

Authentic Performance of Troubadour Melodies

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As is the case with most early music, there is a great deal of debate on exactly how troubadour music was performed. Scholarly research in this field is thus very important if a modern performer wishes to attempt an authentic performance. Three paramount factors to consider when attempting to replicate the manner in which a troubadour piece was originally performed are rhythm, the use instrumental accompaniment and the amount of faithfulness with which the given melodies should be treated.

There are 460 known troubadours with approximately 2600 surviving poems.¹ Unfortunately, only 264 of these poems survive with musical accompaniment,² and this is usually little more than a simple melody. Also, although scholars of the time wrote prolifically about the poetry, they were relatively silent regarding descriptions of the music and its performance. Even that theoretical material that can be found is usually addressed to composers rather than to singers. All of this adds to the difficulty in determining how troubadour music was performed. It is thus necessary to realize that scholars must often rely on indirect evidence and that their conclusions can often be little more than well educated guesses. This should not be taken as discouraging, however, since the scarcity of evidence not only poses an exciting challenge, but also provides for a rich diversity of performance practices, authentic or not, which would probably not have otherwise arisen.

The shortage of evidence should not be misinterpreted as an indication that the music of the troubadours was seen as unimportant relative to their poetry. Folquet de Marseille wrote that "a verse without music is a mill without water"³ and Dante said that the *chanson* is "the action or

passion itself of singing."⁴ Not only did the troubadours feel that their poetry needed music in order to be complete, but they also believed that public delivery was just as important, if not more so, than the act of composition.⁵ This belief is made clear in the words of Geoffroi de Vinsauf:

In reciting aloud, let three tongues speak: let the first be that of the mouth, the second that of the speaker's countenance, and the third that of gesture. The voice has its own laws, and you should observe them in this way: the period that is spoken should observe its natural pauses, and the word its accent. Separate those words which the sense separates, join those that sense joins. Modulate your voice in such a way that it is in harmony with the subject; and take care that voice does not advance along a path different from that which the subject follows. Let the two go together; let the voice be, as it were, a reflection of the subject. As the nature of your subject is, so let your voice be when you rehearse it: let us recognize them as one.⁶

Rhythm is the aspect of performance which has inspired the most debate. Aside from a few exceptions in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, all troubadour melodies are notated with neumes, which give no indication of rhythm. When combined with the apparent carelessness of some scribes in matching words with music, this leaves a good deal of ambiguity.

Virtually all modern scholars agree that troubadour melodies had at least some rhythmic shape. The fact that most manuscripts do not indicate rhythm is probably only an indication that scribes were disinclined or unable to notate

¹ Derrick Henry, *Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: Quarto Marketing Ltd, 1983), 22.

² Giulio Cattin, *Music of the Middle Ages I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 132.

³ Gustave Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1940), 205.

⁴ John Stevens and Theodore Karp, "Troubadours, Trouveres," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

⁵ Elizabeth Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 237.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

it.⁷ Troubadours were probably aware of some rhythmic aesthetic that was easy to apply at performances, and scribes chose to omit it from their manuscripts for simplicity's sake. This is consistent with the need to exercise economy when producing manuscripts and the idea that written music in the context of performing was intended as little more than a memory aid.

There are also many indications that scribes may have been trying to convey some information about rhythm. Some syllables have repeated notes, some notes are elongated and some notes are given an extra stem. Vertical bars at ends of verses may have also been intended to indicate a pause.⁸

Many works also have a structure and style that are so compelling that it is difficult to believe that the rhyme scheme and verse structure did not receive at least some form of rhythmic articulation.⁹ Most pieces also include patterns of repetition, including motives, pitch goals, cadences, melodic contours and structure of the text.¹⁰ It is likely that singers who were singing similar passages several times over would fall into some overall rhythmic structure, even if the passages differed slightly from one another. There are also some troubadour songs which appear to be dancing songs, which certainly implies some form of rhythm.¹¹ Most convincingly, theorists of the time made some mention of accentuation in troubadour performance. As Jofre de Foixa's writes in the 13th century *Regles de Trobar*, "Accent is when one raises the voice and holds it more on one syllable than on another."¹² He treats sung and spoken inflections the same.

