Kees Boeke

Agricola and the »Basevi Codex«
Some Considerations About the Performance of Chansons

Sonnez muses mélodieusement,
Chantez de voix et jouez d'instrument,
Par doux accord et joueuse harmonie,
Et qu'un chacun [fait] faire étudie
Pour réjouir tout lui entendement.[1]

There is little doubt that the secular works of Alexander Agricola[2] range from compositions for three singing voices to wholly instrumental elaborations of pre-existent song material *a 2*, *a 3* or *a 4*. It is however the repertoire that falls in between these extreme categories that represents the shady area onto which the present article will try to shed some light.

In order to distinguish between materials of a vocal, as opposed to an instrumental nature, we have to develop criteria which will enable us to fit text to musical notes. The opposite procedure of transforming vocal into instrumental music does not present any particular difficulties and seems to have been common practice since the Middle Ages.

The *Basevi Codex* is a case in point as its text treatment in the manuscript is extremely sloppy and haphazard. It thus presents difficulties in determining the exact destination of many of the compositions, although from other sources it might be clearer sometimes to which category of pieces a chanson or instrumental fantasia belongs. Generally texted in Basevi are the motet-chansons, the Latin chansons and the songs by Pierre de la Rue (10 out of 15, against Agricola 4 out of 22 or Johannes Ghiselin 4 out of 11). *Basevi* was compiled c. 1505–1508 for a Senese patron at the Brussels/Mechelen scriptorium in use by the Habsburg-Burgundian court.[3] Agricola died of the plague in 1506 in Spain and so certainly did not oversee this collection himself. Also La Rue is known to have been in Spain in this same period,

1 *Basevi Codex. Florence, Biblioteca del Conservatorio, MS 2439*, facs. edn., introd. Honey Meconi (Peer, 1990), fols. 71^{v}–72^{r}. French modernized.

2 *Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia*. Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae 22, ed. Edward R. Lerner, vol. 5*: Cantiones, Musica Instrumentalis, Opera dubia* (American Institute of Musicology, 1970).

3 H. Meconi, Introduction, in Basevi Codex (cf. fn. 1), p. 7.

but he returned to Flanders only after august 1508[4] and thus it seems unlikely that he had any influence in the copying of his chansons. However this may be, circumstantial evidence might yield an indication to which creative period in Agricola's life these chansons and instrumental pieces belong. Ottaviano Petrucci's first publication of lute intabulations and diminutions by Francesco Spinacino of 1507,[5] which contains various elaborations of famous Agricola songs, inevitably tells us that this repertoire had achieved ›top hit‹ status, as is consistently the case with any form of known diminution repertoire, be it the *Faenza Codex* of the early 15th century or the late 16th century Italian diminution schools. As a rule, the model takes twenty to thirty years to become authentic ›public domain‹. In other words, it seems likely that an important part of Agricola's secular output must have been composed roughly before the 1490s at least. Of course, the presence in the *Basevi* compilation itself points in the same direction: A precious choice of ›famous‹ compositions would form the core repertoire of a typical chansonnier, not freshly composed material that nobody knew yet.

These considerations of at least an overall timeline are especially important for repertoire where instruments are involved: Which type of instrument was available, practical and plausible at the precise moment that these chansons or instrumental pieces were written?

Howard Brown and Keith Polk in their section about instrumental music in the latest revision of the *Oxford History of Music*[6] take the period between c. 1300 and c. 1520 as an historically coherent timeframe where essentially the same type of instruments were in use and can be categorized. The ›revolution‹ of the early 16th century created a totally new concept of instrument families like the viola da gamba quartet,[7] recorder consort etc.,[8] which

4 Honey Meconi, *Pierre de la Rue and Musical Life at the Habsburg-Burgundian Court* (Oxford, 2003), p. 254.

5 Francesco Spinacino, *Intabulatura de lauto. Libro primo* [*secundo*] (Venice: Ottaviano Petrucci, 1507), RISM 1507[5], Reprint, introd. François Lesure (Geneva, 1978).

6 Howard Mayer Brown and Keith Polk, »Instrumental music, c. 1300 – c. 1520,« *Music as Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages*. The New Oxford History of Music 3.1, ed. Reinhard Strohm and Bonnie J. Blackburn (Oxford, 2001), pp. 134–5.

