

## The Troubadours of France

1100-1300

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### I. Introduction

The best-known troubadours lived in Southern France during the period of 1100 to 1300. Their verse and musical manuscripts provide an interesting insight into the rich culture of medieval communities, the crusades, and courtly life. Varying interpretations and schemes of classification by linguists, ethnographers and musicologists add to the problems in interpretation and performance of these works. After briefly exploring the historical and sociological context, this paper will examine various interpretive issues inherent in the performance of troubadour songs.

### II. History

According to musicologist J.B. Beck, the troubadours emerged from a tradition of nomadic singers called histrions, mimes, and jongleurs (Whigham). Their roots can be traced back to the sixth century, when Caesar of Arles wrote a decree banishing secular entertainers at the urging of church bishops. His text notes that they are responsible for "infamous and diabolic songs of love (p.12)."

Many of these men and women were of noble backgrounds. The upper-class frequently sent their boys to Catholic monastic schools where they learned grammar, religious music and neumatic notation as a part of the basic trivium and quadrivium. Beck argues that many of these students became talented composers and musicians (p.16). After finishing their formal education, these young men returned home to apply their artistic training to more secular themes.

Troubadour music is synonymous with themes of courtly love. At the same time, the Catharist heresy emerged in southern France. The Cathars were ascetics whose beliefs encompassed a love greater than mere sexual contact. The contact of troubadours with Cathars is documented by De Rougemont:

*Moreover, quite possibly the presence of troubadours at such courts is a sign of heretical tendencies in them. . . . / the troubadours, like the Cathars, extolled (without always practising) the virtue of chastity; that, like the Pure, they received from their lady but a single kiss of initiation/ . . . / They reviled the /Catholic/ clergy and the clergy's allies, the members of the feudal caste. They liked best to lead the wandering life of the Pure, who set off along the road in pairs. And in their verse are expressions taken from Catharist liturgy ((De Rougemont)pp. 84-5).*

After the fall of the Roman empire, the vulgar Latin once spoken in France evolved into two similar

languages, the langue d' oïl of Northern France and the langue d'oc of the southern Occitanian regions (Hughes). The troubadours wrote their verse using the langue d' oc, which is said to be the more lyric and beautiful of the two languages. The troubadour counterpart of Northern France was known as a trouvère. Most song genres developed by the troubadours have their northern counterpart in the langue d' oïl. Both northern and southern performers led similar courtly roles, but only the southern troubadour is identified with the Catharist heresy, a relationship which eventually led to the persecution of troubadours by Pope Innocent III.

The northern crusaders mobilized to crush the Catharist heresy in 1209 after failed attempts to convert the southern nobility using missionaries (Strayer). Led by Simon of Montfort, the first campaigns crushed the poorly organized resistance. Many troubadours joined the Occitanian defense; others fled to less dangerous surroundings. In 1216 the resistance won their first victory by successfully forcing Simon to withdraw. "A wave of excitement ran through Occitania; the troubadours mocked Simon, and the exiled and the dispossessed began to weave new plots (p. 110)." By 1244, the campaigns were over and the Catharist church went underground. The Pope responded by sending inquisitors into Southern France. By 1350, nearly all remaining followers of the Catharist church, including many troubadours, had been imprisoned or burned at the stake.

One trouvère, Guillaume le Breton, wrote of one of the bloody battles of the campaigns:

*The men of Toulouse tried to defend themselves within their camp, but soon had to give ground. Unable to resist the furious charge, they retreated shamefully before their enemies. Like a wolf who, having broken into a sheepfold by night, does not care to slake his thirst or fill his belly with meat, but is content to tear open the throats of the sheep, adding dead to the dead, lapping up blood with his tongue, so the army consecrated to God thrust through their enemies and with avenging swords, executed the wrath of God on the people who offended Him doubly by deserting the faith and by associating with heretics. No one wasted time in taking booty, or prisoners, but they reddened their swords with heavy blows. . . . On that day the power and virtue of the French shone forth clearly; they sent seventeen thousand men to the swamps of hell (Strayer)p.95)."*

### III. Culture

Trouvères and troubadours were an integral part of courtly life in both Northern and

Southern France. Their songs provide narrative insight into the lives and courts of the noblemen. The courtly duties of these poet-musicians were both literary and musical as they composed to reflect the issues, feelings and characteristics in the castles and courts of the wealthy. The root verbs "trobar" and "trouver" mean "to find" or "to invent" and imply that troubadours were perhaps also gifted improvisers of both verse and music. As Van der Werf notes, the troubadours and trouvères straddled the dividing line in Western culture which separates literary and musical works into two distinct realms. For the purposes of this paper, the term "troubadour" will encompass characteristics of both regions and languages of France.

