

## ***The First Noëls: An Anthology of the Earliest French Christmas Carols for Which Music Survives.***

In view of existing resources and past scholarship, the anthology adopts an interactive hypertext format that aligns varied text, graphics, and sound materials germane to the earliest *noëls* (ca. 1492-1515). Inter-textual connections resonate in each of these carols and their sources in traditional liturgy for the Christmas season (pre-eminently the Vulgate Gospels of Matthew and Luke) as well as individual motifs from the apocryphal pseudo-Matthew and the Christian Song of the Sybil. Transmitted to the first *noëls* through contemporary secular *chanson* lyrics were several genres that had persisted since *troubadour/trouvère* song as well as secular allegory from the *Romance of the Rose* and Marie de France's Breton lays, subsequent conventions of the "second rhetoric," and narrative elements from pan-European balladry. Through their tunes, profane songs used as a basis for the earliest *noëls* collided with canonic sacred material as well as para-liturgical, chapter-house, civic, and domestic practices of seasonal feasting, dancing, pastime, ritualized begging, dramatic representation, etc. This collision yielded the first genre of musical publishing to arise entirely within the history of printing.

Uniformly, the tunes most often used in the *noëls* were the simplest—and arguably, the "catchiest"—available in the repertoires on which they drew. The earliest *noëls'* melodies also provide ample evidence of vernacular harmony, strongly implying their own accompaniments in quite determinate ways that could have been realized readily in the diverse settings where they appear to have been performed. Moreover, one of their secular tunes provides clear evidence of *ex tempore* counterpoint and embellishment (*gringotage*) and several others—both sacred and secular—survive in substantial melodic variants, so that one can reasonably expand and contract the extant versions of all the first *noëls'* tunes. By extension, the earliest *noël* tunes provide invaluable help in defining, through overlapping "triangulations," sub-idioms within French *secular* song ca. 1500 and a reasonable basis on which to "extract" significant monophonic variants from more elaborate *a3* and *a4* arrangements. Consistent with these observations, the *noëls'* diction, versification, dissemination, and social provenance testify to their great importance for literacy acquisition and the articulation of constructed national sentiment just before the Reformation.