

Expanse of the Field: Medieval to Contemporary

The "Not-so-precisely Measured" Music of the Middle Ages

Hendrik van der Werf

In the area of performance practice few issues have been debated as fervently and as dogmatically as has rhythm and meter in medieval song. For more than a century researchers have tried to reconstruct the original manner in which these songs were performed and, by the middle of the century, almost every conceivable theory had been broached. In a book published in 1962 Burkhard Kippenberg subjected the existing theories to a thorough scrutiny and came to the conclusion that no logical and decisive evidence had been brought forth for any of them.¹ In addition to the objections voiced by Kippenberg one should mention the monolithic approach as a serious weakness of most research in this area: it has been (and sometimes still is) taken for granted that one type of rhythm governed either all songs in a given language or all songs of the entire medieval period.

Several thousand non-liturgical songs have come down to us. For the majority only the texts have been preserved, but we have both text and melody for well over 2,000 of them, the precise figure depending upon one's own definitions of the terms "non-liturgical," "song," and "Middle

1. Burkhard Kippenberg, *Der Rhythmus im Minnesang: eine Kritik der literar- und musikhistorischen Forschung mit einer Übersicht über die musikalischen Quellen* (Munich, 1962).

Ages." It may be regretted that so many of the songs with music have a French text, but this accident of history does have a fortunate aspect in that one genre, often called "trouvère song,"² or simply "chanson," has been preserved in such abundance that we can learn much about performance practice from the texts and melodies themselves, from the manner in which they were preserved, and especially from the manner in which a given song varies from one manuscript to another. Although we all would prefer a more direct approach, we have little choice but to take the best known genre as a vantage point from which to study the lesser known repertoires. With great caution we can try and determine in what respects the trouvère songs differ from, and in what respects they resemble the other ones. For now, we may restrict our attention to monophonic song in French and Occitan.³ We must bypass plainchant altogether, and leave other "not-so-precisely-measured" genres for a future occasion.⁴

The Texts

Our study of melodic rhythm must begin with the texts. One of the major principles for versification of troubadour and trouvère songs (and of most subsequent poetry in Romance languages) is the "syllable count." A given line, or verse, normally has a fixed number of syllables in each strophe of a given poem, but there is no fixed position for accented syllables in places other than the rhyme and, in a limited number of poems, the caesura. An occasional line may seem trochaic or dactylic,

2. For the sake of this study the term "trouvère" has both the advantage and disadvantage of being vague. Some scholars, especially experts on medieval poetry, have used the term sparingly and usually in the meaning to be proposed here. Others, especially authors of textbooks on the history of music, have used it in reference to all French poet-composers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. According to their contents the manuscripts allow a conveniently narrow interpretation of the term. The medieval songs in Old-French have been preserved in a dozen large manuscripts (and in many small and fragmentary collections) dating from the middle of the thirteenth through the beginning of the fourteenth century. They contain a rather wide variety of poems and melodies, but one fairly homogeneous group prevails. The poems in this group are strophic in form and content, and most of them deal with *fin' amor*, nowadays often called "courtly love." Only the first strophe of the poem is provided with a melody. I shall restrict the term "trouvère song" to members of this group.

3. The term "troubadour song" will be used for songs in the Provencal, or Occitan, language.

4. Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental Practice and Songs in France 1100-1300*, (London, 1987) comes to largely the same classification, and considers troubadour and trouvère songs to be in a "high style," the others in "lower styles." With more or less the same results, we can also take attribution as a criterion for categorization because most of the songs that are attributed to a specific author belong to the first group; conversely, many of the songs outside of it are anonymous. Fearing that uninitiated readers may see a value judgment in the terms "high" and "low," I prefer not to use them.

but there is no case in which an entire poem or entire strophe has a regular alternation of accented and unaccented syllables. I may recall here that there is such an alternation in many Latin poems of the same time, including many (not all) Latin motet texts and even some French motets. Traditionally, the syllable count is referred to as the "meter" of the poem. In discussions of melodic meter this could lead to confusion, and one might be tempted to reason that, if there is meter in the poem, there must have been meter in the music. This apodictum is flawed because the term "meter" is used in two meanings. A fixed number of syllables in a poem does not necessarily mean that the melody had a fixed alternation of accented and unaccented or long and short units. Except when the context calls for a general term, and in discussions of "modal rhythm," I will avoid the terms "rhythm" and "meter" in preference for less ambiguous ones, such as "syllable count," "accentuation," and "duration."

