

Seeing Sound, Hearing Image:
Interplay of Music, Text, and Visual in Senleches's *La harpe de melodie*

The final decades of the fourteenth century and early years of the fifteenth were an extraordinary time for the proliferation of polyphonic music. Composers associated with the so-called *Ars Subtilior* movement adopted an exceedingly complicated musical language, extending rhythmic intricacies explored by the previous generation to unparalleled extremes through sophisticated yet often arcane innovations of notation. Aside from enabling temporal complexities, the notational practice of some *Subtilior* composers explored pictographic configurations, staves and noteshapes arranged in such a way as to form an image. While such novelty fostered an early perspective of *Subtilior* music as the product of erudition run amuck, specialized scholarship over the past forty years has led to a recognition that notation of this period, rather than being “a goal in its self and an arena for intellectual sophistries...” as Willi Apel famously mused, transcends glib gamesmanship to forge additional layers of meaning within a work’s overall symbolic form.¹ Anne Stone has expounded upon what she terms the “self-reflexivity” of some *Subtilior* works, remarking that:

The tendency to refer specifically to its own notation or graphic presentation, over and above its creation or performance, is in fact one of the principal attributes that marks a song as belonging to the stylistic category of *Ars Subtilior*.²

Among a handful of compositions which materialize in “graphic presentation[s],” Jacob de

¹ Willi Apel, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music, 900–1600*, 5th ed (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 403.

² Anne Stone, “Self-Reflexive Songs and Their Readers in the Late 14th Century,” *Early Music* 31, no. 2 (May, 2003), 183.

Senleches's *La harpe de melodie* epitomizes such self-reflexivity, its written transmission taking the form of a beautifully illuminated representation of a harp, its text extolling the sonorous splendor of the instrument. Notable scholars who have considered *La harpe* include Reinhard Strohm, Tilman Seebass, and Jehoash Hirshberg, all of whom characterize the chanson as an autobiographical piece by a composer-harpist. Strohm and Hirshberg agree that the piece would have been performed by a single person, likely Senleches himself, with the vocal line sung and the tenor and canonically-derived lines played on the harp.³ Accordingly, Strohm has described the chanson as “a challenge of virtuoso performance by a single musician” and “an opportunity for an intimate dialogue with his [the composer's] harp, his other self, which accompanies him as his shadow.”⁴ Hirshberg, in a similar vein, writes that *La harpe* represents “a unique case of a conservation of a musical event in the musical career of a great performer-musician.”⁵ Although both authors offer perfunctory observations regarding the unique material existence of the work, neither pursues a thorough examination. In a book chapter devoted to graphic notation in the late middle ages, Seebass begins to probe the pictorial transmission of *La harpe* before prematurely abandoning course and retreating, disappointingly, to a well-worn and safe assertion — that “the notation...is not meant primarily to preserve an invented composition on paper or to enable its performance” but rather is meant to “celebrate the harp and the harpist.”⁶

The following examination of *La harpe de melodie* will reveal how its peculiar notation, integrated within the image, is inextricably tied to the physical reality of the harp itself and,

³ Reinhard Strohm, *The Rise of European Music, 1380–1500* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 57–58, and Jehoash Hirshberg, “Criticism of Music and Music as Criticism in the Chantilly Codex,” in *A Late Medieval Songbook and its Context: New Perspectives on the Chantilly Codex* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009): 147–151.

⁴ Strohm quoted in Hirshberg, 149.

⁵ Hirshberg, 151.

⁶ Tilman Seebass, “The Visualisation of Music Through Pictorial Imagery and Notation in Late Mediaeval France,” in *Studies in the Performance of Late Mediaeval Music*, ed. Stanley Boorman (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 29.

moreover, that the nature of the music hinges on the particular type of harp depicted, dispelling Seebass's implication that the piece was not intended for performance. My exploration of the complex relationships between music, text, and image will demonstrate how the three interact to engender an exceptionally pregnant symbolic form. Ultimately, evidence gathered through historical research and visual analysis of the chanson's illumination will inform my theory that the harp portrayed was real and that its ownership can be surmised.

As with many of the composers whose music is associated with the *Ars Subtilior*, the details of Jacob de Senleches's life and work are scarce. Thanks to the composer's own chanson texts as well as surviving payroll documentation, Senleches is known to have worked for both Queen Eleanor of Aragon at the court of Castille and Cardinal Pedro de Luna of Aragon in Navarre during the early 1380s.⁷ Recent scholarly work has deduced that Senleches most likely spent time in Italy during the last decade of the fourteenth century. In her paper considering the contents of the Newberry Codex (Chicago, Newberry Library, ms. 54.1) and the individuals responsible for its commissioning, Lucia Marchi amplifies Strohm's earlier claim that Senleches maintained significant contact with the Visconti court at Pavia, a city which endeavored to become a cultural center under Visconti rulers.⁸ Marchi traces how close ties between the Visconti family, the *Studium generale*⁹ at Pavia, and the three mendicant orders (Franciscan,

