

**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 the French 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.

**Variants on “Mein junges Leben hat ein End”**

Sweelinck’s fame was as a teacher of keyboard composition. His teaching is still evident to us today, for it begat that most fertile generation of German organ composers leading from the likes of Samuel Scheidt to Dietrich Buxtehude to J. S. Bach. Sweelinck’s composition teaching style included writing actual pieces for his students to study and imitate in their own national or personal styles. In many cases, the observer can tell that Sweelinck did not structure his variations in any particular overarching form. Indeed, this set of variations, like most of his others, begins outright with the first variation and ends matter-of-factly just a few variations later. The melody, in this case a folksong on a text about a young man reflecting on his fleeting earthly life, is always present and clear.