Title: Aeron's Song
Entrant: Isolde de Languedoc
Category: Bardic
Specific Art Form: Songwriting
Entry Contents: Melody in period notation and full song text

Background

The troubadours comprised a movement of poets, songwriters and performers active between about 1100 and 1300 CE.[1] Although they are often discussed in the same breath with the trouvères, singer/poets from contemporary Northern France, the troubadours are distinct geographically, linguistically and stylistically. They flourished in Occitania, also called "The Midi" – the region "encompassing Aquitaine, Périgord, Limosin, Auvergne, Gascony, Langeudoc, and Provençe in the south of present-day France."[2] With the exception of some multilingual forays,[3] troubadours composed their poems in the *lang d'oc*, also called Old Occitan or Old Provencal, a relative the *lang d'oïl* of the trouvères (Old French) and other Romance languages.

Although many troubadours were widely traveled,[4] they were not all the wandering minstrels of popular imagining. Though some are believed to have come from humble origins,[5] they were well educated, and the most successful attached themselves as permanent fixtures to the court of a *senhor*, or lord. Here they enjoyed a relatively stable existence, often being sponsored for retirement to a monastery in their later years.[6] Some were clergymen to begin with,[7] a few were *senhors* themselves.[8]

Troubadours composed poems on numerous themes, but they are best known for furthering the theme of courtly love – *fin amors*, in Occitan. Indeed, they were instrumental in establishing this culture.[9] Troubadour cansos, or love songs, are replete with vaunted images of women, usually the wife of the *senhor*, and superlative flattery.[10] These cansos place their ladies on pedestals and frequently praise them even when they prove false or indifferent.[11]

The popularity of the troubadours in aristocratic circles and their obsession with praising noble ladies may, in part, explain the unusually high number of trobaritz – female troubadours. Of the 460 troubadours whose poems survive, twenty are female,[12] nearly half of whom we know were respected as poets during their own lifetimes.[13] This may seem scant, but it far outstrips the frequency of female activity in any other region or period of medieval literature.[14] Trobaritz were noble women – educated and exposed to the songs of their male counterparts at court.[15] Some are believed to have been relatives of troubadours,[16] some are believed to have had relationships with troubadours.[17]

As aristocratic women, they were the objects of the troubadours' courtly idolatry and participated fully, authoring love poetry of their own and even engaging in tensos, collaborative back-and-forth poems, with each other and their male counterparts.[18] Their poetry, as a corpus, is stylistically distinct from that of the male troubadours in ways that will be explained in the next section.

Lyrics

In writing this song, I have attempted to take as many stylistic cues as possible from the poetry of the troubadours, and the trobaritz in particular. My hope is that the resulting work is something that would not seem out of place sung by a noble woman in

an Occitan court during the 12th and 13th centuries, lyrics in modern English notwithstanding.

Like their male counterparts, the trobaritz authored cansos more than any other type of poetry. Unlike their male counterparts, the trobaritz tended to write their love songs in simple, direct and usually fairly realistic terms. Although they praise the objects of their affections, they are less worshipful in their praise than the male troubadours, acknowledging their faults and hurts without glorifying their lovers' power over them.[19] My song is, primarily, a song of praise, enumerating the beauties and graces of my love, "My lover's arms are strong, hands gentle, body lithe and stature high." At the same time, however, it expresses my frustration at his blindness to his beauty and grace as the causes of my love – arguably a fault, though not one that deserves reproach.

Judged by the yardstick of feudalism, the phrase, "I'd love his soul, his hands, his body, were he peasant, lord or king," expresses a decidedly anachronistic sentiment. It would seem to superimpose democratic standards of modern love onto an extremely hierarchical medieval form. Courtly love was very much an economic, rank-based system.[20] Male troubadours usually had an aristocratic subject in mind when writing their cansos – the wife of their *senhor*. The trobaritz, on the other hand, as the aristocratic subjects of troubadour cansos, were usually the ranking female members of a court. They wrote their love poetry not to their husbands, but to the troubadours who sang their praises. Male troubadours gained in stature through the attentions of a lady of higher rank, women gained only (occasional) emotional satisfaction through the love of a man of lower rank. Therefore, from the point of view of the trobaritz, this disregard for the rank of one's lover is a decidedly period sentiment, though it would be glaringly anachronistic from the perspective of a male poet.