⁷ The text of Senleches's own ballade *Fuison de ci*, a lament on the death of Queen Eleanor of Aragon (d. September 1382), places him in her service. His employment by the Cardinal is evidenced by payroll records from the royal household in Navarre dated August 21, 1383. The Cardinal would eventually become Benedict XIII, successor to Clement VII and the second and final Avignonian antipope of the Western Schism. It is not known whether Senleches remained in Navarre or instead followed Benedict to Avignon. See Yolanda Plumley, "Citation and Allusion in the Late 'Ars nova': The Case of 'Esperance' and the 'En attendant' Songs," *Early Music History* 18 (1999): 335.

⁸ Lucia Marchi, "Music and university culture in late fourteenth-century Pavia: The manuscript Chicago, Newberry Library, Case ms. 54.1," *Acta Musicologica* 80, 2 (2008): 143–164.

⁹ The *Studium generale* was founded in 1361 under Visconti patronage. Originally a center for the the study of law, medicine, and liberal arts, it would eventually become the University of Pavia.

Dominican, Augustinian) linked to the university point to Visconti sponsorship of the Newberry Codex. Copied and dated by a friar in 1391,¹⁰ the codex is a compilation of theoretical treatises such as Johannes de Muris' *Notitia artis musicae* and *Libellus cantus mensurabilis, Tractatus figurarum* attributed to Magister Philippottus Andree (possibly Philippus de Caserta), and several texts by Marchetto de Padova. The manuscript is, however, most famous for its inclusion of the beautifully illuminated *La harpe de melodie*, appearing on folio 10 (see FIGURE 1). Of great significance is the fact that *La harpe* is the one and only composition to appear within the codex, a circumstance which strongly indicates that its patrons held Senleches in high esteem; moreover, these patrons (Giangaleazzo Visconti and his family?) most assuredly encountered the composer and his work firsthand. Strohm has suggested that the iconographically notated *La harpe* is a "prototype" (or more likely a "fair copy" of a prototype) of the work's original conception, designed by Senleches himself. Strohm proposes that prior to performing the work, the composer would have distributed copies of this image to patrons in the audience, individuals who were uniquely privileged to receive the full "meaning" of the chanson.¹¹ Strohm's implication that Senleches would have reserved the deepest secrets of his composition for the benefit of his benefactors seems wholly plausible. Marchi notes that Giangaleazzo Visconti's daughter Valentina, herself an accomplished harpist, would have certainly enjoyed the piece in both its sounding and visual forms.¹² It stands to reason then that *La harpe de melodie*, while functioning two-fold as musical entertainment for the Visconti court and as a gift of both visual

¹⁰ The manuscript is signed and dated on folio 6v, following Johannes de Muris' treatise: "Papie sc[ri]pt[um] 2 octobr[is] 1391 p[er] F[r]at[er] G. de Anglia." The scribe was therefore an English friar, identified only by the first initial "G." See Marchi, 157.

¹¹ Strohm, 57.

¹² Marchi, 161.

art and intellectual privilege to patrons, might have been conceived with the particular interests of Valentina in mind.

