

Busnoys in the hands of scribes, or: What did key signatures mean to the scribes?

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It is well known that Busnoys got his knuckles rapped by Tinctoris on issues of notational and compositional procedures. When we at great temporal distance read Tinctoris' consistent efforts to create a theoretical foundation for regulating the musical practises of his time, it becomes clear that Busnoys' background and education – and maybe also his artistic temperament – placed him in a tradition different from the one Tinctoris' logic had to recommend. But when we study sources, which were created while Busnoys' fame was in ascendance, it also stands out that the scribes, who were professional musicians, encountered problems with his musical imagination and boldness when they did their best to communicate it in writing.

My project is about the five related chansonniers known as the “Loire Valley Chansonniers” from the years around 1470, and its first stage is an online edition of the Copenhagen Chansonnier, which is nearly completed (<http://chansonniers.pwch.dk/>). This project started more than 25 years ago, but was laid to rest as rather futile in recognition of how little we actually knew about the manuscripts and of their place in 15th century society. It was revitalized as a result of Jane Alden's research into the chansonniers and her new description of the scribes' role in their genesis and of the books as multifaceted cultural artefacts. On this groundwork it has been obvious also to try to change the view of what they tell us about music.

Cop	Copenhagen, The Royal Library, MS Thott 291 8°
Dij	Dijon, Bibliothèque Municipale, Ms. 517
Niv	Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Rés. Vmc. ms. 57 (Chansonnier Nivelles de la Chaussée)
Lab	Washington D.C., Library of Congress, MS M2.1 L25 Case (Laborde Chansonnier)
Wolf	Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Codex Guelf. 287 Extravag.

Of course the chansonniers are important sources for lots of musical works. But they also represent performances in the minds of the scribes frozen on parchment, and they are witnesses of serious efforts to communicate how a musical mind wanted the songs to appear in sound. In many cases the divergent versions of the songs in the related sources must reflect the scribes' experiences with the music as sounding realities. Therefore I have chosen to make use of the capacity of the online format to transcribe every version of the songs as performances in their own right.

Analyzing the repertory from this angle brings out a lot of questions. For most of them I have only preliminary answers. One question in particular I find intriguing. It concerns the degree of prescriptiveness of key signatures in the second half of the 15th century.

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Table 1

Content of Copenhagen Chansonnier		Dij	Cop	Lab	Niv	Wolf
1	ff. 0v-1 »Comment suige de vostre cueur« 3v [Delahaye]	Red	Red			
2	ff. 1v-2 »Pour changier l'air ne pour fouir les lieux« 3v [Convert]	Red	Red	Red		
3	ff. 2v-3 »N'araige jamais mieulx que j'ay« 3v [Morton]	Red	Red	Green		Green
4	ff. 3v-4 »Ma plus, ma mignonne, m'amy« 3v [Convert]	Red	Red	Red		
5	ff. 4v-5 »De tous biens plaine est ma maistresse« 3v [Hayne van Ghizeghem]	Red	Red	Red		
6	ff. 5v-6 »Puis qu'il convient que le depart se face« 3v [Delahaye]					
7	ff. 6v-7 »Se mieulx ne vient, d'amours peu me contente« 3v [Convert]	Red	Red			
8	ff. 7v-9 »Tart ara mon cueur sa plaisance« 4v [Molinet]	Red	Red		Hand C	
9	ff. 9v-11 »Nul ne l'a tele, sa maistresse« 3v [Baziron]		Red			Red
10	ff. 11v-13 »M'a vostre cueur mis en oubli« 3v [Busnoys]	Red	Red	Red		
11	ff. 13v-14 »Riant regard, acompli en douleur« 3v (unicum)					
12	ff. 14v-15 »Seulement une fois le jour« 3v [Anonymous]	Red	Red			
13	ff. 15v-17 »Ma plus qu'assez et tant bruiante« 3v [Busnoys]	Red	Red			
14	ff. 17v-19 »Garison sçay / Je suis mire« 4v [Anonymous]					
15	ff. 19v-20 »Je ne requier que vostre bien vueillance« 3v [Anonymous]		Red	Red		Red
16	ff. 20v-21 »Puisque honneste vie la pare« 3v (unicum)					
17	ff. 21v-23 »Le joly tetin de ma dame« 3v [Anonymous]		Red			Red
18	ff. 23v-24 »Mon cueur et moi d'une alliance« 3v [Anonymous / ?Prioris]		Red			Red
19	f. 24v »Tant est mignonne ma pensee« 1v [3v] Only S [Anonymous]	Red	Red			
20	f. 25 »Le souvenir [de vous me tue]« 2v [3v] (Only T and C) [Morton]	Red	Red	Green		Green
21	ff. 25v-26v »Ostez la moy de mon oreille« 3v (incomplete) [Anonymous]	Red	Red			

