
Anne Walters Robertson’s new study, a discussion of all of Machaut’s motets as well as the Mass and the *David Hocket*, is an impressive addition indeed to the bibliography on this composer. As its title suggests, the corpus of Machaut’s cantus firmus works is interrogated for meanings that are to some extent dependent on the locality and liturgy of Reims itself and the composer’s position within the cathedral there. The initial section of the book presents information about the town and its places of worship, and specifically about the Cathedral of Notre Dame, coronation site for French kings and the institution at which Guillaume de Machaut was active as one of its canons. In the context of Machaut’s association with the cathedral chapter, Motets 18 and 19 are seen as reflecting – specifically and in the abstract, respectively – the often troubled relationship between the canons of Reims and their archbishop. The last section of the book examines the Mass and *David Hocket* in terms of the royal association of Reims cathedral, and treats the three late motets (Motets 21–23) in the context of the Hundred Years’ War (which in 1359/60 was focused on a Reims besieged by Edward III’s forces, who were hoping to have him crowned King of France there). In the central second section of the book, the most fascinating part of the discussion, Motets 1–17 are read as a cycle depicting a spiritual journey of a kind common in the mystical literature to which Machaut would have had access in the library of the cathedral.

A central premise of the book is thus Robertson’s conviction that Machaut’s works need to be resituated in Reims, a location which has been ignored in favour of an emphasis on Machaut’s public life, but which has much to offer their would-be interpreter. The corollary of the usual emphasis on Machaut’s public and political life is that later centuries have been able to conceive of him as a familiar figure, an essentially secular educated man writing love poetry and counterpoint, or – in more recent scholarship – as a professional poet voicing open and multi-layered texts through complex personae. Robertson’s focus on Machaut as a citizen of Reims and a canon of its cathedral offers a counterweight to this view by giving an insight into the
spirituality of Machaut. In so doing, Robertson renders even his ‘courtly’ French-language texts as examples of a Christianity that is of a deeply layered, mystical nature, alien as much to the secular liberal culture of the modern university as to today’s mainstream liberal Christianity.

Until Robertson’s present study, only the Mass was commonly perceived as an exception to Machaut’s secular and courtly interests, being unequivocally sacred and specifically liturgical in function. Nevertheless, a traditional explanation – that it was written for the coronation of Charles V – had provided a convenient way of annexing even this work to a courtly, almost public sphere. Robertson rejects this explanation, and considers the Mass more personal, arguing that it functions first as a devotional Marian celebration and latterly as a requiem for the souls of Guillaume and his brother.¹ Robertson’s reasons for rejecting the theory that the Mass was written for Charles V’s coronation is that its Marian associations would make it inappropriate for Charles’s coronation day, which was on Trinity Sunday. Robertson herself briefly discusses one objection to this, when she recognizes that the Mass is only rubricated ‘de Nostre Dame’ in Vg. This problem is in fact more serious than Robertson suggests, however. Although textually Vg is one of the finest sources (in terms of readings and underlay particularly), it was – despite Robertson’s claim that it was prepared under Machaut’s supervision (p. 261) – probably written outside Machaut’s direct sphere, as the odd ordering of Loange items hints.² As Machaut was a canon at a cathedral dedicated to Our Lady, it is fairly easy to imagine how a scribe could have generated Vg’s unique rubric, especially if he had heard it performed in the cathedral. And, arguably, nothing in its musical substance links the Mass unequivocally to Mary.