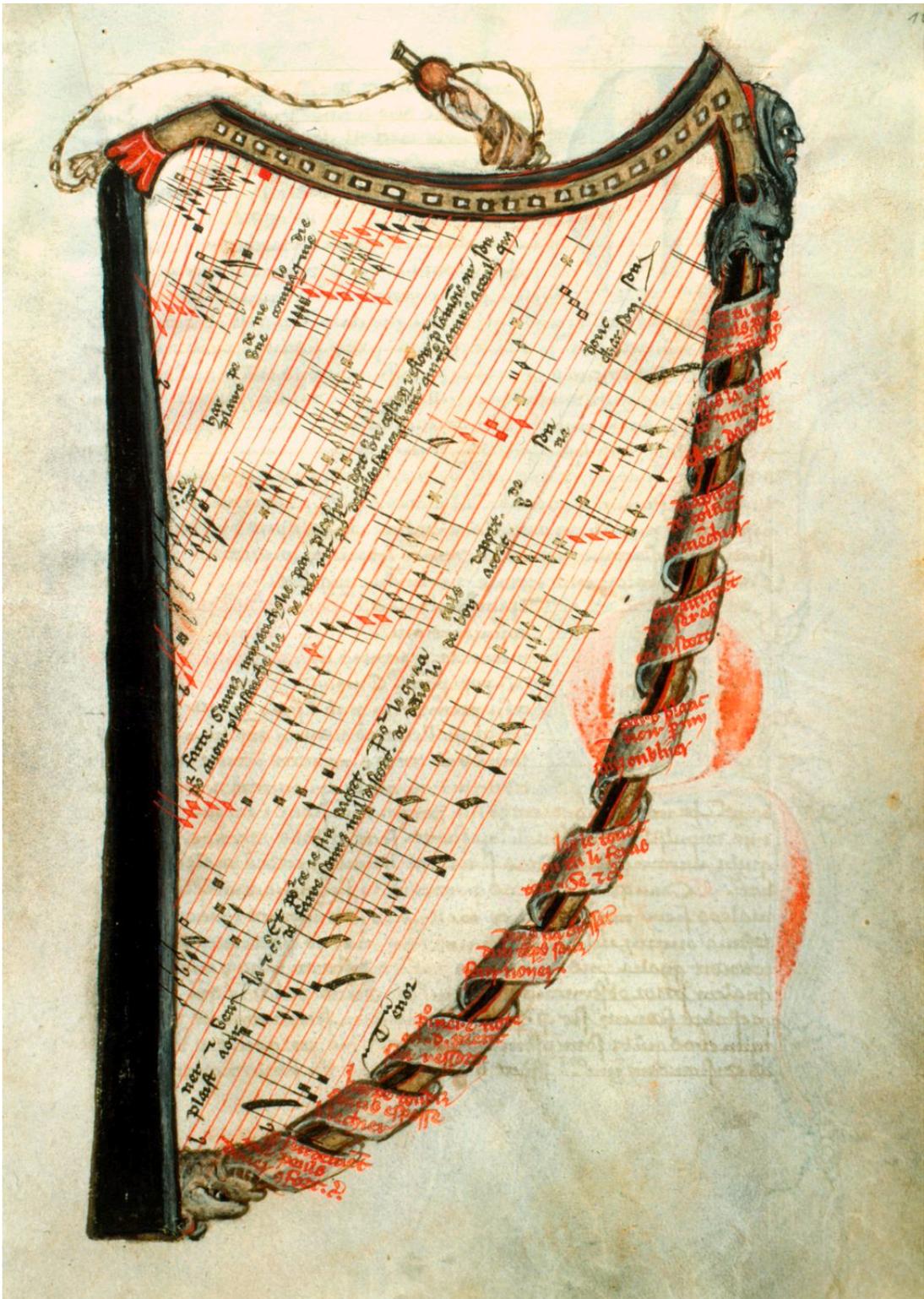


FIGURE 1: *La harpe de melodie* by Jacob de Senleches, appearing on folio 10r of Chicago, Newberry Library ms. 54.1. Digital scan provided courtesy of the Newberry Library, University of Chicago.

The pictographic score of *La harpe de melodie*, as shown in FIGURE 1, fills an entire folio of the Newberry Codex. The instrument is positioned such that the soundboard is on the left side of the page and the column (or pillar) is on the right. Four groups of strings,¹³ allocated 10+9+9+9 and totaling thirty-seven strings, stretch across the frame. It has not gone unnoticed amongst scholars that there is a discrepancy between the number of strings and tuning pins, of which there are twenty-two. Seebass has remarked on this “incongruity,” in addition to the fact that harps of this time period possessed only about two dozen strings (corroborating the number of tuning pins in the image).¹⁴ The difference in number between strings and pegs can easily be explained when one considers that Senleches’s image is comprised of both *realistic* and *imagined* elements: The excessive number of strings is unambiguously *imagined*, with the thirty-seven red lines serving to both represent strings and provide musical signification — namely, by standing in for staff lines, grouped into four staves.¹⁵ At the same time, the shape of the instrument is *realistic* (see below), as is the number of tuning pins lined up across the instrument’s neck — a visual reminder of the twenty-two strings which would ordinarily be present in a straightforward, organologically accurate illustration of the harp.

Roslyn Rensch has described the instrument shown as a “small triangular frame harp...depicted in right profile.”¹⁶ Her observation regarding the shape of the harp is crucial, for it is this distinctive trait that prevents misidentification of the instrument. Senleches’s late fourteenth-century contemporaries would have immediately and definitively recognized his illumination as representing a harp and not some other multi-stringed instrument, such as a lyre

¹³ Not to be confused with four *sets* of strings. For information on harps with multiple sets of strings, see Roslyn Rensch, *Harps and Harpists*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 84–88.

¹⁴ Seebass, 29.

¹⁵ Instead of the term *imagined*, one might prefer *abstracted*, since the number of strings is not arbitrary but rather derived from the number of staff lines required to notate the chanson.

¹⁶ Rensch, 81.

or lute. Furthermore, the depicted instrument's rounded shoulder (top left corner of the harp frame), as well as its arched neck (top of frame) and rounded column (right side of frame) are typical of "developed harps" of the time period.¹⁷ Many other contemporaneous portrayals of harps also conform to these structural characteristics. A famous rendering of King David playing a triangular harp while seated cross-legged serves to illuminate the interior of the initial "B" of the word *Beatus* on folio 10 of the Ormesby Psalter (see FIGURE 2).



