Conveyance of Text Meaning: An Analysis of Janequin’s *Le Chant des Oiseaux*

Text and music that contains it have been a partnership of two worlds for centuries. Throughout this time, there has been a continuing challenge to unite these two elements in a way that expresses text while continually expanding musical technique. Looking back to the 16th century, one of the things in which theorists and performers began to change and develop was how text was placed under the music. Through the work of theorists like Zarlino, rules were developed and put into practice by composers. The importance of text underlay has been debated as to what makes texts meaningful and whether or not these composers use this in their own works. Applying this to the Parisian chanson, it is important to understand the rules and stylistic aspects of the chanson in order to understand how the text’s meaning is realized. What is more interesting, however, is how composers step outside these barriers while conveying the text’s meaning. Janequin is one composer who expanded his technique in relation to the texts in order to expand his style. Through text analysis of his chanson, *Le chant des oiseaux*, we can examine why this work was considered his most programmatic and whether or not this correlates with his methods of conveying text meaning.

Looking back to its origins, the chanson is difficult to trace because of the very characteristics that make it chanson. Chanson is generally performed without accompaniment and contained popular tunes of the day.1 “Popular”, as used in this context, relates to the frequency of performance rather than the more contemporary definition pertaining to

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opposition of art music and folk song. This genre was linked with the “middle-class social milieu” and was present in two differing styles—the chanson “musicale” and the chanson “rustique.” Both styles incorporated love themes in their texts; however, with the rustique, there is an element of naivety without the use of irony or satire used in the “musicale”. The “rustique” favors refrains and a wider variety of subjects catering to the lack of interest in the real world. Tracing origins of the text for chanson is difficult because in the first quarter of the 15th century, authorship was not as common as composers in this part were more likely to borrow popular tunes and texts from each other. Stylistically, the chanson is homorhythmic and strophic, with texts taken from literary collections.

The term “Parisian” chanson applied to the location of the composers and the schools where it was written. The French school identified with composers similar to Attaingnant. The composers writing Parisian chanson often worked for the court, or in Janequin’s case—the church. As the chanson developed, stylistic elements—as relative to text reflection—changed so that composers no longer chose poems following rigidity of theme and formal structure in the latter quarter of the 16th century. Therefore, these songs contained no fixed rhyme scheme, contained patterned intelligible repetition and many times were strophic. These long metrical patterns balanced the texts that lead to “refined melodic manner that is the epitome of mid-century chanson.”

\[\text{Ibid. 18.}\]
\[\text{Ibid. 19.}\]
\[\text{Ibid. 20.}\]
\[\text{http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40032 (accessed December 1, 2011).}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
Some scholars view the pinnacle of Parisian chanson as displayed through the music of Janequin or Passereau; however, each composer has differing techniques so it is unclear as to which style epitomized “Parisian chanson” exactly. Looking at general structure of the chanson for these composers, the first few phrases are usually repeated with new text. The melodic themes are structured according to the AABBC theme, and the “subject matter and diction of poems chosen by Parisian composers also reflect a new freedom and a release from the strictness of late medieval traditions.” These elements can be seen in Janequin’s work, as will be seen later in the discussion. Janequin, however, was not always consistent in this style, as most of his works feature heterogenous textures, long, uneven phrasing which was often poorly articulated, and some unusual mannerisms, such as using texts that were useful for their phonetic value alone.

Clement Janequin (1485-1558) had a unique approach to his music, which may have been contributed to his early associations with other composers. By 1529, Janequin already had some of his works published by Pierre Attaingnant, a leading publisher of that period. Janequin’s most prolific years were in the 1530’s when Attaingnant published four volumes dedicated to Janequin’s chansons. During this time, Janequin held a church post, which associated his work with the “Parisian” chanson because these chansons were “courtly” and indicated the use of a more complex style.

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8 Brown, et al. “Chanson”
10 Ibid.
Janequin’s style is notable for his use of rapid repeated notes, short rhythmic values, syllabic writing and textural complexity, also called “pattern chanson.” He tended to favor long, melismatic lines that revealed that the “restrained lyricism and largely homorhythmic textures typical of Sermisy’s work were not the only means available to French Chanson composers.” Long and descriptive, only two of Janequin’s chansons are identifiable as true ‘Parisian chanson’. His other works contained “sprawling, serpentine melodies […] and volatile, eccentric rhythms” which seemed to remove his work from the common language. Where Janequin tended to differ alternatively from Sermisy and other contemporaries was in his use of themes in his series of compositions, including La guerre, La chasse, Le chant des oiseaux, Les cris de Paris and Le caquet des femmes. These themes ranged from bird songs and the hunt to battles, fanfares and gossip. They allowed him to make a more programmatic and virtuosic display of “onomatopoeic possibilities.” Howard Brown describes Janequin’s unique style in relation to text placement:

Janequin set the words of his chansons carefully because so many of them are narrative. However, like many other French composers, he seems to have been more interested in fitting the music to the rhythm of the words than in reflecting the meaning of the text in the music. In harnessing rhythm in the service of good declamation, he sometimes resorted to a repetitive formula […] but more often the melodic lines unfold in a very flexible rhythm that ignores the bar-lines and is capable of shifting back and forth from duple to triple metre to emphasize either a single word or a whole phrase.

