

Noel, noel, noel: A Discussion of the French Noël

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by
Gabrielle C. Reardon

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ABSTRACT

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Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Gabrielle C. Reardon

This is a discussion of the medieval French Noël song form. Many different definitions exist among current scholars, with some even discounting the subject matter of the song when it comes to differentiating this song from others available during this time period. Through a review of five songs and the existent scholarship, this study attempts to provide a possible definition for the Noël, something that is necessary in order to focus and enable possible future scholarship regarding this genre. This study begins by discussing the current state of the definition and comparing three definitions attributed to Block, Routley, and Rus as well as a more general idea regarding the classification of these works. It then moves into a discussion about the pitfalls of the more general methodology for classifying the works before positing a definition that is then applied to the *Noel, Noel, Noel*, a work attributed to Antoine Busnois, as well as an anonymous parody “noël” found in Block’s own study.

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Introduction

The word “noël” alone has a number of definitions, ranging from the nativity to an exclamation of joy and excitement, and spellings based on where the writer is located. Similarly, the song form of the French Noël has escaped more exact definition like the chanson or motet. When discussing the Noël, scholars commonly note that it appears seemingly fully formed during the 15th-century and tend to define the song as any written song found in a collection with the word “noël” or any of its other spellings in the title of the collection. Musical scholarship on this subject matter has been sparse at best, with only a few major works on the subject with the works separated by decades of silence on the subject. This has led to the formation of many different definitions, three of which will be discussed further below, that seemingly differ from one another. These definitions range from the overly generic to a more detailed discussion of the origin of the music, given that the Noël is considered to be a parody genre. The differences in the definitions perpetuates the confusion regarding the genre and structure of the song or associated lyrics. It also acts as a barrier to further research on the topic.

The Word “Noël”

As previously stated, one issue with classifying the Noël is the word itself. From province to province, the word was spelled differently and may have even had different definitions. This could impact the content of the song as well as the interpretation of the work from a textual standpoint. Additionally, if a stanza comprised of the repetition of the word Noël is necessary for classification purposes, it is important to be aware of the different spellings that may appear in various works in order to not overlook an instance of this genre by accident. As such, a brief overview of the different spellings and their regions is necessary before discussing

the genre more closely. As in the rest of the paper, “noël” will be used to refer to all versions of the word when speaking and the genre itself when speaking generally.

In Bas-Quercy (Nouël), Besançon (Nouë), Patois d’Ille-et-Vilaine (Noa, Noua), Chansons des Brentons (Nedelek, Nouël), and Burgundy (Noei)¹, it is easy to see the word’s root in “Nouvelles,” which, roughly translated, means news. In this sense, it be construed as meaning the gospel’s idea of good news. However, though the root is not as obvious, it could also stem from the Latin “Novus” or new, meaning that the song itself is a new comment on a continuing musical environment or simply a new song. In these cases, noel would either comment on the content of the song or the song itself.

In Bas-Quercy (Nadal) and Gascoigne (Nau, Nadau, Nadalet)², it is more apparent of the word’s origin in the term “Natalis” which stands for nativity or the Christmas season. For this reason, many have come to associate these songs with messages or texts stemming from the celebration of the birth of Christ. However, as will be discussed later, noels are not exclusively about the nativity nor do all noëls have meaningful content. By assuming this as the preferred definition, we would broaden the genre to possibly include any song dealing with the nativity without any mention of the “noël” or any of its other forms.

Finally, there was been some more recent scholarship that states the word may simply be an exclamation, denoting excitement over a great many ideas and events that may or may not be tied to the nativity. In this manner, noel would be similar in usage to Eureka. In these instances, the word does not seem to have a function beyond being an appendage to a line of text, acting to terminate it. When noel is used in this context, it commonly occurs in a truncated, single-

¹ John Stainer, *Carols, English and Foreign, The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* (42, 706), 785.

² Ibid.

syllable iteration such as noe or noa. The use of noel thusly may be to fit the word into a line it otherwise wouldn't fit in metrically or to use space the original line may not have been able to fill. As the noël is a parody genre, the presence of the shorter version of the word would be useful to make lines fit the original song's meter.

Formal Textual Definitions

The French noël, like the English carol, is normally regarded as a literary genre. Noëls generally illuminate events of the Nativity and those events that happened soon after or before the Nativity itself, though some works may contain no content other than the word noël. Lengthwise, noels can be anywhere from three to forty verses long. Some noëls would include refrain like passages, not unlike the burdens of the English carol, sometimes repeating only a single word, noël. With the wide range of topics and verse numbers and the irregular presence of a refrain, the definition of the literary genre noël is seemingly ambiguous. How, then, is this form defined musically?

The definition of the form "noël" differs based on which scholar you may read. According to Adrienne F. Block, writers of noëls would utilize already existing verse structures, normally borrowed from existing chansons, and add new texts.³ Block's definition would mean that the form of the verses and musical content would be pre-determined by the tune's original source. Thus, if they original chanson was in the form of a ballade, the noël would be the same. Similarly, if the original source included a refrain, then the noël would include the same. In this manner, the writing of a noël would seem to be formulaic rather than creative.

³ Adrienne F. Block, *The Early French Parody Noël*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 6.

In this manner, the noël has become known as a parody genre. However, there are songs for which no parody source can be located, as described in Bloch's book. Given the age of the sources and the fact that not every song from the period is recorded, it is possible that these seemingly innovative noëls are in fact parodies of lost songs. More interestingly, among the various definitions, it is only Bloch's which deals with the texture of the music. His discussion, though, is limited in scope to that of the identifiable original source material for each noël and focuses solely on the fact that the texture can be as varied as the sources available. Thus, the noël could be polyphonic or monophonic dependent on the source of the verse structure and music, the chanson the noël is parodying.

