

Hareu! le feu!

*The use of literary tradition in text and music of
Machaut's motet 10 with an outlook on motet 17.*

“A wee paper on renaissance lyricism”

(Inspired by Machaut and Company,
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by

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Introduction

In understanding Machaut's motets it seems important to first get an insight into medieval literary tradition. Machaut's music shows a very loose tie between word and tone, since his music is based on the principle of musical construction. The unity between text and music is spiritual, therefore it is a matter of the conceptual substance, as demonstrated by the choice of texts, and not of any immediate relationship of word and tone. The love poems are to be seen as conventional, impersonal love poems. The art of the composer is more to be seen as the *scientia* of the composer in artistry and complexity.¹ However, as Boogart underlines, the use of literary or theological references in the writing of Machaut does allow the composer to put different ideas into a new perspective, it entitles him to create new ideas in literary common places and to play around with well known philosophical pictures. He might rethink the ideas of other recent or distant authors or confront them with each other. Machaut's motets are full of references to different medieval philosophical and theological ideas, as well as quotes of fellow writers and composers. But also, the motets 10 and 17, representing milestones of a spiritual journey, can be seen as opposite approaches to the courtly love theory. Machaut is looking for liberation of the constant presence of antithetic ideas of the wheel of fortune in motet 12 (*libera me* in the tenor is lead against pairings as *hope/ despair, joy/ anguish*). Motets 10 and 17 stand in a similar perspective, held together by different angles of the *nature* concept. Two completely different approaches to the conventions of courtly

¹ See Alfred Einstein: The conflict of word and tone (July 1954). In: The Musical Quarterly. Vol 75/4. London: Oxford 1991, pp. 167.

love are painted, enabling further discussion of a wide range of connotations. Robertson² is quoting a letter of Dante, naming the four traditional ways of writing in medieval text: historical, typological, tropological and anagogical. In the following, all four possibilities of reading in Machaut's motets should be taken into consideration and their interaction with Machaut's musical writing shall be examined. Furthermore, a more literal translation of motet 10, closer to the old French text in grammar and diction, will be proposed.

Courtly Love tradition in Motet 10

Motet 10 shows one of the stages of courtly love pointed out by Tuchheim³. The moans of approaching death from unsatisfied desire are put together with the tenor *obediens usque ad mortem*, which could be standing for another one of those stages - wooing the lady with oaths of virtue and eternal fealty. As pointed out by Boogart⁴, there is a motet by Philippe de Vitry called *douce playsance*, that serves as a model for motet 10. Both motets have their theme, the fire metaphor, but while Vitry describes it as something that can be soothed by pleasure, for Machaut it is a fire, that a human heart can

² See Anne Walters Robertson: *Guillaume de Machaut and Reims. Context and meaning in his musical work*. Cambridge: Cambridge 2002, pp 103. Later quoted as *Robertson*.

³ See Barbara Wertheim Tuchmann: *A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous 14th Century*. New York: Knopf, 1978.

⁴ See Jaques Boogart: *Encompassing Past and Present: Quotations and their function in Machaut's Motets*. In: *Early Music History*. Vol 20. Cambridge: Cambridge 2001, pp. 51. Later quoted as *Boogart*.

not stand for long. The metaphore *fire* is also used in some of the previous motets, as Robertson shows. In motet 10, however, the fire becomes more and more intense and creates a tension between carnal versus spiritual love concepts, underlined by a tenor, that focuses on the obedience concept. *Fire*, here also stands for the willingness to give up one's life for another in order to gain survival and love. The typological reading of these lines clearly goes back to Christ, giving his life for the salvation of mankind. In the pursue of courtly love this is a very common image, leading to adventurous deeds for the lady, as presented in the tales of Arthur and it's counterparts. Fire is used to turn the soul into a form of higher being through mortification.