Writings of thirteenth-century troubadour Guiraut Requier suggest that four ranks of troubadours existed (Falvy). The jongleurs were only part-time musicians; their primary function was to entertain using acrobatics, animals, and props. Menestrels were full-time musicians; their rank is subordinate to the

troubadour because their repertoire consisted primarily of other composers' songs. The troubadours were the composers of music and lyric; they primarily performed their own songs. The highest ranks of troubadours were the doctores de trobar who were the most outstanding of the composers.

According to Van der Werf, some of the higher-ranked troubadours preferred to avoid "public performances" and allowed others to perform their songs. Apparently some social stigma was attached to performing for the masses, thereby further distinguishing the true "doctore" from the average troubadour. These great troubadours were men (and women) of letters who mastered the art of rhetoric (trivium). Their distinction and place in medieval society are proven by the fact that they are known by their names, unlike other musicians of their time.

According to Requier, troubadours of higher rank could require donations from lower ranking singers who used their music. Higher-born troubadours who were independently wealthy might have preferred payments of courtly esteem or ladies' favors to mere salary. In some ending lyrics of a chanson, Van der Werf finds evidence "in some envoys" that some lesser troubadours were hired to act as singing messengers to deliver songs at great distances to a noble man or woman (he does not mention the chansons by name). In this way, a high-ranking troubadour could "service" more than one court and receive higher wages.

The courtly functions of a troubadour suggest that some extra-musical traits were necessary for success. According to Falvey, troubadours had to possess temperance, virtue, generosity and a veneration of women. The songs had to be appropriate to the moment so that the courtly conversation was "elevated (bels digz plarens and solatz)." In troubadour song there was a special genre for every occasion: the sirventés for political or generally opinionated discussion, the planh for death of a friend, the chanson á danser or estampida to encourage dancing.

The chanson á personages were predominantly concerned with the love of women. This genre includes the canso (or lay in Northern France),, pastora (or pastorella), alba and descort (or retroncha). The canso is the courtly love song, usually composed in honor of a specific lady. The pastorella is a rowdy song about the loving exploits of a knight (perhaps a crusader) and a shepherdess. The alba is a song of praise and/or blame, heralding the break of dawn as the point where love's battle has been either won or lost. The descort and retroncha are sorrowful or "crying" songs about unrequited love, cruelty or deceit. According to Vidal, their melodies should not be used for planhs.

Aside from their performances in courts, troubadours might perform for important public meetings or at fairs. In Northern France, Pui (song contests) were held starting about the thirteenth century. Some of the manuscripts note that a song had been "crowned" the winner in one of these contests. A Puy combined both sacred and secular themes and eventually grew to include wordplay. Eventually, plays and poetry eclipsed the music and the Puy became a sort of guild (Whigham). Musicologist Peter Whigham asserts that Guillaume de Machault was a member of a Puy.

#### IV. Notable troubadours

Guilhem VII, Count of Poitiers and IX Duke of Aquitaine (1071-1127) was a significant early troubadour whose grand-daughter married Henry II of England. His granddaughter's immersion in troubadour music is probably the reason she later brought French troubadours to live in her court in Normandy (Hughes). While Guilhem's surviving works consist of only one melodic fragment and a number of lyrics, his granddaughter Eleanor of Aquitaine had a tremendous impact on the musical