7 See Dietrich Kämper, *Studien zur instrumentalen Ensemblemusik des 16. Jahrhunderts in Italien*. Analecta musicologica 10 (Köln, 1970), pp. 81–85; Italian translation by Lorenzo Bianconi as *La musica strumentale nel rinascimento. Studi sulla musica strumentale d'assieme in Italia nel XVI secolo* (Torino, 1976), pp. 95–9.

8 Although mention of a »quatuor de flutes« is already made in the 1440s at the Burgundian court. See Jeanne Marix, *Histoire de la musique et des musiciens de la Cour de Bourgogne sous le règne de Philippe le Bon (1420–1467)*. Sammlung musikwissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen 39 (Strasbourg, 1939, Reprints Geneva, 1972, and Baden-Baden, 1974), pp. 105–6.

coincided incidentally with the ultimate shift in secular composition from three to four part writing. But this means inescapably that the ›instrumentarium‹ to be applied to Agricola's secular music, and that of his contemporaries, is essentially still of medieval origin and tradition. And of course the same applies to the entire Burgundian chanson repertoire immediately preceding, that still holds a tight grip on the composers of the next generation, who in the endless emulation, elaboration and diminution of their models show admiration, respect and a sense of tradition.

Agricola's ›heroes‹ in this respect are typically Binchois, Johannes Ockeghem, Hayne van Gizeghem and Walter Frye, the English ›Burgundian‹. Of his roughly fifty chansons and motet-chansons a solid 47 are three part, with only one »Fortuna desperata« *a 6*, a »Je n'ay deuil« *a 4* (based on Ockeghem's chanson a 4) and the motet-chanson »Revenez vous« *a 4*. Three part writing also prevails in the secular works of an other prolific chanson composer of the previous generation, Antoine Busnoys: 46 pieces *a 3*, against 16 *a 4* of which, however, 7 are poly-textual or so-called double-chansons. This tradition goes back all the way basically without interruption via Guillaume Dufay, Binchois, and Arnold and Hugo de Lantins to the Ars subtilior composers of the *Chantilly Codex* and ultimately, Guillaume de Machaut. Historically the majority of chansons *a 3* are presented with a texted and obviously vocal cantus part, and textless tenor and contratenor parts. A smaller portion have two texted parts, the second of which is either a »biscantus« or a texted tenor or contratenor; the least frequent form is a fully texted chanson in all parts.

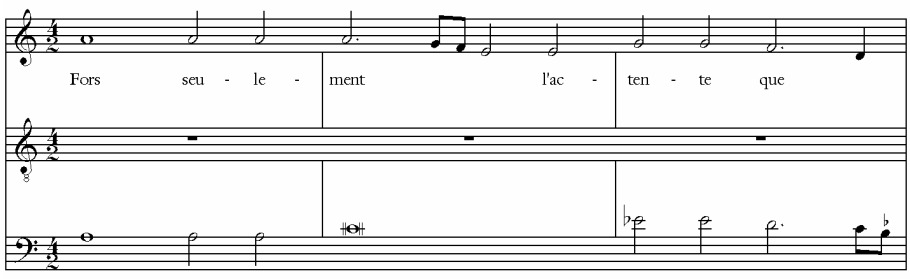
Agricola's compositions *a 4* in the *Basevi Codex* consist of the motet-chanson »Revenez vous regretz« / »Quis det ut veniat«, the instrumental elaboration upon Walter Frye's »Tout a par moy«, two versions of Ockeghem's »D'ung aultre amer« and one of »Comme femme« by Binchois in the same manner. Agricola does not venture into four or more part song writing like some of his illustrious colleagues; he stays firmly rooted in tradition. Of the 33 texted chansons by him that we know, 24 are still written in the *formes fixes*.[9]

9 For all works by Agricola see Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia, vol. 5 (cf. fn. 2).

»Fors seulement«

The *Basevi Codex* contains no less then seven elaborations on Ockeghem's famous »Fors seulement« tenor,[10] by Ghiselin (2), La Rue, Antoine Brumel, Matthaeus Pipelare, Marbriano de Orto and Jacob Obrecht, all *a 4*. Interestingly, Agricola is not represented in this company, and the only »Fors seulement« ascribed to the latter in Petrucci's *Canti C*[11] is actually most likely by Brumel (ascribed to him in the collections *Basevi*, *Pernner*[12] and *Fridolin Sicher*[13]).

