CHAPTER 9

“SANZ NOTE” & “SANZ MESURE”:
TOWARD A PREMODERN AESTHETICS
OF THE DIRGE

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Silence is the perfectest herald of joy; I were but little happy, if I could say how much.
—Shakespeare, Much Ado about Nothing

Alas, that sweet and noble lady could not compose the third stanza, so wearied and afflicted, sad, wretched, and full of tears was she.
—Machaut, Le Livre du Voir dit

It is easy to think that something has gone wrong in the middle column of folio 5v of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France ms. fr. 146 (see figure 9.1). At this early point in the famously lavish copy of the Roman de Fauvel made in ca. 1317, the copying of the motet Ex corruptis/In principibus seems to have been suddenly interrupted. Three voices are present: the first, beginning “Ex corruptis arboribus,” is at the top of the column and starts with a decorated initial. The second, “In principibus perpera,” starts midway through the ninth staff, but its capital letter is missing, as is that of the third, tenor voice, labeled “Neuma d’alleluia” (“melody from a [chant] alleluia”) at the bottom of the page. But it is not the missing capitals that draw the eye’s attention, since a much more vital aspect of the motet is conspicuous by its absence: there are no notes here, only empty staves. Because medieval scribes normally copied words before notes, scholars have assumed that the makers of Fauvel intended to add notation and then did not—perhaps they forgot to, or perhaps the music never arrived. As an early commentator put it, “dieser motetus fehlt” (this motet is missing).

But this is not a straightforward case of incomplete transmission. Rather, the motet’s blank staves are juxtaposed on the folio with a description of song that is barely audible because its singers are miserable. This essay reads Fauvel’s strikingly
illustrated lament alongside passages from the works of Guillaume de Machaut and Christine de Pizan which also situate sad song on the boundary between voice and voicelessness. What emerges is an outline of a late-medieval aesthetics of the dirge as a song that is formally or sonically imperfect or deficient. The final part of this
study turns to Binchois’s setting of Christine de Pizan’s *Duel angoisseus*, exploring the implications of such an aesthetic for the analysis of musical settings of doleful texts.

To return to *Fauvel*: a close look at folio 5v dispels the impression that the motet is simply “missing.” As I argue elsewhere, not enough space has been left for the motet’s tenor, and the upper-voice texts are copied with such a rate of scribal abbreviation that the necessary number of notes would not have fit above them. Only the most inexperienced of scribes would copy the text of a motet in such a way as to preclude musical notation, and the *Fauvel* scribes are among the best of the fourteenth century. Finally, *Ex corruptis/In principibus* is included in the index to the manuscript, under the category “motez à trebles et à teneures” (three-voice motets), even though the index was made retrospectively. So is it possible that this motet is *not* missing?

A verse couplet on the same folio offers a neat explanation for the work’s unusual transmission. At this point in the satirical *Fauvel*, Gervès du Bus is engaged in casting aspersions. Ostensibly his focus is the memorable horse Fauvel, whose filthy muddy brown color attests to his decay. But the fault is not really with him, but with society, which is so rotten that rich men and poor, lay and clergy groom and pet the filthy beast. Folio 5v focuses on the sins of the pope and his cardinals. The pope’s concerns are all secular: he “n’i met pas sa chape” (does not wear his cape) but acts as a mere executor for the king, helping Fauvel to collect taxes. As for the cardinals, they are negligent and greedy. To make this point, du Bus turns to the obvious pun on *pasteur/pastor* and the figurative meanings of terms associated with sheep-shearing (*tondre* is “shear” but also “plunder” or “strip”). He paints a vivid and violent picture of shepherds literally “fleecing” their flock, shearing their coats during the cold winter months, cutting so close to the skin that they bleed. In response to such indignities, the poor, shivering sheep perform two selections from the Office of the Dead: *Placebo Domino*, the first antiphon of Vespers, and *Dirige, Domine*, the first antiphon of Matins:

*Placebo* chantent hautement  
*Mais Dirige* dient sanz note.

[They sing *Placebo* loudly, but *Dirige* they say *sanz note*.] (ll. 616–17)"
the *Placebo* and *Dirige* in their church every day *sans note*).\(^8\) What is interesting about the *Fauvel* couplet is the sonic contrast it evokes between “chantent” and “dient,” a timbral distinction bolstered by a likely change of volume: the singing of *Placebo* is executed “hautement” (loudly), and the *Dirige*’s volume, though not specified, is clearly quieter by contrast. Furthermore, in the less technical, poetic context of the *Fauvel* narrative, “sans note” might better be translated as “without a peep.” Hence Armand Strubel’s modern French rendering of the lines as “Ils chantent *Placebo* à haute voix / Mais murmurent *Dirige* sans faire entendre de note.”\(^9\) During the couplet, the congregants move from song to murmur, from loud flattery to whispered plea. And in the adjacent empty motet the relative voicelessness of the victimized and dispossessed is rendered as absolute.

