

A New Case of Number Symbolism in Josquin?

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A new case of number symbolism in Josquin?

IN several of his articles, Jaap van Benthem has paid attention to gematria¹ and number symbolism in works by Franco-Netherlandish composers of the 15th and 16th centuries. His latest study, devoted to 14 Marian motets by Josquin des Prez, recently appeared in France in a volume published by the Centre Culturel de Rencontre d'Ambronay.² Referring in the introduction to such musical elements as the number of *partes*, voices, notes and bars that in earlier studies have been associated with symbolical numbers, Van Benthem postulates that also the number of phrases of the text, words, syllables and their planning may hide the composer's message.³

The present contribution aims at briefly commenting on a possible new example of number symbolism in Josquin's *Stabat mater* (NJE 25.9; forthcoming) that is put forward by Van Benthem. As is well known, the motet is constructed around the tenor of the popular three-part rondeau *Comme femme desconfortee*, which has a unique attribution in the Mellon Chansonier to Binchois, and was at the time of the composition of *Stabat mater* already some 40 years old (ex.1).⁴ The relationship between the Latin and French texts is obvious: Mary, as the weeping mother standing beside the cross of Jesus, is represented as a woman who is in distress because of the loss of her beloved friend.

The chanson is preserved in the following sources:⁵

- Dijon, Bibliothèque Municipale, Ms.517
- Escorial, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial, Biblioteca y Archivo de Música, Ms.IV.a.24
- Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms. Magliabechi XIX.176
- Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Musica Ms.9659
- New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library for Rare Books and Manuscripts, Ms. 91 (Mellon Chansonier)

Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Manuscrits, Ms.4379, (and Seville, Catedral Metropolitana, Biblioteca Capitulary Colombina, Ms.5-1-43)

Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Manuscrits, Collection Rothschild, Ms.2973 (Chansonier Cordiforme)

Uppsala, Universitetsbiblioteket, Ms. Vokalmusik i Handskrift 76a

Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Cappella Giulia XIII.27

Washington, DC, Library of Congress, Music Division, Ms. M2.1.L25 Case (Laborde Chansonier)

Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Ms. Guelferbytanus 287 Extravagantium

For the versions of the motet, which is transmitted in mensural notation in no fewer than 34 sources, the following manuscripts and printed editions are of prime importance:⁶

Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, Ms.215-16 (dated 1516) [BrusBR 215-16]

Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, Ms.9126 (dated 1505) [BrusBR 9126]

Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms.II.1.232 (dated 1516-21) [FlorBN II.1.232]

London, Royal College of Music, Ms.1070 (dated 1508-14) [LonRC 1070]

Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Musica Ms.12 (dated 1525-30) [MunBS 12]

Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Chigi c VIII 234 (Chigi Codex) (dated 1498-1503) [VatC 234]

Liber selectarum cantionum ... sex quinque et quatuor vocum (Augsburg: Grimm & Wyrnung, 1520) [Grimm & Wyrnung 1520⁴]

Motetti de la corona libro tertio (Fossombrone: O. Petrucci, 1519) [Petrucci 1519²]

Various aspects of the tenor voice of the chanson and Josquin's use of it are worth noting: (a) as has been pointed out by Leeman Perkins, the reading of the tenor

Ex.1 The tenor of *Comme femme desconfortée* in the Chansonier Cordiforme (ParisBNR 2973), ff.38v–40 (transposed up a 4th). The numbers above the barlines correspond to the bar numbers in the motet

of the chanson presents a remarkable variant in bar 21, where the Escorial manuscript and Mellon Chansonier give four minims *g f g e*, semibreve *d* (ex.2a) instead of minim *g*, semibreve *f*, minim *e*, semibreve *d* (ex.2b) as in the other sources, and as in Josquin's motet;⁷ (b) the tenor is quoted continuously throughout the whole of the motet's 179 bars, without any interruption, in quadruple augmentation of its original note values and transposed up a 4th (all the sources for the motet contain a large number of *ligaturae ternariae* and *quaternariae*); (c) in bars 21–2, Josquin changes the long *e'* into two breves *e' f'*, thus allowing the harmonic progression F–C–F–B \flat (ex.2c) (this is the extra note to which Van Benthem refers (see below)); (d) in bars 97–100, the two semibreves *g'* are replaced by perfect long *g'*, breve *g'*, to reinforce in bar 100 the rhythmic pulse in the other voices (ex.2d); (e) in bars 133–4, the two breves substitute one semibreve of the chanson; (f) in bars 137–48, the doubled dotted maxima *a* is for notational reasons divided into two dotted maxima *a*; (g) in bars 151–4, the two longs in the motet's earliest source (Chigi Codex) – all other sources have a maxima – substitute one breve of the chanson; (h) in bars 43–4, 93–4 and 149–50, the rhythmic figure consisting of a dotted minim followed by a semiminim has been converted into two breves.