Medieval Writings Concerning Measurement

Medieval writings about the poetry of the troubadours and trouvères are devoid of information concerning melodic rhythm. Among the treatises dealing with music, only the one by Johannes de Grocheio contains a few remarks that may pertain to trouvère songs. In order to evaluate his remarks, we must keep in mind the development of the discipline called *musica*.⁵ St. Augustine is one of several authors who define *musica* as the "art of measuring" or the "art of measuring well." Some of those who were interested in measuring, including St. Augustine, seem to have found great delight in studying the numbers in those Latin poems that have long and short syllables in a ratio of 2:1. In the fifth chapter (the fifth "book" as medieval people called it) Augustine discusses numerical equalities that we can perceive with our intellect, but not with our senses. In the last chapter the real purpose of Augustine's study emerges when he turns to the harmony found in God. Other learned authors were fascinated with the numbers or ratios found among pitches in the scale. Some transferred these numbers to the universe and organized the heavenly bodies as pitches in an octave. In an almost inscrutable development, the meaning of the term *musica* widened and came to include everything that we now call music. For some time this development went hand in hand with a confusing non-sequitur: since

5. For two recent and rather different interpretations of *musica* in reference to duration see van der Werf, *The Emergence of Gregorian Chant: A Comparative Study of Roman, Ambrosian, and Gregorian Chant*, vol. I,1 (published by the author, Rochester, N.Y., 1983), 22-30, and John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350* (Cambridge, 1986), 413-434.

musica concerns itself with precisely measurable phenomena, everything discussed under the heading *musica* was assumed to be precisely measurable. In the second half of the thirteenth century Franco of Cologne and Johannes de Garlandia discuss in detail measurements in motets, while explicitly stating that plainchant was immeasurable. Johannes de Grocheio disagrees with their latter statement. In his opinion calling "music" immeasurable was contrary to the tradition of *musica*. Circumventing the problem in typical medieval fashion, he concedes that plainchant was "not so precisely measured." Although he is not explicit concerning trouvère songs, Grocheio seems to place them among the "not-so-precisely-measured" genres. Even if I am wrong on the last point, we must reckon with the possibility that not all music of the thirteenth century was precisely measured. Above all, we must be very cautious in taking at face value medieval statements about the measurability of any genre of music.

The Musical Notation

Most musical scribes of troubadour and trouvère songs used the square notation which we know from Gregorian chant and which bears no indications of duration aside from double notes. One of the distinctive features of this notation was its use of simple and compound neumes. In the latter one notational symbol comprises several pitches sung to one syllable. Sometime in the thirteenth century the neumes acquired mensural meaning. Not only the presence or absence of a stem, but also the shape of the compound neume, also called a ligature, determined the duration of its individual pitches. We do not know to what extent the scribes of troubadour and trouvère sources were familiar with this innovation, but it is obvious that non-mensural notation was the norm for the chansons. In a manuscript that almost exclusively contains works by Adam de la Hale mensural notation was used for his rondeaux and motets, all of them polyphonic, while non-mensural notation was used for the chansons and jeux-partis, all of them monophonic. The scribe of the manuscript now known as the *Chansonnier Cangé* demonstrated his familiarity with mensural notation by using it for the major part of a motet for two voices, while his notation of most chansons is decidedly non-mensural.⁶ Almost as if to confuse us, he gives the impression of having used some half-hearted form of mensural notation in a limited

6. For more details on the semi-mensural notation in the *Chansonnier Cangé* see van der Werf, *The Chansons of the Troubadours and Trouvères a Study of the Melodies and Their Relation to the Poems* (Utrecht, 1972), 36-37 and 139-146. See also the photographic reproduction, transcription, and discussion in Jean B. Beck, *Le Chansonnier Cangé*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1927).

number of chansons by clearly distinguishing between stemmed and unstemmed single notes without giving mensural meaning to his ligatures. Furthermore, the alternation of stemmed and unstemmed single notes varies from completely regular in some melodies to absolutely meaningless in others. This leaves us with the problem of distinguishing between real and make-believe mensuration in this particular manuscript. All in all, the scribal habit of giving chansons in non-mensural notation strengthens the idea that duration in chansons was "not so precisely measured."

Multiple Versions

By a stroke of luck the troubadour and trouvère repertoires, especially the latter, present us with a source of information that we have just begun to explore. In many instances a given song has been preserved in more than one manuscript; and some songs occur in up to a dozen sources. The multiple versions are rarely identical. For a long time it was assumed that the extant readings were copied, directly or indirectly, from the author's autograph and that copyists were to be blamed for the many discrepancies. Early in this century another explanation emerged, as literary scholars recognized that initially the songs were disseminated by word of mouth, and that only in the mid thirteenth century was dissemination through writing juxtaposed against a continuing oral tradition. Most importantly, the realization arose that, for both performers and scribes, requirements for faithful transmission were much looser than they are in our print-dominated society. In other words, both the persons involved in the oral tradition and those who preserved songs in written form felt free to vary certain aspects of the texts. Consequently, editors of the poems gave up their attempts at reconstructing the original version of a poem. It is now general practice to select one version as basis for an edition and to list variants from other sources in the critical apparatus.

In retrospect, it is difficult to believe that in the early 1960s I was the first to use differences and similarities among multiple versions as a source of information about musical characteristics, especially the rhythm of troubadour and trouvère melodies. Melodic variants are more numerous (and probably more significant) than textual ones. Moreover, oral transmission can be proven much more convincingly for the music than for the poetry, thanks to the many songs in which the music for the first and the second verse are repeated for the third and the fourth verse (i.e. AB AB X). Almost invariably these first four lines differ less in multiple versions than do the subsequent lines. If there had been a written

transmission from poet-composer to extant manuscripts, we could have explained this phenomenon only by assuming that musical scribes turned sleepy and sloppy at the beginning of the fifth verse, but returned to fairly accurate copying when they started the next tune. In an oral tradition, however, a person learning a song from listening to it would hear the A and B melodies twice as often as the X section, and thus retain the former better than the latter. Accepting oral transmission as the normal process does not imply that scribes entered the songs directly into the extant sources either from memory or upon hearing. On the contrary, there are ample indications that they (or someone else) made what we might call "a rough copy" that was used as the model, or exemplar, in the production of a collection in book form. Another feature provides valuable information concerning the scribes. Four of the trouvère sources preserve long groups of songs, often by a single author, in the very same order and with few differences. Clearly, these four scribes had access to the same exemplars, and it is encouraging to learn that they could copy very precisely. Obviously, they made some errors, but it is of more importance to note that they also must have made some deliberate changes.