Musical/Poetical Construction in Motet 10

The isorhythmical structure in motet 10 includes in the first part 3 periodes of 8 tenor bars, showing the same rhythmical structure in the tenor in bars 1-4 and 5-8. The second part shows the same pattern in a smaller scale in just 4 bars with a shortened ending. The rhyme schemes at each ending of the first part is *-ure: dure* (8), *seure* (16), *dure* (24). The second part is mainly constructed from hoquetus passages leading into the final rhyme *nature*. The texts of the upper voices create a network of connotations, especially shown in the various cadencings in the first bars. *Help! My heart has caught on and sustains the fire of burning desire, that never before existed like this set against Help! where can comfort be found for me who is worth as much as a dead man?* The passage *d'ardant désir qu'einsi* must be given special concern, since it introduces the first cadencing in bar 5 with F/C/A approached by a melisma on the top voice, leading into the 3rd and those words therefore being clearly understood by the listener. The second line

draws the rhythm homogeniously through both lines of text. The cadence A/A/E is reached together by both upper voices. Interesting here is the step leading up from D to E in the top voice creating a contrast to the 3rd down C to A on the word *mors*. The literal contrast between *soutenu* and *mors* is also shown in this cadence. The following lines *Love is it, who should with of hope held back joy cool down this burning. If the fire, that inspires art lasts* and *When nothing can protect me except [...]* interact more like a dialogue than they do at the beginning. Emphazised words therefore are *joie retenu*, *garentir* and *se le feu qui ensement l'art*. Especially the last phrase is problematic in translation. The word *art* can refer to skill, talent, knowledge, but also allows a broad field of religious connotations, like a god given destiny. Having this phrase stand out on it's own with nothing but a breves in the tenor and rests in the second voice could therefore also be noticed as an exclamation of an idea. This theory is also underlined by the previous mixolydian cadencing (prepared by the F# in 17) on the word *ardure* on G/C/C, followed by a rest, creating a tension of different meanings that can be present at the same time. The word *art* in a setting of courtly love also recalls Ovid's *ars amatoria* and the grouping with the word *dure*, spelled the same way as in *dure - hard*, and coming back later in the motet in that meaning might be an indication of the hardship the lover encounters, as well as path of the spiritual journey represented in this motet. Not only are the words problematic, also the harmonic progression is a little odd. The phrygian ending E/B under the word *dure* changes right away into E/C as soon as the tenor is picked up again. This progression also separates the phrase from the following and shows it's

outstanding placement in the motet. The ending of the first section therefore might also be seen as a subtitle to the motet.

The second period of eight tenor bars in the motet starts with the following words:

My heart will be bruised and extinct, which through this fire already is without color and darkened in order for it to become noble, loyal and earnest: so much so that I expect that it will die before good Love assures it of mercy by the virtue of certain hope. < - > [...] my dear lady who wants me to cry in despair furthermore because I love her like nobody else. The rhythmical structure ties together the upper voices homogeneously. The cadence in bar 28 on G/C/C picks up the tonality known from *ardure* and spins it over *estains* to *et tains* in bar 32. In 32 the music seems to stop at A/F#/A. Here the stopping of the music refers to the stopping of the heartbeat if we consider that the words *estains* and *et tains* just sound the same way: the idea of salvation through mortalization is emphasized in text and music three times. In bar 38 the motet cadences on F#/B/D followed by C/C/G in 40. If the semitones in this motet (F# and C#) are seen in a melodic regard as suggested by Bain,⁵ the F# stands out and turns over the dorian feeling of into a – at least for the modern listener- B minor chord. If the focal pitch of the motet is assumed to be F as established in the first cadence and at the end F# might even be seen as a way to put the transition shown through the purification of the fire in the text into the music. Hence the words *pour ce que (in order to)* seem to present a *halte* in bar 40 indicating some sort of advice: the F# of bar 38 is not returning until later and *par la vertu d'esperance seure*

⁵ Jennifer Bain: Tonal structure and the melodic role of chromatic inflections in the music of Machaut. In: Plainsong and Medieval Music. Vol. 14/1. Cambridge: Cambridge 2005, pp. 73.

(*through the virtue of certain hope*) can be taken as the direction to the way back into life - finally cadencing on the unison F/F in bar 47.