A further objection to Robertson’s rejection of the coronation theory is that her preceding chapter – on the David Hocket – had made a strong case for seeing the coronation service itself as, at least analogically, Marian. She argues there that the David Hocket was written for Charles’s coronation despite it being built on a Marian cantus firmus – a far more explicit link to Mary than the lone rubric for the Mass in Vg. Although Robertson starts by almost dismissing the Marian liturgical context of the David Hocket’s tenor in favour of the tropological and allegorical associations of David as musician and, most importantly, as the Lord’s anointed King (a paradigm for French kingship), she goes on to relate the figures of Mary and David analogically, to make clear that both contexts are in fact available and meaningful. Specifically, she argues that the Marian cantus firmus was appropriate to the coronation because of the analogical link between the fleur-de-lis, Mary and Christian kingship – of which David is the biblical model and the French King the foremost living example. So by her own reasoning the coronation is a potentially Marian occasion, as well as being on

¹ This chapter is largely reworked from Robertson’s article, ‘The Mass of Guillaume de Machaut in the Cathedral of Reims’, in Plainsong in the Age of Polyphony, ed. Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge, 1992), 100–39. Certain opportunities for updating have been missed, however. For example, in a note to this chapter on p. 389 Robertson cites Daniel Leech-Wilkinson’s 1990 edition of the Mass as the most recent, showing her text’s origin in a period before the publication of Lucy Cross’s edition in 1998.

² See Lawrence Earp, Guillaume de Machaut: A Guide to Research, Garland Composer Resource Manuals 36 (New York and London, 1995), 244, where Earp suggests that the ‘Vg group lies a bit outside the Machaut circle’.
Trinity Sunday: to argue that the Mass is Marian – something by no means certain – would therefore not necessarily exclude a performance at the coronation.

Robertson instead uses evidence from the cathedral itself to justify a suggestion first made (without much supporting evidence) by Armand Machabey that the provision of a Mass in the epitaph for the Machaut brothers, which existed in Reims cathedral until the eighteenth century, refers to Machaut’s own polyphonic Mass. To link Guillaume’s Mass to Reims, she adduces the fact that the isorhythmic movements are based on well-known chants and that the Gloria and Credo paraphrase Credo I and Gloria IV in the tenor. These chants appear together in a local Kyriale, and Machaut would have known them from singing services as a canon. Robertson goes on to assess how appropriate each of these chants is to a Marian use, finding them all having fourteenth-century connections to Marian liturgies. However, she rules out performance at the Purification, Annunciation, Assumption, Nativity and Conception services because the epitaph suggests the rouelle as the site of celebration, and these great feasts would have been celebrated at the main altar. But this is already assuming that the epitaph and the polyphonic Mass are linked; yet the epitaph says nothing about the Virgin. As further evidence she adduces the large amount of money (300 florins) that the Machauts’ inscription mentions, which, Robertson asserts, is too much for chant alone.

As can be seen from the discussion so far, the chapters on the Mass and the David Hocket offer new interpretations and reject older ones, yet their reasoning is not (and perhaps cannot be made) completely watertight. This is not at all to say that I disagree with Robertson’s hypotheses, let alone that I would proscribe the making of such bold readings. On the contrary, I applaud her fascinating interpretative work and do not entertain any better theories about the performance situation of either work. The pleasures and the perils of this book are the same – its readings require us to place hypothesis on hypothesis. At any stage the hermeneutic house of cards could be blown away, or could be marvelled at as a thing of beauty and scholarly insight. Luckily for her readers Robertson is perceptive and resourceful, particularly in her original inductive use of Machaut’s physical context in Reims. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the core and most compelling section of the book – ‘Turned-About Love Songs’.

This central section of the book situates a number of seemingly secular courtly motets within a spiritual narrative drawn from texts outside those of the motets themselves. Noting that the tenors of Machaut’s motets seem to have been freely chosen (they are not the tenors commonly used in thirteenth-century motets), Robertson seeks to understand Machaut’s reasons for picking those particular musico-textual fragments – what might they have meant to him? In sourcing the tenors she looks not just to the chant’s liturgical context and parent biblical texts but