When evaluating similarities and differences among multiple versions, we must choose between two assumptions. Putting things in black and white, we can assume that the transmitters were connoisseurs who left the essential features of a song intact, or that singers and scribes knew virtually nothing about the subtleties of troubadour and trouvère art, and corrupted both text and music. The texts of the chansons help us solve this riddle in that they suggest that troubadour and trouvère poetry is unlikely to have appealed to the masses. Their dissemination is not likely to have been accomplished by footloose and unsophisticated entertainers who eked out a living as jugglers and storytellers in city streets and town squares. Instead, the poems are rather esoteric and are likely to have been appreciated only by aficionados. It may be argued that these connoisseurs, many of them troubadours or trouvères themselves, were responsible for the transmission. At the beginning of the oral tradition stood the poet-composer himself. Regardless of whether he sang in order to teach his creation to someone else or in order to present it to his peers, the author, as a song's first performer, established the manner of presenting it to an audience. If the transmitters were experts and connoisseurs, they are not likely to have altered any characteristics that were essential to either the genre or the individual song, although they may have varied other features within the boundaries of the poetic and musical customs of the time. In this process the author may also have been the first to vary his song from one presentation to another. If this

was the case, the similarities and differences among multiple versions afford us a valuable source of information about the manner in which the songs were actually performed.

The "Approximate" Equality of Individual Notes

The differences between multiple versions make it impossible to reconstruct the original melody in all its details, while the similarities assure us that what the scribes left us must have been closely related to what the poet-composer sang at the "world première" of a given chanson. The multiple versions of many songs agree fairly well on the pitches for a given passage, but differ on how the pitches are to be distributed over the text.⁷ Taken all together, such differences inescapably lead to a strong but negative conclusion: they could not have come about if all chansons always had been performed in modal rhythm or in any regular alternation of long-short or accented-unaccented units. Fortunately, the study of similarities and differences also allows a positive conclusion, albeit a vague one: the variants could have come about only if essentially all pitches were of more or less equal importance to the flow and the character of the melody. This gives new meaning to Grocheio's remark that pitches in trouvère songs were "not so precisely measured," i.e. that they were of more or less equal duration, with emphasis on, and great uncertainty about the degree of "more or less." In a performance in which pitches do not have a fixed duration and do not come in a fixed sequence of stress and unstress, any text could be sung as the performer desired. The poet-composer as first performer more or less determined the "not so precisely measured" duration of a pitch, a syllable, and a word.

Although this conclusion is vague, it does solve some problems, e.g., why variants in the choice or order of words can bring about variants in the placement of textual accents. In this type of free rhythm, strophes with different distributions of accents can be performed to the same melody, without injustice to either the text or the music. Even better, in this free rhythm both text and melody can receive proper attention and neither is subservient to the other. This gives meaning, too, to the "double note," i.e., the immediate reiteration of a pitch over a syllable. It seems

7. Since my conclusions are based upon the overall situation, I would rather not refer to specific examples and instead suggest the study of many songs in multiple versions. For this purpose see van der Werf, *The Extant Troubadour Melodies: Transcriptions and Essays for Performers and Scholars*, Gerald A. Bond, text editor (published by the author, Rochester, N.Y., 1984) and *Trouvères-Melodien*, Monumenta Monodica Medii Aevi, vols. XI and XII, Bruno Stäblein, general editor (Kassel, 1977-1979).

reasonable that a double note represents a pitch that is longer than the one represented by a single note.⁸ And the duration of a given pitch very likely varied from one performer to another and from one strophe to another. Thus, it should be not surprising that two scribes, notating the same melody, might disagree on whether a given pitch was represented by a double or single note. At the present stage of the research, it is risky to draw conclusions from the fact that double notes occur exclusively as part of a compound neume, i.e., over syllables sung to two or more pitches.

Fluctuation in the duration of pitches must have been so pervasive that even as staunch a believer in *musica* as Grocheio was unable to measure them as precisely as he would have liked. On the other hand, something must have enabled scribes to distinguish between pitches of average and longer than average duration, and to consider most of them average. Probably, the duration of pitches was sufficiently close to equal to create a prevailing, although "not precisely measured" unit of time.

