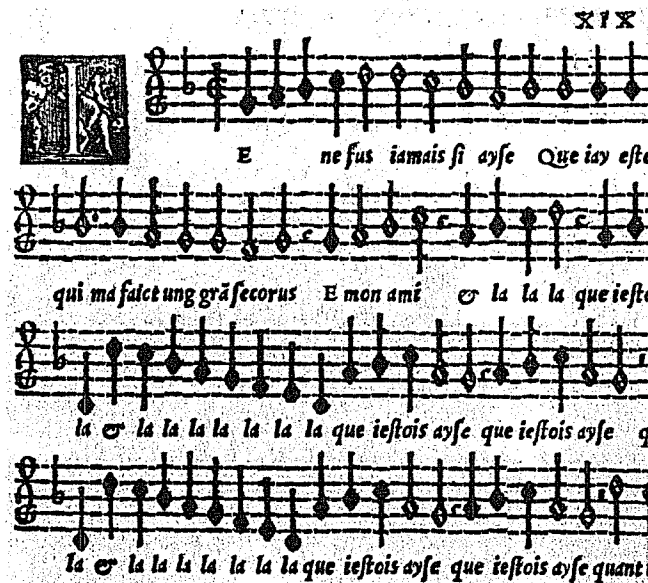


Musique mesurée: Music of Elegance and Simplicity

by Lyn Schenbeck



Musique mesurée was a type of chanson developed by the poets and musicians of the Académie de poésie et de musique in Paris during the latter half of the sixteenth century. The Académie was created under the Letters Patent of Charles IX in 1570. The goal of its founding members, poet Jean Antoine de Baïf (1532–89) and musician Joachim Thibault de Courville (d. 1581), was to create a new kind of music that would revive music's ethical power. Their aim was not to improve or modify conventional verse and music but to create a new style of art.¹

Members of the Académie consisted of professional musicians who performed the *musique mesurée* and gentlemen auditors. Composers associated with the Académie included Pierre Certon (d. 1572), Nicholas de la Grotte (1530–1600), Jacques Mauduit (1557–1627), Eustache du Caurroy (c.1549–1609), Claude Goudimel (1514–72), Claude Le Jeune (c. 1528–1600), and Orlando di Lasso (c. 1530–94). Two-hour performances took place every Sunday at Baïf's house.

Vers mesurée

Musique mesurée is based on the principles of *vers mesurée*, a sixteenth-century style of French poetry inspired by classical models. In the spirit of Renaissance humanism and its interest in the past, Baïf devised a set of rules for French verse based on the prosody of the ancient Greeks. He developed a system of phonetic spelling (Figure 1) that helped determine which syllables would be stressed (and therefore elongated) and which would be unstressed.² Baïf's phonetic alphabet consisted of ten vowels and nineteen

consonants that represented sounds of the spoken language more accurately than the conventional alphabet and distinguished more clearly between long and short syllables. In order to accomplish this, he invented rules for determining which syllables are always long (e.g., any vowel followed by two consonants). The system was not without flaws; sometimes an unaccented syllable was considered long, which produced an incorrect stress.³

Setting Verse to Music

Composers of the Académie applied the quantitative principles of Baïf's *vers mesurée* to their musical settings of French poetry. The result was *musique mesurée*, a style in which words were set according to accent in a simple, homophonic texture. The words and their affect were clearly communicated. Thus, *musique mesurée* as a style stood in opposition to much secular music of the early sixteenth century in which contrapuntal activity obscured the text. To some extent Baïf's principles anticipated the aims of the early-seventeenth-century Italian theorists and composers in Florence who promulgated the *stile recitativo*.

A good example of Baïf's method applied to music is *Vous me tuez si doucement*, one of his *chansonnettes mesurées*, set to music by Mauduit in 1586. The poetic meter is as follows:

Vous me tuez si doucement
 Aveque tourmans tant benins
 Que ne scay chose de douceur

Plus douce qu'est ma douce mort
 S'il faut mourir, mouron
 d'amour.⁴

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In his musical setting Mauduit matches the long syllables with long notes (usually a half note) and the short syllables with a note half that length (Figure 2).