Troubadour cansos are written in one of two registers – trobar clus or trobar leu. Trobar clus employs elaborate metaphors and extended conceits designed to deliberately obscure the specific meaning of a poem – perhaps a code for a very specific intended audience.[21] One excellent example is a stanza from Bernart Marti which describes a hawk taking flight from its keeper's wrist. The layers of meaning in this passage could plausibly encompass the literal meaning, the flight of a woman from her lover, a kiss or the process of writing poetry.[22]

The trobaritz vastly favored trobar leu, characterized by "direct, unambiguous and personal" language.[23] Although images and metaphors are often included in trobar leu, they are employed to illustrate, and not to obfuscate a point. In my song, I have attempted to use image and metaphor in this manner – in order to express as clearly as possible my meaning, and not to create the possibility of double meanings. Direct, literal language is to be found in each of my stanzas. Trobar leu was often so direct as to identify specific people, usually toward the end of a poem.[24] I have mentioned the name of my song's subject in the final line.

We have access to a few extant musical treatises that discuss the requirements of various genres of Occitan poetry – the canso among them. Raimbaut Vidal's *Las Razos de trobar*, like other treatises on musical and poetic style, was written by a scholar and contemporary of the troubadours (around the middle of the 12th century).[25] It was not written by a poet, and thus often presents style in a more strict manner than is reflected in the actual corpus of troubadour poetry. It does, however, provide a good guide to the general structure on which troubadours occasionally riffed. According to Vidal, a canso

should be composed in five or more stanzas and one or two optional tornadas.[26] My poem is composed in exactly five stanzas and two tornadas. Tornadas, smaller stanzas appended to the end of a song, often take their structure from the last few lines of a longer stanza, as do mine.[27]

Troubadour poems are strophic – composed of regular stanzas, identical in form (with the exception of the tornadas). In the rare occasion in which one finds a refrain among these stanzas, it is not longer than a line, often only a word, and embedded into the stanzas themselves.[28] Troubadour songs do not contain the "chorus" type refrain with which modern audiences are familiar, and I have avoided the temptation to include one in my piece.

On first glance, the poems of the troubadours appear to be consistently iambic, bearing a pattern of stressed-unstressed syllables similar to Shakespeare's iambic pentameter. Closer examination, however, reveals them to be syllabic – lines contain the same number of syllables from stanza to stanza, but not necessarily the same stress patterns.[29] There is, however, a marked tendency toward iambic meter in troubadour poems. English, like other Germanic languages, is a stress-timed language (stressed syllables are longer than unstressed syllables).[30] Because of this, stress patterns sound more exaggerated, and syllabic poetry more alien, in English than in syllable-timed Romance languages such as French, Spanish and Old Occitan. For these reasons – the tendency toward iambic meter in Occitan poetry as well as the anachronistically foreign sound of syllabic poetry in modern English – I have written my verses in iambic meter.

The rhyme scheme I have used is coblas singulars – a common and simple rhyme scheme in troubadour verse. Coblas singulars establishes a rhyme scheme within a stanza, and then repeats that scheme in each successive stanza.[31] Occasionally stanzas are linked through shared rhyme sounds, as are my tornadas, but the internal structure of the rhyme within a stanza is consistent throughout the poem.[32] Masculine rhymes (oxytonic – rhyme on the final syllable, which is stressed) and feminine rhymes (paroxytonic – rhyme on the final two syllables, the first of which is stressed) were both utilized in troubadour poetry, as they are in my piece.[33]

Melody and Notation

Troubadour poems and melodies were recorded in several chansonniers (songbooks) in France and Italy from about 1240-1280.[34] This is the very end of the period of troubadour activity, and many of the songs are works from previous generations that survived into the late 13th century through an oral tradition. With only a handful of exceptions, the surviving melodies are written in non-mensural notation (the music is not divided into measures, and there is thus no regular division or distribution of beats) using square noteheads.[35] These neumes (notes) express the movement of pitch throughout the melody, but tell us very little about rhythm – the virga (long) and punctum (short) are the only expressions of note length, and the more elaborate ligatures (single units of notation that indicate a series of notes) express pitch movement without indication of rhythm (see fig at end of section). When translated into modern notation, troubadour melodies are typically written with stemless noteheads, in order to reflect the lack of any indication of rhythm.