Application to a Specific Chanson

Clearly, the above conclusions pertain to troubadour and trouvère songs, in general. In respect to a specific melody, the search for the original rhythm has a disappointing result, for we are unable to reconstruct precisely how it was performed seven or eight centuries ago. However, two aspects of our general conclusions add up to valuable guidance for today's singer of early music. I am optimistic enough to think that we can come reasonably close to an authentic rendition of troubadour and trouvère songs by applying the general conclusion to a specific chanson. Playing the schoolmaster, I may suggest that performers begin by studying the text (not reciting it without the music). In the next step, sing the entire song (not one strophe at a time) making all single notes fairly equal to one another, and making double notes more or less twice as long as single ones. By concentrating on getting the text across to an audience, one is likely to develop small differences in the duration of individual pitches and, especially, almost continuous but subtly executed fluctuations in tempo. A brief elaboration on the two caveats in the above suggestion may be helpful. Beginning the learning process of a song with reciting the text without music may result in a rendition in which the syllables are of equal duration. For basically syllabic songs, this may not be a serious shortcoming but, for more ornate ones, this type of rhythm may fail to do justice to the melody. If one were to learn

8. In existing "precisely-measured" transcriptions such lengthening often conflicts with the meter selected by the editor.

a song a strophe at a time, the first strophe might get fixed so strongly in one's mind that its rhythm gets transferred to subsequent strophes. Needless to say, such uniformity will fail to do justice to the differences of meaning and textual flow in individual strophes.

Perhaps, these theories can be elucidated a bit more with the help of a personal note or two. I am not a trained singer and have virtually no experience in reciting poetry to an audience. I do not give recitals but often sing some chansons to illustrate a lecture. I am convinced that one can do justice to both poem and melody. By trial and error, one can learn how to sing several pitches over a seemingly insignificant syllable, and to sing one pitch and one "not so precisely measured" unit of time for the most important syllable of the sentence. In the process one is likely to develop a great appreciation for what at first may appear a duality in medieval songs: one comes to enjoy singing pitches that have primarily melodic meaning at the same time one is "reciting" a poem. Text and melody may not be wedded as they are in songs by Schubert or Fauré, or in an aria of Mozart, yet they go far beyond the point of coexisting or of merely tolerating one another.

The first time I published the above conclusions I used the terms "claim" and "declamatory" in an unwise attempt to capture a manifold theory in a single word.⁹ Paying more attention to the single term than to the entire theory, some fellow medievalists rejected my conclusions as valid only for syllabic passages. Andrew Hughes wrote that my "theory fails to help with melismatic passages."¹⁰ And as the following excerpt (with a quotation from my book) indicates, my choice of terms seems to have misled John Stevens as well:

My . . . task will be to examine some of the deeply held, if not always deeply questioned, beliefs which are current about words-and-music in medieval song. The assumption that it is the words which substantially determine the rhythm of a song is shared not only by convinced adherents of the 'modal' theory but by its strongest opponents, such as Appel, Monterosso and van der Werf. The practical results they come to are very different; but at root they do have certain beliefs in common. . . . Van der Werf is more ready to subordinate the melodies to the exigencies of the text: 'the rhythm

9. Most notably in van der Werf, "Deklamatorischer Rhythmus in den Chansons der Trouvères," in *Die Musikforschung* 20 (1967): 122-44.

10. Andrew Hughes, *Medieval Music: the Sixth Liberal Art* (Toronto, 1974), 160.

in which one might *claim* the poem without the music' will shape the musical interpretation.¹¹

I apologize to those who were led astray by an isolated term but derive solace from those who understood the total theory. More importantly, I hope that this and other recent discussions of rhythm in chansons rectify whatever wrong impressions I may have given on earlier occasions.¹²

Precisely Measured Melodies

Although they do not seem to be very numerous, there are exceptions to the above generalizations. In fact, it has been known for a long time that there are some trouvère songs in which the pitches are precisely measured. Unfortunately, most studies of them, even the most recent ones, are flawed by preconceived notions. Too often, it is taken for granted that, until the middle of the thirteenth century, modal rhythm was the only form of precise measurement for both monophonic and polyphonic music. In addition, the occurrence of modal rhythm in *some* chansons is still taken as evidence that *all* of them are in modal rhythm.¹³ In some other cases the researcher seems preoccupied with the "saving" of modal rhythm for the troubadour and trouvère repertoires.¹⁴ What we need is an objective study of all songs that show signs of durational measurement. For the sake of the present discussion we may divide such songs into three groups.

Several of the manuscripts saving primarily chansons contain a separate section with motets.¹⁵ This does not prove much more than that

11. Stevens, *Words and Music*, 493-494. I cannot understand how Stevens, p. 502, footnote 28, concludes that I speak "of the concept of 'approximate equality' as applying only to syllabic (i.e. single note) progression."

12. See also van der Werf, *The Extant Troubadour Melodies*, 75-83, and my contribution to the forthcoming *Handbook of the Troubadours*, Ron Akehurst and Judith M. Davis, eds.

13. See my review of *Chanter m'estuet: Songs of the Trouvères*, Samuel N. Rosenberg and Hans Tischler, eds. (Bloomington, 1981) in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35 (1982): 539-54. See also Tischler's reaction to my review in the same, 36 (1983): 341-44, and my response in 37 (1984): 206-208. In a review of two of my books in *Journal of the Plainsong and Medieval Music Society* 8 (1985): 59, David Hiley called my evaluation of Tischler's theories "one of the best available descriptions (and refutations) of the idea that modal rhythm provides a key to the interpretation of troubadour songs."