Van Benthem rightly draws attention to the fact that Josquin, in bars 21–2 of the *prima pars* of the

motet, inserts an extra note in the *cantus prius factus* (see above), bringing the total of notes to 51.⁸ And he goes on to say that, at the end of the *secunda pars*, the last note of Binchois's tenor has its place in 99th position.⁹ He thereupon concludes that this final note coincides with the beginning of the word 'Amen', and that the sources of this part allow us to suppose that Josquin wanted to add still another *f*, so that the total number of notes would grow to $99 + 1 = 100$ (ex.3).¹⁰

Example 3 shows that the penultimate note *g* of the tenor of the chanson falls at bar 177, where it forms the 5th in the fermata chord on the dominant C. In bars 179–80, the final note of the tenor melody is 'translated' into two chords on F, and closes the motet with the Amen.

In medieval number symbolism, 100 is above all associated with eternal life,¹¹ the central idea in the last half-versicle of the sequence:

(10b)	
Quando corpus morietur,	When my body shall die,
Fac, ut anime donetur	Grant that my soul is given
Paradisi gloria.	The glory of paradise.
Amen.	Amen.

While Jaap van Benthem certainly deserves our respect for having opened up new horizons in the music of the period in several of his publications, the

Ex.2 (a) *Comme femme desconfortée*, bars 19–21 (after the Chansonnier Cordiforme); (b) *Comme femme desconfortée*, bars 19–21 (after the Mellon Chansonnier); (c) Josquin, *Stabat mater*, bars 20–3; (d) Josquin, *Stabat mater*, bars 97–100

way in which he arrives in the case of *Stabat mater* at the total of 100 notes is, it seems to me, open to question.

Taking the tenor of the chanson as presented in ex.1 as a point of reference, the melody that Josquin seems to have had near at hand contained 95 notes: 49 in the *prima pars*, 46 in the *secunda pars*. A count of the separate *cantus firmus* notes in the eight earliest sources—these cover a period from c.1498–c.1530—gives the following numbers for the *prima pars* and the *secunda pars*:

BrusBR 215–16	52	+	46	=	98
BrusBR 9126	50	+	48	=	98
FlorBN II.1.232	50	+	49	=	99
Grimm & Wirsung 1520	50	+	49	=	99
LonRC 1070	51	+	46	=	97
MunBS 12	52	+	54	=	106
Petrucchi 1519	53	+	55	=	108
VatC 234	50	+	50	=	100

Though Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms.II.1.232 and *Liber selectarum cantionum* contain the same number of notes in both *partes*, it would be premature to conclude that these sources may present the *cantus firmus* in a similar form. Actually, there are no two *cantus firmi* entirely identical between the eight sources, because note contractions or divisions can be different, whether or not dependent on folio turns or the repeat of the final note in the *prima pars* and/or the *secunda pars*.

We should of course not pass silently over the question of why the sources differ so widely in the notation of the tenor. This may be explained by the fact that the long note values, sometimes extending over six bars, render the part inappropriate for being sung. The dotted maximas are, for example, divided into shorter values in several sources. The two in bars 137–48 are replaced in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ms.II.1.232 by three

Ex.3 Josquin, *Stabat mater*, final bars (after the Chigi Codex)

174

- tur Pa - ra - di - si glo - ri - a. A - men.

- tur Pa - ra - di - si glo - ri - a. A - men.

- tur Pa - ra - di - si glo - ri - a. A - men.

- tur Pa - ra - di - si glo - ri - a. A - men.