FIGURE 2: Ormesby Psalter: *Beatus* initial, folio 10. The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Douce 366. Digital scan acquired from the library's LUNA database, <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/s/tbhz9b>

¹⁷ Rensch, 41–42. "Developed harp" is used by Rensch to refer to harps with a complete three-sided frame, a "rounded shoulder," and an "ample soundbox."

Given that we are able to confirm the accuracy of many aspects of the harp depicted within the Newberry Codex, one wonders whether Senleches's own harp — or perhaps Valentina Visconti's — were similar in design? At the very least, it seems unlikely that the pictographic notation of *La harpe* is merely a clever afterthought by a scribe. Rather, it must be a carefully planned illumination guided by an individual intimately connected to the instrument.

In the Newberry Codex transmission of *La harpe de melodie*, the poetic text is situated below each of the first three staves of music (the fourth staff supports an untexted tenor). Taking the form of a virelai, the text is partitioned into two lines, reflecting its structure: the **A** text is positioned atop that for **a**, and the text for **b** atop that for **b'**. The original Old French is provided below alongside Lucia Marchi's English translation.¹⁸

A	La harpe de mellodie Faitte saunz mirancolie Par plaisir doit bien cescun Resjoir pour l'armonie Oir sonner et veir.	The harp of melody, created without melancholy, out of pleasure, must well please all who hear, play and see its harmony;
b	Et pour ce ie sui d'acort Pour le gracuis deport De son douc son.	and so I agree, for the nice pleasure of its sweet sound,
b	De faire saunz nul discort De Deus li de bon acort Bonne chanson.	to make upon it [the harp] a good song, with good agreement, without discord,
a	Pour plaire bonne compagnie Pour avoir plaisanchelie De ma vir pour desplaisance Fruir qui trop anvie A ceulz qui plaist a oir.	to please fine company, for to have happy and deserved pleasure, for to abandon discontent which is too annoying for those who like to listen.
A	La harpe de mellodie...	The harp of melody... ¹⁹

¹⁸ Several translations were considered during the course of my study. Marchi's seemed to me the one which most directly transmits the semantic content of the text. For an alternate reading, which places greater weight on preservation of poetics, see Richard Hoppin, ed., *Anthology of Medieval Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 171.

¹⁹ Marchi, 161.

The poem is straightforward and unassuming on its surface, praising the mellifluous sound of the harp as an instrument created to “please fine company” with its “sweet sound” and “good song.” Naturally, providing entertainment and pleasure would have been Senleches’s outward aim when performing his composition before an audience. But a closer reading of the poem reveals significant connections between the textual, musical, and visual elements of the composition.

From the very outset, Senleches’s chanson is pregnant with meaning. Instead of setting the entire opening line “La harpe de melodie” to a single musical phrase, the composer chooses instead to present only the words “La harpe,” carried by an extended melisma and followed by rests (see FIGURE 3). The melodic line descends a perfect fifth from *D* to close on *G*, the latter pitch asserted as the modal final of the piece.²⁰ “Harpe” is further emphasized by a change in mensuration which creates hemiola against the canonic voice and sets in relief the linguistic sign for the composer-performer’s instrument.

The image shows a musical score for the first four measures of the piece. It consists of three staves. The top staff is for the voice, with two versions: '1. La' and '2. Pour'. The lyrics are 'har - - - pe' and 'plai - - - re'. The middle staff is for the Tenor, with lyrics 'har - -' and 'plai - -'. The bottom staff is for the bass. The music features a melisma on the word 'harpe' and 'plaire'.

FIGURE 3: Mm. 1-4 of *La harpe de melodie*, transcribed from *US-Cn 54* by Nors S. Josephson, “Die Konkordanz zu ‘En nul estat’ und ‘La Harpe de Melodie,’” *Die Musikforschung* 25 (1972): 295–298.

Such musical and text-setting strategies unambiguously elevate the harp itself – not the composer, performer, or listeners – to the center of focus. The virelai’s refrain speaks of the harp as something to “hear, play, and see” (“Oir, sonner et veir”). While Senleches’s audience would

²⁰ I refer to *G* as the “final” or “tonic,” despite the fact that *La harpe* does not close on this tone. Curiously, the piece exhibits an open rather than closed ending.

not have played the harp themselves, they would have both seen and heard the instrument and, of course, witnessed it being played. Yet these choice words would have held special import for the privileged few holding the illuminated score during performance, who enjoyed the added pleasure of seeing the harp in a beautifully-rendered representational form in addition to its physical manifestation.