14. This seems to be the case with some of Theodore Karp's publications, e.g. "Three Trouvère Chansons in Mensural Notation" in *Gordon Athol Anderson: in Memoriam* (Henryville, Pa., 1984), 474-94.

15. See especially mss. Paris, B.N. f.fr. 12615 (known as "Chansonnier de Noailles") and Paris B.N. f. fr. 844, published as *Le manuscrit du roi*, 2 vols., Jean B. Beck, ed. (Philadelphia, 1938).

collectors who were primarily interested in chansons did not necessarily shun motets, and that modal rhythm was not anathema to the connoisseurs of the "not so precisely measured" chansons. Of more interest is the "split personality" behaviour of those pieces that appear as monophonic songs in chansonniers and as motets for two voices in other collections.¹⁶ In the latter, the relation between tenor and upper voice suggests that they were conceived and normally performed in modal rhythm. It does not seem strange that, at least occasionally, certain motets were performed without tenor, but we can only guess at what happened to their modal rhythm in a monophonic rendition. The type of double occurrence discussed here is not the only form in which an extant chanson is related to an extant motet, and a thorough study of all such cases will teach us quite a bit, not only about the compositions involved but also about the differences and similarities among chansons and motets in general.

Some of the more interesting and more elusive exceptions to be mentioned occur exclusively in the Chansonnier Cangé and are anonymous. As discussed above, the scribe of this manuscript occasionally made use of what some have considered an early form of mensural notation, but which I prefer to call a semi-mensural notation, because only the single notes, not the ligatures, appear to express mensuration.¹⁷ As I have shown before, in most instances the rhythm suggested by the semi-mensural notation is flatly contradicted by differences and similarities among multiple versions of the chansons concerned.¹⁸ But in a few cases good reasons exist for accepting that the chansons combine the modal rhythm of motets with features more typical of chansons,¹⁹ one being that no multiple versions can be found that might argue against these songs having been conceived in modal rhythm. But the strongest reason is that these songs resemble motets in the way the modal rhythm fits the melody. Before we can determine the place of such hybrid songs in the poetry and music of the thirteenth century, we need to know more about this particular manuscript.

16. See van der Werf, *The Chansons*, example 12, 134-38.

17. The same type of notation is used in the motet collection Paris, B.N. nouv. acq. fr. 13521, published in photographic reproduction by Friedrich Gennrich, *Ein altfranzösischer Motettenkodex...La Clayette* (Darmstadt, 1958) and by Luther Dittmer, *Paris 13521 & 11411* (Brooklyn, 1958) and in transcription by Gordon A. Anderson, *Motets of the Manuscript La Clayette* (Rome, 1975).

18. *The Chansons*, 36-40.

19. *The Chansons*, 144-47. Some reservation must be made about my following the standard procedure of maintaining one rhythmic mode throughout a composition. In the case of semi-mensural notation it is impossible to determine how strictly the composer adhered to a given rhythmic mode. As I hope to show in the near future, there are several indications that mixing modes was not uncommon.

Someone involved in its compilation seems to have been interested in making it look like a motet collection, and in making its chansons look like motets. The semi-mensural notation is the most striking consequence of this attempt. The order in which the chansons are entered may be another one. This is the only trouvère chansonnier to present the songs in alphabetical order (exclusively according to the first letter of the text), while at least two motet collectors similarly organized their manuscript.²⁰

Finally, some chansons contain internal features atypical of their genre compelling us to consider whether they are more precisely measured than is normal. In a chanson by Blondel de Nesle the uniformity in its multiple versions, including the placement of word accents and distribution of pitches over the text, is unusual for the genre. A close examination of these features made me "conclude that if this chanson was meant to be performed in one of the rhythmic modes known to us, it probably was performed" in the third mode.²¹ None of the rather diverse commentary upon my transcription has brought us any further to a solution of the problems posed by such atypical chansons.²² I am still not convinced that it was conceived and normally performed in one of the rhythmic modes known to us, but still consider it likely that its pitches were measured more precisely than was usual for chansons.

Recent Performances and Recordings

Until recently, it was customary to perform all troubadour and trouvère songs in strict modal rhythm, in which syllables were the primary durational units in a ratio of either 1:2 or 1:2:3.²³ For syllabic passages, this resulted in an uninspiringly regular alternation of long and short syllables. Judging by recent recordings, performers of early music have completely abandoned this aspect of modal rhythm. For neumatic and especially for very ornate passages, "modal" performance yielded rhythms

20. This is the case for ms. Bamberg, Staatl. Bibl., Lit 115, published in photographic reproduction and transcription by Pierre Aubry, *Cent motets du xiiiie siècle*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1980), and published in transcription by Gordon A. Anderson, *Compositions of the Bamberg Manuscript* (Stuttgart, 1977). It also is the case for several sections of the ms. known as W2, published in photographic reproduction by Luther Dittmer, *Wolfenbüttel 1099 (1206)* (Brooklyn, 1959).

21. See van der Werf, *The Chansons*, 42 and 100-103. See also my remarks concerning chanson R620 by Blondel de Nesle in *Trouvères-Melodien I*, 559 and 26-32.

