

THE TROUVÈRE CHANSONS AS CREATIONS OF A NOTATIONLESS MUSICAL CULTURE

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THE TROUVÈRES occupy a curious and bifarious position in the cultural history of the Middle Ages. According to tradition they were both poets and composers, which leads us to ask whether they were poets first and musicians second, whether their poems existed by grace of the melodies, or whether they attained the apogee of lyrical art: complete unity of poem and melody. Whichever is the case, the trouvères stand apart from their fellow poets, and especially from their fellow composers, in their predilection for monodic chansons which are often esoteric in content. Some medieval authors such as Chrétien de Troyes, Richard de Fournival and Jean Bodel, who are primarily known for literary works, also wrote chansons, but the famous trouvères, except for Adam de la Halle, produced chansons exclusively. Adam seems to have been exceptionally venturesome in his choice of literary and musical genres. As far as we know, no other trouvère composed polyphonic music, and he and Guillaume d'Amiens were the only trouvères to write chansons in fixed forms.

Hundreds of trouvère chansons have been preserved.¹ They evoke colorful images and arouse great curiosity about the personalities of the trouvères and the circumstances in which the chansons were created and performed. The scarcity of information has stimulated rather than dampened this curiosity, making it difficult sometimes to distinguish fact from fancy. In the last analysis, knowledge of the conditions surrounding the chansons remains quite incomplete.

It is often pointed out that there were many noblemen among the troubadours, the earliest authors of vernacular lyric poetry; the ranks of the trouvères, on the other hand, included

¹For a list of the trouvère chansons with complete information about their sources, see Spanke 1955.

burghers as well. We may further assume that the trouvères, whatever their social status, were in general not professional authors or musicians. It is widely accepted that the trouvères left the performance of their chansons to professional performers, the so-called jongleurs. Everything considered, it is easier to establish the characteristics of a trouvère chanson than of a trouvère or a jongleur.

A trouvère chanson is often preserved in more than one manuscript, but the melody of the chanson is seldom identical in all sources. In some cases the versions differ only slightly, whereas in others there does not seem to be any relationship between them, even though the text demonstrates that we deal with the same chanson. Nevertheless, there is usually no doubt about the common parentage of the preserved melodies even if the discrepancies are considerable. Thus editors of trouvère melodies are confronted with the problem of establishing the original melody, while wondering how so many significant changes could occur.

Nearly all editors of trouvère melodies appear to have been guided by the principle that most of the discrepancies in the sources are deteriorations caused by scribal inaccuracy or by inadequacies of the oral tradition. Friedrich Gennrich, the acknowledged authority in the field of secular medieval monody, formulated the following simple and seemingly undebatable principle for deriving the critical version of a medieval song from its various versions: correct the recognized errors and record the variants (1937:33). He explicitly rejects the opinion of those, notably Pierre Aubry (1909:XXVII), who warn that attempts to reconstruct the original melody of the trouvère chanson may well result in the creation of a new composition. Instead, Gennrich claims that "at present we are able to establish a critical version of the melody with equal if not greater certainty than the text" (1955:XIV). At first sight Gennrich's principles seem quite acceptable even though he seldom mentions the corrections he makes in his own editions. But a closer examination reveals a number of aspects that are questionable to say the least. Gennrich's method of editing medieval monody is extensively explained by Werner Bittinger (1953), who gives the careful reader the impression that this method consists of a set of directions for distilling the best possible melody from a number of different versions of a chanson, and for proving that the versions we find in the chansonniers

are scribal deformations of this best version. Aubry's observation—certainly startling for its time—that the discrepancies were legitimate variants rather than errors goes unheeded. He regarded the indistinct melodies and the imprecise notation as the chief causes of the variants (1909:XXIV).

Philologists who publish the poems of the *trouvères* encounter problems similar to those of the musicologists who edit the melodies. Since very few of the melodies but nearly all of the poems have been published, it is worthwhile examining the philologists' approach. We find that the 19th- and early 20th-century editions of poems were based upon the principle that somewhere under a blanket of scribal errors and other deteriorations lay the original poem in all its charm and beauty. Accordingly, the editors set out to correct all errors and emend all changes made by later hands. However, they gradually concluded that their basic principle implied some questionable assumptions, such as, that the scribes were extremely inaccurate and made scores of mistakes, and that the chansons could only deteriorate during the process of being performed and copied. According to these assumptions, each chanson was sent into the world as a good chanson which the performers and scribes corrupted and forgot parts of, offering a poor substitute for the original poem. Realizing these implications, some editors came to the conclusion that efforts to reconstruct the original had produced only a new version.

