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Playing with the Performer in Medieval Music:
Machaut’s Ideas on Love and Order in
Quant vraie Amour / O series summe rata /
Super omnes speciosa (Motet 17)

Machaut’s seventeenth motet might be one of his earliest works. Under its simple appearance
it hides essential poetic reflections about the problematic relationship between paradoxical
Love and the regular order of the universe, a problem which he kept pondering all his life.
This problem is expressed both by the texts and by the music. To bring his performers
to an understanding of his thought, Machaut first misled them, in a clever play with the
ambiguities of the notational system of his time. We can still enjoy that play when reading
and performing his music.

The fourteenth-century poet-composer Guillaume de Machaut often plays with the reader/
performer of his musical works. The present tense ‘plays’ is used here on purpose, since
we can still take part in that play, when we do not just read from a modern transcription
but try to understand the way in which Machaut has conceived and written down his
composition. Especially in his motets, which for the most part belong to the earlier part
of his compositional career, clear traces of his thoughts about the relationship between
text and music can be detected.

In seventeen of his twenty-three motets Machaut reflected on the many love-problems
about which the poets of the preceding century had sung in their poems; he was a faithful
heir to the tradition of the troubadours and trouvères. But Machaut went further and
turned such problems into almost philosophical reflections about human emotions, by
merging literary ideas with intricate modern composition and exploring the limits of
the new speculative theoretical ideas of the fourteenth century. In comparison to his
contemporaries, he was somewhat exceptional in his preference for writing French texts;
in this respect he continued the great motet tradition of the thirteenth century, where,
especially in its latter half, French texts are in the majority. (In the surviving Ars nova
motets Latin prevails.) I will concentrate on one particular motet, Quant vraie Amour /
O series summe rata / Super omnes speciosa, which might be one of his earliest works.1
It seems almost a textbook example of the genre; it has a very clear and regular structure –
so regular indeed as to arouse some suspicion.

An isorhythmical motet – the archetypal musical genre in French theoretical treatises
of the fourteenth century – is built on a borrowed melody, usually a melisma taken from
plainchant (sometimes a secular song), which is called the color. It becomes the lowest
voice of the new composition, the tenor. Its notes are rhythmicized in large values, divided
into a small number of identical rhythmic formulae, the taleae. Over this tenor two upper

1 For the greater part, Machaut’s motets belong to his earlier compositions; they are already almost complete
in the oldest manuscript of his works, MS Paris, BnF f.fr. 1586 (c. 1350), and reappear virtually unchanged and
in the same order (which is not chronological) in the later manuscripts, except in the late MS BnF f.fr. 9221.
Only the last three Latin motets were probably composed c. 1358-60.
voices, a *triplum* and a *motetus*, are composed, following more or less the melodic and rhythmic contour of the tenor, but far more freely and in smaller note values, with, in principle, the motetus at a distance of a fifth, the triplum of an octave above the tenor. The piece is not notated in score but in separate voice parts.

In this work the color consists of 18 notes; it is repeated and is both times divided by three taleae. The end of the talea is each time marked very clearly by a little melodic refrain in the highest voice, the triplum. The connection to the next talea is made in the middle voice, the motetus, by two longs in ligature forming a descending interval of a third or fourth; only the transition to the last talea is a rising fifth in two separate longs. These two devices make the structure easy to follow for the listener.

In sound and contrapuntal technique the work leaves at once a strange and an old-fashioned impression. The tenor melody is rather high-pitched in comparison to those of other motets; since the upper voices should in principle sound above it, the whole piece seems conceived in a very high register, although there are some voice-crossings, notably by the motetus.\(^2\) Also striking are the many held-out perfect sonorities and several strings of parallel perfect intervals, especially fifths. Such parallels would certainly have been crossed out by later masters of counterpoint, but they were already disapproved of by theorists of this period, and Machaut usually avoided them. For about a third of the time only perfect intervals are heard. It gives the impression that the piece was meant to emphasize the sound of the basic consonances of fifth, fourth and octave, the Pythagorean cosmic harmony. This would be in accordance with the message of the texts, as will be seen.