*Ex corruptis*/*In principibus* is perhaps a too-literal illustration of voice at its limits, but it is not the less useful for that. I suggest the murmured *Dirige* can serve as a pointer toward one late-medieval way of understanding the expressive connotations of excessive emotion: namely, that emotional excess can result in expressive deficiency. The broad applicability of this *topos* is apparent when we compare the plight of the sheep in the *Roman de Fauvel* with a passage from a late-fifteenth–century moralized *Roman de la Rose* by rhétoriqueur Jean Molinet (1435–1507). In the course of a long digression from a passage about optics, Molinet describes the rise and fall of a courtier as an allegorical note sitting—and singing—on Fortune’s wheel.\(^10\) At first, the note, which is a “minim” (modern-day half-note), “se trouve au plus haut de la game, tant augmentée de si grant value que . . . illec chante a haute voix *Le serviteur hault guerdonné*” (“finds itself at the very top of the scale, so augmented and of such great value . . . [that] it sings in a loud voice [Guillaume Du Fay’s song] *Le serviteur hault guerdonné*”). But when the wheel turns, Fortune “l’apprent deschanter tant legierement et si bas que sa voix n’est plus ouyé . . . et en faisant gros soupirs se lamente avecques Iheremie, si dit a voix cassée comme fort estonné, *Terriblement suis fortunée*” (teaches it to sing so feebly low that its voice is no longer heard . . . and making great sighs, it laments with Jeremiah and says, in a hoarse voice and very astonished, [the anonymous song] *Terriblement suis fortunée*”).\(^11\) Thus the ability to be heard is contingent on the happiness of the singer. Because this is a musical allegory, the minim’s two modes of expression are further distinguished through the dimension of pitch: it is high and loud in its happy state; low and hoarse—barely singing—when it’s down and out.

Molinet and Gervès du Bus, writing almost 200 years apart, would seem to agree about a basic aspect of human expressivity: there is such a thing as being too depressed to sing—being too put down to complain about it. This relates to what Sarah Kay has called the “paradox of suffering”—that the true expression of suffering is that which cannot be expressed.\(^12\) Intuitively, it makes sense that any emotion, if extreme enough, can cause the voice to waver or die out. The voices of the distressed first become inarticulate—when words change to groans and sobs with extreme sadness; squeals or laughter with sudden intense joy—and then disappear entirely.

It seems probable that there is nothing historically specific about such failures of voice. But if we attempt to map them on to the artistic—poetic and
musical—expressions of those moments of emotion, we do indeed find a disconnect between the medieval and modern approaches. That such expressions cannot be handled mimaetically is obvious. As Cédric Giraud reminds us in his study of Marian meditations in chapter 11 of this volume, true expressions of suffering, which elicit real emotional responses from the hearer, are untranscribable, and in turn linguistic (and artistic) evocations of emotion stand at a remove from those emotions themselves: the child must stop crying to say “I am crying.” And it is in the act of transcription that cultural and temporal differences become salient.

We in 2015 are the inheritors of a Romantic sensibility in which emotional excess is paired with expressive superabundance and privileged access to creative production. The emotive creator (van Gogh, Beethoven, Kurt Cobain) is inseparable from his art, which would presumably be less expressive, remarkable, and authentic if it were not for his loneliness and depression. Kay suggests that medieval poets too wanted—needed—to feel distress, and that “maintaining just enough distress to enable the production of poetry” was “the condition of virtuosity.” The role of consolation, in her analysis, is to keep poets away from the point of negative returns. And Elizabeth Eva Leach argues that music goes even further than poetry in “[relieving] the silence that inexpressible woe threatens”: “the silence to which knowledge based on language is reduced…and evaded as ‘unspeakable woe’ [via the inexpressibility topos]…is made to sound through singing itself.”

Both Kay’s idea of suffering as a necessity for expression and Leach’s notion of music’s power of expressing sorrow that words cannot articulate could be seen as broadly in line with Romantic aesthetics. This is not necessarily a problem: there may indeed be something universally human about it all. But the examples from Fauvel and Molinet’s Rose discussed here hint at a model in which emotional excess leads to expressive deficiency. In so doing they offer a glimpse into what happens to music beyond the point of “just enough distress.” In the next section of this essay I turn to passages from the writings of Guillaume de Machaut and Christine de Pizan which allude to songs that are the worse for being written or performed on the brink of emotional rupture. These cases imply that certain aspects of creative expression were seen to degrade as sadness mounted.

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The most detailed medieval discussion of the relationship between musical production and emotion survives in the Prologue Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377) wrote for his collected works sometime in the early 1370s. In the course of describing Music’s power (Music being one of Nature’s gifts to Guillaume, along with Sens and Rhetoric), Machaut identifies an emotional register for music that is surprising in its seemingly limited range:

Et Musique est une science
Qui vuet qu’on rie et chante et dance.
Cure n’a de merencolie,
Ne d’homme qui merencolie
A chose qui ne puet valoir,
Eins met tels gens en nonchaloir.
Partout ou elle est joie y porte;
Les desconfortez reconforte,
Et nès seulement de l’ôïr
Fait elle les gens rejoïr.