Why exactly this little rondeau became such a touchstone for (instrumental?) composition is open to speculation, and the same question applies to its English counterpart, the *In Nomine*. However, there are certain aspects of its melody, and specifically the first four *tactus* of it, as stated both in the tenor and superius, that deserve special observation (Example 1).



Example 1: Johannes Ockeghem, »Fors seulement«, bb. 1–3

10 See Helen Hewitt, »›Fors seulement‹ and the Cantus Firmus Technique of the Fifteenth Century«, *Essays in Musicology in Honor of Dragan Plamenac to His 70th Birthday*, ed. Gustave Reese and Robert J. Snow (Pittsburgh, 1969), pp. 91–126, and Cristina Urchueguía, »Intertextualität und historisches Textverständnis in der Musik der Renaissance. ›Fors seulement‹: zwischen Werk und θεμα,« *Text und Autor*. Beihefte zu editio 15, ed. Christiane Henkes and Harald Saller with Thomas Richter (Tübingen, 2000), pp. 115–51.

11 RISM 1504[3]; *Ottaviano Petrucci. Canti C Numero Cento Cinquanta: A Facsimile of the Venice, 1503/4 Edition*. Monuments of Music and Music Literature in Facsimile 1.25 (New York, 1978), fols. 5[v]–6[r].

12 D–Rp, Cod. ms. 120, fols. 324–5.

13 CH–SGs, 461, fol.-no. 9, pp. 16–7, facs. edn. *The Songbook of Fridolin Sicher around 1515 (Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek Cod. Sang. 461)*, introd. David Fallows (Peer, 1996).

A brevis and two semibreves on the same note, followed by a descending tetrachord consisting of a dotted semibreve, two semiminims and an arrival note. This is the archetypical configuration of the later *canzona* head-motif: The dactylic rhythm on a repeated note or most typically non-diatonic interval, followed by a consistently diatonic, or ›melodic‹ group of notes. It is at the same time the archetypical juxtaposition of separated, articulated (in instrumental terms) or syllabic (in vocal terms) material and linear, »legato« (in instrumental terms) or melismatic (in vocal terms) material in a nutshell. Of course, the *canzona*, or more complete *canzon alla francese*, was nothing but an Italian instrumental translation of the French eminently popular »*Parisian*« *chanson* of the 1520s, 1530s and 1540s. That the Italian *canzona* became an instrumental form par excellence for a century and a half or so, certainly had its origins in the widespread practice of instrumentalists playing these chansons, probably more often than not garnished with the wildest diminutions; in fact, in the 16th century this became their bread and butter. The »*Parisian*« *chanson*, in its turn, drew heavily on its forebears, not so much formally, but certainly in terms of melodic language and poetical substance. And the so popular head-motif that we generally associate with it, actually had much older origins as testified by the »Fors seulement« theme, and not only: As a matter of fact, 40 out of the 87 compositions in the *Basevi Codex* use this thematic structure as the opening motif of a piece in one or more voices. But then, even Ockeghem, when he coined his first »Fors seulement« before 1460,[14] already had some examples he could follow. In conclusion, the »Fors seulement« motif and its direct ›relatives‹ form a very substantial part of the thematic material of chansons over an extended period of time. Moreover, in its various historical guises it seems to have been closely associated with instrumental performance.

A second observation regards the equally archetypical descending tetrachord that constitutes the second half of the »Fors seulement« theme. Ockeghem employs it to give expression to a particularly dark and depressing poem, where the desolate subject unusually is the girl and not the boy. A separate study could be made of the use of this simple device in expressing sorrow throughout musical history, the most obvious, and famous, example probably being Dowland's »Flow my teares« (not to mention Anton Bruckner's third symphony).[15]

14 See David Fallows, »Ockeghem,« *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, second edn., ed. Ludwig Finscher, Personenteil, vol. 12 (Kassel and Stuttgart, 2004), col. 1282.

15 See Nicole Schwindt, »Die burgundische Formel,« *›L'esprit français‹ und die Musik Europas. Entstehung, Einfluss und Grenzen einer ästhetischen Doktrin. Festschrift für Herbert Schneider*.