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22	f. 27 »La plus [mignonne de mon cueur]« 2v [3v] (T and C only) [Anonymous]					
23	ff. 27v-29 »Soudainement mon cueur a pris« 3v [Busnois]					
24	ff. 29v-30 »Quant vous me ferez plus de bien« 3v [Busnoys]					
25	f. 30v »Je le prens sur ma conscience« 1v [3v] (S only) [Anonymous]					
26	f. 31 »S'il advient [que mon deul me tue]« 2v [3v] (T and C only) [Michelet]					
27	ff. 31v-32 »Mon tout, mon souvenir, m'ameye (1)« 3v (unicum)					
28	ff. 32v-33 »D'un autre amer mon cueur s'abesseroit« 3v [Ockeghem / ?Busnoys]					
29	ff. 33v-35 »La plus bruiant, celle qui toutes passe« 3v [Anonymous]					
30	ff. 35v-36 »Sur mon ame, m'ameye« 3v [Anonymous]					
31	ff. 36v-37 »Nul ne s'i frocte a ma maistresse« 3v [Magister Symon]					
32	ff. 37v-39 »Ja que lui ne s'i actende« 3v [Busnoys]					
33	f. 39v »Prenez sur moi vostre exemple amoureux« 3v ex 1v Canon [Ockeghem]					

Did the scribes regard a flat sign as a prescription changing all occurrences of the signed position into a *fa*-step? Or was it just, especially in situations involving partial signatures, a marker of a default reading of the tone system's variable step, a marker of which alternative the performers should consider first? Many discussions of music theory depend on the answer to this question, and it certainly influences the sound of performances. In by far the majority of such discussions the question has not been raised, and the modern understanding of key signatures has tacitly been assumed. It is, however, a question that I feel confident enough to try to answer for the scribes of the related chansonniers based on an examination of only the 33 preserved chansons in the Copenhagen chansonnier.

The short answer is that the scribes showed great insecurity in these matters, and that it is impossible to assign the prescriptive power to the concept of key signatures, which it acquired in later music.

Copenhagen chansonnier offers a unique opportunity to examine this question, because many songs in its repertory were copied two or three times by the same scribe, the so-called Dijon scribe who made most of the Dijon, all of Copenhagen and a good part of the Laborde Chansonnier. And one soon realizes that he probably used the same exemplar for all his copies, but he did not interpret the exemplar in the same way every time.

Table 1 shows in red colour all the versions made by the Dijon scribe using the same exemplar. The lighter shades of colour designate the use of exemplars so similar that they in fact could be the same thing. The table shows furthermore that in four instances the Dijon and the Wolfenbüttel scribe used very similar exemplars, that the Laborde and Wolfenbüttel

Table 2

Copenhagen Chansonnier		Dij	Cop	Lab	Niv	Wolf
2	ff. 1v-2 »Pour changier l'air ne pour fouir les lieux« 3v [Convert]					
4	ff. 3v-4 »Ma plus, ma mignonne, m'amy« 3v [Convert]					
11	ff. 13v-14 »Riant regard, acompli en douceur« 3v (unicum)					
12	ff. 14v-15 »Seulement une fois le jour« 3v [Anonymous]					
13	ff. 15v-17 »Ma plus qu'assez et tant bruiante« 3v [Busnoys]					
16	ff. 20v-21 »Puisque honneste vie la pare« 3v (unicum)					
21	ff. 25v-26v »Ostez la moy de mon oreille« 3v (incomplete) [Anonymous]					
25	f. 30v »Je le prens sur ma conscience« 1v [3v] (S only) [Anonymous]					
27	ff. 31v-32 »Mon tout, mon souvenir, m'amy (1)« 3v (unicum)					
29	ff. 33v-35 »La plus bruiant, celle qui toutes passe« 3v [Anonymous]					
30	ff. 35v-36 »Sur mon ame, m'amy« 3v [Anonymous]					

scribes in three cases (in green) could have exchanged exemplars, and that a later hand added a song to Nivelles Chansonnier using the Dijon scribe's work as model. But this is different story about the relations between the sources.

The table also makes it clear that the count (3) of compositions unique to Copenhagen is slightly misleading. In fact it is no less than 11 of the 33 songs that we know solely through the eyes and ears of the Dijon Scribe (see *Table 2*). He is thus an important witness.

Let us zoom in and take a closer look at three virelais or bergerettes by Busnoys to see how the Dijon scribe handled key signatures. Here I can only give very broad outlines of the cases - details can be found in the comments to the online editions. A single glance on a tabulation (*Table 3*) of the three songs' key signatures will tell you that the scribe had to make a lot of choices while working (a flat in parentheses = one flat in 1-2 staves).