Additionally, Bloch does mention that some noëls would differ from their original source material. Normally these alterations were slight and the listener would still be able to discern the original tune and form from the noël's setting. The largest structural changes occurred when the text of the noël did not fit the borrowed musical content. In these cases, the parodied music would be assigned to a refrain, whether one was present in the noël's literary source or the chanson's structure or not. The verses would be spoken, delivered as a speech, with the refrain and music inserted between the verses. In these instances, the text of the refrain could be as simple as a single word, normally "noël". Other times, however, it may not mention the word "noël" at all.

One important issue in accepting Bloch's assertion that these refrains may not mention the word noël and yet the whole work may be classified as a noël is the problems this creates with identifying examples of the genre. In this instance, this definition may cause the genre to become overly broad, incorporating already existent and separate genres. Specifically, in instances where the refrain is without mention of noël and where the text of the song is

declaimed, the work may be better and more accurately as a liturgical drama. After all, liturgical dramas may be comprised of both sung and spoken parts, alternating with one another as needed. Additionally, the text of the drama may deal with the stories of the Gospel, which, as was previously discussed, is one of the varying definitions of the word *noël* and a key content area. While some may point to the length of the work in defining whether a work is a *noël* or liturgical drama, early liturgical dramas were shorter in length, only growing longer in the 12th and 13th century. It is possible that a *noël* may have appeared in later liturgical dramas as the length of the latter increased, much as operas contain arias, duets, and other song forms as numbers within a larger work. Since the liturgical drama also surged in popularity during this time, about the time the *noël* also began to emerge as a genre, confusion between the two genres would be compounded by allowing this broad definition to continue to be utilized.

According to the numerous definitions Martijn Rus cites at the beginning of his article, “Le *noël*, miroir de la société. Du XVe au XIXe siècle,” the *noël* can be defined as a spiritual song, written in the common language, on the theme of the Nativity.⁴ Rus’ definition leaves the musical content of the work entirely open. All he says is that it must be a song. There is no reference to preceding works used as a basis for the music or the music at all. Instead, he is more focused on the literary content of the work. Though it is a sacred piece, it is not to be sung in Latin but rather the vernacular language, French. The content is that of the Nativity or events surrounding it. This definition does not deal with those troublesome examples of *noëls* which contain no content beyond the word “*noël*,” excluding them based on content. Additionally, Rus is more interested in how the *noël* parallels society at the time of its creation than its content. He

⁴ Martijn Rus, “Le *noël*, miroir de la société. Du XVe au XIXe siècle,” *Neophilologus* 94 (2010): 242-243

mentions how, in the 16th century, the noël functioned as a religious-political pamphlet, taking part in the religious revolution. He cites numerous noëls, most written in support of the Catholic faith. However, in all of his discussion, he never mentions or analyzes the music of a single noël.

Erik Routley in the section of his book on carols outside England writes, “There is nothing in music so childlike as the French noel, with its short and often repetitive phrases, and its absolutely unsophisticated grace.”⁵ He goes on to say that the noël is a “lively survival[] of a catholic peasant culture.”⁶ From Routley’s comments, a keen observer may conclude that the noël’s stanzas are simple, short, strophic, and based on religious stories or ideas. and that the song is not through-composed but rather strophic. If the noël were a parody of a contemporary French chanson, the original work would likely have been written in one of the formes fixes, which themselves are strophic, so this observation would not be surprising. The most important comment here would instead be that regarding the short length of the phrases. This would be reminiscent of the *The First Nowell*, a song that Routley even hints would be better classified as a noël than an English carol. Of note is that, though Routley does discuss the structure of the music, he makes no mention of the songs being parodies of contemporary works.

Routley does directly deal with some of the music, specifically the tune *Iris*, better known as *Angels We Have Heard on High*, (*Les anges dans nos campagnes*), whose words Chope translated in 1875.⁷ While this song is originally classified as a carol, Routley makes an argument that it could be considered a noël. Like *The First Nowell*, the first two lines and the second two lines of each verse are set to the same music. The refrain, the melismatic Gloria, is

⁵ Erik Routley, *The English Carol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 206.

⁶ Block, vol. 1, page 3.

⁷ Erik Routley, *The English Carol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 206.

musically independent, utilizing a single phrase. It is in songs such as this that the border between English carols and noëls become blurred. According to Block, the English carol predates the noël by 200 years,⁸ which would ease our classification troubles by allowing us to classify songs by date. Routley, however, considers them as two concurrent musical forms, developing out of the French musical tradition. He finds that the carol has its root in the French “carole” or circular dance, thus its repetitious or round nature. By his estimation, however, the noël is a much simpler genre than that of the carol. Though it is still strophic in nature, the phrases are, on the whole, shorter and simpler. However, beyond this small difference and that of language, Routley gives little additional guidance in differentiating between the two genres.

While it may seem that Routley and Block are discussing different musical forms, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the two forms may be the same, though the definitions themselves may be incomplete. While Block focuses on the genre as a parody, bound by the original music, Routley comments on the structure. Looking at the music Block includes, we find that the melodies of the chansons do tend to parallel those seen in *Iris* or *The First Nowell*. In cases such as *Noel sur la chant de La, la, la, la, La gentile nonette, la*,⁹ the first and second lines are given the same music. The next two lines, which both end “Entendz-tu?” and thus act as a refrain, are given similar music to one another yet different music from the first two lines, making them musically independent like the Gloria refrain in *Iris*. The phrases are short and pithy as described in Routley’s definition. Thus, though their descriptions of the music seem vastly different, they are in fact discussing the same material, music with short, simple lines and

⁸ Block, vol. 1, page 3.