The upper voices use two languages, French and Latin (motet 17 is one of only two bilingual motets in Machaut’s corpus). The French triplum has six strophes of five lines, each strophe covering a talea; the Latin motetus has sixteen lines of text (divided over the taleae as 4 x 3 and 2 x 2; the rate of declamation thus slows down towards the end of the piece). The ‘sport’ of a motet was – and still is – to find out which subject the composer-poet treats and how he translates it in musical terms. Egidius de Murino, one of the few theorists to give indications for the composition of motets (in his treatise *Ars qualiter et quomodo debent fieri mottetti*), prescribes to choose for the tenor a fragment of chant of which ‘the words should concord with the matter about which you wish to make the motet.’\(^3\) The tenor words, a fragment from the Marian antiphon *Ave regina coelorum*, are: ‘Super omnes speciosa,’ ‘Fair above all’. To discover their meaning in the motet, first Machaut’s own texts must be discussed.\(^4\)

The triplum (Figure 1) treats a moral problem: a girl has pledged herself to a true lover but is then courted by a second suitor, whom she refuses because she must remain faithful to her first love-bond. Love is presented as a regulator who, by command of Nature, at the right time couples two lovers. Very unusual is the presentation of the argument in

\(^2\) There is of course no absolute pitch in this period; yet, in this case the notation is suggestive of a high register. Philippe de Vitry used the same melody for his motet *Vos qui / Gratissima / Gaude gloriosa / Contratenor* but he transposed it down a fifth. A clear example of the opposite is the rondeau *Puis qu’en oubli*, in which Machaut used the lowest available clefs, obviously in order to express the utterly depressed mood of the text.


a double chain-like syntax of dependent conditional clauses preceding the principal sentence; this is found nowhere else in contemporary French poetry. The text opposes

In its syntactical and semantical structure the text was probably modeled on the praise of Amor by the late-Roman author Boethius (De consolatione philosophiae II, m. 8). This poem has the same syntactical structure, which in Latin poetry is as unusual as it is in Machaut’s poem. For a further explanation of the background of Machaut’s texts, see my article ‘Encompassing past and present’ in Early Music History 20 (2001), pp. 41-50. The present article is an elaboration of the remarks made there.

Quant Vraie Amour enflamee,  When True Love inflamed,  
D’ardant desir engendree,  and engendered from burning desire,  
Pucente mestrie  masters a girl  
Ou temps que doit estre amee,  at the time when she ought to be loved,  
Se vrais amans l’en prie  if a true lover prays her for it (her love)  

Par foy de fait esprouvee,  by faith proved by deed,  
Tant que loiautez juree  so that sworn loyalty  
Fait qu’elle à li s’ottrie  makes her give herself to him  
in such perfect union  
Qu’enduy n’ont qu’une vie,  that the two of them have but one life,  

C’un cuer ne c’une pensee,  but one heart, but one thought,  
C’est qu’en deduit ait duree  that is in order that in pleasure there  
shall be durability,  
Leur amour commencie.  after the beginning of their love.  
Se puis vient autre qui bee  If then another comes who strives  
to make her his beloved,  

Et celle dou tout li vee,  and she utterly refuses him,  
Pour ce qu’avant s’est donnee,  because she has given herself before,  
S’il par sa druerie  if he, [driven] by his love-feelings,  
Maintient qu’Amours soit faussee,  maintains that Love is false  
Quant il n’i trueve mie  because he does not find in her  

Merci d’amant desiree  the lover’s reward he desires  
Combien qu’il l’ait comparee  although he has paid for it  
Par mout dure hachie,  by very hard torments,  
[Nen] doit estre Amour blassee  [then] Love ought not to be blamed for it  
Mais de tant plus prisie  but esteemed all the more  

Qu’elle ensieut comme ordenee  because she follows, as she was commanded,  
Nature qui l’a formee,  Nature who has formed her,  
Sans estre en riens brisie;  without being at all broken;  
Car qui .ij. fois vuet denree,  for: he who wants goods twice  
Le marcheant conchie.  cheats the merchant.

Figure 1  
The text of the triplum of Guillaume de Machaut’s motet 17, Quant vraie Amour / O series summe rata / Super omnes speciosa. My translation.
two situations: when True Love masters a girl at the right time..., if she is then asked by a suitor... and if they unite and have but one life..., then this is in order to make their union durable. A contrast follows, with the same construction: if another lover turns up..., if she refuses him..., if he persists and accuses Love of being false..., even then Love should not be blamed but praised all the more. The reason is that Love cannot be ‘broken’; she follows the commands of Nature, who has ‘formed’ her. A proverbial expression, as a popular wisdom to demonstrate the truth of the reasoning, concludes the poem: ‘he who wants goods twice cheats the merchant.’ The last word, conchie – ‘cheats’ or ‘shits on’, a rude expression – rings out of tune in Machaut’s usually elevated poetic language; he used it rarely. One of its few occurrences is in the introduction to his Jugement dou roy de Navarre, where the Black Death of 1348-49 is explained as a punishment for human sin. There it points to the reason for this plague: Nature avenges herself for the corruption and utter disharmony in the human world: all those who should naturally love each other, cheat (conchie) each other instead.6 In the motet the word ‘conchie’ may thus equally denote a disharmony, which is the consequence of trying to break the bond of Love; loyalty in love is a key concept in all of Machaut’s poetry.