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3 These paraphrases are very loose, and were merely proposed by Handschin and Leech-Wilkinson, respectively; they are not universally accepted. The 1992 version of this chapter is much more equivocal in both ascribing these views to named other scholars (whose names are removed from the main text in the book version) and in using language suggesting equivocation and provisionality; see Robertson, ‘The Mass of Guillaume de Machaut’, 104.
also to the occurrence of such textual tags in the mystical and theological writings to which Machaut had access in the library at Reims cathedral. The texts of many of the tenors are those commonly expounded upon in mystical writings by figures such as Henry Suso, making them affective meditative phrases that key a reader or listener into an exegesis which can be literal, allegorical, tropological or typological. In a manner reminiscent of the arguments made for motets from the previous century by Sylvia Huot, Robertson notes a deep interpenetration of sacred and secular vocabularies. By viewing the motets’ upper voices as this interpenetrative kind of commentary on the tenor, Robertson is able to explain how a situation that seems unequivocally secular can in fact be read as an allegory for a stage on a spiritual journey in pursuit of sacred love.

When read in the light of the mystical writings popular in Machaut’s time and available to him in the cathedral library, the first seventeen motets are revealed to form a veritable song cycle, representing the twelve more-or-less standard steps on a spiritual journey to union with the Beloved (Christ). This journey – often elaborated by pictures – can be found in many works of the period, notably in Suso’s *Horologium Sapientiae* (Wisdom’s Watch Upon the Hours), which Machaut could have found in the library at Reims. The idea that the order of Machaut’s motets is structural and meaningful and the use of the spiritual journey as a frame enables the explanation of otherwise troublingly ‘low’ secular texts such as Motet 16, whose tenor is a secular song in which a lady asks why her husband beats her. Although this is not a text expounded per se (as the chant tenors’ texts are) by mystical writers, Robertson is able to show that the idea of being beaten – and, in one example, of wife-beating specifically – is a stage that comes immediately before the full union with the Beloved, which is the journey’s end. This may seem incredible to any modern reader unused to such analogical contortions, even if he or she is also acutely aware of the otherness of medieval reading habits. However, Robertson’s discussion of the first seventeen motets as reflective of this narrative is highly referenced, stimulating and thought-provoking. Whether it is also ultimately convincing will no doubt depend on the individual modern reader’s requirements of inductive interpretation; personally, I find it enticing because it joins a tiny handful of attempts to read significant meaning into Machaut’s use of small-scale order in the musical items of his oeuvre.

Order has often been noted as central to Machaut’s poetics, but little has been done by way of explaining the ordering of individual lyric and musical items, except to comment that it reflects chronology (an argument that neither Robertson nor I find convincing on a piece-by-piece basis, even if it seems logical on a batch-by-batch basis). Robertson’s disclosure of the seventeen-motet sequence is all the more surprising given that this number of motets is not one to which we have any material witness. Motets 1–20 occur in the earliest source, yet Robertson divides them into three groups as 1–17, 18–19 and 20. And she recognizes that there may have been

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stages before the full set of seventeen, which Machaut may have only decided upon close to the compilation of manuscript C. Motets 2 and 3 form a pair, for example, as do 14 and 15.

As well as positing earlier stages than the seventeen-motet cycle, Robertson recognizes later expanded versions of the motets’ order when she deals with the last three motets, Motets 21–23. She comments that both Motets 23 and 17 are terminal in function, and that both have Marian tenors (something Machaut associates with terminality, whether of manuscript order or of his own life). Given her acknowledgement of both earlier and later stages of order within the motets, it seems a little curious that Robertson gives short shrift to the work of Thomas Brown and Jacques Boogaart, both of whom analyse the cycle of twenty that exists in the earliest material manifestation of the motets. Motet 20 is also terminal – in its obsessive use of a single rhyme sound in the motetus and its final ‘Amen’ – and like M23, but unlike M17, it does actually occur as the final motet copied in a surviving manuscript witness.