⁹ Block, vol. 2, page 372. A copy of this song can be found in the appendix as exhibit C.

similarly simple music. It may be that, when discussing the source material of the noël, Block simply failed to mention the prevailing characteristics of the borrowed melodies.

As important as these scholar specific definitions are, there is a larger issue with an idea that is more generally accepted when classifying the noël. For years, the prevailing methodology for identifying noëls has not been the music nor the literary content but rather the title of the collection. Should a collection mention the nativity or the word “noël” in the title, scholars were ready and willing to label every song within the same as a noël.¹⁰ This was done without regard to the characteristics of either the song-specific text or the music. In some cases, such as in Pierre Attaignant’s collection *Chansons Nouvelles*, based on the possible definitions of “Nouvelles,” could simply be saying that this was a collection of new works. In fact, this is a collection of twenty-five short chansons. Before positing a solution to the issue of the definition of this genre, it is important to discuss the issues inherent with identifying a work solely by the name of the collection. As such, a discussion of Attaignant’s *Chanson Nouvelles* follows.

Further, by defining the song based on its surrounding collection, if the title page is lost or the only extant version of a noël is found outside of its collection, the song may be incorrectly classified. For example, Antoine Busnois’ *Noel, noel, noel*, which can be found in the Brussels Manuscript 5557, has commonly been classified a motet or chanson. However, based on some of the definitions for the noël, Busnois’ work may be better, more specifically classified as a noël. This is not to say that it may not be a chanson as, as will be discussed later, the noël may be better understood as a sub-genre of the chanson than a stand-alone musical genre.

¹⁰ Block, vol. 1, page 104

Pierre Attaignant's collection *Chansons Nouvelles*

Pierre Attaignant was a French music publisher active from the late 15th-century to the mid-16th-century in Paris. Attaignant primarily printed collections of chansons, printing over 1,500 chansons by composers such as Claudin de Sermisy and Clement Janequin. Based on the title page of this collection, it was printed in January of 1535. There are 29 songs in total in this collection. Many of the pieces are short, made up of four or five lines of text, and are written for three or four voice parts. While some works set the text to the same musical lines, perhaps with minor changes due to a difference in the number of syllables in another line, others are more generally through composed.

In analyzing this collection, we will look at a select number of the songs. The first song for discussion is *Ag iour colin*¹¹ by Janequin. Janequin was a French composer most famous for his chansons. His liturgical output was small, amounting to only two masses and a single motet. *Ag iour colin* is one of his shorter works, spanning just a few very short lines. The text roughly translates as follows:

Un jour Colin la Colette accula,
En lui disant, “or mettex le cul la,”
Puis de si pres
Se prit a l'accoler,
Qu'en l'accolant,
Qu'en bricolant,
La goutte fit couler,
Et pour culer,
Jamais ne recula.

One day Colin the Prude drove to a halt,
Saying to her, “now put your backside there,”
Ever so close,
He put his arms around her neck,
That embracing her,
Alarming her,
The test was made to flow,
And as for pulling away
She never did draw back.¹²

¹¹ This song is better known under the spelling “Un jour Colin”. A copy of the score is found in the Appendix as Exhibit A.

¹² Richard Metzger, *Chansons of the 16th Century for Classical Guitar*, (Fenton, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2011), vi.

The literary context of this work is not that of a scene from the Nativity nor a religious scene at all. Instead, it is largely regarded to describe a sexual act between Colin and an unnamed woman. If the Noël were defined in large part based on the content of the text, this work would fall outside of the definition as, at a minimum, it is not about a religious subject nor is it about the nativity. This would be counter to the three scholar-specific definitions previously discussed.

Looking to the musical content of the song, there is no refrain and the song is through composed with no repeating musical idea. This runs counter to the definitions posited by Routley as, while the phrases are short, they are not repetitive. Likewise, there is no incipit included, pointing to another musical source for the music, which would support Block's definition of the Noël. However, as Block does discuss, sometimes the incipit is left out as it is assumed the consumer would be familiar enough with the works to know what tune the song was to be sung to.

Taking into account both the musical and textual aspects of the song, there is nothing to link this work to the idea of the Noël nor the genre at large. Its inclusion instead supports the idea that defining the genre based on the title of the collection the works are found in is overly broad, encompassing songs that otherwise may better fit in other categories. Instead, "Nouvelles", in this instance, may better refer to the idea that these are new works, never before produced in such a collection. Since usage of the word "new" in its many forms does seem to be a common advertising practice among publishers, this could be troublesome when trying to decide what works constitute Noels.

However, it is possible that one work in a collection may not fit the overall collection. As such is the case, it is important to look at another work in the same collection. This next

work, *En esperant*, is by Claudin.¹³ Claudin, like Janequin, is regarded as one of the most renowned composers of French chansons in the early 16th-century. Unlike Janequin, however Claudin was also known for having a significant sacred music output, including twelve extant masses, about one hundred motets, and other works. Below is a translation of the text of the work found in this collection:

En esperant en ceste longue attente	Hopeful during this long wait
Le bienheureux et desire recevoir	The luck and desire to receive
Je noubliroy la coustume debvoir	I will not forget the traditional duty
Qui me rendra melheueux le ou contente	Which will make me miserable or content

This song, unlike the previous one, may be about a religious topic. “Bienheureux” can translate to mean both luck and blessing, and the long wait may mean the wait for the return of Christ. Finally, the mention of a duty that may make one miserable or content may refer to judgment day, wherein our works on Earth (our duty) will either make us miserable, as those who are found wanting are permanently destroyed, and those who are found to be good are to be elevated.¹⁴ While this text may have a religious reading, however, it is far from being a story about the Nativity. Again, based on subject matter, this work would fail to be a Noël.