A third aspect to be mentioned here, to which we will come back later, regards the practice of the transposition of modes, or transposition in general. Of the 34 compositions built on Ockeghem's original (in a, a transposed Dorian itself with Phrygian flavours) nine follow his version, seven are transposed down a fifth, seven are transposed down an octave, seven an octave plus a fifth, one is a fourth down, one is a fifth up and two are an octave up. This rich spectrum follows traditions and conventions that have been described by theorists since the early Middle Ages.

Text underlay

The problem of text underlay in medieval and Renaissance music is as complex as it is essential for the correct understanding of the repertoire we are performing.

We have, in my opinion, to accept a few basic assumptions in order to make any significant progress in this thorny field. First of all we have to accept the fact that virtually no medieval or Renaissance manuscript presents us with a realistic text underlay as we would conveniently like it.

As a consequence we have to develop criteria of texting from historical material where for one reason or another, the text placing is clear and beyond doubt, as for example in music where the text setting is entirely, or almost entirely syllabic. In the specific case of Agricola we can take one of his *Lamentations* (printed by Petrucci in 1506[16]) as an interesting guide, because in fact here the correlation between text rhythm and musical rhythm leaves relatively little doubt as to which syllables belong to which musical notes (Figure 1).

The system that emerges here could be synthesized as follows:

1. Each text or verse line starts out syllabically and is followed by a melisma (if there is one) on the last two or three syllables.
2. The closing syllable of each line is never printed or written exactly under the last note of the musical phrase that goes with it, but there is no logic or system in the way this is done. A case in point are the letters »-ph« that close the word »Aleph«: it is not realistic to ›sing‹ the last three notes of this

Studien und Materialien zur Musikwissenschaft 40, ed. Michelle Biget-Mainfroy and Rainer Schmusch (Hildesheim, 2007), pp. 149–66.

16 *Lamentationum Jeremie prophete liber primus* [*secundus*] (Venice, Ottaviano Petrucci, 1506), RISM 1506[1], Reprint (Stuttgart, 2004); Alexandri Agricola Opera omnia (cf. fn. 2), vol. 3: *Lamentationes, Hymni, Magnificat* (1966).

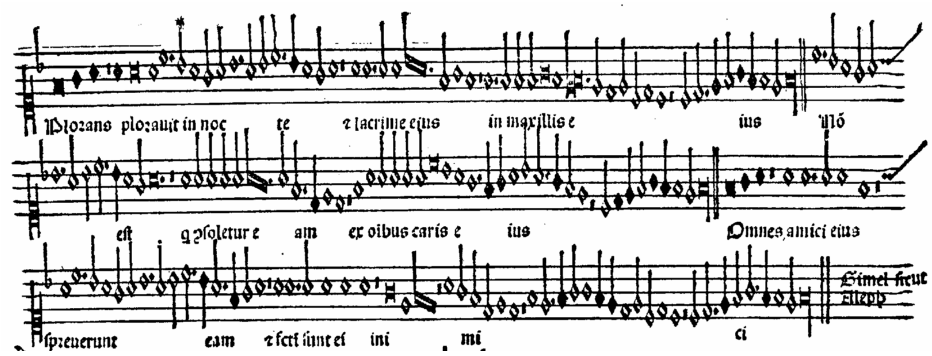


Figure 1: Alexander Agricola, »Plorans« , Discantus, fol. 14[v]

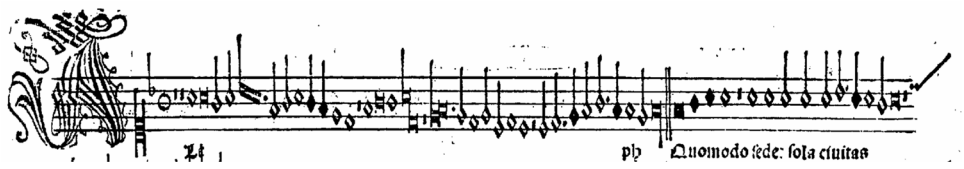


Figure 2: Alexander Agricola, »Aleph« (beginning), Discantus, fol. 13[v]

melisma on a »ph« sound. It is safe to assume that the last note corresponds with the last syllable (Figure 2).