[And Music is an art which likes people to laugh and sing and dance. It cares nothing for melancholy, nor for a man who sorrows over what is of no importance, but ignores, instead, such folk. It brings joy everywhere it’s present; it comforts the disconsolate, and just hearing it makes people rejoice.] 17

If music is always joyful, where does that put the dirge? Machaut specifies that even when he is treating a sad subject, the poet should be joyful, as should his mode of expression: “Et s’on fait de triste matiere, / Si est joieuse la maniere / Dou fait” (ll. 157–59). An unhappy author can neither write well nor sing joyfully (“bien ne fera / Ne gaiement ne chantera,” ll. 159–60) because his heart flees from happiness, whereas poetic creation is a joyful act. The happy lover has the advantage of Sweet Thought and Imagination, which improve his poem a hundredfold, while miserable poets are distracted by their rage, suicidal thoughts, and the threat of insanity. When a wretch thinks upon the perfections of a woman who cares nothing for him,

[Il] a tant de dueil et de rage
Que c’est merveilles qu’il n’enrage,
Ou qu’il ne se tue ou se pent,
Ou que d’amé ne se repent;
Si qu’il ne porroit nullement
Riens faire si joliement
De sa matiere dolereuse
Com li joieus de sa joieuse,
Pour ce qu’il n’a rien qui l’esgaie,
Ne matiere lie ne gai,
Et s’a desir, et povre espoir
Qui sa doleur empire espoir.

[He has such sorrow and rage that it’s a wonder he doesn’t go mad, doesn’t kill or hang himself, or repent of loving. Thus he can in no way compose anything as pleasing from his mournful material as the happy man can from his happiness.] (ll. 187–98)

This rather unambiguous statement, which has been called Machaut’s “poetics of joy,” not only marginalizes the sad song but even seems to make it an impossibility with its emphasis on music’s inherently joyous nature. Are we, then, to assume that all of Machaut’s sad songs are actually joyous meditations on sad themes? Further complicating matters is the fact that in several of his other dits Machaut contradicts his Prologue, making instead a claim for poetic authenticity encapsulated by the oft-quoted couplet “car qui de sentement ne fait / son chant et son œuvre contrefait” (“for he who doesn’t write about his [true] feelings counterfeits [or ‘writes against’] his song and his work”). 18 According to this dictum, the poet
should write sad poetry if he is sad, or risk being untrue to himself. How can this view be squared with the Prologue, according to which sad people make bad poets? In a recent analysis of Machaut’s poetics, Leach has called this a “seeming doctrinal contradiction.” The contradiction is only seeming, she argues, because the Prologue’s poetics of joy trumps the Remede’s poetics of authenticity due to the former’s place in the authoritative Prologue, while expressions of the latter (i.e., the poetics of authenticity) originate with narrators rendered “unreliable” by youth, old age, or suffering itself. Machaut’s real poetics is that outlined in the Prologue, where “joy both creates music and is its result,” and where “music’s proper function is to provide joy to its audience.”

But there is something unsatisfying about the notion of music as a joyful “veneer” that can be applied to even blatantly sad themes. This is where the murmuring sheep and the hoarse minim may be of some use. The flock’s spoken Dirige—and the note-less motet that amplifies it (by failing to amplify it)—remind us not that sad songs are inauthentic per se, but that sometimes the emotionally authentic thing would be to not sing. As Machaut explains, beyond a certain point, the poet shuts up, goes mad, or commits suicide. From this conclusion one could proceed straight to the “paradox of suffering,” and with it to the politically dangerous idea that true despair has no melody, and that anyone who still has voice to sing (or write songs) about their troubles is not truly miserable. But there is another path available.

It may be that, as Machaut’s Prologue insists, “music brings joy and cares nothing for melancholy,” but that is what ideal music does in an ideal world. In this one, miserable people often have cause to sing and compose. The possibility of a spectrum between voicelessness and fully articulate song is hinted at in the polytextual virelai De triste cuer / Quant vais amans / Certes, je di, whose statements on poetry, joy, and emotional authenticity have been so elegantly analyzed by Leach. Here the cantus (top voice) explains that “cilz qui fait de joieus sentement...doit plus joieusement faire / Et pour ce sont mi chant de rude affair” (“he who composes from joyous feelings...must compose more joyously. Because of this all my songs are a crude affair”). The virelai’s tenor voice notes that when Desire murders the lover’s sad heart in sorrow and hatred (“Ardans Desirs mourdrist secretement / Son triste cuer en douleur et en haire”) the lover “ne fait pas si joliement / Com cilz qui joit et ou joie repaire”—“does not compose as merrily as he who rejoices where joy resides.”