Amour, then, rules the natural order of things, but a problem remains: the second suitor follows her as well, in her aspect of Desire, which makes him endure Love’s pains and insist on having his reward. This makes him, however, transgress the laws of Nature because the first love-bond must not be broken. Thus Love may also cause disorder, by the contradictory character of Desire.

The motetus text (Figure 2) explores the problem of the relationship between Love and Order further, viewed within an even clearer cosmic perspective. The invocation of the first line allows for several translations: the Series summe rata is the ‘calculated chain of the sum’ or, interpreted in a related sense, the ‘perfectly proportioned order of the universe’? Then the problem is expounded as a chain of causes in a hierarchical descent: the Order reigns over Nature by a uniform bond or tie (ligatura; also a musical term) that cannot be broken, as has been proved by reasonable arguments. Yet this same Order has also given birth to Love who despises Measure (again a musical term), i.e. reason and restraint. Love is sweet but also causes fire. She gives a ‘creature’, a lady who is gentle to all but hard for the poet himself. The poet’s persona appears here for the first time in the motet, at the bottom of the scale, in the repeated word ‘michi’. Since he does not understand the result of this chain of cause and effect, the ‘I’ complains about this ‘genitura’, this birth or generation. Given the combination of the texts one may assume that he is the unhappy second lover in the triplum.

It appears, then, that in his motet Machaut ponders the ambiguous role of Love in the universe, on the one hand as maintaining a natural harmony in the world, on the other as destabilizing that same harmony. What is the meaning of the tenor text in view of this paradox?

The source for the words ‘super omnes speciosa’ is found in the Bible, in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, Sapientia 7:29. The author praises Divine Wisdom: ‘For she is more
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beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of the stars. A little further, in Sap 8:1-2, Wisdom is exalted both as ordering the cosmos and as a beloved: ‘She reacheth therefore from end to end mightily, and ordereth all things sweetly. Her have I loved, and have sought her out from my youth, and have desired to take her for my spouse, and I became a lover of her beauty.’ The courtship of Wisdom as the beloved one, which can be interpreted as a search for insight into the order of the universe, explains the choice of this particular chant for a motet of which the subject is the incomprehensible relationship between Love and Order.

How did Machaut render such lofty ideas and images in music? The poems have in common that both have a chain-reasoning, and a central idea in both is the bond that must not be broken; in the motetus this idea is expressed in the words ‘non pati fracturam’, and in the triplum as ‘en riens brisie’. The image of an unbreakable chain is ingeniously rendered by the tenor rhythm (Example 1). In Machaut’s works – as in Ars nova works in general – the mensuration must be deduced from the grouping and combination of the note-signs: mensuration signs, although available, are used very rarely. The values of tempus and prolatio are unproblematic (respectively imperfect and perfect), but the modus is difficult to determine. (It is important to know its quality since the motet contains an exceptionally high number of longs.) Long signs are not visually differentiated as perfect or imperfect; only the rests are unambiguous: a vertical stroke of two spaces for imperfect long rests, of three spaces for perfect long rests (which are not used here). An imperfect long rest between two longs in the tenor is one of the most reliable indications that imperfect mode is meant (a long then lasts two breves). Each talea contains three such rests.

Figure 2
The text of the motetus of motet 17. Translation by Leofranc Holford-Strevens.

8 ‘Est enim haec speciosior sole et super omnem stellarum dispositionem.’ In the poetic tradition called ‘sapiential’ by Peter Dronke, the Virgin appears as the personification of Sapiencia; hence the choice of this text for a Marian antiphon. P. Dronke, Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, vol. I, pp. 87-97.

9 ‘Adtingit enim a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter. Hanc amavi, et exquisivi a iuventute mea, et quaesivi sponsam mihi adsumere, et amator factus sum formae illius.’

36
Although up to a certain point the tenor could also be read in imperfect mode, it gradually appears from the combination of the notes and from the counterpoint that, belying this strong convention, the longs are perfect, three breves worth. And yet the first and last long rest are not complemented by a breve, as is the middle one; it suggests a temporary change to imperfect mode. As a result the tenor exhibits an odd arrangement of three bars in perfect mode followed by one bar in imperfect mode, twice per talea (Example 2). The performer is not warned of the change of mode quality by red notation as is usual in Ars nova notation in such cases, although here it would not be strictly needed since the rest signs are unambiguous (Machaut did use red notation to indicate change of mode, in two of his motets, 5 and 23, and in the ballade Biauté qui toutes autres pere).