Table 3

	Dij	Cop	Lab	Niv	Wolf
»M'a vostre cueur mis en oubli«	(b), b, b / b, -, b	b, -, b / -, b, b	-, -, b / -, b, b		
»Soudainement mon cueur a pris«	-, -, - / -, -, -	-, -, - / -, -, -		-, b, b / -, b, -	
»Ja que lui ne s'i actende«	-, -, - / -, -, -	-, b, (b) / -, b, -	-, (b), b / -, -, -		-, -, - / -, -, -

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I will start with the most straightforward case: The main difference between the sources for “Soudainement mon cuer a pris” lies in their use of key signatures:

Busnoys, »[Soudainement mon cuer a pris](#)«

Nivelle: –, **b**, **b** / –, **b**, –

Dijon: –, –, – / –, –, –

Copenhagen: –, –, – / –, –, –

Copenhagen/Dijon has none, while Nivelle has flats in the lower parts. However, in performance this difference is only really audible in the last line of the first section, where the punch lines of the poem suddenly changes to a colouring of minor thirds in Nivelle. Contrasts are the lifeblood of fixed forms with their rigid pattern of repetitions. In the rondeau contrasts between the first and the second section and in the bergerette between refrain and couplets are important for the unfolding of the form. Tonal contrasts using the variability of the tone system are here crucial.

In Nivelle the flat affecting the B in the tenor in bar 19 would probably have been sung as a natural in view of the tenor’s circling around the note E during the preceding six bars ([see the edition](#)). This example shows the type of problems the Dijon scribe had to decide on.

The Dijon scribe’s exemplar could very well have been quite similar to the Nivelle scribe’s including flats. My research shows that the Dijon scribe often analyzed the music and performed it in writing according to his own taste. Realizing that flats are kind of optional in a piece in D-Dorian, and that some of the song’s charm depended on a fluid state of the scale’s variable step, he decided not to put in key signatures ([see the edition](#)). He did put in the important flat before B in the contratenor in bar 26, and the usual rules for choosing between high and low Bs would automatically produce the intended turn to the flat side at the end of the refrain. The resulting performance is completely predictable, but slightly different from Nivelle’s, without in any way changing the song’s identity. Maybe one of his goals was to ensure a correct performance of the contrasting couplets – the cancellation of the B-flat in the contratenor in Nivelle could easily be overlooked.

»M’a vostre cuer« offers an instructive example of how difficult it could be for a meticulous music scribe to present the sounding reality of music in writing.

Busnoys, »[M’a vostre cuer mis en oubli](#)«

Dijon: **(b)**, **b**, **b** / **b**, –, **b**

Laborde: –, –, **b** / –, **b**, **b**

Copenhagen: **b**, –, **b** / –, **b**, **b**

Rome 2856: –, –, – / –, –, –

Florence 176: –, –, – / –, –, –

Bologna Q16: –, –, **b** / –, –, **b**

Florence 2794: –, –, **(b)** / –, –, **(b)**

Seville 5-I-43: –, –, **b** / –, –, **b**

The sources for this chanson show the complete range of possibilities. In the slightly later Italian and French manuscripts it appears without any key signatures at all or with a one flat signature in the contratenor only. Only the Dijon scribe has used three different configurations of key signatures in the two sections of the bergerette.

The sources evidently transmit two different interpretations of the tonal development and contrasts in the song. In the sources without any flats quite a lot of B-flats will have to be performed in the contratenor to correct fifths, but B-flats will not be needed in the opening of the second section, and in this way a contrast between the two sections is established. In all the sources with at least a flat in the contratenor this tonal contrast will be eradicated in performance, and the contrasts reduced to what happens inside each section.

The Dijon scribe apparently struggled with these internal contrasts. We can only guess what his exemplar looked like, but it probably had a key signature of one flat in the contratenor like the majority of other sources and no signatures in the upper voices. The scribe tried different strategies to convey the changing quality of B's in the upper voices to the performers. It never occurred to him to put some unambiguous accidentals in their parts.

I'll spare you the details. After trying different combinations of flats in Dijon and Laborde, he ended up with flats in superius and contratenor in the first section and flats in the lower voices in the second section. This solution gives the music a rich tonal colouring, and the singers only have to supply a few naturals – it might be his final word on this chanson.

The Dijon scribe's difficulties in deciding how best to communicate the fluidity of the variable scale degree and its influence on the sound of the music clearly demonstrates that to him and to many others of his generation the concept of a key signature had not acquired its modern prescriptive meaning.