Turning to the music, we find that the work is written in relatively long phrases of perhaps 48 beats, by more modern standards. This would be counter to Routley’s definition of the Noël. However, the music of the first and last lines are the same, though with slight modifications in the tenor line. The soprano’s part is even more repetitive, using the same music for the first and second lines and a descending fragment in the second line that is largely based on that use in the first line for the word “attente”. This follows the structural idea espoused by

¹³ A copy of the score is found in the Appendix as Exhibit B.

¹⁴ Revelation 5:10; 14:1-4; 20:4-9.

Routley and seconded by Block. Again, as in the previous work, there is no hint that this work may be grounded in a melody from another pre-existing work. Instead, it is presented without an incipit.

While the example from Janequin better shows the issues with defining a work by the name of its collection, this example shows the difficulties create by defining a work of this time period on the music alone. While this work may seem to fit the musical definition due to the reuse of a previous musical idea in the last line, it does not fit the textual needs of the genre. While the work may be thought of as being religious, it is not about the Nativity nor any of the surrounding events. Instead, it may be about the day of judgment. The content of the work during this period is important when classifying songs. After all, the difference between a madrigal and a motet is more so that one is secular and one religious than its musical form. Thus content is just as important when classifying a song as the musical form.

Definition Revisited

As the follies of defining a definition by the name of the collection and by the form the music alone have already been addressed, it is important to describe what a good definition of the Noël genre might be.

During this period, the text of the song is a strong indicator of genre. Routley, Rus, and Block all seem to agree that the content of the song is paramount. The song should be about the Nativity or a closely related religious subject. Thus purely secular songs would not fall under this genre.

Musically, the song should be simpler. Block believes the song's form is based in its predecessor from which the music is borrowed. Routley simply says that the song is made up of short, repetitive phrases. Both assumptions could be true in that composers may set Noël texts to

borrowed tunes that were simple and strophic in form. However, it is possible that a more complex song may still be termed a noël if the tune is borrowed and the text relates to the nativity. In this way, while the musical form is important, it is not the governing factor in the classification of songs.

Another important point is that the noël may not be a stand-alone genre in that it might be a sub-set of a larger musical form. For instance, since many of the noël's musical materials will probably be borrowed from chansons, it might be easy to mistake one for the other. The noël would be subservient to the chanson's influences and forms. Additionally, by placing so much emphasis on the text when classifying the works, we are moving the definition out of the musical sphere and into the literary one. While it might be tempting to argue that there is no noël genre based on this discussion, it is also possible to argue that the noël is simply a specialized parody chanson.

Finally, due to the age of the musical sources, there is one further issue. Though we may choose to adopt Block's idea that noël's are a parody genre, it may be hard to find every original musical source. If the original chanson is no longer extant and an incipit was not included due to its popularity at the time, the parodying noël may appear to be wholly original. This is not to mean that there are not borderline pieces that discuss the Nativity, follow the format of a simple chanson, and are original. However, it is also possible that we simply are unable to find the original musical source either due to major alterations to fit the text of the noël, distorting the original work, or due to missing musical sources.

There is one other fragment of Block's definition that deserves a little more attention. Block states that the noël may or may not have a refrain. Much like we may or may not be able to identify the work's musical sources, we may or may not be able to identify if the noël has a

refrain. Incipits defining the work's musical source are not always included before the work when it is thought that the public will already know the source of the music. In much the same regard, it is possible that the noël has a refrain added based on an oral tradition. It is possible that the singers simply ad libbed a verse of the song, substituting either another text or repeating the word "noel" and all of its variations, as a refrain. Much as we may not be able to find every musical source for these works, it is not possible to know if refrains were sung to songs where it they are not necessarily present in the music.

For the purposes of this work, it appears the best definition available is that the noël is a musical form akin to the chanson, which more commonly than not borrows its musical material from a chanson, and deals with the story of the Nativity. These works may or may not have a written refrain and may not explicitly use the word "noel" in any of its verses.

Antoine Busnois' *Noel, noel, noel*

With the idea that some works may be more generally classified as a chanson and more specifically as a noël, there is need to discuss one such example. In this case, attention is given to Antoine Busnois' *Noel, Noel, Noel*,¹⁵ which is commonly referred to as a chanson. However, the sole literary aspect of the work is the repetition of the word "noel".

Busnois was a Burgundian composer. Like many early composers, details of his early life are largely unknown. He was a French trained composer, probably having attended a church choir school in northern or central France. He was familiar with Johannes Ockeghem, and there is record that both served at the Church of St. Martin in Tours. In 1467, Busnois settled in Burgundy, working for Charles the Bold both before and after Charles became duke. Busnois

¹⁵ A copy of the score is found in the Appendix as Exhibit D.

continued to work for the Burgundian court until 1482, years after the death of Charles the Bold, after which little is known about his works.

Not surprisingly, given the relationship between noëls and chansons, Busnois was known mainly as a composer of chansons, with most being either rondeaus or begerettes. In most of his works, he utilized only three voices, though a fourth may be added in later editions. Busnois is considered to be a melodist, writing long and elaborate vocal lines, not short and pithy noël lines. His musical phrases move from syllabic declamations with clear motives to faster motions with long melismas.