The third period picks up the F/F unison. *For because of her alone, who endures much misfortune, Pity, to which all beauty leads, is failing, Suffering reigns and Domination stays theret, Disdain lives there and Loyalty is weak there and Love cares for neither her nor me. Joy hates it, my lady, she is harsh. And, in order to increase my miserable misfortune [...] < - > And Memory, in order to inflame the burning of my unhappy desire, always shows me the great goodness and her fine true beauty that makes me burn twice as much.* This section is characterized by the appearance of allegorical figures. Emphasized is the line *Amour n'a de li ne de moy cure* cadenced on F/C/F and followed by a rest. This line integrates the lady in the process for the first time. She also must be suffering by neglecting the persuader. Explanations follow in *Joie le het, ma dame li est dure*. But right away this sentence is put into perspective by naming her properties *grant bonté et fine vrai biauté*. Those properties are expressed by words that mostly refer to character in the literary tradition. *Goodness* is a property somebody can only reach on a higher level of existence in life, like after a spiritual journey. *True beauty* also refers to beauty of the character, therefore the focal pitch is reached in both of those lines (bars 65-71) as an equivalent to the pure moral values presented in the text.

[...]Love, who is my chief puts me in a despair which is so hurtfull that all good is taken away and my body is so unnatural that I must die inspite of Nature <-> Without a heart and without hope I happen to die, neither can any human heart have the fire for a long duration. The second part of the motet introduces hoqueting passages and changes the

sonority. The first anker point would be in bar 80 between *Amours and ardoir*. The connection of those two words cadencing on D/D/A, following the sentence *qui est meschies*, echoing the rhyme of *meschiés*, carrying the idea on to *sans espoir* in 88 on A/F#/A and hoquetus until the cadence in 92 on C/C/G.

The end of the motet consist of an idea that is picked up in motet 17. The harmonic structure in bar 98, introducing Bb/D/F creates a tension between *humains* and the spiritual journey that might be indicated by the reoccurring F# in bar 100 followed by *nullement*, a word stretching the gap between *feu* and *cueur humeins. me convient morir*; *I happen to die* here refers to a supernatural power and can be seen in a religious way. *malgré Nature* – of course introduced as an allegory again - shows the presence of a greater force than the force of nature.

Final union with the beloved in motet 17

The upper voices in motet 10 end in parallel fifths. This perfect interval can be remembered when Machaut picks up the Boethian idea of a perfectly ordered universe in motet 17.⁶ Also the *ardant désir* and the image of the flame of true desire return in motet 17. The question on how to approach the literary conventions of courtly love was already a cause for dispute under philosophers and poets a century before Machaut wrote his motets. In Walther's songs, for example the topoi of courtly love are placed in a new environment. The lady still might be of noble character, but is not of noble birth, which enables the poet to pursue a final union with the beloved in a liberated speech, but still he uses the same poetological concepts. At Machaut's time, the ideals of courtly love already

⁶ See Robertson, pp. 174.

were so dull and overly used, that the final union with the beloved at first glance seems not to make any sense: Neidhart is writing his satirical summer and winter songs in the first half of the 14th century to put up an insulting mirror to the decadent court society of his time. All that underlines Robertson's theory that the maiden in motet 17 might stand for the pure soul to be united with Christ and it also stresses the concept to regard the motets 1-17 as a spiritual journey.

Conclusion and Outlook

If *scens* is perceived as the ability to bring everything into harmony, Machaut was a true master. The words and the music are woven into each other on a large scale (a spiritual journey hidden behind vernacular and latin motets in the style of courtly love poetry), but also are worked into the smallest of details (like note changes, stressing a certain connotation or syllable of a word) in order to create a network of metaphores in different layers and meanings. There are still plenty ways to look at Machaut's work and it is not surprising, that many of artists in the last decades have gone back to look at Machaut's work. Some quoting the master in a way as the master himself would have done it. The dilemma, that poets found themselves in after world war II presented by Adorno and the literary traditions, have led us back to Machaut. His sophisticated work has not only been a model for composers since then, also countless poets have picked up on Machaut's technique of networking speech and meta-speech. The endless cycle of love and pain,⁷ created within motet 17, but also within motet 1 through 17, furthermore might be seen on a much larger scale, connecting artistic approaches over centuries.

⁷ See Robertson, pp. 174.

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