

# The *Chansonnier de Bayeux*: An Early Sixteenth-Century Polyphonic Source and Its Polyphonic Relatives

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## REPORT INFO

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## ABSTRACT

*The research focussed on a monophonic chansonnier compiled after 1500 in the context of earlier, contemporary and later musical sources transmitting polyphonic and monophonic concordances and variants of its repertoire, without forgetting the repertoire uniquely transmitted by it. The resulting monograph on the manuscript will include a historical introduction and an online transcription of the melodies with their texts. It will moreover examine a group of songs shared with another monophonic chansonnier, exploring their polyphonic arrangements in related sources and the transformations of music-poetic forms, like the virelai. In examining the spread of various songs from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century, this study explores the significance of monophonic songs within the musical landscape of late medieval and early Renaissance France and Europe. Moreover, it reconsiders the concept of 'variant', proposing a more nuanced and open conception of 'musical work', existing well beyond the traces left in the sources.*

## 1- Introduction

The *Chansonnier de Bayeux* (F-Pnm, français 9346) and F-Pnm, français 12744 (known as *chansonniers* B and A, respectively) are the only two surviving anthologies from around 1500 that contain secular monophonic repertoire, with one-third concordances in their overall 245 songs. Few studies on these manuscripts were available until comprehensive dissertations by Douglas J. Rahn (1978) and Isabel Kraft (2009).<sup>1</sup> Kraft criticized the neglect of monophonic songs and the nationalistic biases in earlier works on these sources, such as the study and edition of *chansonnier* A by Gaston Paris and Auguste Gevaert<sup>2</sup>. As research evolved, assumptions about the songs merely being monophonic excerpts of polyphonic

works were challenged, such as in the now outdated monograph and edition of *Bayeux* by Théodore Gérold.<sup>3</sup> In a 1952 essay, for instance, Theodore Karp and Gustave Reese, ultimately recognized that only two melodies can be considered as part of known polyphonic compositions.<sup>4</sup> Kraft's pioneering work attributes individual 'work' dignity to the songs in *chansonnier* A, highlighting a gap for further exploration of *chansonnier* B, which an forthcoming monograph by the present author aims to address.

## 2- Aim of the research

The project aimed to complete a new monograph on *chansonnier* B, encompassing a historical introduction, a codicological analysis of sources, and an online transcription of texts

and melodies, including a comprehensive list of monophonic concordances and polyphonic variants. The focus is especially on those songs in common with *chansonnier* A and their polyphonic arrangements in other sources, in case they are extant. Particular attention is given to the presence of different music-poetic forms and their transformation, such as *virelai* and several kinds of refrain songs, and the not inconspicuous role of orality in the widespread transmission of this repertoire. The monograph will moreover address the manuscript as an object embedded in its historical and cultural context and will culminate in a chapter on the modern revival of these monophonic songs by contemporary folk artists. In seeking to uncover the dissemination of a diverse network of songs from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century, the study assesses the role of monophonic songs in the musical context of late medieval and early modern France and Europe.

### 3- Results and discussion

The decision to collect dozens monophonic songs on two carefully crafted manuscripts made of costly parchment manifests a very definite will to assemble a specific repertoire, in the case of *Bayeux* certainly reflecting the musical tastes of its likely sponsor, Duke Charles de Bourbon-Montpensier (1490-1527). The texts of the songs cover a wide range of topics, going from the most stereotypical ‘courtly love’ to the more or less explicit portrayal of erotic desire, often by way of witty metaphors, and then again from historic topics frequently in connection with Norman history and to episodes from the last battles of the Hundred Years War to songs with a pastoral theme, from drinking songs to simple popularising ditties. This variety of themes is matched by an equally diverse approach to formal treatment, both musically and textually. In the *virelai* for instance, the only *forme fixe* to appear with a certain frequency, the scribe often writes out the music for the *tierce*. In theory, this should be identical with the refrain, but in fact subtle variations are often introduced, as though the scribe were recording or recalling a specific performance. On the other hand, quite a few melodies are basically identical with tenors of

polyphonic songs, especially in the two chronologically close French royal *chansonniers* London, British Library, Harley 5242 and Cambridge, Magdelene College, MS 1760: in this sense, Gérold was right that at least a few of the songs are tenors of polyphonic arrangements, though of course this cannot be generalised.

Probably the most exciting and important result of this research is the redefinition of the concept of ‘work’ in relation to ‘song’ as an ‘idea’ existing beyond its written transmissions, which in turn constitute traces left of its possible manifestations, be they in one or more voices and within a range of several textual and/or musical variants.

The concept of ‘variant’ in music, while lacking a universally accepted definition, often implies a hierarchical relationship between a ‘model’ work and its derivatives. A more apt terminology would be ‘song family’ or ‘network’, suggesting that songs grouped together share melody and/or text variations, akin to a biological family. These relationships can range from closely knit pairs to more loosely connected songs with common themes. But unlike genetic research that seeks a definitive prototype, the goal here is not to find an original ancestor; historical evidence suggests that several versions circulated simultaneously, even influencing each other. This notion aligns with Paul Zumthor’s concept of ‘mouvance’, which denotes the fluidity of medieval poetry and has also been applied to medieval chant, illustrating that a song can exist as multiple variants across different interpretations and genres.<sup>5</sup>

The edition, which is now complete, also includes, beyond the ca. 100 songs transmitted in *chansonnier* B, those in common, about 35, with *chansonnier* A, together with related polyphonic arrangements in dozens other earlier, contemporary and later manuscripts. Related songs have been included so as to give an idea of the degree of embeddedness of both monophonic *chansonniers* within European song culture of the early modern era. Beyond the music, a separate edition of the texts and their variants has been provided, given that the

poetic texts set to music are to be considered works in and of themselves, sometimes even transmitted independently of the musical setting. After a thorough revision, the edition will be sent and integrated into the Ricercar Data Lab of the CESR (<https://ricercardatalab.cesr.univ-tours.fr/en/>).

This is a very important step, because in this way it will powerfully enrich the data ecosystem of the Lab, entering into a productive dialogue with the works, especially the songs, already part of the Ricercar Data Lab. Moreover, as an online edition, it will be dynamic and will be able to be revised and possibly integrated with further related songs, as the case may be. The edition is to be understood as a companion to the related monograph, which is going to be published by Brepols.

#### 4- Conclusion

The year at the CESR has permitted me to bring to near conclusion a work on an important *chansonnier* which I had been working on for a few years. If the edition and the monograph will shed renewed light on an important and uncommon source at the crossroads of late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, they will additionally highlight a rich network of songs across different genres and settings, questioning at the same time the very notion of individual musical ‘work’.

#### 5- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

The plan to include the edition within the Ricercar Data Lab of the CESR (see above) provides the very basis for a future, ongoing collaboration with the host laboratory.

#### 6- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

“Melodic and Formal Peculiarities of Monophonic *chansons* around 1500 and Related Polyphonic Settings”, forthcoming for *Polifonie. Storia e teoria della corallità*;

*The Chansonnier de Bayeux: An Early 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Monophonic Source and Its Polyphonic Relatives*, for Brepols.

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<sup>1</sup> See RAHN 1978 and KRAFT 2009, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See PARIS/GEVAERT 1875.

<sup>3</sup> GÉROLD 1921/1979<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> See REESE/KARP 1952.

<sup>5</sup> See especially ZUMTHOR 1972.