For “Ja que lui ne s'i actende” there is a majority of sources without any key signatures: Dijon, Wolfenbüttel, Mellon Chansonnier in New Haven, and the Colombina Chansonnier in Seville. But two sources, Laborde and Copenhagen, introduce flats in curious patterns. And still more curious, Dijon and Copenhagen were copied after the same exemplar, and Laborde and Wolfenbüttel might on their side also have been after the same exemplar, and yet we see these differences. They have a story to tell.

Busnoys, »[Ja que lui ne s'i actende](#)«

Wolfenbüttel: ♭, ♭, ♭ / ♭, ♭, ♭

Dijon: ♭, ♭, ♭ / ♭, ♭, ♭

Laborde: ♭, **(b)**, **b** / ♭, ♭, ♭

Copenhagen: ♭, **b**, **(b)** / ♭, **b**, ♭

New Haven 91: ♭, ♭, ♭ / ♭, ♭, ♭

Seville 5-I-43: ♭, ♭, ♭ / ♭, ♭, ♭

It is a very special song. The equivocal sense of the poem's first line, “Though he does not expect it” or “Jaqueline expects”, places this bergerette firmly in the famous series of Jaqueline d'Hacqueville songs by Busnoys. And that something unusual is going on here is made audible by the music: The contratenor hammers out “ja/que/lui/ne” in four repeated brevis notes on *c* ([see the edition](#)). For once, neither the superius nor the tenor is the most important voice to present the text. Busnoys' song offers a bold perception of the courtly chanson. The three voices were conceived as a unity, probably with the contratenor as its principal voice and with a heavy reliance on hexachordal procedures.

The opening of the contratenor is unique in this repertory, and it marches on in equal semibrevis notes. The contratenor extends the four Cs by a complete statement of the natural or the C-hexachord, which reigns until bar 15. Then the hard or G-hexachord is brought into play, first in high position then in low position. At the end of the refrain it mutates back to the C-hexachord.

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The tenor supplements the hexachordal play of the contratenor. In bars 1-16 it keeps entirely within the G-hexachord, only in bar 17 it moves to the C-hexachord – when the contratenor changes to the G – and so on. The strict hexachordal play of the lower voices gives the first section its own distinctive sound.

This is how the song appears in the Dijon Chansonnier and most sources without key signatures. In Wolfenbüttel the scribe introduces a flat before *B* in bar 28, which immediately causes flattening of *E* in the next bar and of *B* in the tenor (see the edition). It was possibly provoked by an uneasiness about the stressed diminished fifth *b-f'* between tenor and superius in bar 29 – the diminished fifths in passing in the preceding bars apparently did not bother the scribe.

The Laborde scribe went a step further in order to dispel his anxiety about diminished fifths. He placed key signatures of one flat in first two staves of the tenor as well as of the contratenor (see the edition). The flat in the contratenor does not cause any real problems; the fifths become perfect, but apart from that it does not influence the superius much. The tenor flat is different. Owing to the tenor's oscillation between *E* and *B* the performer has to supply many naturals in order not create serious problems.

When the Dijon scribe worked on completing the Laborde Chansonnier he could not copy “*Ja que lui ne*” into the MS. It was already there. But he studied the version made earlier by the Laborde scribe carefully, and in stead he entered a song modelled on “*Ja que lui ne*”, namely the anonymous rondeau cinquain »*La pourveance de mon cueur*«. This song quotes the start of Busnoys' contratenor as its tenor and duplicates the hexachordal roles of the lower voices – it may be a sort of *reponce*. He notated it without any key signatures in the upper voices and a signature of two flats in the contratenor and created a sound world modelled on the Laborde version of “*Ja que lui ne*”. It was either composed by himself or possibly edited from an effort of someone in his circle of musical colleagues – probably originally without a key signature.

Having ‘learned’ a lot from the Laborde “*Ja que lui ne*” the Dijon scribe copied it into the Copenhagen chansonnier using his own exemplar but introducing key signatures inspired by Laborde. The tenor in Copenhagen has a one flat signature in both sections causing and extending similar problems in performance as in Laborde, while the contratenor only has a flat in the first staff of the first section (see the edition). While the Wolfenbüttel and Laborde versions appear to work satisfactorily in performances, the cross-fertilization whose result is the Copenhagen version was less successful.

A crucial spot in the song is the cadential figure in the superius, which ends the first line. It includes the tritone movement from *b'* to *f'* in the superius above an *f* in the contratenor and seems to demand a flat in the superius, and it may have forced the thought of flats in the lower voices on the Laborde and Dijon scribes. This figure is present in all six sources and thus with a high probability goes back to a first generation clear copy of the song. But it may still be an error. If we dare to correct a detail, which all the sources agree on, and replace it with another standard figure, no thoughts about flats are induced at this point (see the restored edition).

(http://www.pwch.dk/Publications/PWCH_BusnoysInTheHands.pdf)