Using these simple principles other composers set Baif's *verses mesurées*, as well

as those of other major poets such as Pierre de Ronsard. One excellent example is Le Jeune's *O Vous, Reine d'honneur*, from his collection of *Airs* published by Pierre Attaignant in 1608. The poet was probably Baif, and the chanson may have been written for the 1572 wedding entertainments of Marguerite de Valois, daughter of Catherine de Medici, and Henri de Navarre. Typical of poetry written for court entertainments, these verses not only praise the Queen and King but also celebrate France and the gods: "Grand oracle promettant tout bonheur en France désormais" (Henceforth the great oracle promises total well-being in France). The oracle was Apollo, the Greek god of manly beauty, music, and poetry, who foretold eternal happiness for France. Verse three echoes sentiments that lay at the core of humanism: "On verra s'élever les arts, l'ignorance s'abaisser" (When one seeks to elevate the arts, ignorance declines).

The *musique mesurée* style of *O Vous, Reine d'honneur* is clearly seen in its lively rhythm. The texture is mostly homorhythmic, alternating between duple and triple rhythmic groupings. After each verse, the *rechant* or refrain is sung. The music is written for five parts with the exception of the concluding *reprise* set for seven voices. Of the five parts, the *taille* is the most elaborate in all the verses, introducing passing tones to add melodic interest (Figure 3).

Other compositions by Le Jeune also demonstrate an elaborate *taille* part. *Reveyez venir du printemps* from Le Jeune's *Le printemps* (1603) opens with a *rechant à 5* in which the *taille* is highly ornamented compared with the other voices (Figure 4).⁵ *Musique mesurée* chansons by Certon, de la Grotte, de Courville, and Mauduit, however, show a more homorhythmic treatment of voices, with less melodic ornamentation.

One Le Jeune chanson, however, displays an unorthodox use of chromatic harmony, atypical of the *musique mesurée* style. *Qu'est devenu ce bel œil*, for three voices, is the last composition in the 1608 *Airs*. Although the rhythm and text follow all of Baif's rules, chromaticism abounds in each voice part (Figure 5).⁶

Le Jeune's *Muze honorons de ta chanson* from his *Airs* (1608) illustrates a notational device that may mislead modern editors or performers (Figure 6). Although no music is written on the lowest voice

Modern Symbol	Baif's Symbol	Baif's Description	Phonetic Symbol
ch	ç	ç pour ch	[ʃ]
e	e	e brief	[ə]
é	é	é komun	[e] or [é]
ê	e'	e'	[è] or [ê]
g (gu before e)	Ʒ or ʒ	Ʒ pour gu	[g]
j	j	j por i konsone	[ʒ]
l	ʎ	ʎ pour ill	[ʎ] (palatal l)
gn (ng when final)	ɲ	ɲ pour gn	[ɲ] (palatal n)
o	o	o brief	[ɔ] or [o]
au	@ or ω	@ long	[o]
ou	8	8 pour ou	[u]
eu	ⓔ	pour eu	[ø] or [œ]

All other symbols are the same in both spellings

Figure 1. The orthographical symbols used by Baif

Figure 2. Mauduit, *Vous me tuez si doucement*

Figure 3. Le Jeune, *O Vous Reine d'honneur*

Rechant à cinq

Dessus
Re - ve - cy ve - nir du Prin - temps L'a - mou - reux le doux et beau temps.

Cinquième
Re - ve - cy ve - nir du Prin - temps L'a - mou - reux le doux et beau temps.

Haute-contre
Re - ve - cy ve - nir du Prin - temps L'a - mou - reux le doux et beau temps.

Taille
Re - ve - cy ve - nir du Prin - temps L'a - mou - reux le doux et beau temps.

Basse-contre
Re - ve - cy ve - nir du Prin - temps L'a - mou - reux le doux et beau temps.

