquin's secular music“, *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 35 (1985), 67–96, at p. 77. Louise Litterick, „Chansons for three and four voices“, in Richard Sherr, ed., *The Josquin companion*, Oxford 2000, 335–391, at pp. 351–353 and especially note 34.

But there is perhaps no harm in ending with another tricky case among the Josquin songs: *Une musque de Biscaye*. The lovely melody is treated in canon at the fourth between the top two voices. Once again I have texted them according to a monophonic songbook in Paris, where there are four stanzas of text. But among the nine surviving sources for this song not a single one has any text beyond the incipit; and among those sources there are several that in general add texts, among them Florence 229, the Cortona partbooks and the Columbina chansonnier. There was a really nasty moment near the end where nothing could be made to work unless two syllables were sung to a single note. But I swallowed that. Only later did I see that a far saner solution would be again to refrain from texting any of the voices.

My conclusion is easy. Just that there are many more subdivisions of the repertory around 1500 than are generally proposed today; and that among the „popular arrangements“ there are many that were never intended to carry text in any voice. Exactly how many it is hard to say, but we cannot ignore them.