Busnois also commonly utilized the cantus-firmus technique in his sacred works. He would utilize a pre-existing melody to act as the basis for a motet or mass. Some of these works include his *Missa L'homme armé* and his motet *Anima mea liquefacta est*.¹⁶ The difference between this musical borrowing and that mentioned in Block's discussion of the parody noël is that in the cantus-firmus piece, the borrowed music acts only as a basis or scaffolding with new melodic lines surrounding it. However, in the noël, the entirety of the original music is kept and only the words are replaced, with minor musical alterations to fit the new text. Thus, the level of musical borrowing in a noël is higher than that of a cantus-firmus piece. However, given Busnois frequent employ of the cantus-firmus technique, it is not impossible to believe he may have been involved in the genre of the noël as well.

In discussing Antoine Busnois' *Noel, noel, noel*, many issues arise. We must first deal with its pre-existing formal definition. In numerous articles regarding the Brussels Manuscript

¹⁶ Howard Mayer Brown and Louise K. Stein, *Music in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 76.

5557 (henceforth BR 5557), musicologists have referred to this work as a motet.¹⁷ Secondly, musicologists believe that the work is not based on any pre-existing tune. Brown himself says it is "... thought to have been freely invented without any reference at all to pre-existing melodies."¹⁸ Finally, the text of the song is comprised of a single word, *noel*, repeated thirteen times.

The easiest of these three issues to deal with is the text. The singers repeat the word "Christmas" or simply the word "new"¹⁹ throughout the four phrases of the song. This is not a story of the Nativity. However, we must remember that not all parts of the *noël* were necessarily set to music. When a refrain was present, it may be the only part set to music. The music would be borrowed from the *chanson* it is parodying, and sometimes a repetition of a single word would be used to fill the requirements of the form. The verses, in this case, were declaimed rather than sung. With all this in mind, it is possible to say that *Noel, noel, noel* is the refrain of a *noël* in which the missing verses are spoken. It is also possible that the verses were written down elsewhere. Perhaps only the refrain was written out due to the fact that it was made up of new musical materials while the verses were sung to an existing melody. For this reason, the verses, simply written out, possibly on a separate page from the music, may have gotten lost. Either way, the word "noël" plays a large role in the known musical work.

Taking into consideration the way in which a free standing refrain may look, it is not surprising that the song may be called a motet. *Noëls* are sacred in nature, meaning that the text of a motet and a *noël* may tell the same stories. However, it is in their method of delivery,

¹⁷ Sylvia Kenney published an article on the Brussels manuscript in which *Noel, Noel, Noel* was considered a motet. However, she was focused more on the provenance of the manuscript as a whole than the individual works.

¹⁸ Brown, 76.

¹⁹ Block, 7.

specifically the language, where they differ. Motets were typically sung in Latin. If French was present, it was normally as an added text, not the only text. Noël's were primarily sung in French with Latin texts added very rarely. In the case of this song, no Latin text is present. "Noel" is the French word for the Christmas season (or an exclamation). The parallel Latin phrase would have been "nativitatis," which does not appear a single time in the text. It would make no sense to argue that some of the iterations of noel were actually nativitatis, as they do not match syllabically. Additionally, though the musical texture may be reminiscent of early motets, it also is reminiscent of chansons.

Finally we turn to the question of whether this song is comprised of original musical material or if it is a text fit to pre-existing material. In answering this question, it is important to look at how it was recorded (on the blank pages of a larger manuscript), the hand it was copied in (Busnois was highly involved in the compilation and notation of the BR 5557), and the nature of the music itself (whether it parallels works by Busnois or the works of other Burgundian composers). Through this discussion, I hope to show that this music indeed shows markers of a different Burgundian composer, Binchois, and Busnois may have simply added a new text or transcribed an existing work onto open space.

BR 5557 is a manuscript comprised of twelve gatherings, in which *Noel, noel, noel* appears on the last verso of the sixth and the first recto of the seventh gatherings.²⁰ Common printing practices of the time dictated that these pages would be blank. When compiling many gatherings into a manuscript like this, however, other shorter compositions may be written on these blank pages, adding to the continuity of the manuscript. Thus, though each gathering may

²⁰ Sylvia W. Kenney, "Origins and chronology of the Brussels Manuscript 5557 in the Bibliothèque royale de Belgique," *Revue belge de Musicology/ Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 6, no. 2/3 (April to September, 1952): 88.

represent one time period or collection, the added songs could come from any known source or time. They may be small compositions already known to the court or they may be a newly written work made to connect the last work of the first gathering to the first work of the second gathering.

In the case of BR 5557, the majority of the compositions found at the borders of gatherings are said to be written by Busnois. These include *Noel, noel, noel*, *Alleluia verbum caro factum est*, and *Anthonius qui limina*. Additionally, the materials used in the manuscript and the handwriting appear to be similar if not the same from beginning to end, signifying that the works were collected and bound in a relatively short amount of time.²¹ There are at least five distinct handwritings present in the manuscript, some spanning multiple folios. One handwriting style links all the Busnois from the 8th folio motets along with *Anthonius qui limina* from the 4th folio together.

However, the 7th folio, on which half of the motet *Noel, noel, noel* is written, poses problems. A second handwriting is found on the Busnois *Magnificat* found in the 7th folio, and there is no mention of what handwriting the *noël* was written in, possibly meaning it was not similar to any of those already present, including Busnois own handwriting. Additionally, the 7th folio is the only folio written on a completely different style of paper with a different watermark (a crescent).²² This has led some to believe that the *Magnificat* was written prior to compilation of the manuscript or even prior to Busnois entering the service of Charles the Bold, being added to the manuscript after the fact. If this is the case, this means that not all of the music within the manuscript was new or commissioned for the work. Rather, it could simply be a collection of

²¹ Ibid, 89.

