Troubadours and Trouveres

Trouvères were the secular musicians of Northern France in the 12th to 13th century that mirrored the troubadours of Southern France at the same time period. Both groups composed music for solo voice as well as instrumental music in varying styles through the beginning of the 14th century when the period came to an end. The trouvère movement began approximately half a century after the first known troubadour, and many elements were borrowed from their southern neighbors (Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998). The southern troubadours wrote in the language known as Old Occitan, whereas the trouvères of the north wrote in Old French. While love songs were the most popular among French compositions, other genres such as political songs, laments, and pastorals were popular (Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998).

Manuscripts

Troubadours and trouveres composed music, but they were not the scribes who notated their music. Compositions may appear slightly differently in multiple manuscripts based on how the particular scribe wrote down the melody. Pieces would change as each performer learned and performed the piece, either consciously or unconsciously changing the music. A piece may be notated by a scribe many years after it was first sung. Additionally, accompaniment was not notated in manuscripts, though period sources tell us that pieces may be sung by solo voice or accompanied by a fiddle or harp (Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998).

Melody and Rhythm

A majority of manuscripts did not use mensural notation to notate exact rhythms in the music. Thus, the rhythm of the music is extrapolated based on the cadence and stress of the text itself. Trouvères and troubadours in period likely performed the same piece differently based on their personal style, and thus rhythm is flexible and should move freely with the text (Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998). Additionally, pieces considered “high style,” such as chansons, are thought by some to have been sung with a “free unmeasured rhythm” (Aubrey, 2000).

In some cases, multiple manuscripts exist of the same piece that notate seemingly different melodies. Often, these variations can be traced to a core melody but show that different improvisations on the melody existed among musicians in period (Aubrey, 2000). Thus, both rhythm and melody were freely treated by the period performer and performances of the same piece in different ways is appropriate.

Medieval Accompaniment

Instrumental accompaniment of period pieces may take many forms. Instruments may simply play a drone, or play the melody (or simplified melody) along with the voice. Additionally, instruments may be used to play a prelude to the music, as filler interlude between versus of sung words (an interlude), or to accent phrases with flourishes. Instrumental postludes after the sung text was also common. Additionally, the type of accompaniment or instrumental interlude may change from verse to verse (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).

Descriptions of accompaniment styles is limited. Multiple sources refer to accompaniment that matches the melody in fifths, or refer to accompaniment as parallel fifths (Tindemans, 2000). Some trouvère texts specifically reference accompaniment, such as the Chansonnier de l’Arsenal which includes an illumination of a fiddler (Tindemans, 2000). This suggests that accompaniment is appropriate for trouvère music and that notes in the accompaniment should rely on fifths.
Drone accompaniment

A drone is a single note played continuously throughout the performance of a piece. The drone is generally the tonic pitch of a piece, or a pitch compatible with the tonic. A drone pitch may change for certain phrases of the music when there is a temporary tonal shift in the music that makes the tonic drone contrast too strongly with the section of music. Many medieval instruments (such as bagpipes and hurdy-gurdys) have a built in drone while other instruments, such as bowed or plucked strings may easily add a drone in addition to the melody. The drone may be continuous, in the case of a bagpipe, or plucked or bowed at intervals determined by the performer (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).

Melody doubling

Doubling the melody as accompaniment could be done in unison or in octaves with the sung melody. The melody may not be exact, and variations in ornamentation, called heterophony, was common in medieval music. Additionally, the melody may be simplified in the instrument compared to the singer (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).

Preludes

A prelude is a short improvised introduction to the sung piece. The prelude could be sung or played on an instrument and was generally based on the melody of the piece. The prelude was often unmeasured and served to introduce the modal pattern and tonal center of the piece. It may be simple or complex, short or long, or fast or slow as long as it followed the basic tenant of sticking to the modal center of the piece (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).

