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# Dutch polyphonic song (to 1600)

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Polyphonic setting of secular or devotional poems in Middle Dutch (14th–15th centuries) or early standard Dutch (16th century). The genre is sometimes referred to with the less precise term ‘liedeken’ (little song), which is found in 16th-century printed collections of both monophonic and polyphonic songs. The earliest Dutch polyphonic songs date from the late 13th century, are for two or three voices, and are often cast in a *forme fixe*. In the later 16th century in which the genre flourished, through-composed, often imitative settings up to eight voices are found. The complete corpus of songs, which is described in Bonda (1996) and included in the online catalogue of Dutch songs ([www.liederenbank.nl](http://www.liederenbank.nl) *<http://www.liederenbank.nl>*), consists of almost 500 settings representing more than 330 song families. This also includes compositions with mere textual incipits in Dutch and settings with mingled texts including Dutch. Unity within this repertory depends on the musical environment in which the songs were created, the textual relationship with genres of Dutch poetry, and the musical correlation with monophonic songs in Dutch.

Even though some periods produced large numbers of Dutch polyphonic songs, the genre is always outweighed in the sources by secular works in French or Italian. Obviously most, if not all, fully texted settings are by composers from the Dutch-speaking area of the Low Countries. A considerable number of song settings are found in sources from Italy and the German-speaking parts of Europe with garbled texts, with textual incipits, or without any text at all. These settings are often part of one of the international song families from the late 15th and early 16th centuries (*see also* §2 below).

The literary genres and themes of the repertory as a whole are closely connected to those of the spoken poems (*refereinen* and *balladen*) of the *rederijkers* (*rhétoriciens*): ‘amoureux’ (love poetry), ‘zot’ (humorous and/or moralistic poems), and ‘vroed’ (serious, mostly religious poems). The first two genres predominated up to the publication of Susato’s *musyck boexkens* in 1551. The texts of the ‘zotte’ songs are wide-ranging in subject matter, from titillating to obscene, and are at times informative of Flemish customs and traditions (McTaggart, *Tielman Susato*, xiv). In the second half of the 16th century scriptural songs quickly rose to popularity (*see also* §5 below).

Approximately 90% of the song texts consist of a single strophe; settings with more strophes are usually through-composed, with the exception of scriptural songs from the second half of the 16th century. A handful of 16th-century song settings, and especially those of Jacobus Flori, are marked as ‘Antwoorde’, and thus adopt the *réplique* or *responce* structure of 16th-century chansons. The authors of most of the song texts are anonymous. A few poets are known by name, among whom Matthijs de Castelein (c1485–1550), the Bruges *rederijker* Eduard de Dene (1505–1576), and Jan van der Noot (c1539–after 1595) stand out.

## 1. From the late 13th century to about 1475.

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About 30 polyphonic songs with Dutch texts are known from the late 13th century to approximately 1475. Most of these are for three voices and are found in sources dating from the first two decades of the 15th century. Fewer than ten settings are for two voices and many of these are transmitted, with

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mere textual incipits, in the manuscript XI E 9 in the National Library of the Czech Republic, Prague. In this early repertoire the *formes fixes* schemes of especially rondeau and ballade are frequently found. Many works are anonymous, but seven three-voice settings are ascribed to Martinus Fabri (two), Hugo Boy (one), Thomas Fabri (two), Tyling (one), and one to both Johannes Pullois and W. Braxatoris (who may be identifiable with *zangmeester* Willem de Brouwer from Bergen op Zoom). One further song has been assigned to Pullois but is anonymous in its unique source.

An intriguing, yet atypical, setting among the early works is a three-voice motet with two texted upper voices (in *NL-Uu* 6 E 37.1). Its text contains a number of street cries touting household wares and foods, which are interrupted by short narrative texts and allusions to activities typical of daily life within an urban or village community. The piece is both stylistically and thematically related to the motet *Je commence / Et je feray / Soules viex* from the Ivrea codex (Fankhauser).

Other songs seem to come from the cultural centres of The Hague and Bruges. The settings from the northern Netherlands are found in remnants of music manuscripts that were probably related to the court of Holland (*NL-Au* ES 64 and *NL-Lu* BPL 2720). Two of them, *Eer ende lof* and *Een cleijn parabel*, are by Martinus Fabri who became a singer at court in October 1395 and stayed there until he died in May 1400. Both songs are incomplete but show signs of the ballade form. Their syllabic declamation of the text sets them apart from the French works in the same manuscript that are in the style of late 14th-century French composers.