²² Ibid, 98.

songs known to the court. Thus, the same logic allowing the *Magnificat* to be older than the manuscript in question can be applied to the copied *Noel, noel, noel*, even if it was assuredly one of the last added works.

Returning to the topic of the authorship of *Noel, noel, noel*, there is no mention that Busnois' name was written on the work. Instead, it seems more as if it is linked with him via association with the other border works. Looking at the music, however, it seems more likely that this was a transcription of another composer's work rather than the work of an accomplished melodist like Busnois.

Noel, noel, noel is a simple musical work written in G-dorian. The tenor spans the species of fifth in its opening phrase before returning to cadence on G with the bass and soprano. The tenor rarely if ever leaves this range, and when it does it is to approach the G from below. The other main cadential point is on D, the cofinal of the G-dorian. The overall phrase structure of the piece is relatively balanced. It begins on G, cadencing after 3 measures. 3 measures later, it again cadences, this time on D. 2 measures later it again cadences on D, though weaker than the preceding cadence. Halfway through measure 12, there is another cadence to G followed by a second cadence to G in measure 13 when all the voices come to rest.

The text of this piece is mainly homophonic, with the four voices moving mainly in similar rhythm. When the rhythms do differ, the tactus is always present. There is no melismatic gesture breaking the rhythmic flow, moving the beat over a bar line. Even on the final melisma on "noel" in measures 12 and 13, the beat is not obscured. Overall, the melodic writing is simple with little to note other than the line's brevity.

As previously discussed, Busnois phrases were generally long and elaborate, starting off with simple rhythms and ending with melismatic lines. We can see here that the phrases do

begin with simple rhythms, normally with each note representing only one syllable. These lines develop into small melismas at the end of the phrase. However, a three measure phrase is by no means long. In his *Alleluya, Verbum caro fact est*, the phrases are of a variety of lengths ranging from 3 measures to 6 measures long. Sometimes the phrase endings were obscured via overlapping voices. In Busnois *Noel*, there are no overlapping lines at phrase endings. Missing too is the “finely wrought details”²³ of a master melodist. There is not the sense that Busnois’ “melody always pushes forward,”²⁴ but instead that it is stuck. Everything seems to be written out according to some sort of formula.

There is one composer, also of the Burgundian court and mentioned in BR 5557, that is known for having written formulaic music with short, simple phrases. This composer would be Gilles Binchois. He is also known for writing in a chordal style, such as in his setting of *Quem terra*. This work is written in a style not unlike the melodic style of *Noel, noel, noel*. Another hallmark of his composition style is also a formulaic treatment of cadences.²⁵ He would use different voice leading techniques to differentiate the strength of each cadence. It is the cadences within *Noel, noel, noel* that seem most likely to point to Binchois.

In beginning an examination of cadence points, it is important to begin with the first and last cadences first, as these help to define the mode of the work. In this case, both cadences end with the soprano, tenor, bass holding a G and the alto holding a D. In both cases, the alto approaches the D as a sustained pitch. The bass approaches the G from above with a leap from D in both cases. The tenor also approaches the G from above, this time from A in both instances.

²³ Brown, 73.

²⁴ Allan W. Atlas, *Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe 1400-1600* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998), 187.

²⁵ Dennis Slavin, “Some Distinctive Features of Songs by Binchois: Cadential Voice Leading and the Articulation of Form,” *The Journal of Musicology* 10, no. 3 (Summer, 1992): 343.

Finally, the only area of difference is in the soprano. In the first cadence, the soprano travels from F-sharp to E-natural before leaping up to G. In the final cadence, both the F-sharp and E-natural are present, through their order is reversed. Instead, the soprano moves through the E-natural to the F-sharp before continuing to cadence on G. Overall, however, both cadences follow the same formula.



Figure 1: On the left is the first cadence from measure 4 of Noel, noel, noel. On the right is the last cadence from measure 13 of Noel, noel, noel.

This leaves us with one other cadence on G, the cadence in measure 12. Like the previous cadences to G, the soprano, tenor, and bass may be seen to finish on G. However, this time the bass approaches G from below, landing on the G a half-beat late. The tenor arrives on G from A, however, it leaps away to B just a sixteenth note later. The only voice that holds the G and arrives at the right time is the soprano, but it does so without the movement from E-natural. As for the alto voice, it begins on D but fails to hold the pitch instead dropping to B on the downbeat before restabilizing on D. Due to its placement (the middle of a measure), the relative brevity of the cadence, and the way in which the voices fail to line up, it becomes apparent that this cadence to G is much weakened than that at the beginning and end of the piece.

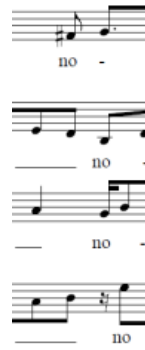


Figure 2: Cadence on G from measure 12 of *Noel, noel, noel*.

As for the cadences on D, neither is the same or even nearing the same. The basses approach the bass D from different directions, though both are through step-wise motion. The tenor simply holds the A in the second cadence, whereas in the first cadence it moves from A to C before returning to A. The alto also approaches its instance of D from opposite directions in both cadences, with the second cadence being further weakened by a C eighth note syncopating the D. Finally, the sopranos in either cadence not only approach their cadential notes differently, but the notes are also different. In the first case, the soprano cadences on F-sharp, while in the second case it cadences on A. Given the length of the cadence and its placement before a longer rest, a structural aspect at the center of the piece, and the fact that the first cadence to D is not syncopated in any way, that first cadence to D is the stronger of the two.