Attempts to posit an earlier closed cycle of pieces whose number and boundaries are exceeded already in the earliest surviving source risks attracting the scepticism of those who would seek to limit our appreciation of Machaut’s ability to create meaning through order and number in the extant copies. However, such scepticism strikes me as unnecessarily limiting, especially in view of how late in Machaut’s career the earliest collected source was compiled. However, I would also not wish to see an order that is present in a surviving physical copy discounted. Machaut as scribe and secretary was an expert reviser of order, someone for whom amplification of a previously complete cycle was an opportunity rather than a loss. The integrity of the original cycle was not jeopardized by the additions, but the additive process brought about new order relations, new connections, and further meanings. Robertson seems to acknowledge this possibility in her recognition of both Motets 17 and 23 as ‘terminal’ and her comment that the use of the same tenor source in both Motets 18 and 21 represents a ‘higher-scale of organization’ (p. 222), but she is unwilling to extend this multiplicity to the 1–20 sequence of Brown and Boogaart (p. 221). Given Machaut’s interest in order, the 1–20 group is surely also meaningful, even if it has, embedded within it, a closed group of seventeen motets, a pair of motets on canonical themes and a valediction for Bonne of Luxembourg. Machaut’s meanings and authorial intent as a compiler of books are also present in this material witness, even if it is Robertson’s masterstroke to uncover the seventeen-motet cycle within the twenty, enabling her to explain the last three as somehow different (and, in the case of Motets 18 and 19, earlier). This should not lead to an out-and-out rejection of the ways in which these seventeen also make sense within the twenty that form the materially ordered whole of manuscript C. Nor should it restrict the meanings of the order of the first seventeen to the narrative of a spiritual journey, even if this may in some sense be the master narrative of several that are analogically equivalent.

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Robertson’s Prologue and Epilogue frame her book in terms of a changing late medieval perspective on musical meaning. As she presents him, the figure of Machaut stands in the shifting sands between the functional mathematical science of medieval music and the artistic rhetorical art that music became in the Renaissance. In this reading, Machaut’s works show an overlay of late medieval scholasticism and nascent humanism. Anyone who has experience of Machaut’s music and poetry can testify that there is indeed something very special about it: his pieces give a clear sense of the man as an artist, as a composer and author in a very modern sense. However, like all such statements the broad-brush characterization of his borderline status within traditional historical periodizations, whilst it makes a publisher-friendly global statement for the Prologue and Epilogue, risks misrepresenting (and denigrating) the things that come before. I am far from convinced, for example, that the polyphonic traditions of twelfth- and thirteenth-century liturgical polyphony, such as that of Notre Dame, are particularly numerical. While functional, such polyphony surely derives much of its meaning from its beauty and expansiveness, especially in two-part organa, which offer sections of exquisite vocalise thrown into hierarchical relief (in terms of level of consonance) by held tenor notes. It seems similarly perverse to see the tradition of monophonic secular music epitomized by the troubadours and trouvères as squarely Pythagorean, about number rather than emotion, and functional rather than artistic; surely this musical poetry is deeply rhetorical? And even music theory, despite the post-Carolingian vogue for Boethian Pythagoreanism, clearly discusses music’s affective qualities. I thus find it difficult to see what kind of previous musical tradition would adequately be referred to as mathematical. The thirteenth-century motet may be based on repeating tenor rhythms and pitches, but it can hardly be considered lacking in artistry and rhetoric after the recent work of Sylvia Huot and Christopher Page – however much they may disagree as to the parameters within which the motet’s subtilitas may operate. Even chant does not fit the bill: a spate of twelfth-century criticisms of self-indulgent singers’ embellishments seems to confirm that at the level of performance at least artistic pride on the part of singer-composers was alive and well. Just because these singers did not write the individualized notes they ‘composed’ through improvisation (not in the sense of spontaneous free elaboration but in the sense of probably often repeated embellishments, composed and recomposed in performance) does not make them less ‘individual’ – just unavailable for us to study. Perhaps this observation points more convincingly to Machaut’s real realm of innovation – he is a musician deeply embedded within a textual culture, obsessed with writing and with textuality. For him, music is an authorial art not at the level of sounding performance but at the level of silent writing, to the extent that, as Huot and others have argued, writing becomes the performance, especially in its visual aspect.