Ex. 4 (a) Josquin, *Stabat mater*, tenor, bars 137–48 (FlorBN II.I.232); (b) Josquin, *Stabat mater*, tenor, bars 137–48 (MunBS 12); (c) Josquin, *Stabat mater*, tenor, bars 137–48 (Petrucci 1519²)

(a)

(b)

(c)

maximas (ex.4a); in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Musica Ms.12 by maxima, two longs, maxima (ex.4b); in Petrucci 1519² by two longs, maxima, two longs (ex.4c).

Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, Ms.9126, a manuscript produced shortly after the Chigi Codex and likewise in the workshop of scribes active at the Burgundian-Habsburg court, has the same number of notes in the *prima pars* as the Chigi Codex, but substitutes a long for the two breves in bars 133–4, and a maxima for the two longs in bars 151–4, reducing in this way the total number of notes in the *secunda pars* to 48. As in the tenor only an incipit is given—‘Stabat mater’ or ‘Comme femme desconfortee’—while the four other voices are fully

texted, the majority of the sources leave no doubt that an instrumental performance is intended, or that the part should be vocalized. In other words, seeing no need for an exact reproduction of their model, the scribes may have changed note values at will.

If, however, it was Josquin’s intention to incorporate the number 100 in the *cantus firmus* of his *Stabat mater*, he clearly must have planned a careful ‘manipulation’ of the tenor melody of the chanson. And indeed, as is shown in the tenor voice in the version of the Chigi Codex (see illus.1), which is the earliest source for the motet and the only one in which the number of notes is the same in each of the two *partes*,¹² Josquin obtains the number of 50 notes

1 Josquin, *Stabat mater*, tenor, bars 1–180 (Chigi Codex, VatC 234, ff.241v, 242v, 243v and 244v)

in the *prima pars* by a single melodic intervention in the pre-existing melody (see ex.2c), and increases the number of 46 notes in the *secunda pars* by the following rhythmic interventions:

- bars 133–4: two breves are substituted for one semi-breve of the chanson (see (e) above)
- bars 137–48: the double dotted maxima *a* is divided into two dotted maxima *a* (see (f) above)
- bars 151–4: two longs are substituted for one breve of the chanson (see (g) above)
- bar 180: an extra long *f* is added (see ex.3).

Of these interventions, only the three note divisions have no apparent impact on the progress of the music. In other words, it may well seem that Josquin divides these notes in order to obtain in the *secunda pars* the same number of 50 notes as in the *prima pars*. If this were indeed a deliberate manipulation on his part, we are reminded of the appropriateness of the following observation, made by Emile Mâle, the great connoisseur of religious art in the Middle

Ages: ‘A detail of apparent insignificance may hide symbolic meaning’.¹³

Finally, with a layout of the tenor voice based on 100 notes, the *Stabat mater* would have a counterpart in Josquin’s five-voice *Salve regina* (NJE 25.5). In an earlier study I have postulated that, while the chant’s head-motif, *la-sol-la-re*, is repeated 24 times as an ostinato in the tenor, producing in the three *partes* of the motet a total of 96 notes, the principal source (VatS 24) adds at the end of each of the *partes* one, one and two notes, respectively.¹⁴ These four additional notes bring the total up to 100. In this case, a performing direction added to the ostinato gives an unequivocal explanation: ‘Qui perseveraverit usque in finem, hic salvus erit’ (Matthew, x:22—‘He that shall persevere [in singing this motif] unto the end, shall be saved’). Since the text in the third section of the antiphon reads ‘And after this our exile, show unto us, Jesus, the blessed fruit of thy womb’, the 100 notes can likewise be associated with eternal life.

Willem Elders is retired Professor of Music History before 1600 at Utrecht University. His publications on Renaissance music include *Composers of the Low Countries* (1991) and *Symbolic scores: studies in the music of the Renaissance* (1994). From 1968 to 1988 Elders was editor of the *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, and he is presently chairman of the Editorial Board of the New Josquin Edition, to which he himself has so far contributed six volumes. willem.elders@wanadoo.fr