Brown suggests that Janequin emphasized musical meaning over text meaning. With consideration to the context surrounding his work, we can look at one of his chansons, Le

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13 Brown et al. “Chanson.”
15 Brown et al. “Chanson.”
chant des oiseaux, or “The Bird Song” and break down the text as it pertains to syllabic emphasis and meaning and its use as a programmatic vehicle.

Janequin’s Le chant des oiseaux is set to a French poem, though the source of the text is debated as texts were often reused or borrowed from more than one chanson composer.\textsuperscript{17} The title of the song translates to “Bird song” as the basis of the song is about birds in the spring. It talks about the love sickness that comes every May with the spring. “Réveillez vous, coeurs endormis, Le dieu d'amours vous sonne” (Rouse yourselves, sleeping hearts. The god of love calls you.) Looking at the English translation, most of the words translate; however, there are sections within the poem that have no English equivalent. As will be seen later, this appears to be contributed to the use of text as means of displaying the music—instead of the other way around. The song includes a variety of ornithological, or bird references as well as a collection of natural sounds. As described by Howard Brown:

When the birdsongs start, the harmonic rhythm slows down and the ‘counterpoint’ becomes simpler. The series of slowly moving chords merely furnishes an unobtrusive frame for the rich jangle of fancifully elaborated animals noises that constitute the main points of this brilliantly amusing work.\textsuperscript{18}

Because Janequin uses programmatic elements often in this particular chanson, one can debate whether he looked for music as a means of expressing the text’s meaning, or if he used text as a means to express music—similarly to how vocal lines in the Baroque era are supposed to be sung like instruments in the orchestra. To determine this, three areas must be explored: 1) The word stresses as they pertain to the melodies and rhythmic contour; 2) The music as means of enhancing text; 3) The use of text as a figurative device without regard to its literal meaning.

\textsuperscript{17} Brown. “The Chanson Rustique: Popular Elements in the 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} Century,” 20.

\textsuperscript{18} Brown et al. “Chanson”
In order to see how the text stresses are displayed, we must understand French diction and word stresses. Singing and speaking French dialect varies, but most of the properties are the same. The following properties pertain to French diction in singing. For words containing the “mute –e”, the “schwa” sound would be used instead of the silent –e. In songs, therefore, this “mute –e” would be allowed its own note or small accentuation in the score, such as an eighth note. Within the line “Vous serez tous en joie mis Car la saison est bonne,” the otherwise silent –e is given a whole note in m.52. While this may seem like a long value, in comparison with the syllable bonn- with 11 beats, 4 beats is much less time. In this case, the value of the syllables in relation to each other (unstressed versus stressed) is relative to total rhythmic value and not the note itself. This example is also one of the few cases where a melismatic passage is used. As mentioned earlier, Janequin preferred syllabic text settings. Whether it was to enhance text meaning is debatable depending on the piece.

Returning to principles of diction, word linking is another important aspect the French language. The lack of stressed syllables allows for connection on some words. One of these types is the liaison in which the pronunciation of a normally silent final consonant at the end of a word follows a word that begins with a vowel or mute –h. As seen in the title of the song, les oiseaux would be stressed on the –seaux and the word would combine syllabically to place the s sound on the section syllable (which is more stressed than the schwa le(s)); therefore, les oiseaux becomes le-soi-seaux. Janequin is mindful of these stressed and unstressed syllables, which is perhaps why his songs tend toward syllabic underlay and less towards melismatic underlay. Taking this into consideration, Janequin seems to place great emphasis and care on

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19 IPA Guide. [http://www.ipasource.com](http://www.ipasource.com)
the placement of syllables in his music, even if the end result was to convey sound imagery over text intelligibility.