3. The only two repeated notes present in the musical phrase at the beginning of the »Aleph« immediately carry the two initial syllables confirming that, generally, repeated notes ask for change of syllable. Of course on typical extended melismas like on the heading letters of the Lamentations, the melisma can also include rests and repeated notes. It should also be noted that the letter »Aleph« normally splits into two syllables »A-« and »-leph«, where the original print shows a further split between »-le-« and »-ph«. This further stresses the idea of the syllable change immediately at the beginning.

4. Since most of the text is ›spoken‹ before entering into the melismatic part of it, its meaning is already clear and therefore the melisma does not interfere with the intelligibility of the text.

5. Rests (necessary, or at least convenient, for the singer to breathe) separate musical phrases, verse lines (in poetry), groups of words within a verse line, and sometimes single words.

Some further observations: The ubiquitous presence of the »Fors seulement« rhythm is solidly rooted in the construction of the French verse itself

»Fors seulement / l'attente que je meure« places the traditional caesura after the first four syllables (long-short-short-long), musically expressed either by a rest or a phrasing. It also shows that the equally ubiquitous figuration on »-ment«, is to be considered a melismatic entity, not to be broken by the introduction of a new syllable.

I will try to apply these criteria to some of Agricola's chansons, and see which conclusions can be drawn.