The motetus also has an imperfect long rest between two longs, at the end of each talea. For this singer the assumption of imperfect mode is correct, as, again, the counterpoint makes clear. Both the tenor and the motetus begin with a long, but for one it lasts three breves, for the other, two. The performers must certainly have needed some time (and head-scratching) to find this out. Since in the triplum the long is imperfect as well, imperfect and perfect mode are, unusually, combined in this motet (Example 3).

The rational – but certainly not obvious – explanation for the strange alternation of perfect and imperfect mode in the tenor is that no change of mode was meant at all: the rhythm is conceived entirely in perfect mode, and the rests must be combined as in syncopation. The definition of sincopa according to Johannes de Muris is: ‘the division of any figure in separate parts which, added, complement each other when the perfections are counted’ (‘Sincopa est divisio circumquaque figure per partes separatas, que numerando perfectiones ad invicem reducuntur’). Applied to this case: the total of six

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10 The complete talea-rhythm reads: longa perfecta (3) – pausa brevis + brevis altera (1+2) – longa perfecta (3) // pausa longa imperfecta (2) // longa perfecta (3) – pausa longa imperfecta + brevis (2+1) – longa perfecta (3) // pausa longa imperfecta (2). The talea thus contains two basic ternary rhythms, the iamb and the trochee, enclosed between perfect longs. There are three taleae per color.

11 This is invisible in the editions that transcribe the work as if the upper voices were also measured in perfect mode. Guillaume de Machaut, Musikalische Werke, Dritter Band: Motetten, hrsg. von Friedrich Ludwig, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1929 (Publikationen älterer Musik, 4/2), unveränderter Wiederabdruck 1954; The Works of Guillaume de Machaut, transcription by Leo Schrade, Monaco: L’Oiseau-Lyre, 1956 (Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century, 2), repr. 1977.

12 Johannes de Muris, Libellus cantus mensurabilis, 9, in Jean de Murs, Écrits sur la musique, traduction et commentaire de C. Meyer, Paris: CNRS, 2000, pp. 216-217. De Muris mentioned the possibility of syncopation already in his Notitia artis musicae of 1321 (II, vii, 4): ‘Item possibile est perfectiones separari et disiungi neque continuari …’ (‘It is also possible to separate or disjoin the perfections and not to make them continuous …’), with the additional remark: ‘Quoniam sicut contingit ex ore proferre, sic possibile est notare, dum vox sit integra sive recta.’ (‘Because everything that can be sung with the mouth can be notated, on condition that the sound be full or correct.’), same edition, pp. 92-93.
Example 2
Transcription of the tenor.

Example 3
Motet 17, first talea.
imperfect long rests (6 x 2) in each color, which are not complemented by a breve, forms the equivalent of four perfect long rests (4 x 3). This may seem a debatable explanation since the syncopation stretches out over no less than thirty-three breves (bars): half of the color, at which point the three imperfect long rests have reached the equivalent of two perfect ones; after that, a new syncopation begins, until the end of the color (see Example 2). Yet examples of such extended syncopations do exist, namely in the already mentioned contemporary treatise on the making of motets, by Egidius de Murino. One of his examples – explicitly defined as being entirely in perfect mode – is very similar to Machaut’s tenor: three black (perfect) longs are followed by one white long (equivalent to red, meaning imperfect), which rhythm is then twice repeated, so that, in addition, the three white longs (3 x 2) equal two black ones (2 x 3).13

Theoretically, then, the tenor contains the ‘sum’ of the note values in a ‘calculated chain’ of perfections and thus realizes the series summe rata in the text. Precisely at the point where the first syncopation ends, in bar 34, the motetus text alludes to the procedure: ‘(O Order) demonstrated by proofs not to suffer fracture’ (see Figure 2, lines 5-6). The rhythmical construction transmits the idea that Love ‘scorns Measure’ (‘spernat mensuram’) but is nevertheless child of a rational Order (‘tui nata’). The tenor thus forms a theoretical experiment with mensuration and syncopation, and at the same time conjures up the image of an unbreakable but seemingly irrational chain.