Two early song settings from Bruges are by Thomas Fabri, who became succentor at St Donatian's in 1412. His *Die mey* was probably written for one of the May festivals and has syllabic declamation and two-voice imitation at the beginning of some lines. The ballade *Ach Vlaendere vrie* has a text that closely fits the poetry of some songs in the Gruuthuse manuscript and is more ambitious in style, with its *prolatio maior*, running melismas, syllabic declamation at the beginning of phrases, and its homophonic setting of the refrain 'Ach Vlaendre, Vlaendre, wat let dy' ('Oh Flanders, Flanders, what hinders you?') (ex.1). Obviously the text was written by someone who was deeply concerned about social, political, and economic internal divisions in early 15th-century Flanders. Possibly also from Bruges are two songs from the Reina codex (*F-Pn* 6771): *En wiiflijc beildt* (also in ballade form) and the macaronic *En ties, en latim, en romans* ('In Dutch, in Latin, in French').

Due to a paucity of sources from the Low Countries almost no polyphonic songs are known from the period from about 1440 to 1470, though two Dutch songs in the collection *E-E* V.III.24 may have ties with the Burgundian court.

*Tertia pars*

**Ex.1** Thomas Fabri, refrain of the ballade *Ach Vlaendere vrie*

## 2. From 1475 to about 1530.

Most of the texted polyphonic songs that are known from the end of the 15th century are devotional in character (*see also* §5 below). Three secular songs are preserved in *F-Pn* lat. 16664 and a manuscript from the church of St Nicholas at Tongeren contains a two-voice setting of *Te Loven in die goede stat* ('In the Good Town of Leuven'). In view of these sparse examples, the Lauweryn van Watervliet manuscript from the first decade of the 16th century (*GB-Lbl* Add. 35087) is of the utmost importance for the history of the genre. It contains 25 songs for three voices, some of which seem to be older works but most of which must have been new when they were copied into the manuscript. *Formes fixes* schemes have now disappeared altogether, although some of the settings still have a first section that is repeated for new lines of text (as in works in ballade form). All voice parts are texted and in many songs two- or three-voice imitation is found at the beginning of sentences. Homophony and non-imitative polyphony are also used and in some instances a clear pre-existent melody is heard in the upper voice (*see also* §4 below).

Fully texted four-voice songs are difficult to find around 1500. Five of the six Dutch songs in the Tournai-Brussels partbooks from 1511 are for four voices, but as one partbook of the set is still missing, most of these works remain incomplete. Two high-quality examples from around 1500 are known from later sources, however: Pierre de la Rue's *Mijn hert altijt heeft verlanghen* and Johannes Ghiselin's *Ghy syt die wertste boven al*.

Until 1475 Dutch polyphonic songs appear only sporadically in Italian, German, and Burgundian sources. A number of settings are found, however, in Italian sources from about 1480 to 1515 (*I-Rc* 2856, *I-Fn* 229, *I-Fc* 2439, *I-Fn* 121, Petrucci 1501 and 1504<sup>3</sup>), but most of these three- or four-voice settings lack complete texts. This also holds true for non-Italian sources such as the Basevi codex (

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*I-Fc* 2439), which contains seven Dutch songs, and even for the Segovia cancionero (*E-SE* s.s.), which was copied around 1500 by a Dutch-speaking scribe. All of its songs, including 19 by Obrecht, have textual incipits only.

German sources show a clear increase of Dutch polyphonic songs after 1500, but transmissions are at times complicated. Some songs are found with garbled, adapted, or translated texts, which makes it difficult to decide whether a song text was originally Dutch or German. Although intractable cases remain, Bonda (1996) has shown that song settings that are found both with a German and a Dutch text in different sources are likely to be of German origin (as, for example, with *Maria zart / Maria sart* and *O werder Mund / O waerde mont*). The opposite is often the case when different Dutch and German settings of the same text coexist (as with *Es sout een meiskin halen wijn / Es solt ein meidlin holen wein*).