22. Stevens in *Words and Music*, 448, Charlotte Roederer in *Schirmer History of Music* (New York, 1982), 72-73, and Theodore Karp, "Three Trouvère Chansons in Mensural Notation," in *Gordon Athol Anderson: in Memoriam* (Henryville, Pa., 1984), 491-94.

23. See footnote 13.

which, depending upon one's point of view, were either "fascinating" or "weird"; they often were contrary to the style of motets. In current practice many singers make the duration of individual pitches quite unequal. In ornate passages this interest in unequal lengths is combined with an apparent desire to make the duration of the syllables close to equal. There seems to be no published defense of this practice, so that one cannot help but wonder whether it arose under the influence of the earlier practice wherein the syllable was the controlling factor, and "fascinating" or "weird" rhythms thereby became associated with the troubadours and trouvères.²⁴ One may also wonder whether the interest in making individual pitches unequal represents an attempt to make secular songs radically different from Gregorian chant. In two respects this desire is without ground. Firstly, our desire for marked differences between religious and secular music is a relatively modern phenomenon which came about slowly well after the Middle Ages, and seems to have gained its greatest impetus during the nineteenth century. In addition, the often quoted pronouncement of Johannes de Grocheio is not the only indication that, throughout the Middle Ages, duration in plainchant was not precisely measured and may not have resembled the equalistic performance advocated by André Mocquereau and his fellow monks of Solesmes.²⁵

Dancing Songs

It was for practical, not for ideological reasons, that my publications on non-liturgical music of the Middle Ages have almost exclusively concerned chansons of the troubadours and trouvères. Going beyond those repertoires is difficult, almost risky, because of the low number of extant melodies for the other songs. The troubadour sources contain many poems that clearly fall outside of the genre discussed thus far. Alas, only a very few of them are preserved with a melody, and most of these seem to stem from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries. For songs with French texts fate has been more considerate, but still not generous enough to provide us with multiple versions for many of them. Thus, I may be forgiven for making primarily cautionary remarks in the next few paragraphs.

24. Stevens's book, *Words and Music*, advocating "isosyllabic" performance of many genres of medieval song was published long after singers went in this direction. For an evaluation of Stevens's theories see my review of his book in the forthcoming issue of *Journal of Musicological Research*.

25. Concerning accentuation and duration in plainchant see van der Werf, *The Emergence of Gregorian Chant: a Comparative Study of Ambrosian, Roman and Gregorian Chant* (published by the author, Rochester, N.Y., 1983), vol. I, 1, 22-42

At first glance, it would appear that pitches in dancing songs were not only precisely measured but also contained regular alternations of stress and unstress. Unfortunately, we do not know enough about medieval dances to either corroborate or contradict this notion. Probably because modal rhythm is associated with ternary meter, medieval dance songs are traditionally transcribed and performed in some kind of "waltz" rhythm, even though we do not know enough about either the dances or the tunes to exclude binary meter from consideration. To make things worse, we even have difficulty identifying dancing songs. Almost the only undeniable cases occur in narratives in which we are told that (certain) people danced to a song, and here the text may be given but the music usually is lacking. Furthermore, such a dancing song is given various labels, such as some form of the words "rondeau" or "carolle," or something like "chanson de carolle," or simply "chanson."²⁶ As generic terms were used in the Middle Ages, we should be wary of taking for granted that every text said to be a "rondelet" or "carolle" is a dancing song.

About a dozen poems have been preserved, without music, under the heading "estampie," but there is no indication whatsoever that they are dancing songs, or that they were performed to a clearly measured tune.²⁷ We also have a number of tunes without text called "estampie" that may be dance tunes, but they stem from the fourteenth century. As far as I know, we have only one case in which both text and music have been preserved for a song called "estampie." Moreover, the melody occurs with both a French and an Occitan text; the former is anonymous, the latter is attributed to Raimbaut de Vacqueiras.²⁸ Nevertheless, we have no clear indication about duration and accentuation in the melody, per se. A confusing factor in the study of the estampie is that it clearly is related to the Latin *sequence*, the German *Leich*, the French *descort* and lyric *lai*, none of which seem to have had anything to do with dancing. Clearly, we need an extensive study not only of the estampies, but also of the various members of the large sequence family. This research must be without preconceived notions; e.g., it must not start with the premise that the Latin sequence is the ancestor of this group.

There is a theory that the rondeau, the virelai, and the ballade either are, or derive from dancing songs. This usually goes together with the

26. See also Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments*, especially 77-87.

27. See also van der Werf, "Estampie," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Stanley Sadie, ed.

28. For a brief discussion and complete transcription of both songs see van der Werf, *The Extant Troubadour Melodies*, 291-93.

assumption that their refrains derive from a practice that dance songs were intoned by a soloist, some of whose verses were repeated by the (other) dancers. It is a thankless task to try to disprove a theory that has never been proven. It may suffice to give the most pertinent facts. It should not surprise anyone to learn from the narratives that medieval people did dance, and (occasionally or often?) did so to a song. From some narratives we may also conclude that an alternation between a soloist and others occasionally occurred in dancing songs. Forms of the word "rondeau" occasionally appear as labels for a dancing song. The noun "ballade" seems to be related to the verb *ballare*, meaning "to dance." Some late entries in *Le Manuscrit du Roi*, which in their form resemble the virelai, have the title *danssa*.²⁹ Beyond that, there is little or nothing to connect all rondeaux, virelais, and ballades to dancing.