This rhythmic ambiguity makes reconstructing the melodies for performance extremely difficult. Scholars disagree as to whether non-mensural notation persisted

because there was no sense of mensural rhythm in the songs themselves, even in performance, or because musical notation during the late 13th century simply had not yet developed a consistent way to express this concept in writing.[36] Therefore, theories of troubadour melodic rhythm range from a completely free, declamatory performance to imposing mensural notation on a rhythmically ambiguous melodic line.[37]

My melody, shown above in modern notation, appears to have a regular, consistent rhythm of sets of 8th notes followed by longer held notes. In performance, however, there is a great deal of rhythmic variation. The melody conforms to a regular, mensural pattern in 4/4 time, however within the sets of 8th notes and from verse to verse, some notes are hurried, some are held, and rests are sometimes inserted. Based on what scant evidence we have by which to judge troubadour rhythm, I believe the rhythmic freedom of my melody is in keeping with a plausible view of troubadour performance. It is certainly well suited to the rhythmically ambiguous notation of the troubadour melodies.
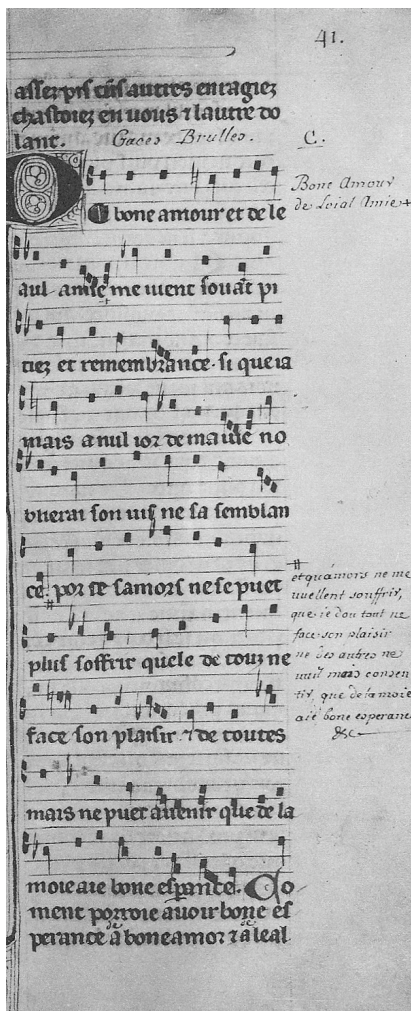
From a French chansonnier, 13th century. Paris, Bibliotèque National, Fr. 846, fol. 41. Image from Parrish, Carl. *The Notation of Medieval Music*. New York: Norton, 1957. Plate XV.

Melodies in the troubadour chansonniers are written on staffs of four or five lines.[38] Light lines running vertically through the staff appear in some manuscripts (such as the image to the left – see the third line of the music) and may be confused for mensural bar lines, but they do not indicate rhythm or division of beats. They are stylistic markings inserted by the scribe to indicate the end of a line or thought, a caesura, to clarify which notes go with which syllables or to draw attention to a clef change.[39] I have used these marks in my manuscript as phrase markings, informed by the phrases in the poetry, much as breath-marks or bow-lifts are used in modern musical notation.

The notes of the staffs in troubadour chansonniers are indicated by either a C-clef or an F-clef at the beginning of each line – clefs could change from C to F or change to a different line of the staff at the beginning of new lines of music.[40] Julie Cumming and

other scholars very reasonably speculate that the pitches of French motets, and medieval music in general, represent *relative* and not exact pitches, and that notes were positioned on the staff and clefs chosen in order to avoid the use of ledger lines.[41] Given the mobile clefs and rarity of ledger lines in troubadour chansonniers, I believe troubadour melodies cannot be an exception to this rule. In keeping with this technique, I have used a C-clef to indicate the position of C on my staffs, and the C is higher in the first line than in subsequent lines. Although I sing the melody in C minor beginning on a G, the song is written in A minor beginning on an E in period notation. Accidentals in the chansonniers are marked with the familiar sharp, flat and natural signs still in use either beside or directly above a note (see image above).

Troubadour melodies often made extensive use of melismas, runs of 2 or more notes on a single syllable.[42] Although many melodies were quite syllabic in texture, none were completely free of melismas,[43] and so I have included one in the last line of my song, as an ornament on a word that is, of course, pivotal to the theme of the text. In modern notation, syllables are broken up with dashes in the text to indicate their continuation over more than one note. In square notation, words are not broken up, but ligatures are used to compress notes into one figure, thus allowing one or two ligatures to fit over a single syllable. Thus, longs and breves indicate the pitches over every syllable but "love" in the last line which, due to the melisma, is notated with two ligatures that indicate five successive pitches.

FIG. I

Image from Parrish, p 6.