These excerpts invite us to imagine a series of gradations from fully joyous song and composition to a point where the singing voice fails and artistic expression is no longer possible. Such a spectrum in turn makes it possible to integrate Machaut’s poetics of authenticity with his poetics of joy without needing either to trump the other: happy people write better songs and sing them better, so it’s best to be happy. (This is hardly a contentious claim.) But emotional honesty is an imperative too. Songs written or performed from a sad heart (“de triste cuer”) are necessarily flawed by some metric, whatever their subject. And if the heart becomes too sad, song becomes impossible.

We may glimpse that edge of the spectrum at work near the end of Machaut’s prosimetric Livre du Voir dit. When the heroine Toute Belle hears in a letter from Guillaume, her amant, that she is rumored to indiscreetly share their private
correspondence with others, she grows pale, lets the letter fall from her hands, and collapses onto a bed (ll. 8518–20). There, through deep sighs and tears and in a piteous frame of mind, she composes a virelai (“en sa dolente pensee / Fist ceste chanson baladee,” ll. 8524–25). With a refrain that begins “Cent mille fois esbahie / Plus dolente et courrecie / Sui, que nulle vraieiment” (“Dismayed a hundred thousand times, more sorrowful and angry I truly am than any woman,” ll. 8526–28), the poet is clearly as far as she can be from the joyful disposition Machuat recommends in the Prologue. In fact, Toute Belle is the epitome of the Prologue’s wretched poet, who “has such sorrow and rage / That it’s a wonder [s]he doesn’t go mad, / Doesn’t kill or hang [her]self, Or doesn’t repent of loving.” In the virelai’s second verse she wishes for death:

Meschief langour, et martire
De tous lieus a moy venir
Mon povre cuer fondre et frire
Dont la mort me sera mire
Ad ce ne puis ie faillir
Ma leesse est amortie
Et ma vertu aféblie
Est si dolereusement
Que sans faire cessement
Tourmentee et apalie
Maudi mes iours et ma vie
Sans avoir confortement

[Misery and suffering make their way relentlessly toward me from every corner to break my heart, set it ablaze; Death would thus be my healer. This I cannot avoid: My happiness has been murdered, and my virtue weakened, by so much pain that, without ceasing, tormented and made pale, I curse my days and life, finding no consolation.] (ll. 8554–65)

This is heavy, but not more so than scores of equally dark thoughts considered to fall within the realm of appropriate fin’ amors expression. What is remarkable is what happens next. “Cent mille fois esbahie, etc” signals the return of the refrain, and should thus lead into the virelai’s third and final verse—but that verse never comes (see figure 9.2). Instead, the lover-narrator’s voice interrupts to explain that Toute Belle could not finish her virelai:

Helas la douce debonnaire
Le tiers ver ne pot onques faire
Tant estoit lasse et adolee
Triste, dolente, et esplouree
Mais les .ij. vers quavez oy
Dedens ceste lettre encloy

[Alas, that sweet and noble lady could not compose the third stanza, so wearied and afflicted, sad, wretched, and full of tears was she. But she enclosed the two stanzas you’ve heard in this letter.] (ll. 8573–78)
At this point in the virelai, then, we witness the sad poet at her breaking point: Toute Belle has moved from fury and hurt to a state in which she can say nothing more: to expression *sanz note*—and *sanz mots*.

A letter—presumably written after Toute Belle had had a chance to calm down—follows. It is equal parts reproachful and affectionate and includes an apology for the tone of her words:

> Et se ie vous ay escript un po rudement et mal sagement, par mame ie ne lay peu amender, Car iestoie si troublee, et avoie le cuer si marry et si courrecie car a peinne peusse ie dire chose ne faire, qui peust plaire a personne.

[And if I wrote you a bit crudely and with little wisdom, by my soul, I couldn’t help it, for I was so troubled, and my heart was so afflicted and worried I could scarcely do or say anything that might please someone.] (Letter 43)

Again, there is a distinct echo of the *Prologue*’s description: Toute Belle “can in no way compose anything as pleasing from [her] mournful material as the happy
man can.” And this is precisely because she writes according to her mood: as she specifies in her letter, “ie vous envoie ce virelay qui est fais de mon sentement” (I send you this virelai composed from my feelings).

Unfortunately *Cent mille fois esbahie* was never set to music. Though this is by no means rare for the lyrics contained in the *Voir dit*, it is also possible that a setting appropriate to this emotionally overcharged text would have been in violation of good taste. What I wish to suggest is that such a setting might have been not excessive, but deficient—actually lacking something. A hint as to the kind of sound involved comes from the slightly later voice of Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430), who followed Machaut in dealing frequently with the issue of the poet’s emotional authenticity. Christine’s first virelai is a succinct statement on the relationship between the joyful aspect that singing demands (the loud *Placebo*) and its conflict with real unhappiness. Her situation is analogous to that of Fauvel’s sheep; singing *par couverture* (as a disguise), she makes “neither moan nor whisper” of her real sorrow:

> Je chante par couverture,  
> Mais mieulx plourassent mi oeil,  
> Ne nul ne scet le traveil  
> Que mon pouvre cuer endure.  
> Pour ce muce ma doulour  
> Qu’en nul je ne voy pitié,  
> Plus a l’en cause de plour  
> Mains treuve l’en d’amistié.  
> Pour ce plainte ne murmure  
> Ne fais de mon piteux dueil;  
> Aïnçois ris quant plourer vueil,  
> Et sanz rime et sanz mesure  
> Je chante par couverture.