These select individuals would have also been amused by the clever syntax-driven wordplay of “Resjoir pour l’armonie / Oir...” (“see its [the harp’s] harmony”), as the musical notation is integrated within the image of the harp. This curious conflation of seeing and hearing is amplified by what is perhaps *La harpe*’s most striking notational phenomenon: notes, which customarily occupy both lines and spaces of the staff, are instead anchored to the lines only. What initially appears to be a skip of a third, therefore, actually constitutes conjunct motion from one pitch to an adjacency.²¹ Seebass fleetingly entertains the notion that this unusual notational strategy might operate within a system of tablature before quickly dismissing the idea, since the depicted harp has many more strings than would be accurate for a harp of the period (discussed above).²² Of course the most glaring reason the pictograph cannot be tablature, which Seebass does not explicitly state, is that the notated music of the cantus does not run its course start-to-finish from one end of the harp to the other. Rather, as previously discussed, the cantus extends across three staves (each of which constitutes a group of 9–10 “strings”), wrapping around to the next staff as needed. Seebass does however seem to recognize that the extraordinary configuration of notes on the page creates a direct association between notes and strings of the harp. And although this observation has been made (usually in passing) by a

²¹ See the first twelve notes of the cantus in FIGURE 1, comprising mm. 1–2 of Josephson’s transcription. Linear motion is entirely by step.

²² Tilman Seebass, 29.

number of scholars, I feel it is a point that deserves further expansion and emphasis: That the notes are attached to the “strings” (and *only* the “strings”) is a powerful visual device that grounds the concurrent musical sound, so pleasing to the ear, in the physical, material reality of vibrating strings from which it is born. Likewise, it forms an inextricable connection between signifier and what is signified: notes on a staff and the sonic result, respectively. Thus, Senleches’s patrons would have heard the sound of the harp, seen the harp and “seen” its harmony, and “played” the harp by scanning the beautiful illumination and its integrated notation with their eyes.

In a commentary appendix nearing the end of *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century*, volume 18, editor Gordon Greene remarks, almost as an aside, that *La harpe* is “unusually devoid of extra accidentals.”²³ Indeed, there are no accidentals present in the piece at hand. And while the music of Senleches is not typically a hotbed of chromaticism, alterations are not out of the ordinary. In the example below from another of the composer’s works, the ballade *Je me merveil* from the Chantilly Codex, accidentals exist in mm. 48 and 52 of Cantus I and m. 55 of Cantus II.²⁴ The ascending motion of *D-F#-G* in the upper voice, mm. 48–49, followed immediately by a descent to *F* via leap to and from *D* is aurally striking.

²³ Musée Condé Bibliothèque and Gordon K. Greene, ed., *French Secular Music: Manuscript Chantilly, Musée Condé 564*, vol. 18 of *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century* (Monaco: Éditions de l’Oiseau-Lyre, 1981), 186.

²⁴ In Greene’s transcriptions, any and all accidentals appearing in their customary position to the left of noteheads are present in the original manuscript. Accidentals appearing above the staff are *musica ficta* suggested by Greene.

voil ma for - ge des -
me vucil tout quoy tay - re et moy
- fai - re : en - glu - me ne mer -
le - sier es - ter

FIGURE 4: *Je me merveil* by Jacob de Senleches, mm. 46–57. Transcribed by Gordon Greene, *French Secular Music: Manuscript Chantilly, Musée Condé 564*, Vol. 18 of *Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century* (Monaco: Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre, 1981): 56–57.

Similar chromatic alterations are nowhere to be found in *La harpe de melodie*. The piece confines itself to only those pitches available within the limits of the notated key signatures ($B\flat$ in the cantus, $B\flat$ & $E\flat$ in the tenor). Nevertheless, Greene's transcription of the piece makes a handful of *ficta* suggestions, presumably to engender greater expression near certain cadence points and to avoid dissonant cross-relationships between $E\sharp$ in the cantus (or canonically-derived voice) and $E\flat$ in the tenor (see FIGURE 5).

10
- ran - co - li - e per plai - sir,
- san - ce li - e de me - dir,

15
doit pour bien chas - cun res - jo - ir pour l'ar - mo - ni - e ou - ir, son - ner
des - play - san - ce fu - ir, qui trop a - nu - i - e a ceulz qui plaist

20
et a ve - ir; et pour ce
o - ir de fa - vre,

FIGURE 5: *La harpe de melodie*, mm. 10–23. Transcribed by Gordon Greene, *French Secular Music*, Vol. 18, 56–57.

As it turns out, most of the cross-relations are created by way of a transcription error by Greene, the editor having incorrectly interpreted notes 18–23 in the cantus at double their correct values.²⁵ Nors Josephson’s transcription, which Strohm has praised as the most accurate,²⁶ does not make the same mistake, although a cross-relation in m. 19 is still unavoidable (see FIGURE 6).

²⁵ Jehoash Hirshberg, “Criticism of Music and Music as Criticism in the Chantilly Codex,” in *A Late Medieval Songbook and its Context: New Perspectives on the Chantilly Codex* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009): 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

FIGURE 6: *La harpe de melodie*, mm. 16–21. Transcribed by Nors Josephson, “Die Konkordanzen,” 295–298. Notice the unavoidable cross-relation at m. 19. This moment corresponds to Greene’s transcription at mm. 17–22.