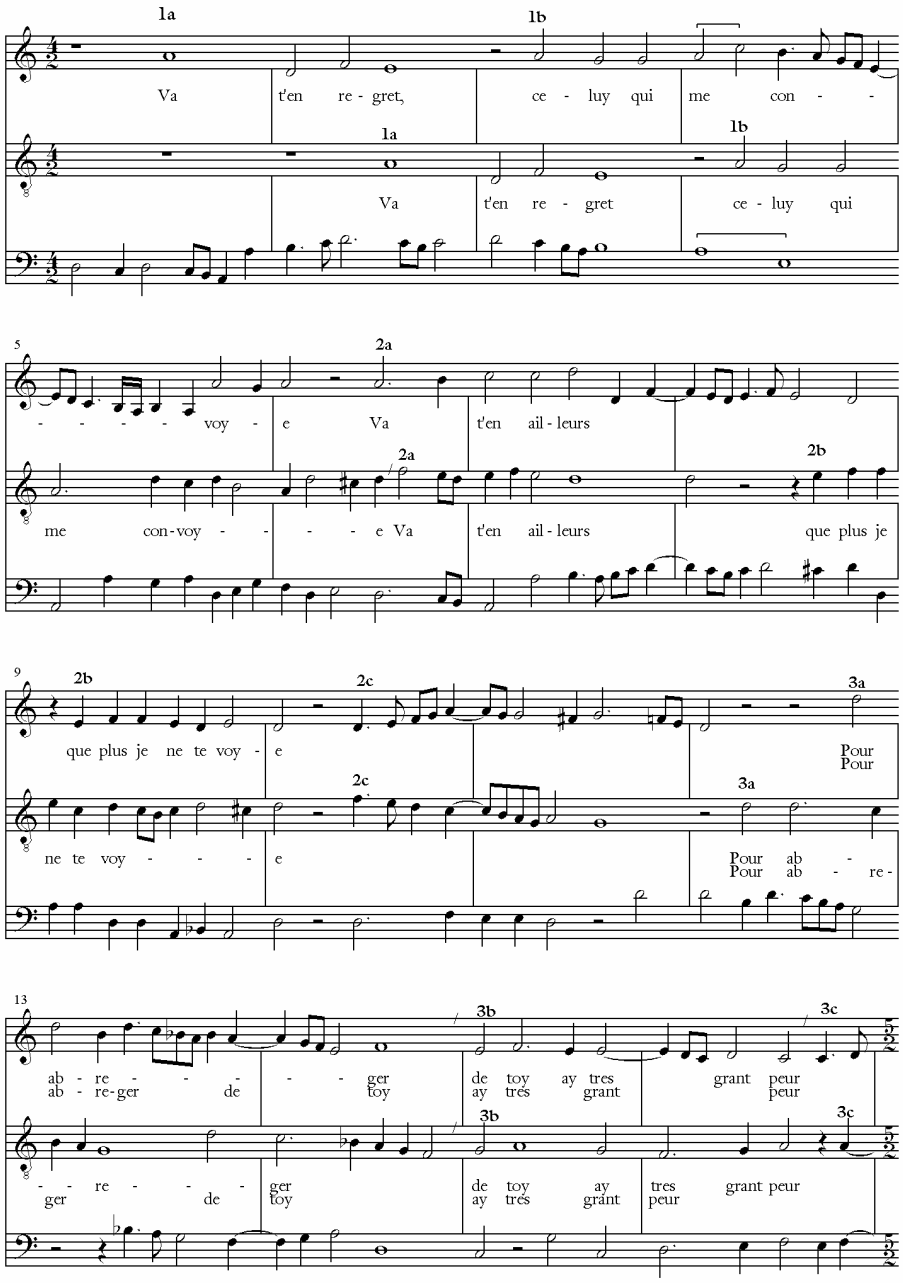
»Va t'en regret«

»Va t'en regret«[17] is the first of a whole section in the *Basevi Codex* of Agricola's compositions *a 3*, it has text incipits only in all voices and is notated in Agricola's habitual C2, C4, F3/F4 clef combination. The piece is a *unicum*, but fortunately his colleague Loyset Compère wrote a song on the same poem, so we do have a text. It is a good example for verifying our text underlay criteria.

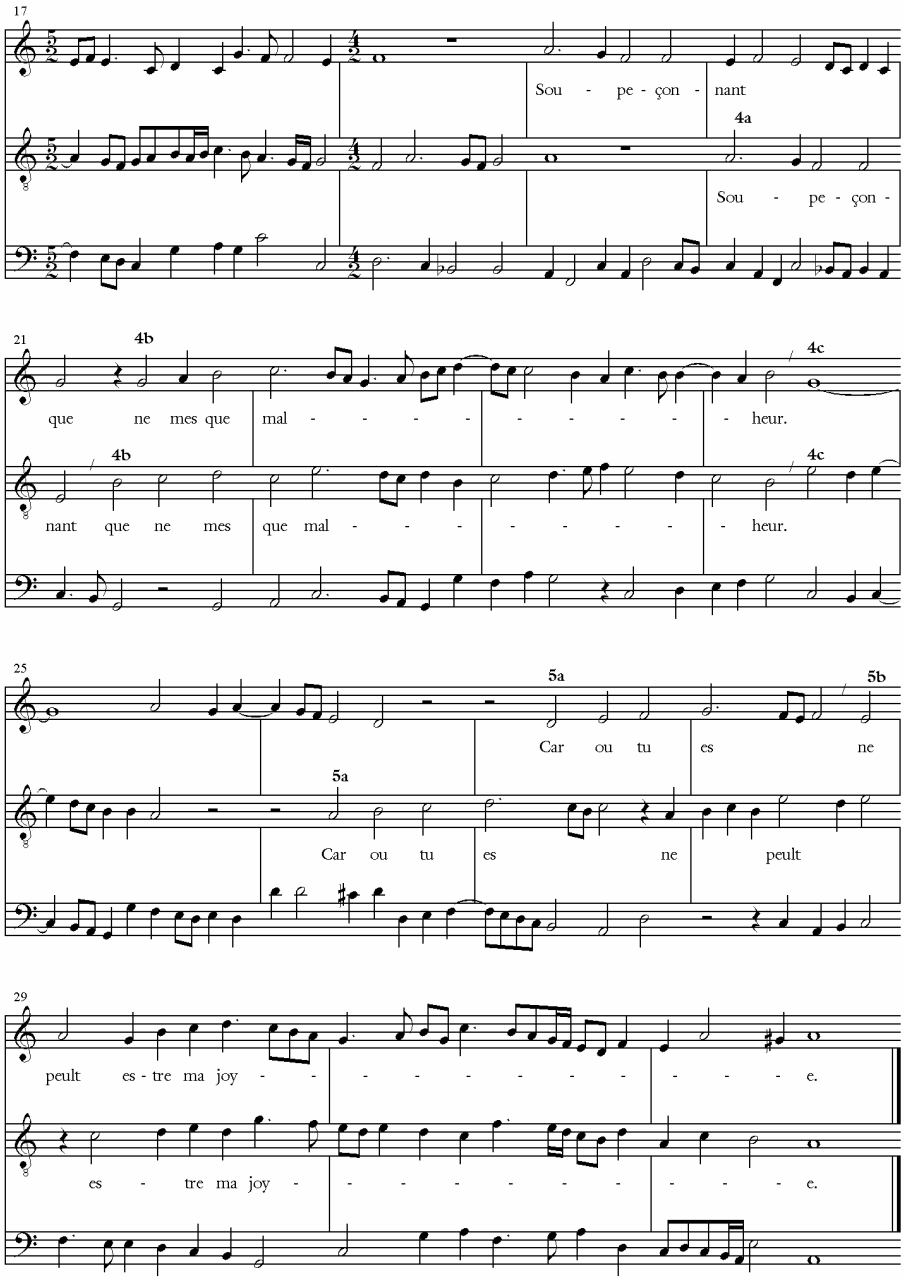
Both superius and tenor consist of nine musical portions relatively regularly divided by rests. Some fragments can further be subdivided in places where we find cadences. A *rondeau cinquain* with a caesura after the fourth (or sixth) syllable would thus ideally result in ten musical fragments, which is more or less indeed the case here. Both parts, that incidentally often imitate each other, show carefully delineated melodic structures, with an average phrase length that ranges between one and three measures. The four-note head-motif of each of the five verse lines (à la »Fors seulement«) is easily recognizable at various points in the composition. None of these characteristics are present in the bassus part, which starts the piece in full swing never to stop until bar 10. Its tessitura is large, from *F–d'*, moving rapidly through the registers. It is technically possible of course to sing this part, but the texting will be entirely haphazard, and the contrast with the two eminently vocal upper parts would be striking, not to say odd or illogical.