Figure 4. Le Jeune, *Revecy venir du printemps*

part, the text is given. This does not mean that some music has been lost and that the editor/performer must reconstruct the part. Rather, it was Le Jeune's method of indicating tacet for the bass part without having to insert a variety of rests. The music, with its momentary change to four-part texture, is complete as it stands.⁷

Textural changes in this chanson are characteristic of many *musique mesurée* works. It begins in five voices, continues with part two in four voices (omitting the *basse-contre*) and ends with part three in six voices. The form of this chanson differs from most other Le Jeune *musique mesurée* pieces. It contains no *rechant*, merely three separate sections with a many-voiced finale proclaiming the illustriousness of Henry. The score contains no indications of repeats.

Little sacred music was composed in *musique mesurée* style, other than Le Jeune's *Pseaumes en vers mesurez* (1606). For these twenty-six settings, the texts of the psalms were translated into French verse (or, in three cases, Latin) by Baïf and others.⁸ Eustache du Caurroy, who was apparently converted to *musique mesurée* upon hearing two of Le Jeune's psalm settings, wrote similar works that have survived. Two simple settings are *O Createur, tu remets* for five voices and *Nous te loüons, bon Dieu* for four voices.

A Useful Repertory

Musique mesurée chansons were composed between 1570 and 1600, though many collections were published just

after the turn of the century. Though much of the music is no longer extant, the chansons available in modern editions are excellent for small ensembles and fairly easy to perform. Although the pieces are rhythmically challenging, their homophonic texture, uncomplicated melodies, and limited vocal ranges make them accessible even for high school choirs. *Musique mesurée* chansons provide a simple and elegant alternative to the more difficult English and Italian madrigal literature of this period.

NOTES

- ¹ D. P. Walker, "The Aims of Baïf's Académie de Poésie et de Musique," in *Music, Spirit and Language in the Renaissance*, ed. Penelope Gouk (London: Variorum Repr., 1985), 93.
- ² Francois Lesure and D. P. Walker, "Introduction," in Claude Le Jeune, *Airs, 1608* (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1951-59), xxiii.
- ³ D. P. Walker, "French Verse in Classical Metres, and the Music to Which It Was Set . . ." (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University,



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Dessus
Haute-contre
Taille

Qu'est de-ve-nu ce bel œil qui mon ame é-clai-roit je de ses rays, Dans qui l'A-mour re-trou-voit ses fle-cbes, fla - mes et traits?

Qu'est de-ve-nu ce bel œil qui mon ame é-clai-roit je de ses rays, Dans qui l'A-mour re-trou-voit ses fle-cbes, fla - mes et traits?

Figure 5. Le Jeune, *Qu'est devenu ce bel œil*

1940) discusses Baif's rules and the problems connected with them.

⁴ Ibid., 53. Translation by Lyn Schenbeck:

You kill me so sweetly
With such blessed torment
That knows nothing of sweetness
Richer is my bittersweet death
If I must die let it be from love.

⁵ The text given in the example, which differs from some modern editions, was found in the original part book and in the *Lesure/Walker Aires*.

⁶ Claude Le Jeune, *Airs* (1608), IV, ed. D. P. Walker (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1959), 66.

⁷ D. P. Walker, "Some Aspects and Problems of musique mesurée à l'antique," *Musica Disciplina* 4 (1950), 174.

⁸ Modern edition by Henry Expert in *Maître Musiciens de la Renaissance Française*, vols. 20–22 (Paris: by the editor, 1905–1906; repr. edition New York: Broude Brothers, 1959).

—CJ—

3 Dessus
Haute-contre
Taille
Cinquième

C'est lui qui seul nous donne en la sai - son.

C'est lui qui seul nous donne en la sai - son.

C'est lui qui seul nous donne en la sai - son.

C'est lui qui seul nous donne en la sai - son.

5

Sans le guer - don l'art pér - it,

Sans le guer - don l'art pér - it,

Sans le guer - don l'art pér - it,

Sans le guer - don l'art pér - it,

Figure 6. Le Jeune, *Muze honorons de ta chanson*

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