A hallmark of the old editorial policy can be seen in the following announcement on the title page of a collection of chansons by the Chastelain de Coucy: *Die Lieder des Castellans von Coucy nach sämtlichen Handschriften kritisch bearbeitet* (Fritz Fath, ed. 1883). In a later edition by Arthur Langfors we see the emergence of a new approach. He remarks that "by making a small number of corrections [in a certain version] one obtains an excellent text; we shall indicate only the principal variants in the other manuscripts" (1917:65). The new editorial method invited discussion among scholars concerning the nature of the small corrections one should make, but in general there were no more attempts to reconstruct the original.

The philologists came to the conclusion that for a long time studies of medieval literature were influenced by "prejudices and prepossessions which years of association with printed matter have made habitual . . . If a fair judgment is to be

passed upon literary works belonging to the centuries before printing was invented, some effort must be made to realize the extent of the prejudices with which we have grown up, and to resist the involuntary demand that medieval literature must conform to our standards of taste" (Chaytor 1945:1). In the study by H. J. Chaytor just quoted we find revealing information about medieval reading and writing habits, about oral tradition, and about the methods of copying texts, and we are made aware of the enormous change in attitude towards language in general, and the written or printed word in particular. This change has come about mainly since the invention of printing.

If the findings of the philologists are applied to the study of the melodies, the discrepancies in the manuscripts become sources of abundant information about the compositional technique of the *trouvères*, the performance habits of the *jongleurs*, and the scribal methods of copyists.

Our first and probably most important conclusion is that, in general, the different versions of a *chanson* present that *chanson* as it was performed by different *jongleurs* who had learned the *chanson* by rote either directly or indirectly from the *trouvère* himself. In other words, the *chansons* were in the first place disseminated by oral tradition and not by copies made from the *trouvère's* autograph. Only towards the end of the *trouvère* era did the *chansons* become "collectors' items," and only then was the *chanson* written down as it was performed at the time. It follows that we should not judge the melodies from their appearance in notation, but rather we should sing them while thinking of an audience; instead of basing the analysis of a *chanson* upon one melody reconstructed from several sources, we should analyze all the melodies as they appear in the sources. Then, when comparing these different versions we should realize that it was not compulsory for a performer always to sing a *chanson* with exactly the same melody. For him a *chanson* was not an untouchable entity with a sacred "original form" to be respected and preserved. It was normal for a *jongleur* to perform in the way he thought that particular *chanson* ought to be performed and we should not pass judgment on a *jongleur* who invented part of a melody or even an entire one. Thus the differences in the versions are not necessarily infractions of the rules for performing someone else's composition, as present-day audiences would be inclined to think;

neither should they be considered as conscious improvisations upon a given theme in the modern sense of the word. On the contrary, according to the jongleur's concept, he was singing the trouvère's melody even though, according to our concept, he was varying it. The difference between these concepts reflects the fact that our attitude towards printed music differs considerably from the jongleur's attitude towards the poetry and melody of a chanson learned by rote.

As a second conclusion from the work of the philologists, we must stress the important effect of oral tradition on scribal copying methods. There may be insufficient documentary evidence for the oral tradition of the melodies,² but without dissemination of this kind the discrepancies among the versions of a given chanson would have been different, unless it is assumed that the scribes either did not know anything about music or that they continually did their best to change the original as much as possible without writing a new chanson. A chanson may have been notated on different occasions after performances by one or several different jongleurs; each such notation may have been copied several times, and the version which we find in a manuscript may be a first notation or a remote copy of it. We may safely assume that the scribes (those who first notated it and those who made copies) did make changes but that only an infinitesimal number of these changes are caused by real scribal inaccuracy; instead, they are the consequence of the attitude towards a chanson transmitted by oral tradition and of the medieval methods of copying. I do not wish to imply that medieval methods of copying were primitive, only that in several respects circumstances were different from those of today. There was no one prescribed way of performing a certain chanson, nor was there the uniformity in musical notation that we now know. Monody was much less uniformly notated than the measured polyphony of the period, though they were perhaps notated by the same scribes. Furthermore, we may conclude that the scribes did not copy at sight symbol for symbol. Instead, certain manuscripts show clearly that a scribe must have sung to himself