From a French manuscript known to contain examples of Occitan poetry. Note the plain, utilitarian calligraphy – the enlarged, but not illuminated, initial letter likely serves to mark the beginning of a song, and no decorative purpose. Image from Wikipedia.
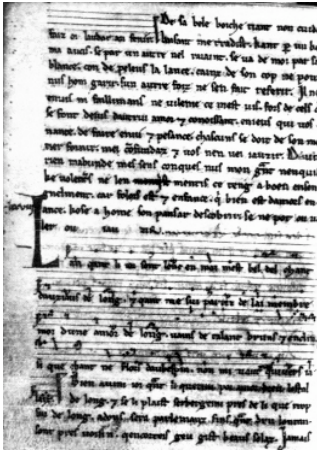
Presentation

Much like the troubadours and trobaritz themselves, I am a songwriter, not a scribe. Troubadour melodies and lyrics were transmitted orally by their composers and performers until the late 13th century, at which point they were recorded by scribes in several large manuscripts.[44] These scribes were not musicians, and there seems to have been no overlap between the composers of Occitan song and poetry and the scribes who recorded them.[45]

Although I have not attempted to calligraph or illuminate the physical copies of my work, in my notation of the melody, I have tried to recreate the look of the strokes used in period manuscripts using a broad calligraphy nib and commercial parchment paper. I find that this is the easiest and most effective way to create clear and legible ligatures. My goal, however, is to present my melody in a period fashion, with all the accompanying ambiguities of rhythm, for musical purposes, not to create an enduring piece of static art.

As the troubadours knew, a song does not live until it is sung, and this song will live more fully in a bardic circle than it can here. Yet performance is still not the full picture. My hope here is to present the technical and historical side of composing a song in the Occitan style.

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[1] Aubrey, Elizabeth, "Occitan Monophony." *A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music*. Ed. Ross W. Duffin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 122-133. See page 122.

[2] Aubrey, Elizabeth. *The Music of the Troubadours*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. See page 1.

[3] A descort by Raimbaut de Vaqueiras includes stanzas in Occitan, Italian, French, Gascon and Galician-Portuguese, Aubrey 15.

[4] See, for example Bernart de Ventadorn and Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, Aubrey 9 and 14.

[5] Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, Aubrey 14.

[6] Bernart de Ventadorn, Aubrey 9.

[7] Mong (Monk) de Montaudon, Aubrey 17.

[8] Raimbaut D'Aurenga, Aubrey 8.

[9] Bogin, Meg. *The Women Troubadours*. New York: Norton, 1980. See page 38.

[10] Any canso will illustrate this quite clearly, but for a specific example, see Bernart de Ventadorn, "*Qen vei la laudeta mover,*" Aubrey 90-92.

[11] See, for example, Uc de Saint Circ, "*Tres enemics e dos mals segnors ai,*" Aubrey 93-95.

[12] Duffin 122; Bogin 11.

[13] Bogin 13.

[14] Bogin 36.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Tibors is believed to have been a sister of Raimbaut d'Auregna, Bogin 162.

[17] The Comtessa de Dia is believed to have had a relationship with Raimbaut d'Auregna, Bogin 164.

[18] See, for example, the tenso between Alais, Iselda and Carenza (Bogin 144), and an anonymous male/female tenso (Bogin 156).

[19] Bogin 68, 69.

[20] Bogin 55.

[21] Aubrey 201.

[22] Aubrey 202.

[23] Bogin 67.

[24] See, for example, the reference to "Floris" in the Comtessa de Dia's *"A joi et ab joven m'apais,"* Bogin 82-84.

[25] Aubrey 72.

[26] Aubrey 86.

[27] See, for example, *"A chantar,"* by the Comtessa de Dia, Bogin 84.

[28] Aubrey 139.

[29] Aubrey 135.

[30] Salmons, Joseph. *A History of German: What the past reveals about today's language*. Forthcoming, 2009. See page 109.

[31] Aubrey 137.

[32] The Comtessa de Dia's *"A Chantar"* is written in coblas singulars and employs a similar linking technique, ibid.

[33] Aubrey 135.

[34] Duffin 128.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Aubrey 247.

[37] Aubrey 240-245.

[38] Aubrey 42, 43, 44.

[39] Aubrey 251, 252.

[40] Aubrey 60.

[41] Cumming, Julie E. "Motet and Cantilena." *A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music*. Ed. Ross W. Duffin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 122-133. See page 57.

[42] See, for example, Peire d'Alvernhe's *"Deioste as bries jors as lons siers,"* Aubrey 204.

[43] See, for example, Arnaut Daniel's *"Lo ferm voler q'el cor m'intra,"* Aubrey 207.

[44] Duffin 128.

[45] For this reason, mistakes and discrepancies are often found in both poems and melodies that appear in more than one manuscript. See Aubrey 29.