- 1 Gematria is the substitution of numbers for letters or vice versa.
- 2 'O Mater Dei, Memento Mei. Annotations sur les structures symboliques de quatorze motets mariaux de Josquin des Prez', in *Musique, théologie et sacré, d'Orsme à Erasme*, ed. A. Coeurdevey and P. Vendrix (Ambronay, 2008), pp.231–91.
- 3 'O Mater Dei, Memento Mei', pp.235–6.
- 4 An edition of the version of the chanson in the Chansonnier Cordiforme may be found in *Le chansonnier de Jean de Montchenu*, ed. G. Thibault and D. Fallows, Publications de la Société Française de musicologie (Paris, 1991), no.29. For other editions, see D. Fallows, *A catalogue of polyphonic songs, 1415–1480* (Oxford, 1999), note 4. For a list of other sacred compositions in which the tenor of this chanson is used, see D. J. Rothenberg, 'Angels, archangels, and a woman in distress: the meaning of Isaac's Angeli archangeli', *The Journal of Musicology*, xxi (2004), pp.514–78, at pp.528–9. Since the *cantus firmus* in Senfl's five-part motet *Ave rosa sine spinis* is identical to Josquin's tenor, it seems likely that Senfl, who placed his motet in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Musica Ms.12 near Josquin's *Stabat mater*, knew Binchois's melody through its use in the latter setting. For an edition of *Ave rosa sine spinis*, see *Ludwig Senfl, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. W. Gerstenberg et al. (Wolfenbüttel, 1974), xi, pp.38–47.
- 5 See Fallows, *A catalogue of polyphonic songs*, p.116.
- 6 For an evaluation of the sources, see my forthcoming edition of the motet in vol.15 of the *New Josquin Edition*, Critical Commentary, Section 4.
- 7 See *The Mellon Chansonnier*, ed. L. L. Perkins and H. Garey (New Haven, 1979), ii, p.293. Though the reading in the Escorial manuscript and the Mellon Chansonnier was adopted in the

editions by Wolfgang Rehm and Leeman Perkins, the reading of the other sources seems more likely because the tenor proceeds in bars 20–2 just as in bars 12–14, in fauxbourdon with the two other voices.

8 'Une comparaison de la tradition du tenor de Binchoys et de son utilisation en *cantus prius factus* dans l'oeuvre de Josquin montre que dans la première partie du motet une note supplémentaire (*fa3*) est ajoutée après la treizième note (*mi3*). Ainsi, le nombre de notes du tenor s'élève dans cette partie à 51 ...' ('O Mater Dei, Memento Mei', p.251).

9 '... tandis que la note finale (*fa2*) à la fin de la deuxième partie du motet de Josquin, se trouve en 99^e position' ('O Mater Dei, Memento Mei', p.251).

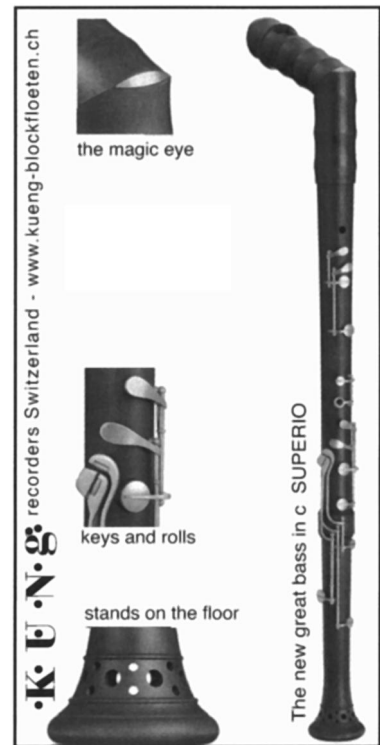
10 'Les sources de ce dernier permettent de penser que Josquin y ajoute un autre *fa*, la longue finale, de sorte que le nombre total de notes du tenor s'élève à 99 + 1 = 100' ('O Mater Dei, Memento Mei', p.251).

11 See H. Meyer, *Die Zahlenallegorese im Mittelalter. Methode und Gebrauch* (Munich, 1975), p.177, where he refers to the Anglo-Saxon theologian and historian Beda (672/673–735).

12 Unless he bases his count on London, Royal College of Music, Ms.1070, or Munich, Musica Ms.12, it remains unclear why Van Benthem counts 51 notes in the *prima pars*.

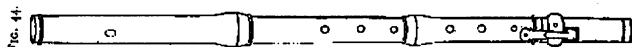
13 E. Mâle, *The Gothic image: religious art in France of the thirteenth century* (New York, 1972), p.15.

14 See W. Elders, *Composers of the Low Countries* (Oxford, 1991), pp.81–2.



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