[I sing as a disguise (but it were better that my eyes should weep) and no one knows the travail that my poor heart endures. I hide my sorrow, for I see pity in no one; the more you have cause to weep, the less you find friendship. That’s why I make neither moan nor whisper about my pitiable sorrow; rather do I laugh when I want to cry, and without rhyme and without measure *I sing as a disguise.*] (ll. 1–13)²⁵

This singing disguise is clearly unsuccessful. Not only does the virelai’s text “out” Christine as miserable (in the longstanding tradition of public texts about secret private states),²⁶ but it suggests that her performance is itself marked as inauthentically joyful, since she sings “sanz rime et sanz mesure”—without rhyme or meter.²⁷ Here, then, is a hint about what the less-than-joyful song might sound like: unconfident, halting, arrhythmic.

This could be a matter of delivery, and thus lost to us. Indeed, insofar as the unmeasured aspects of the performance Christine’s virelai evokes are linked to the body’s sounds of sorrow, they are untranscribable. According to medieval grammarians, sobs and wails belong to the category of *vox confusa* (inarticulate sound). This is contrasted with *vox articulata*—the category of utterances that
can be transcribed. For example, Thomas of Cantimpré (thirteenth century) contrasted transcribable words with the moaning of the sick: “Articulata est, que scribi potest ut a, e; confusa, que scribi non potest ut gemitus infirmorum et voces volucrum aut bestiarum” ([vox] articulata is that which can be written, such as “a” or “e”; [vox] confusa is that which cannot be written, such as the moans of the sick and the cries of birds and beasts).28 Such distinctions have their origin in the work of late-classical grammarians such as Donatus and Diomedes,29 and they continued to be relevant in the early Renaissance. Thus Christine’s contemporary, music theorist and composer Johannes Ciconia, explains that while vox articulata can be expressed by letters of the alphabet, “vox confusa is that which can neither be written nor understood.”30

Returning to our idea of an expressive spectrum, we can understand Christine’s emotionally inauthentic singing as an intrusion of the inarticulate upon the articulate. Her feelings cause her song to lose its meter, moving it in the direction of moaning. If that moan cannot be notated, perhaps it can still be hinted at by poetic and musical means. Leach has shown how another kind of vox confusa—the singing of birds—is staged in late-medieval polyphonic songs through the use of fast (sub-minim) note values and textual patter.31 The effect there is one of musical excess. Emma Dillon has suggested that such sonic and verbal excess can itself be meaningful, evoking an effect she dubs “supermusical.”32 Several contributors to this volume address sonic excesses of other kinds: Julie Orlemanski shows how Margery Kempe’s cries and “roars” come to express divine utterances, while Andrew Albin explores the relationship between canor (angelic song) and Rolle’s excessive alliteration. I posit that a kindred effect of deficiency—expressive, rhythmic, melodic, structural—might equally approach that which cannot be articulated, but from the opposite direction, at whose extreme is not noise but silence, the negation of song.

To test the analytical implications of such expressive deficiency, I turn, in conclusion, to what may be the most desperately sad song of the later Middle Ages. This is quite a title to bestow in a repertory full of sorrowing lovers and songs that being with “Hélas,” but it can hardly be denied that Binchois’s Dueil angoisseus (written in the 1430s) is extraordinarily heavy. And—not coincidentally—it sets to music a poem by Christine de Pizan. One of the poemes de veuvage in her Cent ballades, the text reacts not to the loss of love, but to the loss of life, and does so in six lines of asyndeton (or dissoluto)—stacked-up direct objects that wait for their verb until the beginning of line 7. Though the ballade is not lacking in rhyme or meter, it might be called sparse, even deficient, in syntax. Here I focus on the first stanza:

Dueil angoisseus, rage desmesurée,
Grief desespoir, plein de forsennement,
Langour sansz fin et vie maleurée
Pleine de plour, d’angoisse et de tourment,
Cuer doloreux qui vit obscurement,
Tenebreux corps sur le point de partir
Ay, sansz cesser, continuellement;
Et si ne puis ne garir ne morir.
Anguished grief, immoderate fury, grievous despair, full of madness, endless languor and unfortunate life, full of tears, anguish and torment, doleful heart, living in darkness, wraithlike body on the point of death, are mine continually without cease; and thus I can neither be healed nor die.

Imagining an appropriate setting of such a text from a baroque, classical, or Romantic perspective evokes, perhaps, a dramatic and pathos-laden operatic scene (a Purcell mad song, maybe, or some cross between the Queen of the Night and Donna Anna). Binchois’s setting is as far from these as it can be while still sitting on the audible side of the sanz note divide. Figure 9.3 gives the first section of the ballade; several recordings are available.