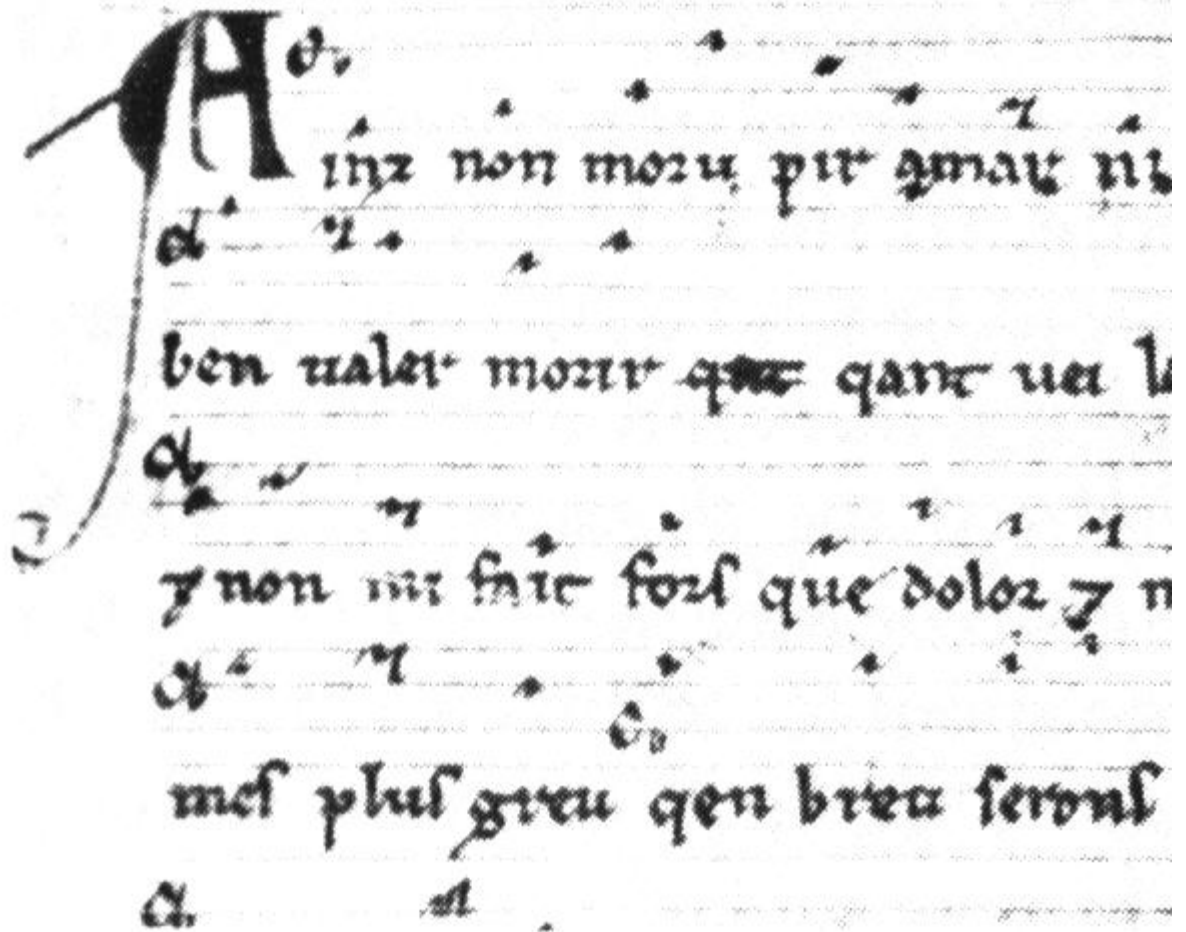
culture of medieval England.

Jaufre Rudel (1125-1148) was heir to the fiefdom of Blaye and bearer of the title Prince of

Blaia (Aubrey). His songs bear references to a crusade to Acre and a fateful (eventually fatal) trip to the Holy Land. Four of Rudel's six cansos survive with melodies. He was a friend and apparently a patron of Marcabru (1129-1149), a poor troubadour whose appeals to many noblemen of France and Portugal are documented. Eventually, Marcabru gained the employ of Count Guilhem VIII, the son of Guilhem VII. His surviving works with melodies include a Crusade-era chanson de geste, a pastorela, a sirventes, and a canso.

Bernat de Ventadorn (1147-1180) wrote in his vida that he was a troubadour to the Duchess Aliènor in Normandy and had accompanied her to England. If this is true, then Bernat de Ventadorn could be known as one of those troubadours whose foreign voyages led to the synthesis of troubadour songs with the music of other cultures. This claim of influence is uncorroborated according to Aubrey, but Bernat de Ventadorn has won his place in music history because eighteen of his forty-one surviving cansos are musically notated. Aubrey notes that some musicologists have argued that Bernart became abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Martin de Tulle in 1210, but this hypothesis has yet to be tested.