On reviewing the song repertory in Italian, German, and Flemish sources from the late 15th and early 16th centuries, it becomes clear that in this phase of the genre's history a new aspect emerges: that of international song families. Some ten song families, each consisting of two up to more than ten different settings, are represented in sources from these areas and can thus be considered to have been part of an international tradition. These include famous songs such as *Een vraulic wesen* (13 settings), *Tandernaken al opten Rijn* (13 settings), *O Venus bant* (11 settings), *Mijns liefkens bruyn ooghen* (ten settings), and *In minen sin* (nine settings). The composers with most contributions in this repertory are Alexander Agricola (ten), Henricus Isaac (seven), Jacobus Obrecht (seven), and Mattheus Pipelare (four). Clearly these reworkings were not all conceived as vocal settings and not all are by Dutch-speaking composers. The *Tandernaken* family in particular is a good example of a song family consisting of predominantly instrumental settings with a significant amount of contributions by composers from the German-speaking part of Europe.

### 3. From c1530 to about 1600.

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The period from the mid-1530s to 1600 may be regarded as the florescence of the Dutch polyphonic song. Six printed editions from this period are exclusively devoted to the genre and contain more than 140 different settings. The more than 700 chansons that were published between 1545 and 1578 by the Phalèse firm alone clearly indicate that even in this phase Dutch polyphonic song never rose to the popularity of its French counterpart.

Egenolff's *Brabandische liedlin* (1535<sup>14</sup>) contains 36 anonymous pieces with textual incipits only. The collection includes settings by Ghiselin, Isaac, and La Rue and is therefore, at least partly, retrospective in character. All songs were republished with their complete texts in the now almost completely lost Kamper songbook of about 1540. The most important editions containing exclusively Dutch polyphonic songs are no doubt Susato's *Het ierste* and *Het tweetste musijck boexken* of 1551 (1551<sup>18</sup> and 1551<sup>19</sup>). In the preface to the first book Susato strongly argues in favour of composing and publishing more songs in the vernacular: 'yet I have always had the intention of bringing to light the noble, heavenly art of music in our Netherlandish mother tongue'. His aim was, no doubt, to provide a repertory for the entertainment of the nobility and middle class living in towns such as Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, and Brussels (McTaggart, *Tielman Susato*, ix–xi). Susato's call does not seem to have generated much response. His two songbooks contain 55 songs, some of which are by composers of an older generation, and it seems that the repertory that was compiled was the fruit of many years of



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Some individual composers made significant contributions to the genre in the second half of the 16th century: Petit Jean de Latre published 17 songs in his *cantionum musicarum* of 1563, Noé Faignient 18 in his 1568 publications (see Wood), and Jacobus Flori 24 in his *Modulorum aliquot* of 1573, several of which are based on Faignient models. Cornelis Schuyt's 17 *Hollandsche madrigalen* (Leiden, 1603) may be seen as the endpoint of the genre's flowering period, though the many 17th-century reprints of Susato's *Livre septiesme* ensured that the Dutch polyphonic song continued to be spread after 1600.

## 4. Monophonic models.

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About a quarter of the polyphonic song families have a parallel non-polyphonic tradition. Unfortunately, only a very limited number of monophonic songs have been preserved in their original form. In many sources, such as the famous Antwerp songbook, the song text is copied or published without its original melody. A short reference to the tune to which it was sung is often included, but this is not always helpful for modern users. Many monophonic melodies are known from devotional collections in which their original texts are replaced by contrafacta. The notation of their melodies is rather inconsistent: stroke notation is found in the Gruuthuse manuscript (*NL-DHk* KW 79 K 10) of the early 15th century; non-mensural and primitive mensural notation are used in two collections of devotional

A- songs from the late 15th century (*Wn* 12875 and *D-Bs* MG oct 190) and in the *Een devoot ende profitelyck boecxken* (Antwerp, 1539). Three 16th-century editions transmit popular melodies in mensural notation: 162 melodies in the *Souterliedekens* (Antwerp, 1540), 116 in Jan Fruytiers's *Ecclesiasticus oft de wijse spraken Iesu des soons Syrach* (Antwerp, 1565), and 30 in Matthijs de Castelein's *Diversche liederken* (posthumously published in Ghent, 1574). It has been argued that the monophonic songs of the *Souterliedekens* are all popular or folk songs, but it now seems clear that at least some of them may have been taken from polyphonic settings.