Given the anguish and fury in its texts, Binchois’s setting of Dueil angoisseus comes as something of a surprise to most modern listeners. Entirely aside from its opening sonority, which sounds like an F-major triad (major triads being, from our perspective but not from Binchois’s, a happy sound), the song is surprising in the stillness with which it begins. The bottom two voices start with maximae—the longest notes of the notational system then in use. Both hold their first pitch for eleven beats. Such stasis might intuitively seem peaceful, and it was perhaps this sound that led Liane Curtis to remark that “the mood of Dueil angoisseus could never be described as morbid, sentimental, or gloomy. It is transcendent, ethereal, perhaps resigned.”

Curtis’s evaluation arguably rests on an entirely modern notion of what sentimental songs sound like. In light of Christine’s description of singing “sanz rime et sanz mesure,” it is surely significant that pulse is precisely what is lacking at the beginning of Binchois’s Dueil angoisseus. Nor is this lack solely the result of the maximae in the lower voices: the upper voices contribute to a sense of suspended time by simultaneously presenting contrasting divisions of the beat. The tenor splits each six-beat measure into 3+3, while the cantus divides the same six beats into three groups of two using the notational device of coloration. A conflict in pulse—three-against-two cross-rhythms—in the upper voices combines with a lack of pulse in the lower two voices to produce an opening that is, indeed, sans mesure.

The ambiguity persists beyond the first few measures. When contratenor I starts moving in measure 3, it does so in a pattern that also resists metrical analysis, this time with notes that are too fast. By moving in a combination of minims and semibreves (shown by half and whole notes in the transcription) it avoids articulating any broader sense of pulse. This effect is heightened by occasional syncopated semibreves (whole notes that start on a weak beat in the transcription). The constant motion, supplemented in several passages by even smaller notes (semiminims; quarter notes in transcription), also serves to control the song’s tempo, since if the fast notes are to be executed correctly, everything else must be kept relatively slow. Occasional fast notes thus paradoxically add to the ballade’s prevailing feeling of stillness.

The cantus voice, which carries the melody of the song, is also notable for its metrical ambiguity. Though by combining larger and smaller note values the cantus has the power to clarify the prevailing pulse, it pointedly declines to settle
Figure 9.3  Binchois/Pizan, *Dueil angoisseux*, mm. 1–8, first ending (ed. Metcalfe).
into a meter. Like all medieval songs, *Duell angoisseus* was notated without barlines, so that downbeats and other significant rhythmic events were not signaled visually by a note’s position in a measure, but rather projected aurally through rhythmic and melodic details of lines. Figure 9.4 shows the layout and notation for the beginning of the cantus voice of *Duell angoisseus* in one of its manuscript sources, and figure 9.5 offers a transcription of this excerpt without bar lines.

Looking at the melody this way, it is not at all clear what its prevailing meter might be. A duple division, suggested by the first three notes and the phrase that follows them, eventually loses explanatory power. In figure 9.6, the melody is parsed by barlines into binary units under the editorially supplied time signature 2/1—that is, two whole notes per measure. Time signatures as such were not used in Binchois’s time, but the circle with a line through it that opens figure 9.4 does provide information similar to that supplied by modern time signatures. It hints at a ternary meter, where each measure (representing the so-called breve) is divisible into three “semibreves” (whole notes in the figure). But this metric interpretation does not sit comfortably either. Not only does the second note end up crossing the downbeat (opening beat of a measure) in this case, but other aspects of the melody are short-changed: the melodic high-points and low-points, the starts of longer notes, and the placement of accented syllables in the text are not served by this scheme (see figure 9.7).

Perception of pulse is of course partly subjective. To this analyst, it seems that opening of the cantus of *Duell angoisseus* does not fit easily into a duple or triple scheme, but rather projects a seemingly random alternation between groups of two and three beats (see figure 9.8). The unsettled effect this creates is bolstered by the
vertical relationship between the discantus and tenor. While we would expect these voices to be in counterpoint with each other, moving mostly in contrary motion and occasionally arriving on metrical strong-points through so-called “directed progressions,” here they move mostly in parallel. The two points of harmonic arrival are marked with arrows in figure 9.8. Such cadence-like events tend to be salient for listeners, and may strengthen a feeling of “downbeat”; accordingly they usually occur on strong beats. It is telling, then, that each falls on a weak beat according to one of the barring schemes in figures 9.6 and 9.7, while in figure 9.3

Figure 9.6  *Dueil angoisseus*, beginning of cantus barred as for a prevailing duple meter.

Figure 9.7  *Dueil angoisseus*, beginning of cantus barred as for a prevailing triple meter.

