

JAN PIETERSZOOM SWEELINCK
1562-1621

Variants on “Est-ce Mars, le grand dieu des alarmes”

With a title like “Is that Mars, the great god of battles I see?” one might expect all manner of bombast. But neither the text of that folksong nor Sweelinck’s treatment of the melody is particularly warlike. The narrator in the anonymous text, while gazing at the heavens, changes his mind over what he sees, and he decides by the fifth stanza that all heavenly visions are outshone by the Sun (which had apparently been smiling upon France at that time), and he therefore changes his song to a prayer for continued good health for the royalty, probably Louis XIII’s sister. That is quite a detour from the first words of the text! In Sweelinck’s treatment the charming, non-warlike melody is given seven equally charming variations. Sweelinck does not present the theme by itself; he begins with his first variation.