Exploring their origin a bit further, I suggest that if the rondeaux, virelais, and ballades of Guillaume de Machaut were descendants of dancing songs, they are at least as far removed from their origin as Beethoven's scherzos are removed from the courtly minuet. From yet a different point of view, we may recall that playing with recurrent thoughts, words, and sentences is a favorite habit among poets in so-called "primitive" as well as "high" cultures, just as playing with recurrent melodic ideas and phrases is popular among composers in notationless cultures. In the fourteenth century these favorite features became stylized and standardized, and this process seems to have been started before the beginning of that century.³⁰ It is beyond question that the rondeaux (or the *rondets*, as they are called in their sole source) by Guillaume d'Amiens are different from his chansons and from chansons by other trouvères, but no indication has been found that they have anything to do with dancing.³¹ Their melodies may have been measured, but there is no reason to consider ternary meter and modal rhythm axiomatic. Since these are the only extant monophonic rondeaux, and since they occur in only one manuscript, we do not have much material for research on duration in their melodies. Despite all this uncertainty, I urge that some systematic and unprejudiced study be made of all the songs that may have had anything to do with dancing, however remote that connection may have been, even though we may never acquire precise knowledge of rhythm or meter in each individual case.

29. For further information see van der Werf, "Estampie."

30. For a discussion of the "balete" preserved (without music) in ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 308, see van der Werf, *The Chansons*, 153 and 158-59.

31. For an edition of these *rondets* see Friedrich Gennrich, *Rondeaux, Virelais, und Ballades* (Dresden, 1921), 30-38.

Narrative Songs

Some two hundred French poems can be typified as "narrative songs." This does not include large epics, known as "chansons de geste"; it concerns relatively short, more or less strophic songs, most of which were published a century ago by Karl Bartsch under the general labels "romances" and "pastourelles."³² Several attempts have been made to subdivide this large group into concise and easily recognizable types. Style and content seem to have been the primary criteria for categorization. To some extant the form of the strophe was also considered, but the style and form of the music played no role. Thus, past research has failed to yield reliable information to those interested in reviving these songs in their original rhythm. My own limited research makes me wonder whether a typological study, taking into account all pertinent aspects of text and music, will yield significantly fewer categories than there are narrative songs.

As a group, the narrative songs combine formal aspects of text and music in a manner that links them with both the trouvère song and *chanson de geste*. The former is strophic in the usual meaning, in the latter the counterpart of the strophe is normally called a *laisse*, the length of which may vary widely. The subdivision of the narrative songs under consideration is usually called a strophe even though the individual strophes of a given song may vary somewhat in their number of lines. Five or six strophes is almost standard for trouvère songs, while the number of *laisses* in a *chanson de geste* is unlimited, and the total epic may have a few thousand lines. In the narrative songs the number of strophes ranges from five to ten in most cases, to twenty or thirty in others. In trouvère songs a ten-syllable line has either ten or eleven syllables, depending on whether the rhyme consists of one or two syllables. This curious form of arithmetic is due to the tradition that in French and Occitan poetry the second (unaccented) syllable of a so-called feminine rhyme is not included in the syllable count. In epic poetry and in many narrative songs a ten-syllable line may have ten, eleven, or twelve syllables. The increase in arithmetical problems is due to the fact that, in addition to an unaccented syllable in the rhyme, there may be an unaccented syllable in the *caesura*, that is in the "break" after the fourth or (less often) the sixth syllable. Beyond the frequently occurring AB AB opening, trouvère songs have relatively little repetition of entire melodic lines. In the narrative songs, however, we often find three- or four-fold repetition of the very first phrase, which may well be

32. Karl Bartsch, *Altfranzösische Romanzen und Pastourelle* (Leipzig, 1870).

related to a tradition of singing all the lines of a *laisse*, or of an entire *chanson de geste*, to essentially the same melodic phrase.³³ Differences in choice of rhyme schemes among the three genres are important but not of direct relevance to questions of melodic rhythm and meter.

It seems inconceivable that a *chanson de geste* was performed in modal rhythm or in any other alternation of long and short syllables. If "not so precisely measured" duration was useful in any genre, it must have been in epic poetry. Almost every narrative song turns out to have some formal characteristics of both the *chanson de geste* and of the trouvère chanson. Although this does not give incontrovertible evidence for their rhythm, it does justify the speculation that duration in them was "not so precisely measured."³⁴ Assuming that duration in all troubadour and trouvère songs, in *chansons de geste*, in all romances and pastourelles, and in all of plain chant was "not so precisely measured" does not necessarily mean that it all sounded alike. On the contrary, this rhythmic freedom allows a wide range of differences in expressiveness and rhythm, however subtle the fluctuations may turn out to be. Let us hope that someone will study the entire group of narrative songs, considering each song on its own merits. The purpose of the research should not be to put each song into a category, to deduce the rhythm for one or two in each category, and to decide that all songs in that category had the same type of rhythm or meter. For the present, however, we are left with no alternative but to consider them all as belonging to one category, and assume that duration in a given narrative was "not so precisely measured," unless evidence to the contrary can be found.