The image of a chain is also evoked in the motetus, even visually. The transitions from one talea to the next are bridged by this voice alone, in an isorhythmic motif of two longs, tied in ligature, with which the motetus also opens. These ligatures hold the ‘chain’ of the taleae together. Five times the same descending ligature sign is used, which obviously refers to the ‘ligatura uniforma’ mentioned in the text (Example 4). Of course only the performers would have seen this; it is inaudible for the listener.

At the sixth occurrence of the motif, in the transition from talea V to VI, the word ‘mi-rans’ is set in two separate longs; the ligature is ‘broken’ (even as a ligature it would not have been ‘uniform’, as the melody is now in an upward direction, which requires another type of ligature). I would interpret this as a clue for another, more tragic, aspect of the text. Both poems state that Love and Order suffer no fracture.14 During the fifth talea the ‘I’ complains about his capricious beloved, who is gentle to all but hard to him. The voice register is suggestive here of a depressed mood: the motetus sings far below the tenor and the word ‘michi’, referring to the ‘I’ of the poem, is emphasized by several plicas, probably an expressive vocal ornament. At the same time, according to the triplum text, the second lover tries to break Love’s first bond by insisting on having his reward. Then,

13 In MS Sevilla, Biblioteca Colombina 5–2–25, fol. 61r.
14 Binding is a crucial idea also in the source poem for the triplum text, Boethius’ De consolatione philosophiae II, m.8, lines 13-15: ‘Hanc rerum seriem ligat ... Amor.’ (‘This order of things [the equilibrium of the elements] is bound by Love.’) Hence perhaps Machaut’s choice of the word ‘series’.
the ‘last link of the chain’ is broken in the transition to the last talea, which contains the sad conclusion of the motet. In addition, the counterpoint is further upset by a sudden reversal of register: the triplum is now the lowest of the three voices, probably to the amazement of the singer of this normally highest part, whereas the motetus, which was the lowest voice in talea V, is now the highest: the natural hierarchy of the voices is totally disturbed at this point (Example 5).

The closure of the motet brings the confusion to its apex. Following the notation, the voices would end at different moments, the upper voices one breve earlier than the tenor (this has been amended in both editions). The singers certainly must have been struck by this dissonant clash while performing from their parts. The many perfect sonorities and the chains of parallel perfect intervals make this motet one of the most consonant of all – perhaps in accordance with the cosmic ideas in the texts – and therefore this final clash has a particularly strong effect. Just like in the triplum text ‘goods cannot be had twice without cheating the merchant’, so the color cannot be sung for a second time and end in consonance without taking recourse to ‘cheating’, by foreshortening. The word ‘conchie’, ‘cheats’, has, as seen above, a connotation of ‘disharmony’ which is aptly illustrated by this disharmonic ending. It is left to the performers to reflect on its meaning.

Problems as discussed here can be found in many of Machaut’s works, but always in different guises. Study of his compositions in their original notation and with their texts suggests that the composer, by cleverly using the possibilities of the mensural conventions, and by merging literary and music-theoretical ideas, invites the performers to think about his speculations on the problematical and surprising role of Love in an orderly world. This motet is an early piece, but to the end of his life the composer kept reflecting about the difficult relationship between Love and Order. This is beautifully rendered by the two well-known allegorical miniatures included in one of Machaut’s complete works manuscripts as illustrations of his late Prologue, in which he formulated his aesthetic views. On the first of these miniatures, Machaut receives Lady Nature respectfully and standing; she represents the cosmic principle of form and ordering and has come down to command him to ‘form’ new and varied works. On the second miniature he is shown clearly as being surprised by Amour while at work, sitting at his writing desk; Amour represents the subject matter of his works and orders him to exalt her feats, as the ‘matere’ to which he can give form. Almost all of Machaut’s compositions have for their subject Love and her manifold difficulties, and all are surprising compositions, each in its own way.

For whom was such a composition intended? In Machaut’s motets we probably hear a still young composer, at a time when he was in contact with literate fellow-composers; he is mentioned in the company of, among others, Johannes de Muris, Philippe de Vitry and Egidius de Murino in two contemporary motets. His musicians were thus probably highly literate persons and at the same time expert music readers, well trained in theoretical issues. Such performers would have understood Machaut’s cryptic texts with their many allusions to other texts from the past, and would have been able to cope with

the musical intricacies. Also the notational pitfalls suggest that these pieces were intended for the performers themselves rather than for an audience without those visual clues.

Literary ideas, philosophical, musical and theoretical speculation come together in this challenging piece which must be sung over and over (it lasts about 2 ½ minutes) but also thought over and over (for much longer), in order to be understood. It is tempting to see in it an artistic manifesto of the young Machaut.