It is my belief that the absence of accidentals in the manuscript of *La harpe de melodie* and the pervasive diatonicism which results are integral to the piece. Assuming Strohm is correct in his theory that Senleches would have performed *La harpe* as a solo act, Greene’s suggestions of *musica ficta* cannot possibly be accurate, as a single harp of this period would be incapable of inflecting both a B^b and B^{\sharp} (or E^b and E^{\sharp}) using the same string. Regarding the frequent appearance of tuning keys in early artistic renditions of harps,²⁷ Roslyn Rensch observes:

Symbolism aside, the fact that the harp player in many of the art examples discussed flourished a tuning key suggests that the harp was known as an instrument that was tuned, and retuned, frequently. Scale patterns may have been changed, or the strings tuned only to the essential notes of a piece, but when the harp was preset in a particular manner whatever the number of harp strings, the instrument itself (apart from going out of tune) was incapable of change without further attention.²⁸

²⁷ A hand holding a tuning key is visible in the Newberry Codex’s illumination of *La harpe de melodie*, above the neck of the instrument. See FIGURE 1.

²⁸ Rensch, 84.

Senleches, accordingly, would have tuned his harp as needed to perform the piece, and there would not (and could not) have been any chromatic pitch alterations. The matter of differing key signatures between cantus and tenor and resultant cross-relations is easily resolved, since it would have been no difficulty to drop the lowest *E*-string to *E^b*, retaining *E[♯]* in the upper octaves. Once again, Senleches’s music is inextricably connected with its notation and that notation’s integration within the harp image.

Previously I spoke of the harp depicted within the Newberry Codex as having both *realistic* and *imagined* (or *abstracted*) elements. The excessive number of strings, functioning as staff lines, was identified as one such *imagined* element, with the “correct” number of tuning pins grounding the image in *reality*. There is one additional aspect of the image’s twenty-two tuning pins which carries significant weight, which is that this number of pins (reflecting the true number of harp strings) corresponds almost exactly to the number of pitches needed to perform *La harpe de melodie*. The ambitus for cantus and tenor are given below.



FIGURE 7: Ambitus of cantus and tenor, *La harpe de melodie*.

Counting the missing scale steps (*D* and *E*), the number of pitches from the bottom of the tenor’s range to the top of the cantus’s is twenty-one. The number of harp strings required to perform *La harpe*, therefore, is merely one less than the number of tuning pins present in its pictographic score. It stands to reason that the famous illumination portrays not merely any harp; incredibly, it depicts a harp *ideal* for the performance of Senleches’s virelai.

Previously, I contemplated whether the harp portrayed within the Newberry Codex might resemble an actual harp belonging to either Jacob de Senleches or Valentina Visconti. It is certainly evident that the image is carefully constructed in order to depict an instrument suitable for a performance of Senleches's virelai. I will now consider a final piece of visual evidence, one I believe is key to answering this question.

Consider the two faces jutting from the top of the instrument's column: those of a man and an unidentified beast. While it is not unusual for harps of this era to feature anthropomorphic or zoomorphic carvings (see for instance the corresponding area of King David's harp, FIGURE 2), one must not overlook the possible signification of such powerful imageries. The head of the beast faces downward, its mouth opened wide to seemingly swallow the harp column. Notable features include sharp teeth on both sides of the mouth, an ear near the back of the head, an open and animated eye beneath a prominent forehead, and pronounced ridges running the length of the snout. The bottom jaw is painted with textured brush strokes to create a wispy appearance. What sort of beast this might be is not readily apparent. But if the illumination at hand does in fact portray a real harp, one wonders if the zoomorphic carving is more than a mere decoration. Perhaps it is a heraldic charge.

Since recent scholarship has identified the Newberry Manuscript as a product of Visconti patronage, it is prudent to pursue an investigation of the family's heraldry. Armories of the Visconti royal line famously brandished the *biscia*, a terrifying serpent-like creature most often pictured "standing" erect and holding (devouring?) a human in its jaws. Adopted from the arms of the city of Milan, the *biscia* represented military power and aggression and was used as a propagandistic tool by the Visconti to assert their legitimacy.²⁹ Below are two representations of

²⁹ Sarah M. Carleton characterizes the Visconti as "tyrants...self-appointed hereditary rulers with no legal right to rule." In "Heraldry in the Trecento Madrigal," (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2009), 94, 97.

the Visconti *biscia*. FIGURE 8 appears within a manuscript from the famed Visconti library and features a woman holding the family's armorials.³⁰ FIGURE 9 is an illustration from Petrarch's unfinished collection of biographies, *De viris illustribus*.³¹



FIGURE 8: Woman holding Visconti armorials, c. 1400-1402. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Reproduced from Edith W. Kirsch, *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991)

³⁰ “In a tower of the Castello in Pavia, Galeazzo II installed a library which, during the reign of his son [Giangaleazzo], was to become one of the glories of Europe. Of the 988 manuscripts included in the earliest surviving inventory of the Visconti library...the majority appear to have originated in Italy in the second half of the fourteenth century.” Quoted from Kirsch, *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti*, 8.

