

The Troubadours

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May 14, 2010

1 Introduction

Troubadour art was a musical and poetic practice that flourished in southern France from *c.* 1100 to *c.* 1250. The first troubadours emanated from the region of mid-Western France in the early twelfth century. The earliest known troubadour was Guilhem de Peitieu. A performance by Guilhem was reported in 1135 by Orderic Vitalis as follows:

Then the Poitevin Duke [Guilhem de Peitieu] . . . related many times the miseries of his captivity before kings, magnates and Christian assemblies using rhythmic verses with witty measures [Bond, 1995, p. 240].

Guilhem was, as his name implies, from the region of Poitou on the West coast of France. Later in the evolution of the culture, troubadour practice extended southward—towards Aquitaine and Languedoc—and eastward—even across the River Rhône towards Provence.

1.1 Historical context

It would seem a serious oversight to divorce this music from the social context which engendered it. The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were turbulent periods in French and European history. Within Languedoc itself, the Albigensian crusade in the early 1200s was a brutal culling of believers in

Catharism. It was accompanied by jockeying of territories and power amongst competing forces—delegates of the Catholic Church on the one hand, and the Cathars and their supporters on the other. The Order of the Dominicans were particularly vehement in their attempts to subdue the heresy [Aubrey, 2000, p. 5]. Natives of the region, including troubadours, who may have been sympathetic to the doctrine, were compelled to clarify their allegiances.

Against this turbulent social backdrop, troubadours and *joglars* endeavoured to keep their art alive. The Albigensian crusade lasted 20 years, however, from 1209 to 1229. And the intellectual and religious freedom which had been a marked characteristic of the region were permanently compromised as a result of the sustained onslaught. Troubadour practice suffered a serious setback, one from which it never truly recovered.

Beyond the borders of France, crusades to the Holy Land continued throughout the twelfth century, and until the middle of the thirteenth. A number of troubadours are believed to have participated in the campaigns. The first generation of troubadours coincided with the second crusade (1147–1149), and it is believed that Jaufre Rudel and Marcabru may have participated. Following the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187, the third crusade took place between the years 1189 and 1192. Gaucelm Faidit and Raimbaut de Vaqueiras are believed to have joined—possibly Peire Vidal also [Aubrey, 2000, p. 4].

Thus, although it was not always reflected in the content of the poetry, the troubadours were evidently concerned with religious as well as secular matters. And the willingness of the afore-mentioned troubadours to undertake the long journey to Palestine seems a testament to their faith. Furthermore, this was a milieu in which the distinction between the sacred and the profane was not always clear. Sacred poetry, for example, often expressed an almost erotic love of God as a theme, thereby blurring a potential distinction with non-religious literature.

It is not surprising, considering this uproar and turbulence in religious and

cultural spheres, that the subject matter of the troubadour poems sometimes extended beyond the relatively innocuous theme of refined love. These accounts demonstrate that the troubadour mind was surely occupied with matters other than the love of a woman. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that the engagement with these powerful social and cultural forces would have failed to inspire musical or poetic output, or to ignite the artist's imagination.

1.2 The background of the troubadours

The troubadours emanated from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Some of them came from aristocratic families; some were members of the minor nobility; some were craftsmen who later turned to minstrelsy; and others had an ecclesiastical background. Guilhem de Peitieu, for example, was also Duke of Aquitaine. And Bertran de Born was a member of the lesser nobility [Aubrey, 2000, p. 12]. Elizabeth Aubrey mentions that they were a diverse, heterogeneous group [Aubrey, 2000, p. 25].

Many of the troubadours were named after the region from which they descended, e.g. Folquet de Marselha, Bernard de Ventadorn, Guilhem de Peitieu, Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, etc.. Some of the troubadours had long, and seemingly prolific, careers. The troubadour culture also extended beyond France. Tempted by the lure of foreign patronage and adventure, certain troubadours travelled to Spain and Italy.

2 The *vidas* and *razos*

It seems incontrovertible that the musicologist who chooses to examine this area is also very much a historian. They face, thus, the concomitant challenge of reconstructing an environment of which only fragmentary relics remain. To what depth can they penetrate the milieu of the Occitan court? The *vidas* and the *razos* are perhaps the most valuable legacy in this regard.

The sharing of *razos* seems to have existed within an oral tradition before they were compiled in written form. A troubadour or *joglar* was accustomed to introducing a song they were about to perform with a short story, pertaining to the song's subject matter and origins. Such stories provided the precedent for the literary genre of the *razo*. Closely related to these were the *vidas*, differing from the former not greatly, but in the sense that the content was primarily biographical. The term *vida* was a retrospective designation which did not appear until the fourteenth century; it was not used by the troubadours or *joglars* themselves, nor even by Uc de Saint Circ (who is discussed below) [Poe, 1995, p. 196].