Once it is assumed that there was some rhythmic form, however, there is a great deal of debate on exactly what it was and how it manifested itself. Many theories have presented themselves, and these will be discussed individually.

One idea is that the performance of troubadour music should use the rhythmic modes of sacred polyphonic music. Pierre Aubry and Jean-Baptiste Beck noted in the early 1900's that

French dupla in 13th century motets use modal rhythms and that some of Adam de la Halle's chansons are written in mensural notation with modal rhythms.¹³ This is also the case in other troubadour pieces. They then generalized these observations and concluded that all monophonic French songs of the time were sung in rhythmic modes.

In response to critics who pointed out that the majority of manuscripts do not contain mensural notation, it was argued that many scribes may have been unaware of this form of notation, and thus did not use it even though it may have been appropriate to do so.¹⁴ Aubry also argues that the modes are reflections of metrical patterns in the texts, although even Beck objects to this by noting that troubadour poetry has no consistent accentual patterns in the verse other than the rhyme.¹⁵

The presence of trouvère melodies in some polyphonic motets has also been used to support the use of rhythmic modes. However, it should be remembered that there is no strong evidence that these melodies were governed by the same rhythmic system outside the idiom.¹⁶ It is even less likely that the use of rhythmic modes is appropriate for troubadour songs, since there is no compelling evidence that the troubadours composed motets or were even aware of the mensural system.¹⁷ There is also much less structural regularity in troubadour phrases than in trouvère phrases.

Although historically there has been a good deal of support for this idea that rhythmic modes should be used in performances of troubadour music, scholars have been unable to explain how singers should discern the mode. Modern music historians tend to reject this theory for lack of persuasive evidence. In one criticism, Hendrik Van der Werf points out that scribes used mensural notation to notate French polyphonic works, but did not in the troubadour songs contained in some of the same manuscripts.¹⁸ The theorist Grocheo wrote in the early 14th century that only polyphony is precisely

⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁸ Ibid., 249-250.

⁹ Ibid., 251-253.

¹⁰ Ibid., 253.

¹¹ Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages*, 206.

¹² Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours*, 239.

¹³ Ibid., 240-241.

¹⁴ Ibid., 247.

¹⁵ Ibid., 240-241.

¹⁶ Ibid., 240-241.

¹⁷ Ibid., 244.

¹⁸ Ibid., 242-243.

measured.¹⁹ Also, those troubadour manuscripts that contain do mensural notation are from the late 13th century and may well reflect changes in the musical style, and thus may not be indicative of how earlier troubadour music was performed.

The isosyllabic theory has also garnered much attention. It suggests that all syllables should receive roughly equal duration. This theory is based on the fact that most troubadour songs are notated like medieval plainchant, with each syllable having its own neume. Also, in the Romance languages, each syllable has roughly the same duration and each word with multiple syllables has one tonic and one or more atonic syllables, distinguished by varying amounts of stress. Ugo Sesini argues that it was the poetry and not the melody that carried the meter of troubadour songs. He states that the notes of the music must be adapted to this meter by giving each syllable equal duration.²⁰ Support for this is found in the 13th or 14th century *Leys d'Amors*, whose author writes that a melody's rise and fall do not need to coincide with text accent and that accented syllables do not require more notes to lengthen them.²¹

John Stevens has proposed a variant of this theory. He claims that poetic theory of the time described Latin poetry as "rhythmic," which means that it relied on syllable count and rhyme rather than on regular meter.²² He concludes from this that each syllable should be sung with the same duration. He does not, however, adopt Sesini's system of poetic meters.

The supporters of declamatory theory propose another alternative. They argue that rhythm depended on the sonority, syntax and meaning of the text. Hendrik van der Werf believes that singers should "declaim" the text as if they are reciting it and that the melody should be subservient to this style of speech. He proposes that the music has no meter per se but that the characteristics of the texts generate natural rhythms. Each note should start out equal in duration, but the singer should make some syllables longer than others, based on the text. Musical stress should also follow the accentuation of the text. For support, he refers to

a comment of the theorist Johannes de Grocheio, who wrote that plainchant is not without measure altogether, but is "not too measured."²³ Van der Werf assumes that this statement applies to secular monophony as well as plainchant.