Polyphonic songs that use pre-existent material either quote or rework a monophonic melody or quote a polyphonic setting. Eight songs in Susato's *Het ierste* and *Het tweetste musyck boecxken* take their thematic material from identifiable popular or folk songs. Two further pieces in the same collection use only the opening phrases of such melodies (McTaggart, *Tielman Susato*, xvi). In many cases it is difficult to establish if different settings are based on a similar model (Bonda, 1996, 232–8). The best known pieces that make use of a monophonic melody are the polyphonic *Souterliedekens* as set by Clemens non Papa, Gerardus Mes, and Cornelis Buscop.

## 5. Devotional songs.

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The 15th century also witnessed the advent of polyphonic songs with devotional texts in Dutch. Some of these are contrafacta of well-known secular songs. Their texts, which are devotional but not usually taken from the Bible, have given rise to associating the genre with the *Devotio Moderna*. The polyphonic devotional song settings, which were not as popular as their monophonic counterparts, include Christmas songs such as the ones in *B-Br* II 270, *B-Br* IV 421, *NL-UU* M 113, and the 16th-century settings by Petit Jean de Latre and Joannes Tollius.

In the 1550s a different type of devotional song emerged and flourished for a short period. These songs usually take their texts from biblical books and among them one finds prayers, songs of praise, admonitions, and psalm songs. Even though these scriptural songs cannot be seen separate from the Reformation in the Low Countries, they do not usually engage in a religious polemic. Composing them



was, certainly at its early stages, considered appropriate for composers of different religious convictions. One of the earliest examples, *Ick arm schaep aen gheen heijden*, comes from Susato's *Het ierste musyck boexken* of 1551. The best known representatives of the genre are the *souterliedekens* (rhymed psalm songs) by Clemens non Papa, Gerardus Mes, and Cornelis Buscop. Some later composers excelled in the biblical devotional songs, such as Noé Faignant (Wood), Jacobus Flori (see Gabriëls and others, 2006), and Jan Alewijnsz, whose altus partbook of about 1570 (NL-Au I.F9) contains more than 30 scriptural songs.

## Editions

modern editions of some essential collections of Dutch polyphonic songs

Fl. van Duyse, ed.: *Een Duytsch musyck boeck: naar de uitgave van 1572 in partituur gebracht en opnieuw uitgegeven* (Amsterdam, 1903)

J. Wolf, ed.: *25 driestemmige Oud-Nederlandsche liederen uit het einde der vijftiende eeuw. Naar den codex London British Museum add. mss. 35087 uitgegeven* (Amsterdam, 1910)

F. Kammerer: *Die Musikstücke des Prager Kodex XI E 9* (Augsburg, 1931)

K.P. Bernet Kempers, ed.: *Jacobus Clemens non Papa: Opera omnia*, CMM, iv/2: *Souterliedekens: Psalmi neerlandici* (Rome, 1953; R1998)

R. Taruskin, ed.: *Een vrolic wesen: Fourteen Settings in Two, Three and Four Parts*, Ogni Sorte, RS 2 (1979)

R. Taruskin, ed.: *Venus bant: Ten Settings in Three and Four Parts*, Ogni Sorte, RS 3 (1979)

R. Taruskin, ed.: *T'Andernaken: Ten Settings in Three, Four and Five Parts*, Ogni Sorte, RS 7 (1981)

R. Taruskin, ed.: *In mijnen zin: Seventeen Settings in Two, Three, Four and Five Parts*, Ogni Sorte, RS 8 (1984)

J. van Biezen and J.P. Gumbert: *Two Chansonniers from the Low Countries: French and Dutch Polyphonic Songs from the Leiden and Utrecht Fragments (Early 15th Century)*, MMN, 15 (Amsterdam, 1985)

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L. Kessels and E. Jas, eds.: *Jacob Obrecht, Collected Works: Secular Works and Textless Compositions*, New Obrecht Edition, 17 (Utrecht, 1997)

T. McTaggart, ed.: *Tielman Susato. Musyck boexken, Books 1 and 2: Dutch Songs for Four Voices*, RRMR, 108 (Madison, WI, 1997)

B. Bouckaert and others, eds.: *Collectie Middelnederlandse en Latijnse geestelijke liederen = Collection of Middle Dutch and Latin Sacred Songs, ca. 1500*, Monumenta Flandriae Musica, 7 (Leuven, 2005)

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