Figure 3: On the left is the cadence from measures 6 and 7 of *Noel, noel, noel*. On the right is the cadence from measures 9 and 10 of *Noel, noel, noel*.

Given the shorter length of the piece as well as its phrases, the simple chordal compositional style, and the cadential hierarchy and planning present, it is possible that *Noel, noel, noel* has been misattributed to Busnois when it may have been written by another Burgundian composer, Binchois. If this is the case, the work may have been written even earlier than thought and simply transcribed onto the open space in BR 5557 by a scribe.

Anonymous' *Chantons grants et petis*

Included in Block's book are a number of noels for which he has been able to find the source text. One such Noël is the *Chantons grants et petis* which is based on the music of *Si j'ayme mon amy*. As in many noels, the authors of both the original chanson and the new Noël are unknown. However, this would be an excellent example of the kinds of works that may be classified as a Noël.

In this case, the text is relatively short at only six lines. The first three lines may be thought to have the same or similar terminal sounds. The last three lines are not related in the same manner. A translation of the text is as follows:

Chantons grans et petis
Ensemble, je vous prie
Pour l'honneur de Marie.
Soyons tous resjouys;
Chantons tous a haulx cris:
"Noel" par melodie.

Songs small and large
Together, I pray you
For the honor of Mary
Let's be satisfied
Let's all sing to holy cries
"Christmas" by melody.

The text is a short honorific for Mary. The first three lines are about praying to honor the mother of Christ. The next three lines are about the nature of the singing, which in this case includes singing the word "Noel" if not about the Nativity. Thus, from a textual standpoint, this work may be able to be classified as a Noël.

The music is made up of two longer phrases with two sub-phrases. The first phrase of each three-line segment is the same. Instead, it is the terminal phrase that is different. Even then, both terminal phrases include a motion from C4 to F4 followed by a melodic elaboration. In the first section, this elaboration is on the second part of the word “Marie,” drawing further attention to the Marian focus of the text. In the second half, the elaboration is on the word “melodie,” or the method of praise for Mary the text is recommending. Even then, these two secondary phrases are only two or three bars in the transcription provided by Block. Each phrase is highly simple with a large number of repeated tones and with very few, if any, melodic skips. It is a straightforward melody that may be described as a short and simple.

Additionally, unlike any examples up to this point, this example has a known song from which the music is borrowed. This is actually the case for most if not all of the songs that Block cites to in his work. The fact that he was able to find so many works for which there is a surviving source melody further emphasizes his assertion that the noël is a parody genre. As there may be small changes between different recordings of the same melody, it is important to note that the melody shown in the appendix is found in Paris MS 12744, no. 118. Attempting to match the noël version to another version of *Si j'ayme mon amy* may have different results on the interpretation of the text or even simply how well the new text fits the music.

Conclusion

The noël is a little researched and poorly defined genre at the present time. In this work, the goal was to discuss some of the issues facing the definition of the genre and set forth a possible definition given the state of the research. While there may be a better definition, at the present time it makes sense to define the noël as a song (1) based on a religious text, specifically those related to the Nativity or Christmas season, (2) based on a pre-existing musical work

(though this isn't definitive), (3) which uses short, simple musical phrases, (4) and may or may not contain a refrain. Only further research can confirm whether this is a valid definition or one that requires revision.

Overall, the noël is a genre that needs more research in general. Many of the sources available include only a passing mention of the noël and date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Block's dissertation on the subject is from the early 1980s and addresses only one specific aspect of the noël: the musical sources for those that are parodies of existent works. This two volume work includes a large number of songs that have been matched to their original musical sources. Block also goes on to address the fact that the noël is an oral tradition, which may impact the modern understanding of the works due to the lack of strict musical representations. Other modern research hints at the genre, such as Janet Satre Tobiska's 1980 dissertation titled *The Noels of the Eighteenth-Century French Organ School*. In this work, Tobiska has a short section regarding the vocal form that pre-dated the organ compositions. However, much like earlier scholarship, it simply mentions the noël in passing without striving to better understand the genre that stands as the basis of the works in question.

As previously shown, the definition of the genre currently requires further clarification, but this is not the only area available for future research. This issue may have stood in the way of present scholarship, as scholars misattributed some songs to other genres or else had simply never heard of the noël. With this new definition, more works currently only considered to be chansons may find their secondary definition as a noël. As more works are defined as such, there will be more sources from which scholars can analyze the patterns inherent to these works. Given a larger sampling of music, scholars may be able to better discuss the role of the noël in society beyond just a Nativity related work. They may be able to make conclusions regarding

the typical composers of these works or their origins. However, without a proper definition, it is difficult to find the source materials necessary for these further clarifications of a little researched genre.

Appendix.

Exhibit A. Clement Janequin's *Ag iour colin* from Pierre Attaingnat's *Nouvelles*

Chansons.

The image displays two pages of a musical score for the piece "Ag iour colin" by Clement Janequin. The score is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are in French and are written below the notes. The first page begins with a large, ornate initial "A" for the word "Agnus". The lyrics on the first page are: "Agnus de di puz a fauour deus bies bies colin la goute fist couler et pour culer la melle de recule". The second page continues the lyrics: "le colin la goute de di puz a fauour deus bies bies colin la goute fist couler et pour culer la melle de recule". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines. The page numbers "16" and "17" are visible at the bottom of the first and second pages, respectively.