³¹ Francesco Petrarca was perhaps the most illustrious guest of the Visconti court. Marchi states that the poet was Galeazzo II's “advisor and long-term friend.” Marchi, 144.



FIGURE 9: Illustration of the Visconti *biscia* on a shield. From Petrarch's *De viris Illustribus* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds, latins 6069). Reproduced from Sarah M. Carleton, "Heraldry in the Trecento Madrigal."

Although the Visconti charge has on occasion been generically classified as a viper, medieval heraldry scholar Arthur Charles Fox-Davies cautions that this unique emblem should not be conflated with traditional heraldic imagery of the serpent:

...the arms of the family Visconti, which subsequently came into use as the arms of the Duchy of Milan, have familiarised us as far as Continental armory is concerned with a form of serpent which is very different from the real animal or from our own heraldic variety.³²

Indeed, salient features distinguishing the Visconti charge from that of a standard snake are visible in both FIGURES 8 and 9. The beast's mouth is agape to reveal dagger-like teeth jutting from both upper and lower jaws. An open eye is sunken beneath a prominent, distended forehead. Unlike a serpent, the creature possesses flapped ears which are situated near the back of the head, attaching at their base and extending outward. In FIGURE 8, a beard dangles from the large *biscia*'s lower jaw; for the smaller *biscia* in the same illustration as well as that in FIGURE 9, this conspicuous attribute has been curtailed, appearing instead as a textured (hairy?) chin.

Strikingly, every one of these features is shared with the beast carving depicted in the illumination of *La harpe de melodie*, albeit with the occasional slight variation. In light of the

³² Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Art of Heraldry* (New York, Benjamin Blom, 1968), 187.

above images of the *biscia*, we understand that the textured brush strokes on the beast's jaw in Senleches's illumination are suggestive of hair or a beard. The forehead of the carved creature, while not as grotesquely distended as that of the *biscia* in FIGURE 8, nevertheless bulges. An example of an equally subtle forehead bulge is seen in a late fifteenth-century wood carving of Visconti arms (see FIGURE 10).



FIGURE 10: Arms of the Visconti, Dukes of Milan. A late fifteenth-century wood carving from the castle of Passau. The *biscia* is azure in contrast with the remainder of the carving, painted silver. Reproduced from Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Art of Heraldry* (New York, Benjamin Blom, 1968), 187.

Furthermore, the ridges observed on the beast's snout in the *La harpe* illumination are indicative of reptilian scales, present in all of the above representations of the Visconti charge. The *biscia* in FIGURE 10 remarkably possesses similar ridges running the length of its snout.

One final clue might help to securely identify the zoomorphic carving in Senleches's image as a Visconti *biscia*: its color. Perhaps the most notable and consistent feature of the Visconti charge, which has hitherto gone unmentioned, is its vibrant blue color. This pigmentation, denoted "azure" in heraldic terminology, was used extensively within European illuminated manuscripts from the fourteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries, the necessary paint created from ultramarine (*lapis lazuli*) imported from Asia by way of Venice. Azure is utilized to dazzling effect in numerous illuminations and paintings of this era, the bright hue having not faded over the centuries. Owing to the scarcity and exorbitant cost of the mineral, however, high-quality ultramarine was often replaced by more commonplace ingredients such as smalt and blue bice. It has been observed that paints fabricated from these elements tend to fare poorly over time. A well-documented phenomenon, the gradual discoloration of ultramarine paint (resulting from exposure to moisture, among other chemical causes) has been termed "ultramarine sickness."³³

Renaissance art specialist John Shearman has commented on the sallow color of the Virgin Mary's robe in Raphael's *La Belle Jardinière*, which was once a bright blue (typical of depictions of the Virgin during this time). He notes, "The painting of the robe suffers... from a condition we call 'ultramarine sickness'... better described as a physical degeneration of the

³³ Joyce Plesters, "Ultramarine Blue, Natural and Artificial," *Studies in Conservation* 11, no. 2 (May 1966): 62–91.

medium.”³⁴ The “opaque, greyish blotchy effect” he describes is visible in the below image of the painting (see FIGURE 11).



FIGURE 11: Raphael’s *La Belle Jardinière*, c. 1507–1508. Oil on poplar panel. Louvre, Paris. Inventaire Napoléon 433. MR 433 Inv. 602. Reproduced from <http://www.3pp.website/2011/10/la-belle-jardiniere-raphael-case-study.html>

³⁴ John Shearman quoted in Hasan Niyazi, “*La Belle Jardinière* – A Raphael Case Study,” *3 Pipe Problem* blog, entry posted October 21, 2011, <http://www.3pp.website/2011/10/la-belle-jardiniere-raphael-case-study.html> [accessed December 11, 2016].