Chromatic Alterations

Finally, we must turn to two "technical" aspects of the performance of medieval songs. *Musica ficta*, or in plain English chromatic alterations, may well form the most elusive problem in the performance of medieval music. Although no all-encompassing study of this phenomenon has been undertaken, many strong opinions have been voiced. The troubadour repertory is small enough that a complete survey can be made of the sharp, natural, and flat signs in the four sources involved; at the same time, it is large enough to give meaningful data.³⁵ For scholars these data are of great significance, but they fail to offer precise

33. In a forthcoming publication I hope to explore the ramifications of the theory that in a *chanson de geste* one line of music was repeated for every textual verse.

34. It is unclear to me why Richard H. Hoppin transcribes narrative songs in modal rhythm in his *Medieval Music* (New York, 1978), 292.

35. For these data, see van der Werf, *The Extant Troubadour Melodies*, 38-61.

prescriptions to performers. To begin with, we have no certainty as to how long a given sign of alteration is valid, although some indication exists that it often pertains only to the pitches on the rest of the staff on which it stands. Beyond that, the variants among multiples versions of troubadour and trouvère songs show that changes were made in the diatonic or chromatic nature of some, but by no means many of the melodies; still they neither reveal who made them nor whether chromatic alterations were added or deleted. Medieval performers do not seem to have been as concerned about note-for-note retention of a melody as are present-day musicians. This attitude appears to have affected chromatic alterations as well as other melodic aspects. Scribes contributed to these differences by adding (or omitting) accidentals in accordance with criteria unknown to us. Since all large chansonniers contain at least some chromatic alterations, we can be fairly sure that troubadours and trouvères themselves did not shun them, but we do not know whether a given composer left us exclusively diatonic melodies, whether he altered a pitch frequently, or whether he seldom did so. Thus, when it comes to determining the diatonic or chromatic state of a melody, it is left to the performer to make decisions where the scholar can only plead ignorance.

Instrumental Accompaniment

Instrumental accompaniment is another thorny issue for scholars and performers alike. For a long time, it was widely accepted that the songs of the troubadours and trouvères were always performed to instrumental accompaniment. As many scholars must have done before me, and as especially Christopher Page did after me, I have searched in vain for information about accompaniment. We know that instruments existed in the time of the troubadours and trouvères, and obviously that they were used. It appears that some troubadours and trouvères could play instruments. We also know that the Middle Ages were not unacquainted with the phenomenon of accompanied song. For example, Tristan often accompanied his own singing.³⁶ But no evidence is present that troubadour and trouvère chansons were accompanied. It is significant that in troubadour and trouvère poems, as well as in the medieval literature concerning them, we find numerous references to singing, but none to accompanying. The mere fact that, occasionally, a musical instrument is mentioned in a poem is no evidence for instrumental

36. The fact that both Tristan and Isolde played instruments is a welcome antidote to the myth that in the Middle Ages playing an instrument was considered a base occupation. Tristan and Isolde were highly admired and the story tellers would not have portrayed them as superb instrumentalists, if playing an instrument would have been in conflict with their noble birth.

accompaniment, and even if we could find evidence for accompaniment of a troubadour or a trouvère song on a certain occasion, we would still have no evidence that they were habitually accompanied. In the only extensive study to date of the medieval use of instruments, Page essentially confirmed what I wrote some twenty-five years ago.³⁷ He went far beyond the troubadour and trouvère repertoires so that we now begin to have some information on what genres actually were accompanied. One thing has not changed: we still do not have any manuscript that actually preserves the accompaniment to any song prior to the fourteenth century. Recital and recording situations being as they are, it may be difficult for performers to abandon instrumental accompaniment completely, but I express pleasure at noting that percussion instruments seem to be losing ground in recordings of medieval music.

On more than one occasion I have written that medieval performers of chansons must have sung expressively, but that we do not know just how dramatic their renditions were. We may be able to draw one more conclusion from the nature and the number of variants among multiple versions. As mentioned above, the variants in the melodies are not only more numerous but also more significant than the variants in the poems. Perhaps one can conclude that the similarities and differences among multiple versions suggest that medieval singers concentrated on presenting the poetry but were rather free in their treatment of the music. In this respect we may raise a crude question: are troubadour and trouvère chansons poems that happen to have a melody or are they musical compositions that happen to have a text? We may not want to answer either question with a simple "yes" or "no," but we can safely assume that the poet-composers wanted their texts to be understood. Thus, we may have an objective criterion by which to judge authenticity of present-day performances, and hold that, from a historical point of view, something is seriously wrong when a song is performed in a rhythm and with an accompaniment that obscure the words. For modern performers there is a painful irony in this conclusion. A performer who sings without instrumental accompaniment, who makes the pitches more or less equal, and who gives a perfect rendition of the text, may encounter less audience appreciation than the one who sings in jumpy rhythms, who is accompanied by an ensemble of odd-sounding instruments, and who is dressed in medieval garb.

37. Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments*.