Robertson orientates her analysis towards the rhetorical through a focus on the verbal texts of the motets. Her stated purpose is not to plumb the depths of meaning in any one motet, but rather to show the overall shape of the journey and the place of each motet within it (p. 109), and the extent to which the analysis of each motet incorporates the musical performance of those poetic elements is variable. Her general
emphasis on verbal sense means that the motets whose tenor source is unknown merit very cursory treatment due to the non-availability of further textual contexts for exegesis. At those (and other) points her analysis might usefully have incorporated even limited aspects of the more ‘numerical’ analyses of other scholars, notably Boogaart. This would not have necessitated the exhaustive musical or poetic analysis she explicitly forswears, but its conclusions might have challenged her historiographical frame, since, for Machaut’s motets, number is rhetoric.

Although it may seem churlish to ask for expansion of a book that is already so full, a greater emphasis on music is not the only way in which the powerful central exegesis of the first seventeen motets could have been made even more persuasive. This central section in particular would have benefited from a fuller consideration of the rest of Machaut’s poetic and musical output. Robertson’s thoroughly understandable justification is that the sheer volume of Machaut’s works necessitates a narrower focus. She claims her choice of the cantus firmus works is justified because they cover the full spread of chronology, languages and registers, and thus represent Machaut’s works in microcosm. However, although it is true that the three motets, Motets 21–23, are later, the first twenty motets significantly pre-date the first surviving collected manuscript source; some could be very early. One suspects the more practical reason for her choice is that the tenor cantus firmus provides a verbal extra-musical key, which is missing (or at least inexplicit) in the non-cantus firmus works. The result of this, however, is that the central bulk of Machaut’s work – French formes fixes poetry – is represented only through the distorting lens of French motet texts. A fuller musical and poetic analysis of the central motet sequence might have been included even at the expense of parts of the two current outer sections of the book. This would have grounded Robertson’s striking central thesis about Motets 1–17 within their Machautian musical and poetic contexts, as a complement to the context of Reims cathedral and its library.

To be fair, Robertson wonders in the Epilogue whether similar sens ordering may be found in the other musical lyric genres. I have recently advanced the idea that the first five balades in the music section form a sequence that in some ways intersects with and parallels the opening of the Loange. From Robertson’s book it is clear that the theme of the Lover choosing between the pain of a secret love and the risk of refusal if he declares it is similarly found in the opening motets. This parallel may extend further, given that Robertson speculates that Motet 1 could have been fabricated retrospectively, something I have also argued for Balade 1. Such retrospective fashioning of opening gestures is plainly the case for Machaut’s Prologue, and this should make it apparent that a focus on order as meaning rather than as chronology would bring us much closer to the reading experience of the Middle Ages, as well as to Machaut’s intentions. The argument that the spiritual journey analogy might also penetrate the songs is harder to make in the absence of spiritually resonant tenor cues, but it might be made purely on the basis that these meanings are a feature not only of

texts themselves alone, but also of readers and readings. If tropological and analogical reading can be shown to be the norm, then readers could choose to understand Machaut’s je lover as a soul on a journey, regardless of whether he is in Motet 1 or Balade 1. To situate these meanings in the domain of reception may be thought to imperil the argument for authorial intention that is necessary if Machaut the poet-composer is to represent a new individualism generally associated with the Renaissance. But Machaut is not just an author but also a reader par excellence, as his use of other texts shows. He would have been aware of all the kinds of readings that his text made available given the contemporary habits of readers, with which he would be well acquainted and of which he himself is an outstandingly proficient practitioner.

Although it is not the single-volume introduction to Machaut that would update the now sadly inadequate 1971 study of the composer by Gilbert Reaney, this undeniably full and rewarding book is sure to stimulate debate and open new avenues of research for many decades to come. Robertson’s Appendix 2, containing the complete texts and English translations of the motets, will be a particular boon.

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