Peire Vidal (1183-1205) was the son of a Toulouse furrier (Falvy) and spent most of his career in Provence at the court of En Barral of Marseille and Alfonso II of Aragón. During his lifetime he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, traveled to Hungary to compose at the court of King Aimeric (son-in-law of Alfonso II) and journeyed to Malta to work in the court of Count Pescatore (Aubrey). Twelve canso melodies and forty-five lyrics survive, with fourteen of those poems paying homage to the wife of En Barral. Apparently this relationship with the nobleman's wife erupted into conflict with the viscount and, according to Falvy, Vidal had ruffians cut out the viscount's tongue. An example of one of Vidal's melodic manuscripts is found on the next page (note: examine the alignment of notes to syllables).



Guiraut Riquier (1250-1292) is better represented by surviving manuscripts than all other troubadours. More than one hundred works survive, including forty-eight songs with notated melodies. He spent most of his life in Narbonne in the court of Viscount Almaric IV, though occasionally he ventured out to visit other courts in France and Spain. Findings by musicologist Higinio Angles suggest that Guiraut explored new techniques in genre, metrics, structure and subject matter, including several hymn-like religious songs (Aubrey).

## V. Notation and performance

One of the problems in classification and analysis of troubadour music stems from the great emphasis of twentieth-century scholars on the text and poetic forms of the songs. Many researchers cannot agree on whether the lyrics or the melody should form the foundation for interpretation and performance. The problem has its roots in the lack of mensural notation. Mensural or "measured-time" notation was a slowly emerging practice which was still evolving during the golden era of the troubadours. While much speculation and argument has ensued over performance issues, it is likely that the truth about the way these songs were actually performed will never be known.

Falvy surveyed what he called "the whole of troubadour music" and concluded that "the melodic cadences agree with the rhyme schemes of the text lines only rarely." According to his research, the forms of all troubadour songs are derived from melody and not the structure of the poems. Instrumental accompaniment was definitely always present and "served to bridge the difference between the two."

A counter-argument is advanced by Wilkins, who finds the real problem in researching troubadour music is that we cannot trust the surviving melodies to be indicative of the true musical work. If musicologists cannot trust the accuracy of surviving troubadour manuscripts, then any conclusions such as the ones Falvy made are susceptible to error. As Wilkins notes:

"Quite often, practical reasons of spacing caused the copyist to misplace syllables to right or left; indeed, since the text was normally copied first, he often failed to allow sufficient space for all the notes which later had to be fitted in. At other times he was simply careless (p.193)." While Wilkins has made an excellent observation, is the copyist's inaccuracy really significant when one considers all examples of troubadour music (as Falvy has)?

As for the instrumental accompaniment of troubadour songs, Hughes and Parker cite miniatures and literary texts which confirm that vielles and harps were used in performance. In a literary reference one finds that "she sang with a jongleur on the vielle this new chansonnette: she began to sing as the jongleur played it on the vielle. (Parker)" But the existence of these pictorial examples do not conclusively prove the accompaniment hypothesis. As Parker concedes, many of the depictions of instruments were added to illustrations "as a purely decorative device, the filling of empty spaces by elaboration or multiplication typical of the medieval horror vacui(p.196)." As Aubrey notes; "I am unable to find in the small amount of evidence any guidelines about the way instruments might have been used."

Given the lack of conclusive evidence as noted above, it is difficult to imagine that musicologists will ever answer any of the questions regarding notation or performance. Borrowing from techniques used by literary scholars, the poems can be analyzed to reveal a high degree of structure. Looking at the lyrics alone, one will surmise that troubadour verse is largely strophic, with the music of one stanza repeated for successive stanzas (Hughes). Each stanza of a canso, for example, consists of a foot or pes (pedes) which is repeated at the beginning. Then a contrasting line (cauda or tail)is sung which terminates in a melodic cadence (either open or closed). The pes is repeated to contrast lines ending with incomplete (open) cadences. The stanza ends when the contrasting line's cadence is complete (closed). The troubadour might end a canso with an envoy, which is an ending directing the listener to think about the composer when the lyric is remembered at a later date.

Ex. 101<sup>2</sup>

(PEDES)

Can par la flor jus - tal vert fuelh E vei lo tems clar  
Et aug lo chans d'au - zels pel brueilh Quem a - dos - sal cor

(CAUDA)

e se - re Mais l'au - zel chan - ton a lau - zor, Ieu plus ai  
em re - ve,

de joi en mon cor, Dei ben chan - tar, car tug li miei jor -

-nal Son joi e chan que no pens de ren als.