Returning to the carved beast in the illumination of *La harpe*, one notices that its greyish blue-green hue is markedly similar to that of the Virgin's robe. Is it possible that the carving once appeared bright blue? Chemical analysis of the Newberry Manuscript is necessary to make a determination, but an affirmative conclusion by such testing, when considered alongside previous observations, would overwhelmingly indicate that the creature depicted is in fact a Visconti *biscia*. Assuming this hypothetical result, one must inescapably conclude that the harp portrayed was not only real but belonged to the Visconti family and was probably played by Valentina Visconti herself. Senleches's chanson would have therefore been conceived as a gift to please his patrons and satiate the particular interests of their harpist daughter.

Reinhard Strohm's suggestion that Senleches performed his composition solo, having distributed copies of the illuminated score, is attractively plausible yet founded on little more than speculation. Given previous revelations, I would similarly like to indulge in speculation: Perhaps a performance of *La harpe de melodie* at the Visconti court would have consisted of the composer's singing accompanied by Valentina at her harp, Giangaleazzo and family members enjoying the exclusive privilege of both "see[ing] and hear[ing]" the instrument's harmony as they scanned the pictographic notation. In this scenario, the chanson would serve as a vehicle by which to display Valentina's talents before her family and the royal court. At the same time, onlookers would have been faced with the terrifying visage of the *biscia* carved into the front of the harp, a not-so-subtle reminder of the Visconti's stranglehold on power.

Jacob de Senleches's chanson is an astonishingly pregnant symbolic form, one whose meaning is driven by an ingenious interplay between what is heard — musical sounds and poetic text — and what is seen — written signifiers of sounds integrated within a visual representation

of the sounding body itself. It is fascinating to think that the very harp that first produced the “sweet sound” of Senleches’s virelai may have been known to us all along.

APPENDIX A

La harpe de melodie, transcribed from *US-Cn 54* by Nors S. Josephson, "Die Konkordanz zu 'En nul estat' und 'La Harpe de Melodie,'" *Die Musikforschung* 25 (1972): 295–298.

La harpe de melodie

Senleches (Newberry)

1. La har - - - pe
2. Pour plai - - - re

1. La har - -
2. Pour plai - -

Tenor ♫: ♩.

5 de me - lo - - - di - - -
(b)on - ne com - pag - - - ni - - -

- pe de me - lo -
- re (b)on - ne com - pag -

10 - li - - - e, par plai - - -
- li - - - e, de me - - -

saunz mi - ran - cho - li - - - e, par
- voir plai - san - che - li - - - e, de

15

- sir doit bien ces-cun res - - -
 - vir pour des plai-sance fru - - -

plai - - - - - sir doit bien ces-cun
 me vir pour des plai-sance

- joir pour l'ar - mo - - ni - e oir
 - ir qui trop an - - vi - e a

res - - - - - joir pour l'ar - mo - -
 fru - - - - - ir qui trop an - -

20

son - - - - - ner et ve - ir.
 ceulz qui plaist a oir.

- ni - e oir son - - - - - ner et ve - ir.
 - vi - e a ceulz qui plaist a oir.

25

Et pour ce ie sui d'a - cort pour
 De fai - re saunz nul dis - cort de

Et pour ce ie sui d'a - cort
 De fai - re saunz nul dis - cort

le Deus gra - de - cuis de - -
Deus li de bon a - -

30 32 33
1.
- port de son doux son.
- cort (b)on - -

8 - cuis de - port de son doux son.
bon a - cort (b)on - -

2. 32a 33a 34
- ne chan - - son.
- - - - ne chan - - - son.

*: Ligaturen nur in *Ch*, Einzelnoten in *N*

APPENDIX B

La harpe de melodie, transcribed by Gordon Greene, *French Secular Music*, Vol. 18, 56–57.

fol. 43v

C [L]a

1. La har - pe de
2. Pour plare u - ne

T [T]enor

5 mel - lo - di - e fay - te sans me -
com - pa - ni - e, pour a - voir plai -

10 - ran - co - li - e per plai - sir,
- san - ce li - e de me - dir,

15 doit bien chas - - cun res - jo - ir pour l'ar - mo - ni - e ou - ir, son - ner
pour des - - play - - san - ce fu - ir, qui trop a - nui - e a ceulz qui plaist

20

et a ve - o - ir ; et pour ce de fa - vre,

25

je suis d'a - cort pour le gra - ci - sans nul dis - cort de - dens li, de

30

- oux de - port de son bon a - cort do - ne

1. 2. 35

dolcz son. chan - son.

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