It is believed that many of the *vidas* and *razos* were authored by the same individual. This was a troubadour known as Uc de Saint Circ. Indeed, Uc explicitly identifies himself as the author of the *vida* of Bernart de Ventadorn. Uc was himself a *joglar*. He was destined initially for an ecclesiastical post. In the course of his studies, however, he found his attention drawn to the literature and poetry of his own region. He was a keen observer of the human condition, and the *vidas* reveal that he had a subtle and drole sense of humour. Some of the most valuable information on the troubadours is preserved in Uc's anecdotes on his fellow poet-musicians.

Uc's position in the timeline of the troubadours afforded him a unique and favourable perspective on their history. His own active period coincided, in part, with the two decades of the Albigensian crusade, in which the troubadour culture began to decline. Although this signalled the end of the 'golden age', as Aubrey refers to it [Aubrey, 2000, p. 5], Uc would have witnessed the culture during its zenith. According to Elizabeth Poe,

Uc's great contribution ... was that he collected the stories already in circulation among his fellow jongleurs (undoubtedly adding some of his own), invested them with genealogical and historical detail gathered both from his travels and from his studies in Montpellier, and recast them in

his own style [Poe, 1995, p. 188-189].

In short, she explains, ‘he turned them [the stories told by performing musicians] into literature’.

Although the *razos* are seemingly more complex than the *vidas*, this ought not be construed as evidence that the former were preceded by the latter chronologically. It seems, in fact, that the opposite may have been the case [Poe, 1995, p. 194]. Furthermore, in the case of a number of the biographical anecdotes, it is difficult to declare that they belong to one genre or another—as they exhibit elements of both [Poe, 1995, p. 195].

Certain scholars have tended to dismiss the notion that the information in the *vidas* can be upheld as historically valid. Poe, however, is keen to point out that, in many cases, the reports contained are accurate and verifiable [Poe, 1995, p. 190]. The appeal of the *vidas* and *razos*, however, relies not only on their value as historical documents, but also on their unique literary status. As Poe explains, the troubadour tradition was one dominated by poetry. The *vidas* and *razos* constitute an exception to this trend. They are the largest body of prose to survive from within the troubadour tradition [Poe, 1995, p. 185].

3 Transmission and notation

Van der Werf suggests that, in the place of performing from written notation, the troubadours practiced something akin to ‘remembered improvisation’ [van der Werf, 1995, p. 132]. He believes that many of these performers may have been illiterate. (There were obvious exceptions, of course, such as Uc de Saint Circ, whose capability as a writer is evident in the *vidas*.) Those amongst the troubadours who could read and write could not necessarily do so with the facility that we do today. This is not to imply that the troubadour songs were without sophistication. Such an impression is readily dispelled by even a superficial acquaintance with the repertory.

Despite the potential negative connotations of designating a musical culture as ‘oral’, it also seems to suggest a possible merit.¹ That the potentially cumbersome and time-consuming task of preserving the musical ideas was never undertaken is not necessarily to be lamented.

This point has been eloquently argued by van der Werf [van der Werf, 1995, p. 133]. The attempt to notate a musical idea would have placed obstacles in the troubadour’s or trobairitz’s practice of his or her art. It would have engendered a decline in spontaneity, an interruption in the creative process. Furthermore, the absence of a written record of melodies may have afforded performers a degree of leeway. And the reluctance or failure of a poet-composer to notate his melody perhaps lessened the onus upon subsequent performers to provide an exact replica. The manner in which a performance should proceed was probably not cast in stone even at the time.

Despite the potential frustration experienced by the researcher when confronted with the paucity of extant troubadour melodies, we ought to be prepared to acknowledge these possibilities. To the extent that efforts at transcription may have impeded other aspects of troubadour musical practice, perhaps it is best that such avenues were not by default pursued.

4 The music and poetry

The surviving melodies Approximately 250 troubadour melodies survive, representing some 45 troubadours [van der Werf, 1995, p. 124]. These are dispersed through 4 manuscripts: *G*, *R*, *W* and *X*. Compared to the number of trouvère melodies which survive (approx. 1400), this is quite small.

Van der Werf, in his attempts to establish common characteristics in the

¹Because of the unfavourable connotations of the term ‘oral’, van der Werf prefers to refer to the troubadour culture as ‘notationless’ [van der Werf, 1995, p. 133]. A notationless culture, as he points out, is also notation-*free*.

music of the repertory, has made much of what he refers to as an ‘underlying structure’ [van der Werf, 1995, p. 134]. He explains this concept as follows:

Pitches that, within a given melody, frequently stand out by position, reiteration, longer duration, or frequency of occurrence form what may be called the “underlying structure” of the melody; they seem to serve as the frame of reference over which the composer draped the melody [van der Werf, 1995, p. 134].