Exhibit B. Claudin de Sermisy's *En esperant* from Pierre Attaingnat's *Nouvelles*

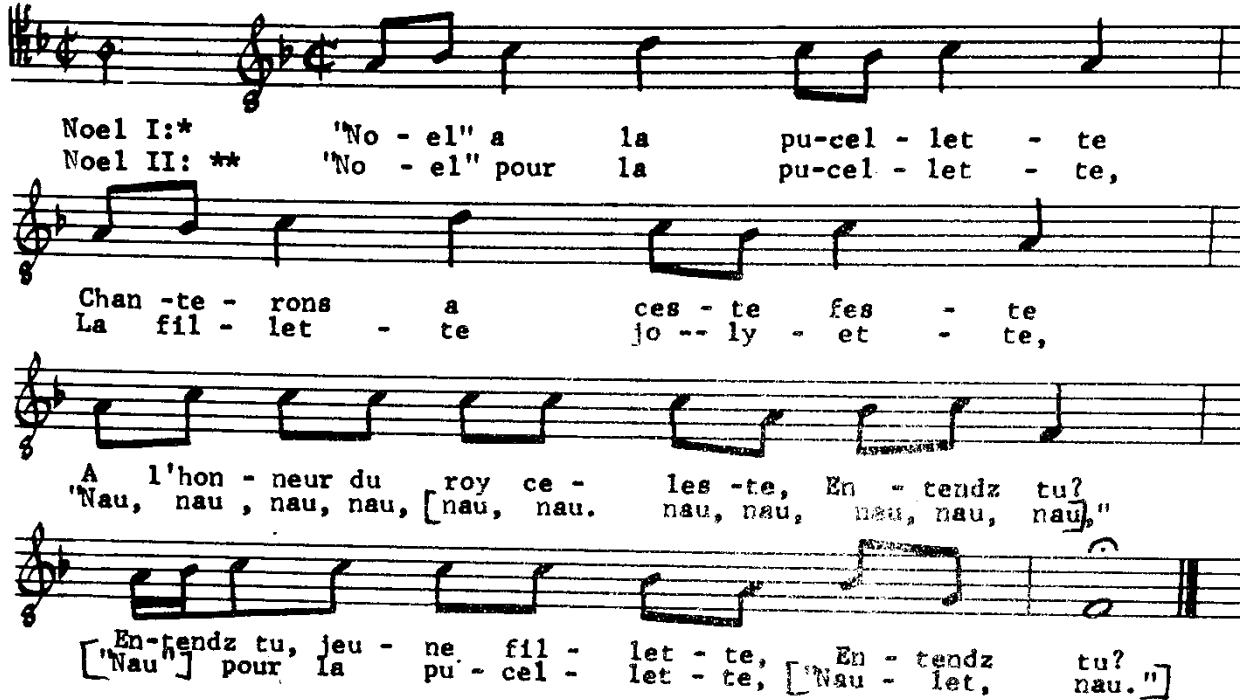
The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piece "En esperant" by Claudin de Sermisy. Each system consists of a vocal line and a lute line. The lyrics are written in French and are repeated across the systems. The first system includes the lyrics: "en ceste longue attente", "te a bien heurault et beffine reuoir", "es beffine reu", "se noybliray la couffume beuoit", "si", "Quat me rendra malheureuse ou ceste", "te qui me rendra", "malheureuse ou ceste", "te.", "en ceste longue attente", "te a bien heurault et beffine reuoir", "es beffine reu", "se noybliray la couffume beuoit", "si", "Quat me rendra malheureuse ou", "ceste", "te qui me rendra", "dra malheureuse ou ceste", "tes", "te.", The second system includes the lyrics: "en ceste longuetim", "te a bien heurault et beffine reuoir", "se noybliray la couffume beuoit", "Quat me rendra malheureuse", "si", "Quat me rendra malheureuse ou ceste", "te.", "en ceste longuetim", "te a bien heurault et beffine reuoir", "es beffine reuoir", "se noybliray la couffume beuoit", "si", "Quat me rendra malheureuse ou ceste", "reue", "si", "Quat me rendra malheureuse ou ceste", "reue.", The piece is identified as "En esperant" and is from Pierre Attaingnat's "Nouvelles".

Chansons.

Exhibit C. *Noel sur la chant de La, la, la, la, La gentile nonette, la* from Adrienne F.

Block's *The Early French Parody Noël*.

Example 88.



Noel I: * 'No - el' a la pu-cel - let - te
Noel II: ** 'No - el' pour la pu-cel - let - te,
Chan - te - rons a ces - te fes - te,
La fil - let - te jo -- ly - et - te,
A l'hon - neur du roy ce - les - te, En - tendz tu?
'Nau, nau, nau, nau, [nau, nau. nau, nau, nau, nau, nau,]'
'En - tendz tu, jeu - ne fil - let - te, En - tendz tu?
['Nau'] pour la pu - cel - let - te, ['Nau - let, nau.']

* Text from [Moderne], *La Fleur des noelz nouvellement notés*, fol. B2.
** Text from Sergent, *Les Grans noelz*, no. 88.

Exhibit E. *Chantons grans et petis* from Adrienne F. Block's *The Early French Parody*

Noël.

Example 97a.

Chanson: Si j'ay-me mon a-my Trop plus que mon ma-
Noël: Chan-tons grans et pe-tis En-sem-ble, je vous

ry, Ce n'est pas de mer-veil - - - - le.
prie, Pour l'hon-neur de Ma-ri - - - - e.

Il n'est ou-vrier que luy De ce mes-tier jo-
Soy- ons tous res- jou- ys; Chan-tons tous a haulx

ly Que l'on fait sans chan del - - - - le.
cris: "No - el" par me - lo - di - - - - e.

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