Interludes

An interlude is a short section of instrumental music played between sung verses. The interlude may be a pure repetition of the melody, or a modified or embellished version of the melody, and may also consist of only a part of the melody, as well as contain improvised elements. An interlude may be played between every verse, or only occasionally. Additionally, the interlude may change each time, with a brief phrase occurring after one verse, and a lengthier embellished rendition of the full melody may occur later in the piece (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).

Postludes

A postlude is an improvised section at the end of a written piece. A medieval instrumentalist would be expected to appropriately improvise a postlude, the guidelines for which follow that of Preludes and Interludes (Tindemans, 2000).

Performance Techniques

Medieval musicians used limited types of embellishments and relied heavily on improvisation in performance.

Ornamentation

Embellishments using ornaments has limited documentation prior to 1350. However, through analysis of extant manuscripts that recorded different versions of the same piece, evidence of ornamentation emerges. Three versions of a 12th century troubadour manuscript ‘Fine amours en Esperance’ give evidence for ornamentation used in France in this time period (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988). The most common ornamentation in this time period were graces, which can be broken into mordents, which may involve upper or lower notes, and trills and passaggi, which were notes that filled in or connected other notes. Most ornamentation was stepwise, and relatively short (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).
**Improvisation**

Improvisation was one of the most important elements of medieval music and the *troubadours* and *trouvères* were no exception. The previously discussed preludes/interludes/postludes were commonly improvised elements, but some performers improvised melodic lines for poetry. Singers and instrumentalists could improvise harmony to an established melody, either in parallel or in counterpoint. While improvisation did follow rules concerning tonal centers of music, matching of first and last notes in improvised passages, and other rules of counterpoint, it was an integral part of performance throughout the time period (McGee, Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988). In general, improvisation should be simple, deliberate, and based on appropriate modes and patterns for the instrument (Tindemans, 2000).

**Instruments**

Period sources report the use of fiddle and harp to accompany French music (Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998). Additionally, a theorist named Johannes de Grocheio, circa 1300, reported use of a vielle with all forms of music (Aubrey, 2000). Thus, strings including vielle, lute and harp were likely used for accompaniment, but rarely winds or drums (Aubrey, 2000). According to McGee, “the instruments most often depicted with solo singers of the Middles Ages are: harp, lute portative organ, Vielle, and psaltry” (Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide, 1988).

**Tuning**

The middle ages generally used Pythagorean tuning, where the fifth has a harmonic ratio of 3:2, called a “pure fifth” (Duffin, 2000). This left fifths as the most consonant interval, whereas thirds were more dissonant than in modern Equal Temperament tuning. In the Middle Ages, fifths were the primary intervals used. However, by the Renaissance, thirds were becoming more popular. Just Intonation, which is a tuning system based on harmonics and allows thirds to be more consonant than in Pythagorean tuning, but that introduces some more dissonant fifths, may have been used at some point during the troubadour and trouvère period, though there is no definitive proof (Duffin, 2000).

**Example piece: Au Renouvel du Tens**

*Au Renouvel du Tens* is an anonymous trouvère chanson from the manuscript *Recueil de chansons du XIIIe siècle, avec musique notée*. The manuscript is dated 1301-1325, which is towards the end of the trouvère period. The piece is written in Old French and the lyric is about the singer who observes and overhears two women discussing whether one woman should marry a poor, generous and refined handsome man or a rich man with no brains or beauty (Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998).

References


Au Renouvel du Tens

arr. Aibhilin inghean Daibhidh

At the return of the season when new flowers
india-blue and white blossom in the fields,
I found, as they were gathering violets in a hazel grove,
a lady who looked like a fay and her companion,
with whom she was pondering
which one of two suitors
of hers to love:
the poor man who was refined,
upright, and generous even more than a king,
and flawless handsome,
or else the rich man with money and land
but with no beauty or brains or refinement.

*Translation from Songs of the Troubadours and Trouvères
(Rosenberg, Switten, & Le Vot, 1998)