There are many other theories that have not achieved quite as much fame. Antonio Restori suggests using shifting meters and treating melismas as ornaments.²⁴ The proponents of prosody say that the rhythm is primarily dependent on the relationships of the melody to the text. They consider the structure of the poem, its sound, accent and content. Ewald Jammers proposes that melody and text should each be given their own unique rhythms. Text accents and rhymes combine with motives, melismas, repeated notes and other musical elements to produce a broad rhythm that is not necessarily patterned but not entirely free. Jammers says that it is up to the singer to apply this theory by considering the structure of each individual song.

Some argue that the songs were completely free rhythmically. Van der Werf supports this argument by pointing out that the existence of different versions of single songs may imply that they had no set rhythm.²⁵ Christopher Page lends his limited support by claiming that courtly songs in the "High Style," such as cansos, compliantes and sirventes were free and unmeasured, while songs in the "Low Style," including dance songs and pastourelles, were measured.²⁶

An alternative interpretation of this discrepancy between different recordings of songs is that those syllables that are of longer duration were more faithfully reproduced whereas those that were sung more quickly had pitches that were more variable. For instance, Example 1 shows three versions of one song. The second and fifth syllables are similar in all three cases, thus possibly indicating that they were given a longer duration and were thus more memorable, whereas the disagreement on the other syllables may be due to their reduced importance because of lack of rhythmic stress.

It has also been suggested that a singer's approach may have varied from day to day based on his mood or the context of the performance.

¹⁹ David Fenwick Wilson, *Music of the Middle Ages* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 173.

²⁰ Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours*, 241-242.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²² *Ibid.*, 241-242.

²³ *Ibid.*, 242-243.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 242-243.



Example 1: Peire Vidal. PC 364,11, verse 1. X fol. 87v; R fol. 8; G fol. 40v.

Troubadours may well have desired the freedom to use a rhythm that fit the circumstances of each particular performance rather than being forced to conform to some predefined aesthetic. This fits in with the idea that songs lived for a specific hearing, which many troubadours subscribed to.²⁷

In the end analysis, it is probably unreasonable to assume that there was some universal rule that governed the rhythm of all troubadour performances. Each of the theories dealt with above may well have applied to some or even many pieces, but none of them are supported by evidence compelling enough to grant them universal applicability. When preparing a performance, it is best to consider each piece individually in terms of its genre, poetic structure, style, notation, variants and musical structure and come to a conclusion that applies to that particular piece.

Another major issue to consider when performing troubadour music is whether or not to use instrumental accompaniment. If instruments are used, it must be decided which ones are appropriate and exactly how they should be played.

Up until the 1960's, the presence of instruments in manuscript miniatures and other artistic works of the 12th and 13th centuries was enough to convince most scholars that they were used in troubadour performances. Evidence from a few literary sources, such as *vidas* and *razos*, was used to reinforce this idea. For example, Pons de Capduelh wrote that one troubadour "knew very well how to compose and fiddle and sing" and it was also written that another troubadour, Elias Cairel, "fiddled badly and

spoke still worse."²⁸ References to the use of instruments by troubadours in social situations can also be found, such as in the work of Bertran de Born or in the epic work, *Daurel e Beto*.²⁹ Finally, the texts of a few troubadour songs make reference to the use of instruments. One song by Albertet ends with the words, "Peirol, fiddle and sing my songs gracefully, the words and the light melody" and Pierre d'Alvernhe make reference to a song made to be played with a bagpipe.³⁰

Unfortunately, there is virtually no evidence to explain how the instruments were played. Many modern performers use instrumental drones, but there is little reason to believe that this is what troubadours did.³¹ Indeed, given that many of the melodies have a variability of tonal center, it is difficult to choose an appropriate pitch as the drone. This implies that the use of drones was unlikely. There is also no clear-cut connection between troubadour songs and the polyphonic tradition, so it would be a dubious practice to try to look there for inspiration. By process of elimination, it is perhaps most likely that the accompaniment imitated the melody itself or consisted of ornamentations of it. This idea is supported by the lack of information in manuscripts on anything but the melody, but it is still only conjecture. It has also been suggested that there may have been instrumental interludes between verses.³²

One assertion that can be made with a good deal of confidence is that there was no ensemble

²⁷ Ibid., 244.