Figure 9.8  *Dueil angoisseus*, beginning of cantus with bar groupings indicating a variable meter; arrows mark points strengthened by contrapuntal means.
they occur on beats five and four, respectively, of six-beat measures. None of these are particularly apt positions for harmonic arrival. In short, harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic motion combine in the opening of *Dueil angoisseus* to project a shifting sense of meter that is tantamount to none at all.

The second half of the ballade contributes one more passage where the musical setting reacts directly to the text. In measures 20–22, another maxima, this time of 12 beats’ duration, sounds in the tenor voice. It coincides with the end of the word “continuellement” of the cantus’s phrase “sanz cesser continuellement” (continually without cease), an adverbial modifier for the verb “ay” (I have), whose objects are all of the negative emotions listed in lines 1–6. The text’s emphasis on continuity as projected by the cantus is reinforced by tonal stasis in the other voices, where the notes C and E sustain for 12 beats (see figure 9.9). It is as though the melodies have frozen in place.

To sum up: the music set to “rage desmesuree” in the cantus’s first line is indeed itself *desmesuree*, and later there is a very long tenor note following “continuellement.” These may seem like rather obvious reactions to the text, but they are only so in retrospect. In Christine’s poem, the talk is of emotional eternities

![Figure 9.9 Dueil angoisseus, mm. 18–23 (ed. Metcalfe).](image-url)
and excesses, not temporal ones. Nor is this a simple matter of word painting.
Later, so-called madrigalistic techniques such as the upward scales on “ascendit in caelum” (ascended into heaven) in Renaissance masses, where musical ascent mimes the scriptural ascension, would probably have seemed trivializing to listeners in the 1430s. And it is unlikely that Binchois would do anything showy in a poem this serious. Furthermore, his approach here is unique within his own oeuvre: The stillness prompted by the word “continuellement” and the metrically ambiguous opening of the two lower voices are the only occurrences of maximas in all of his 60-plus songs. From a performer’s perspective, these long-lasting notes are hard to sing; they threaten to use up all the breath we have and to leave us gasping. And it is easy to get lost while counting them, to succumb to the eerie stillness that threatens to render our own performance sans mesure. Probably for this reason, all the available commercial recordings of Dueil angoisseus break up Binchois’s maximas into shorter notes, reinstating a sense of pulse and arguably undermining what is probably one of the ballade’s most powerful effects.

In a technical sense, we might describe Binchois’s setting of Christine’s ballade as musically deficient: halting and heavy, it denies listeners the pleasure of a steady beat—something that can usually be counted on in both folk and “art” music until the twentieth century. This is not, of course, to imply that Dueil angoisseus is a worse song for it. In my opinion, it is one of the most beautiful works of the fifteenth century. But its beauty is irregular. The difference between it and the joyful music Machaut idealizes in his Prologue can perhaps be perceived if we compare Dueil angoisseus with Binchois’s Amoureux suy, whose text begins “I am in love, and all joy comes my way.” Even though this rondeau is set in what we would call a “minor” mode, its unabating triple pulse amounts to a confident projection of mesure that, applied to a melody that has been called “guileless,” results in an energetic and joyful sound.

Figure 9.10 reproduces the opening of this song. Especially useful in creating energy—“joy,” we might say—is the contratenor voice, whose alternating trochaic and iambic patterns (oo oo) both mark the beat and maintain forward momentum. Perhaps these jaunty rhythms were what encouraged René Clemencic to add a loud drum to his recording of the rondeau with the Clemencic Consort. You can’t do that with Dueil Angoisseus.

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It is rather a long way from a dirige without notes amplified by a noteless motet in a source from ca.1317 to a 1430s setting of a late-fourteenth-century ballade. And it may actually be that the sheep and their murmurs have nothing to do with the sounds of anguish and grief evoked by Christine and interpreted by Binchois. But if there is something more than a fortuitous echo between sans note and sans mesure, it is the linking idea of music sans—music without. These examples, however disparate, present an alternative to the surplus that would eventually become linked by convention with artistic renditions of extreme emotion. A convention by which emotional excess causes music that is less
regular, less smooth, less “perfect,” the greater the writer’s emotional turmoil, and that tends ultimately toward silence—a rupture caused by illness, death, or the renunciation of love—is certainly no less arbitrary than the Romantic model, and may indeed be more realistic. While immoderate grief, fury and dejection are by definition excessive, grammarians and poets alike remind us that there is a gulf between outcries and their expression in writing, whether poetic or documentary. And, at least in the long fourteenth century, that gulf contains some telling absences, irregularities, and omissions. There, the dirge may be most audible when we listen for voices that are broken, interrupted, or just barely singing.
Notes


5. Armand Strubel, ed., *Le roman de Fauvel* (Paris: Librarie Générale Française, 2012), line 580. All further citations of *Fauvel* are by line numbers to Strubel’s edition, and translations are by Eliza Zingesser, used with kind permission.


7. The full text of the antiphon is “Placebo Domino in regione vivorum” (I will please the Lord in the land of the living). For editions see the *Liber usualis*, with introduction and rubrics in English, ed. Benedictines of Solesmes (Tournai and New York: Desclée, 1961), pages 1772 (*Placebo*) and 1782 (*Dirige*).

