

# 105. Falla con misuras (La Bassa Castiglia)

Basse danse Gulielmus (Italian, mid-15th century)

Beat

(Superius)

(Tenor)

5

10

15

20

25

30

35

40

45

Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale, MS 431, ff. 105v-106r  
The *basse danse* was a popular courtly dance in France and the Low Countries (and in Italy under the title of *Bassadanza*) during the 15th and 16th centuries. The name probably derives from the low, gliding steps by which it was characterised. *Basse danse* melodies consist of monorhythmic cantus firmi, above and around which lively counterpoints would have been improvised by one or two instrumentalists (the favourite ensemble consisted of a slide trumpet playing the cantus firmus and two shawms providing the decoration). Many *basse danse* cantus firmi survive; each cantus firmus has its own choreography, indicated by a sequence of letters each of which stands

for a certain step. Because they were usually improvised, polyphonic settings of *basse dances* have rarely come down to us. This example, which may date from about 1470, is one of the earliest polyphonic arrangements to have survived. The cantus firmus (a tune entitled *La Spagna*, of which some other settings are known) is in the lower part, and the upper staff has a florid counterpoint of a markedly improvisatory character. The *basse danse* was often paired with a following more lively dance called *pas de Brabant* (in Italy, *saltarello*). The Italians also cultivated an even more animated dance called *piva*, and a more stately *quaternaria* or *saltarello tedesco*.