His efforts are predicated upon the belief that the troubadour repertory can only be examined according to ‘organizing principles other than the major or minor scales’ [van der Werf, 1995, p. 134]. Even in the absence of a major-minor harmonic framework, certain notes can be established as more prominent than others.

Van der Werf identifies a number of seemingly important characteristics in these melodies:

conjunct motion melodies usually move by small step; the intervals of a second and third are the most frequent [van der Werf, 1995, p. 133–134];

prominent pitches as mentioned, certain melodic characteristics confer upon certain notes a greater status than others;

tertial and quartal chains melodies whose underlying structure consists of pitches separated by either a third (e.g. D-F-A-c) or a fourth (e.g. D-G-c) are both common [van der Werf, 1995, 136–137].

A number of these characteristics are identified in Figure 1, the opening of a melody by Jaufre Rudel. Even a cursory glance at the melodic content reveals that stepwise motion predominates. Although only the beginning of the melody is shown in Figure 1, the overall form of the song is A A B. The song itself is on the theme of *fin d’amor*. A possible translation of the first verse of the poem is given in Figure 2.

We might pause at this point, and inquire about the genuine value of such

Figure 1: Jaufre Rudel, *Lanquan li jorn son lonc e may*, opening (R manuscript version)



Interval content:	<i>Interval/repeated note:</i>	Repeated	2 nd	3 rd	
	<i>No. of occurrences:</i>	4	11	1	
Pitch content:	<i>Note:</i>	c	d	e	f
	<i>No. of occurrences:</i>	2	5	5	5

Figure 2: Jaufre Rudel, *Lanquan li jorn son lonc e may*, translation of first verse

During May, when the days are long,
 I admire the song of the birds from far away
 and when I have gone away from there
 I remember a love far away.
 I go scowling, with my head down
 so much that songs and hawthorn flowers
 aren't better, to me, than the frozen Winter.

observations. Do such descriptions, and the examination according to the aforementioned criteria, bring us any closer to understanding *how this music actually sounded?* To a limited degree, perhaps; but only in a very abstract way. Such distillations of the music's qualities inevitably fail to retain much of its detail. And formal descriptions of this kind, despite their veneer of objectivity, are surely wanting in certain regards. They are scarcely capable of giving us a meaningful impression of how this music sounded. Although research has no doubt furnished valuable insights, a certain amount of ignorance of this musical culture may be inevitable.

Rhythmic interpretation Van der Werf asserts that the troubadour melodies were performed in something like an isorhythmic manner, treating notes as being of approximately equal duration, with the exception of double notes—which were notated differently by scribes in the manuscripts. He rejects the modal theory proposed by Pierre Aubry and Johann Baptist Beck, which was espoused by many twentieth-century scholars [van der Werf, 1995, p. 122].

Instrumental accompaniment Deep uncertainty also exists as to the nature of the instrumental accompaniment to these songs. Modern performers of the troubadour repertory tend to employ the use of varied instruments, but we do not know the extent to which this corresponds to the musical practice in medieval Occitan. Only the melodies and words are preserved in the manuscripts; there is no indication of what instruments, if any, should be used to accompany the singer, nor of what such an instrument would actually play.

4.1 The theme of courtly love

To the extent that minstrelsy was a peripatetic lifestyle, its practitioners must have been of robust constitution. It may strike the observer as somewhat ironic, thus, that they spent so much time writing about the subject of unrequited love. One might imagine that, hardened by the trials of travel, and the vagaries of circumstance, such characters would have had more pressing concerns than amorous prepositions. Nonetheless, *fin d'amor* is the subject that, in many instances, the troubadours and trobairitz chose to write about. And its status as central to troubadour poetry merits a brief digression.

According to Gerald Bond, there are several possible explanations for the centrality of *fin d'amor* in troubadour poetry. Firstly, there was a near-precedent for this genre of poetry in the Muslim courts of neighboring Spain. Secondly, the troubadours may have been influenced by Latin scholars, who were themselves influenced by the great writers of antiquity [Bond, 1995, p. 242]. Bond

mentions, for example, that a number of the troubadours—including Guilhem de Peitieu and Marcabru—were influenced by *Ovid* [Bond, 1995, p. 244]. These literary influences aside, sociological factors may also have been significant.

Feudal society France was, at this time, more or less a feudal society. And Bond believes that this may have been one of the factors in the predominance of the theme of courtly love in troubadour poetry [Bond, 1995, p. 245].

We get the impression, thus, that the frequent reference to *fin d’amor* in troubadour poetry may reflect more a cultural convention than any personal conviction on the part of these poet-musicians. Furthermore, the poetry of different troubadours exhibited different formulations of the theme [Bond, 1995, p. 239–240].