²We are not trying to establish the extent to which oral tradition affected the dissemination of the text. Since there are empty staves above the words of so many chansons we may conclude that it was more difficult to obtain the music than the words, and that there may well have been more copying of the poems than of the melodies.

a section from the manuscript in front of him—not necessarily the melody of exactly one entire line—and then copied from memory what he had *heard* rather than what he had *seen*. Consequently he put himself in the position of a jongleur notating his own performance. In this process he could make deliberate changes and corrections, but he may also have unconsciously varied the melody more or less extensively by changing the distribution of the melody over the text, by ornamenting the melody, or by simplifying it.

Furthermore, it may be assumed that many of the notators and copyists had respectable educations and knew more about the theory of music and the rules of rhetoric than many a *trouvère* or any jongleur did. Consequently, we have to take into account a tendency on the part of notator and copyist to correct the *trouvère* and jongleur. Thus in some cases the changes made by the scribe are in accordance with performance practices, but in other cases the scribe's objective was to make the *chanson* conform to the theories. In some *chansons* he may even have transformed free rhythm into modal.³

Of course, it is conceivable that among the many jongleurs who knew a given *chanson* there was one who performed it in its original form; subsequently, this *chanson* may have been written down exactly as the *trouvère* had created it. Thus we may possess the original melody for some *chansons*, but we cannot be sure of our ability to distinguish the original from among the recorded versions. We cannot simply assume that the version we think is best is the original, for it is quite possible that the jongleurs, who were experienced singers, were better musicians than many *trouvères* and improved upon the latter's creation. More important, even if we could determine the original version, we should not discard the others, because in most cases the *chansonniers* present us with various fully acceptable melodies in the best manner of the period.

³In light of this knowledge we observe that most of the *chansons* in the manuscripts K, L, N, P and X were copied directly or indirectly from one common source. On the other hand, many of the *chansons* in the manuscripts M and T are related in a different fashion: they were probably not copied from one common source but notated from different renditions, which, however, may have come from the same performer. Furthermore, we may conclude that the scribe of the *Chansonnier Cagé* was thoroughly familiar with motets, *chansons* in fixed form, and the like, and that this strongly influenced his opinion of the notation and the performance of the true *trouvère* *chansons*. (The manuscript sigla are those used in Spanke 1955.)

Rather than accepting the above observations as premises for further examination of the trouvère repertoire, we should regard them as two aspects of one complex theory. Other aspects of this theory concern rhythm, tonal structure, melodic form, and the position of the trouvères in medieval culture, aspects which I shall discuss fully in future articles. Here I will briefly mention their major features:

1. Careful examination of the variants discloses that only a very small number of the chansons were meant to be performed in a strict, a modified, or a mixed modal rhythm. If all the chansons had been performed in modal rhythm, as is generally assumed, the variants would have been quite different. In fact, the variants are such that they could originate only in declamatory performances of which the rhythm is free in two ways: first, accented and unaccented tones and syllables may come at irregular intervals, and second, there is not necessarily a simple ratio between the duration of one tone or syllable and that of another.

2. It also becomes obvious that there is no reason to assume that the trouvères were guided by the system of the so-called church modes in composing their melodies, or that they wrote in major or minor scales with tonics, dominants, and leading tones, as has sometimes been suggested. Nor is there always the close interdependence between versification and melodic form which Gennrich describes. Instead, the melodies give the impression of being "remembered improvisations" with little design and a rather loose organization.

3. The chansons in fixed form, the French motets, and the Spanish cantigas stem from the world of *learned* musicians, whereas the chansons of the trouvères originated and circulated in a *notationless* musical culture in which notation and theory exercised little or no influence, but in which the rules of rhetoric were well-known and faithfully observed. Instances of border-crossing are only occasional; therefore, a trouvère chanson resembling a monophonic motet is a rare exception. But it is just these exceptions that mislead so many musicologists who approach the chansons as intricate musical settings of a text. Instead, a trouvère chanson is a poem to be declaimed to an unobtrusive melody which leaves the performer ample freedom for a dramatic rendition of the text and sometimes for showing off his beautiful voice.

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