Looking at the structure, this chanson is divided into five sections—each corresponding to a poetic stanza. According to the text underlay rules and phonetics of French diction, the strong syllables correspond with longer rhythmic values in the song. To see how the music is a means of enhancing text, we can turn to the emphasis on rhythmic motives throughout. Janequin uses two sets of rhythmic motives throughout the chanson, usually appearing in separate verses. This example shows the first rhythmic motive in m.1:

Figure 1.A. Rhythmic Motives (m.1)\(^\text{20}^\)

\(^{20}\) All figures and images were taken from the translated score of Le chant des oiseaux: “Le chant des oyseaux”, “IMSLP.org” <http://imslp.org/wiki/Les_chansons_de_la_Guerre,_la_chasse,_le_chant_des_oyseaux,_l%27alouette,_le_rossignol_(Janequin,_Clément)> accessed November 30, 2011
This pattern of ♩ ♪♩ ♪♩♩ ♪♩ can be likened to the syllabic stresses of the words fit to it. While the last note in the motive varies in the voices, it is always longer than the previous rhythmic value, which follows the trend of text stress and rhythmic contour. This particular motive, “Rhythmic motive A” appears throughout the piece with different phrases. For example, this motive reappears again at m.39 on the words “Vou serez tous en joie mis”, in m.89 on “Rir’et gaudir, ce’est mon devis” and at m.146 with “Fuyez, regrets, pleurs et soucis.” The syllabic stresses of the words themselves are broken down and shown below according to their rhythmic placement and text stress (with stressed syllables bolded):

**Table of Text Stresses with Rhythmic Motive A:**

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In all four instances the text stresses correspond to rhythmic value in relation to other beats. Even though some syllables are more stressed than stressed syllables, they follow the rule of rhythmic value.

A second prominent rhythmic motive conveys text stresses as well using different rhythms:
Figure 1.B. Rhythmic Motives (m.16)

Like Rhythmic Motive A (RM-A), RM-B appears in all four parts as staggered entrances. This particular motive (♩♩♩♩) appears first at m.16 with “A ce premier jour” and can be seen again at the following points: m.53 with “Vous orrez à mon avis”, at m.98 with “Rosignol du bois joli” and at m.155 with “Arrière maître.” Unlike RM-A, RM-B does not always accentuate syllabic meaning with the different phrases. Even though this is the case, it is of relative importance because as a repeated device, it draws attention to those phrases by repetition. Whether this was Janequin’s intent is uncertain; however, for the purpose of conveying text, he uses these motives to an advantage.

Melodically, these motives are significant because each line enters in separately; therefore, the text stands alone and gives the audience or listener four times to catch the first
phrase. Even though these rhythmic motives are important in displaying meaning through phonetic accentuation—outside of these motives—the text meaning seems less important over the melodic structure as each part breaks off into different parts. Fortunately, for the sections without the “bird call”, these lines are relatively homophonic and lightly textured as rhythms and harmonies match up fairly closely.

Janequin is careful to use music as a means of expressing text meaning through his rhythmic repetition and melodic motives; however, his distinguishing mark in this piece is how he uses the text as a means of enhancing the music. This is the song of birds. As Janequin is known for his use of creating man-made sounds to imitate natural ones, he sometimes uses the text as a musical device rather than fitting music to text. This is first seen in m.31 with the text “Fa ri ra riron, Fre re li joli.” Each section has different rhythmic themes and never overlaps perfectly. The accentuation is correct; however, its purpose in this case may be to be unclear to give the listener a sense of “chirping.” This can be seen in Figure 2.A. below as seen again in m.71:

**Figure 2.A. Text as Musical Device: Lack of Clarity**
Using rhythmic confusion as a means of displaying programmatic text is one method Janequin uses. He also uses the words themselves as means of display a “bird sound.” He does this in m.63 with the text “Ti ti Piti pi ti Chouti Thoui thoui”. As applied with language and literal meaning, these words do not have significance in that extent. When sung, however, the fricative consonants and vowel accents give a “tweeting” sound as though the birds themselves began to sing. An example of this style is shown in Figure 2.B:

Figure 2.B. Text as a Musical Device: “Chirping Sounds” (m.63)

This type of “bird call” appears again more notably with the “cuckoo” sounds at m.67. The light texture and repeated “cou cou” gradually builds as the rhythmic patterns in each voice breaks off until new text enters.

Upon analysis of *Le chant des oiseaux*, different themes can be drawn about his use of text in relation to the musical setting. Janequin distinguishes his approach to Parisian chanson in how he steps outside of the traditional form and utilizes text as a programmatic device as much as he uses music to express the text’s meaning. In relation to contemporaries, Janequin uses stylistic approaches of the traditional Parisian chanson, including short motives, repetitive melodic lines and sectionalized form. His approach to text meaning is unique,
however, and allows him creative license within the genre without ignoring the rules of text underlay and syllabic stresses of the language.
Bibliography


English Translations for *Le chant des oiseaux*.


“Le chant des oyseaulx”, “IMSLP.org”

Appendix

Full transcribed score of *Le chant des oiseaux* (attached separately)

English Translations (attached separately)