The above example is by Bernat de Ventadour (Hughes). A great variety in form exists throughout all forms of troubadour music; some indication of the improvisatory nature of their compositions. Cansos, lai, planh, sirvantes, and descorts all follow the basic form shown above

(Hughes; Van der Werf). Hughes points out that later polyphonic music by troubadours is always rhythmically structured around the lyric. This example uses the first and sixth of the six rhythmic modes as its foundation. But Van der Werf notes that "it is unlikely that the earliest troubadours whose melodies have been preserved could have used modal rhythm, because it is very doubtful that it existed in their time."

One of the many problems with modern transcriptions of early troubadour melodies is the use of bar lines. In current practice, mensural notation gives some indication of tempo as well as where the strong and weak beats lie. But in actual performance, one is not certain of either. Falvy's view stresses that strong and weak beats should not be implied from the text, but from the notated melody. Sherr notes that the "mass of theoretical evidence from the sixteenth century is not of much help because concepts of tactus may have changed by then. (Knighton and Fallows)" The best advice, according to Sherr, is to pick a comfortable tempo and perform the piece from the original notation. (Knighton and Fallows)

Since the term "troubadour" is synonymous with one "who invents or finds," it is likely that improvisation played a large part in the performance of the troubadour repertoire. Van der Werf argues that little ornamentation or chromatic inflection is evident in troubadour manuscripts, but troubadours probably ornamented any repetition of a pes or cauda. Aubrey points to the original texts of several troubadour melodies where modifications in melodic components present evidence of a lively tradition of improvisation.

Few examples of estampie or dance pieces have survived. One set of dances in the *Manuscrit du Roi* indicates that repetition of three contrasting melodic sections might have been the norm, but it is risky to form conclusions based on the small amount of dances that survive. Literary texts such as the Parker example cited above indicate that at least some dances included verses that could be sung. Aubrey argues that since entertainment was a primary role of the troubadour, much of their work could be interpreted with dance-like rhythms and tempos, provided that such treatment was appropriate to the verse. (Aubrey)

Eventually, the common practice of medieval composition expanded to include polyphony. Looking at the surviving manuscripts, it seems that few troubadours successfully made the transition from monody

to polyphony. In Northern France, Adam de la Halle is the only example of a polyphonic composer who was also a trouvère (Aubrey). His three-voice rondeaux utilize a very simplistic note-against-note (conductus) style (Wilkins). As Caldwell notes; "though monophonic music continued to be composed in France after his death in c. 1288, and underwent a striking resurrection in the hands of Machaut, Adam is in a very real sense the last of the trouvères (p107)"

## VI. Evidence of the troubadour influence

The songs of French troubadours were heard in English courts as a natural result of England's political affiliations. Caldwell argues that this influence stifled any native English tradition of secular song. Some examples of English secular song have been discovered, notably the Prisoner's Song, but Wilkins believes that the text was initially written in French. This seems reasonable, since due to the Norman Conquest, the nobility of England spoke French.

Germany also hosted troubadours and adopted the Northern French tradition of the Puy (Caldwell). They also adopted the troubadour form of pes and cauda which they called Stollen and Abgesang. Historical documents such as the Codex Manesse contain poetry and illustrations of the troubadour counterpart in Germany; the Minnesinger. Although lack of conclusive evidence exists about these troubadour's accompaniment preferences, we know that the 14th-century German Meistersinger were generally opposed to instrumental accompaniment (Van der Werf).

The close relations between Southern France and Northern Spain also gave rise to the troubadour influence in Spain. Many troubadours traveled to Spanish courts and towns. The only surviving example of Spanish troubadour song is a set of six love-songs by Martin Codax of Vigo (Hughes). Hughes argues that the famous Cantigas de Santa Marie of Alfonso X show subtle influences of troubadour form and technique.

The troubadour influence is present also in the laudi spirituali of Italy and Sicily. The Italian hymns demonstrate the same pes and cauda form as the basic troubadour canso. St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) is also said to have wished that his congregation sang praises to God "tamquam joculatores Dei" /like God's menestrals/ (Hughes). Evidence also exists that troubadours influenced the Dutch rederijkers and the Hungarian joculatores (Falvy and Van der Werf).

## VII. Postlude

While musicologists point to the works of troubadours as potential seeds of the many changes that were about to take place in music and literature, one must not forget the context in which these men and women lived. Their times were filled with plague, famine, inquisition, war and bloody crusades. It is sadly ironic that in such a dark period in history, these composers reached deep within themselves to create songs of exquisite beauty, full of jocular and the love of life.

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