²⁸ Ibid., 256.

²⁹ Ibid., 256.

³⁰ Ibid., 257.

³¹ Ibid., 261.

³² Cattin, *Music of the Middle Ages I*, 133.

accompaniment to troubadour songs. Other than a few rare cases that include one or two musicians in addition to the troubadour, there is no evidence, pictorial or literary, that shows troubadours being accompanied by large groups of musicians.³³ We can also be fairly sure as to which instruments were used. Oval-shaped fiddles are the most common, with harps, mandoras and bagpipes being seen occasionally as well.

The assumption that instrumental accompaniment should be used at all has been challenged in recent years. There is no doubt that there are illustrations showing troubadours playing instruments in addition to those showing them performing unaccompanied. However, troubadours are also often shown as knights on horseback, speaking with ladies or reading books. This means that the portrayals may simply be stereotypical, and as such are an inaccurate representation of troubadours and may not be counted on to show that they used instrumental accompaniment.³⁴ Indeed, the lyre and harp were both symbols of the poet, which inevitably brings up the possibility that the troubadours were drawn with these instruments because of their symbolic value, not because they utilized them during performances.³⁵

The vast majority of the evidence in support of the use of instruments is dated from the middle of the thirteenth century or later and thus may not be indicative of earlier performance practices.³⁶ In addition, such references occur fairly infrequently relative to the references to unaccompanied singing, even in later years. It should also be realized that the literary references to troubadours using instruments may have referred to a context entirely different from what we call troubadour songs. For example, it is possible that troubadours played instrumental music during performances but did not accompany themselves when they sang. It is known that there is no evidence, in terms of manuscript illuminations or texts of songs, to

suggest that troubadours used instruments in the particular case of chansons.³⁷

Christopher Page argues that certain styles may have had instrumental accompaniment while others were entirely vocal. According to him, songs in the High Style were elevated above popular styles, and as such did not make use of instruments. Page states that "instrumental music does not seem to have been associated with the kind of profound creative endeavor which demanded serious and considered attention from the listener."³⁸ Page uses the *Doctrina de Compondre Dictats*, from approximately 1300, and the 14th century *Leys d'Amors* for support. These sources make reference to instrumental accompaniment to dances but not to genres that were considered more artistic.³⁹ Page also notes that a radical change of "ethic" that occurred around 1250 may have led to more instrumental accompaniment after this point. Unfortunately, although Page does have some interesting points, he often bases his ideas more on the absence of overt references to instruments in troubadour music before the mid-thirteenth century than on actual positive evidence.⁴⁰

In the end analysis, it is likely that at least some troubadours accompanied themselves with instruments, particularly after the mid-thirteenth century. However, it is also likely that the majority of troubadour performances did not include the use of instruments and that modern performers use them much more often than troubadours did themselves. Given that we have no clear indication as to what form any accompaniment should take, it is perhaps wisest for modern performers striving for authenticity to restrict themselves to solo singing.

The final major consideration in the performance of troubadour music is the degree of faithfulness with which the given melodies should be treated. Secular music from this period was just beginning to be notated and still had many links to an oral tradition. It is therefore certainly possible that ideas associated with orally transmitted music, such as improvisation and embellishment, were also associated with troubadour music. In addition, the tradition of

³³ Henry, *Medieval and Renaissance Music*, 26.

³⁴ Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours*, 238.

³⁵ Hendrik Van der Werf, *The Chansons of the Troubadours and Trouveres* (Utrecht, Netherlands: A. Oosthock's Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1972), 20.

³⁶ Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours*, 257.

³⁷ Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages*, 9.

³⁸ Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours*, 258.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

W
8. et cor de de - sir - rier non fon.

G
8. lo cor de de - si - rer no.m fon.

Example 2: Bernart de Bentadorn. PC 70,43, verse 8. W fol 190v / B180v; G fol. 10.