Some remark should be made about the »c« fragments in my transcription: Fragment 2b does not leave a shade of doubt about its text underlay and where it ends, with a full cadence and a *pausa generalis* in all three voices. Neither is it problematic to identify fragment 3a as the beginning of the third verse line. The option of an instrumental interlude seems almost to force itself upon us.

17 Basevi Codex (cf. fn. 1), fols. 58^{v}–59^{r}: »Vaten Regret«. See Example 2.



Example 2: Anonymous, »Va t'en regret«



Example 2 (continued)

I have proposed two different underlays for line 3, which both, however, find their natural conclusion on the third minim of bar 16: a similar florid extension follows as in bars 10 and 11. Finally, the fourth verse seems to have a sufficiently expressive melisma on the word »malheur« (equalled by the one on »joye« at the end of the piece) as it cadences in measure 24; prolonging it beyond this point seems to me musically useless and vocally unnatural.

If we hypothesize that the bass part of »Va t'en regret« is not a vocal line, we have to assume that it was meant to be played on an instrument. But which instrument? This is a crucial question that has to be addressed.

The option of transposition

It seems that the instruments in use in the 1480s were not substantially different from those played a century or a century and a half earlier. For the chanson repertoire we are of course primarily looking for the so-called »bas« instruments like lutes, harps, fiddles, gitterns, organetti, psalteries, flutes etc.[18] The size of these instruments, as we can deduce from the vast available iconography, does not permit any of them, to say it prudently, to play real bass notes or a real bass line with a tessitura that goes down to *G*, *F* or even *E* flat. But most of Agricola's chansons (like »Va t'en regret«), or many by composers of the previous generations are written in clef systems that suggest these low ranges in modern transcription. A second peculiarity concerns the cantus. We have many records and descriptions, especially from the 14th century, of performance of song by young girls with angelical, clear voices, from which we can deduct that lightness (*leggiadria*) and clarity were obviously an aesthetic ideal, which may well have persisted into the chanson repertoire of the next century.[19]

Again, this does not agree with most of the material in the chansonniers, that has its superius notated in mezzo soprano clef and range. It has been hesitatingly suggested that sometimes transposition might be an option in the performance of ›early‹ music without however addressing the problem in its entirety with all the incongruities depicted above.

In her study *The Affinities and Medieval Transposition*, Dolores Pesce[20] presents an impressive overview of all reference made to the concept of the modes transposed to their kin pitch positions at the fifth above, the fifth

18 See Brown and Polk, Instrumental music (cf. fn. 6).

19 See *Der Squarcialupi-Codex Pal. 87 der Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana zu Florenz*, ed. Johannes Wolf (Lippstadt, 1955, Reprint Cologne, 1985), Einleitung.