8. *A Collection of All the Wills, Now Known to be Extant, of the Kings and Queens of England, Princes and Princesses of Wales, and Every Branch of the Blood Royal: From the Reign of William the Conqueror to that of Henry the Seventh, Exclusive* (London: J. Nichols, 1780), 110.


16. See also Matthew Shoaf’s contribution to this volume (chapter 12), where vocality and eloquence are shown to be separable—even opposed—for some late-medieval artists.

17. Guillaume de Machaut, *The Fountain of Love (La fonteinne amoureuse) and Two Other Love Vision Poems*, ed. and trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland,
1993), ll. 199–208 (pp. 12–13). Translations have been modified and line breaks removed; further references are by line number in the main text.


20. Leach, *Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician*, 115.

21. This song’s statements about poetic doctrine have been sensitively analyzed by Elizabeth Eva Leach in “Music and Verbal Meaning: Machaut’s Polytextual Songs,” *Speculum* 85.3 (2010): 573–89, and Leach, *Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician*, 103–19.

22. Emphasis mine. This and the following citation are edited and translated in Leach, *Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician*, 111.

23. Machaut, *Le livre dou voir dit*, page 583. Further, parenthetical citations of the *Voir dit* are by line number, with translations modified and line breaks removed.


25. *Mesure*, in a musical realm, can refer to pitch by way of Pythagorean ratios, but here, paired with rhyme, it is surely temporal.


27. As Christine herself points out in her Ballade I, “du grant dueil qui me tient morne et coye / Puis bien parler assez et a plent é” (of the great mourning that keeps me sad and quiet I can speak a lot, and in abundance) (ll. 13–14), cit. and trans. in Semple, “Christine de Pizan’s Phenomenology of Beauty,” 190. On a musical manifestation of this topos, see Elizabeth Eva Leach, “Singing More about Singing Less: Machaut’s *Pour ce que tous* (B12),” in *Machaut’s Music: New Interpretations*, ed. Elizabeth Eva Leach (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), 111–24.

28. *Mesure*, in a musical realm, can refer to pitch by way of Pythagorean ratios, but here, paired with rhyme, it is surely temporal.


34. Figures 9.3 and 9.9 are edited by Scott Metcalfe from the version preserved in Spain, El Escorial, Palacio Real, Monasterio de S Lorenzo MS V.III.24, fols. 36v–37, where the parts called Contratenor I and Contrator II are labeled “contratenor concordans sequenti” and “contratenor concordans,” respectively. Figure 9.10 is edited by Metcalfe from Oxford, Bodleian library MS Canonici
Misc. 213, fol. 82. They are reproduced with kind permission. The available recordings vary in instrumentation: all parts are sung by voices by the ensemble Gothic Voices (dir. Christopher Page), The Castle of Fair Welcome (Hyperion, 1993), track 6, while Dominique Vellard opts for a combination of soprano on cantus and instruments on the other voices in Ensemble Gilles Binchois, Binchois: Mon souverain desir—Chansons (Angel Records, 2000), track 15.

35. Maximae are also longer than any note values in the modern notational system and are thus rendered as several notes tied together by slurs in figures 9.3 and 9.9. For a useful introduction to the history of musical notation, see Thomas Forrest Kelly, Capturing Music: The Story of Notation (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014). Online tutorials for fourteenth-century French (ars nova) notation created by Elizabeth Eva Leach can be accessed at http://diamm.nsms.ox.ac.uk/moodle/login/index.php.


37. The discantus’s first three notes are colored red in the manuscript, while other beats are black. Red ink here indicates a shift from a triple to a duple division of the breve. In the edition in figure 9.3, red coloration is indicated by black filled-in notes, and elsewhere by open brackets or with gray ink.

38. By “weak beat” I here mean second and third beats in ternary meters and even notes in duple meters.

39. Curtis has commented upon the rhythmic ambiguity at the start of the superius line: “as this is the opening gesture of the ballade, we do not yet have any sense of what the meter is. The long flowing note values are combined in conflicting rhythms, and a spacious ambiguity results, conveying something of the mood.” Though noting that “this calm, ineffable, floating effect is a rare beginning for a chanson superius line,” she draws an intriguing connection with “similar gestures employing this same rhythm of four imperfect breves . . . in [Du Fay’s] Helas mon dueil, and in Mercy mon dueil, by Gilles Joye.” Both passages in “Christine de Pizan and ‘Dueil Angoisseux,’” 272.


41. But then, those initial notes would not be red if the default meter were duple, since coloration is used to highlight changes from triple to duple and vice versa. My comments refer to the discantus melody as heard rather than as written.


45. Compare this to the more lyrical and sedate rendition by Gothic Voices, which nevertheless projects a clear and steady pulse: The Spirits of England and France, 3: Binchois and His Contemporaries (Hyperion, 1995).