1. A - ra.m con - sei - llaz sei - gnor. 2. vos q'a - veç sa - ber e sen.

3. c'u - na don - na.m det s'a - mor. 4. c'ai a - ma - da lo - nga - men.

Example 3: Bernart de Bentgadorn. PC 70,6, verses 1-4. G fol. 13v.

musica ficta overlapped to a certain extent with troubadour music in both time and location, so it is possible that the standard practice of raising or lowering notes could have been applied to this music.

Many manuscripts indicate many small-scale differences in different versions of the same piece that probably indicate that the performer was allowed room for a good deal of spontaneity in realizing melodies.⁴¹ Singers may have realigned the pitches with the syllables, changed the contours of phrases, decorated pitches by adding to them or subtracted notes from more florid melodies. The presence of elaborations of melodies upon repetition may also point to an improvisatory performance characteristic.⁴² In addition, chromatic alterations of pitches are inconsistent, suggesting a good deal of fluidity in pitch content and an improvisatory tradition.⁴³

Passing and neighbor are often found in troubadour songs. They are often present in some versions of a piece but not in others. Two different versions of a Bernart de Venadorn song

are shown in Example 2.⁴⁴ Note the addition of passing tones and neighbor notes. This kind of relationship can be found in many other examples as well. These inconsistencies may be an indication that performers improvised passing and neighbor notes.

Van der Werf writes that scribes from northern France were somewhat influenced by the use of musica ficta, but that this was much less common in the south.⁴⁵ Composers and singers from the south, such as troubadours, were therefore less likely to have been influenced by Guido's teachings than was the case with trouvères. Based on this, Van der Werf disagrees with the idea that troubadours added unnotated sharps and flats during performances. He also asserts that there is no evidence to suggest that scribes would not write the music as it was actually sung.⁴⁶

Elizabeth Aubrey presents an opposing view by proposing that singers may have added chromaticisms during repetitions of a pattern or motive. Aubrey argues that in a case such as

⁴¹ Henry, *Medieval and Renaissance Music*, 23.

⁴² Aubrey, *The Music of the Troubadours*, 272.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

Example 3 the B should be flatted in verse 4 as it is in verse 2.⁴⁷

One way or the other, the evidence is not entirely conclusive on whether or not chromaticisms were intended to be added by the performer or not. However, troubadour melodies have neither the regularity of pitch content nor the harmonic alignment that characterizes the polyphony in which the application of *musica ficta* is more clear, so the safer bet might be to abstain from the application of *musica ficta*. On the issue of improvisation, the evidence is not indisputable, but it is likely that troubadours used at least some improvisation. This practice is consistent not only with the evidence given above but also with the troubadour ideal of each performance being unique based on the particular circumstances of the occasion.

One final consideration is the manner in which pieces should be sung. It is known that contemporaries frequently admired the qualities of strength, clarity and sweetness in singing, but little is known beyond this.⁴⁸ Singers should also strive to imitate the appropriate accentuation and pronunciation of the Provençal spoken by troubadours.

The lack of sufficient evidence and the ambiguity or conflicting character of the evidence that does exist is a constant obstacle when trying to discern how troubadour music was originally performed. This difficulty is exacerbated by the presence of many possible clerical errors by scribes and the fact that much of the music was notated long after its composition.⁴⁹ It is also important to consider the intended audience of the scribes, since most manuscripts were meant for aristocratic collectors and not for actual use of troubadours during performances. This may supply a partial explanation for the lack of detail on performance practice.

There are many alternatives to consider when deciding how to perform a troubadour piece, each with some viable evidence to support it. Given the variability of possible performance practices, it is better to consider the individual characteristics of each particular piece when deciding how to perform it rather than trying to

apply some unproven universal principle to all pieces.

Despite all of the difficulties when researching performance practices in troubadour music, the search for an authentic performance practice can lead not only to coming closer to this ideal, but also to the creation of new styles of performance that have a value of their own. It lets us examine this ancient music in new ways that allow us to fully explore it from many different perspectives, something which might not be done if we were sure how to perform the music authentically.

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⁴⁷ Ibid., 265.

⁴⁸ Henry, *Medieval and Renaissance Music*, 27.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Music of the Middle Ages*, 169.

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