20 Dolores Pesce, *The Affinities and Medieval Transposition* (Bloomington, 1987).

below (or fourth above) and the octave, the so-called affinities. The list of theorists that she cites includes most of the major and minor music scholars between Hucbald and Guido of Arezzo and Heinrich Glareanus. A few excerpts may suffice here to illustrate the issue:

> Jacques de Liège, *Speculum musicae* (around 1330): »First, I say that affinity can be threefold: perfect, more perfect, and most perfect. That is called perfect which exists through the diatesseron ... A more perfect affinity is that which exists through the diapente ... That affinity is called most perfect which exists through the octave«.[21]

> The *Berkeley Manuscript* (US–BEm, Ms. 744), finished in Paris 1375, contains the first set of treatises that specifically deal with the concept of affinity in polyphonic music: it gives a list of possible (appropriate) finals for each of the modes. *D–g–a–c'–d* for mode I/II, *e–a–b* natural–*e'* for mode III/IV, *f–b* flat for mode V/VI and *g–c–c'* for mode VII/VIII. [22]

> Nicolaus Wollick, *Opus aureum musicae* (Cologne, 1509): »But transformation of this sort was invented only on account of irregular solmization of songs which arose perhaps at finals through coniunctae or fictae, likewise because of conflicting parts of counterpoint to be placed on the hand (which pleases me more). A tenor, therefore, that sets up the bass under itself is raised higher«.[23]

Pesce explains: »In this reference to transformation he gives two reasons for the transposition of a melody a fourth higher. The first involves the avoidance of altered tones, while the second, to which he explicitly gives preference, states that the tenor should be moved to a higher position so that the contrapuntal bass will not interfere with it«.[24]

> Martin Agricola, *Rudimenta Musices* (Wittenberg 1539): »There is transposition here, however, i. e. the shifting of some song from its proper seat to a foreign one, which is given consideration rarely in plainsong (where the harmonies of individual modes are sung most properly in their own particular places), but in figured music, in which melodies frequently are raised and lowered from their own seats out of necessity to the fourth, fifth and octave, it is given special consideration.« [25]

The concept served two immediate purposes: notational, to copy a song with the least number of accidentals, and practical, to move to a convenient tessitura in performance. William Mahrt summarizes as follows: » ... while the pitches of the gamut are clearly defined in relation to each other, they do

21 Ibid., p. 60.
22 Ibid., p. 88.
23 Ibid., p. 111.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 122.

not imply absolute pitch. Performers thus always need to keep in mind that all medieval notation is potentially ›transposable‹ from the point of view of modern absolute pitch.«[26]

A third aspect, which regards for example the original position of »Fors seulement« (in *a*, as I mentioned before, a transposed Dorian with Phrygian flavours) is pointed out by Mahrt: »While these alternative finals (sometimes called cofinals, affinities, transpositions) were viewed as more similar to their comparable regular finals than different, there were some important differences as well, especially for the final on *a*. The possibility of both *b molle* and *b quadratum* immediately above *a* makes for an ambiguity close to the final; such ambiguities can be merely passing or can contribute to a change of mode, from protus (Dorian) on *a* to deuterus (Phrygian) on *a*.«[27]

From a performance practical point of view we have to exclude the untransposed rendering of instrumental tenor parts anywhere below *c* (an octave below central *c'* in *a* = 440 Hz). There is good reason to believe that the, of course not standardized, pitch in Agricola's time and, in my opinion, an extended period before that, was tendentially considerably higher than 440 Hz, at least in Italy. The organ in S. Petronio in Bologna (built in 1470–1475 by Lorenzo di Giacomo da Prato) was originally at a pitch of *a'* = 520 Hz (until 1530), the instrument in Siena (in S. Maria della Scala, built by Giovanni di Antonio Piffero in 1516–1518) is still at its original pitch of *a'* = 517 Hz.[28]

It is, however, ultimately the circumstantial evidence of the repertoire itself and the physical properties of the instruments and the voice ranges themselves that inform us about the real pitch position of each chanson, be it by Machaut or Agricola.

26 William P. Mahrt, »Gamut, Solmization & Modes,« *A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music*, ed. Ross W. Duffin (Bloomington, 2000), p. 482.
27 Ibid., p. 486.
28 Private communication by Liuwe Tamminga, Bologna.