Other poetic themes The content of troubadour poetry was not limited to expressions of courtly love. The troubadours also composed lamentations, referred to as *planhs*, and poems on social and moral topics, known as *sirventes*. The genre of the *tenso*, on the other hand, denotes those poems which were cast in the form of a dialogue or debate between two or more characters. Those songs whose thematic content was confined to *fin d’amor* were known as *cansos*.

5 The troubadour lifestyle

Their being poets and musicians, it will hardly come as a surprise that the troubadour livelihoods were attended by the same uncertainties and vagaries that attend many musicians, poets and artists in the present day. Those of noble birth, or whose musical activities were merely an adjunct to a well-paid profession, were spared hardship. For others, however, minstrelsy was a precarious undertaking. As Christopher Page impresses upon us, ‘[a]t its lowest, minstrelsy was the refuge of the poor who knew no other way of putting food

in their bellies' [Page, p. 214]. The courtly environment, if nothing else, spared the troubadours the potential indignity of performing on the streets. Fortunate musicians attained patronage which alleviated their pecuniary concerns. Their success in this regard was not only contingent on the calibre of their musical performance however. Their efforts were greatly profited, it seems, by selective mingling in the courtly environment. And to curry the favour of patrons required not only a competence in singing and playing, but also an acumen for courtly conversation.

Thus, while one might harbour the notion that a troubadour's work entailed little more than arriving at the venue, performing, and then 'switching off' again, the process was a great deal more nuanced. According to Christopher Page, a minstrel was 'much more than a professional musician who arrived, performed and left as his modern counterpart is accustomed to do' [Page, p. 213]. And the narrator in *Abril issia* informs us that the art of troubadour performance was not so much about musical expertise as proper deportment in a courtly context [Page, p. 213–4]. The troubadours seem to have relied as much on their wits, as well as a certain competence in precarious social environments, as on their degree of musical aptitude.

The troubadours bear comparison with their contemporaries in the Notre Dame School in this regard. We can discern that the troubadour was obliged to cultivate a different set of competences from their clerical counterparts. The poignant melodic contours of Comtessa de Dia's *Estat ai en greu cossirier* assure us, however, that the musical culture of the troubadours was equally wholesome to that which was cultivated in a sacred context. Whether or not of a scholarly inclination, there seems little reason to doubt that the troubadours were eminently capable musicians. And the legacy which they, or subsequent scribes, have bequeathed is, in one sense, just as valuable as that of the Notre Dame repertory.

6 Conclusion

We can discern amongst this heterogeneous group, not only varied socio-economic backgrounds, but also diverse social and religious affiliations and allegiances. Perhaps one of the clearest demonstrations of this was the division caused by the Albigensian crusade, and the presence of troubadours on either side. Folquet de Marselha, for example, who became bishop of Toulouse in 1205, was an apparently ‘merciless’ opponent of the heretics [Aubrey, 2000, p. 14]. Simultaneously, however, a number of the troubadours were sympathetic to the plight of the Cathars.

Despite this division, their common fidelity, and their shared service, was to poetry and music. Troubadour lyric, then, was an invaluable representation of the zeitgeist of medieval Occitan, of the spirit and mind of its inhabitants. The *cansos* were an outlet for expressions of *fin d’amor*; the *sirventes* for thoughts on social and political matters. It is somewhat regrettable, thus, that only fragments of this culture remain. Compared to the traditions of the trouvères, the number of troubadour songs and poems which survive in manuscript is small. The courtly milieu and the wider cultural context in which the troubadours participated, and in turn helped to define, was no doubt richer than even the *vidas* suggest.

Glossary

- Abril issia* a story written by the Catalan poet Raimon Vidal (*fl.* c. 1200), which recounts the travels of a fictional minstrel; literally translated, *Abril issia* means ‘April was leaving’; it contains, amongst other things, advice on how a *joglar* or troubadour should behave in a courtly context, 11
- canso* a song on the theme of courtly love, 10, 11
- fin d’amor* courtly, or refined, love; one of the central themes of troubador lyric, 10, 11
- joglar* a professional instrumentalist, 2, 4
- planh* a lament, e.g. for a person’s demise, 10
- razo* a short story which could exist in either oral or written form; in its oral form, it was often used by a *joglar* or troubadour to introduce a song or poem; some authors suggest that the distinction between a *razo* and a *vida* is not clear, as the *razos* often contained biographical elements, 3–5, 12
- sirventes* a song on a social or moral topic, 10, 11
- tenso* a song or poem which depicts a dialogue or debate between two or more parties; the subject matter could vary, 10
- vida* a brief account of the life of the troubadour, a sort of brief biography, which might exhibit elements of both fact and fiction, 3–5, 11, 12

References

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