

# The Phenomenon of Singing in the Study of Troubadour Poetry

Elizabeth Brodovitch  
Simon Fraser University

The poetry and music of the troubadours who lived in the medieval kingdoms of southern France known collectively as Occitania contributed to a flowering of literary, musical and artistic culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The troubadours were composers and singers of poetry. They numbered some four hundred men and a much smaller group of women called the *trobairitz*; men and women of noble birth, but many others of more modest origins. Their compositions are grouped according to genre; the satirical song (the *sirventes*), the funeral lament (the *planh*), songs of debate and playful philosophical discussions about love (the *tenson* and the *partimen*), and the love poem (the *canso*).

In the *canso*, the love of the poet for his Lady (who was superior in rank and often married to someone else) is presented over and over in rigidly stylized terms; it is a love so secret that the lover dare not approach the lady, an unrequited passion that must be born in silence to prove the nobility of the lover's intentions, a renunciation of all happiness and a declaration to remain forever a faithful and chaste servant. If the troubadour was not able to hop into bed with his Lady, he was perfectly willing to sing about his passion and the Lady's physical charms in front of an audience and the public disclosure and performance of such private sentiment has troubled scholars in their analyses of the texts.

Study of this poetry in the last forty years has passed from a purely textual or philological analysis of the written word to the inclusion of wider fields of interest: for example, the social and political circumstances surrounding the creation of this lyric poetry, the formal structure and stylistic features of the poem, and the compositions of the *trobairitz*. It is interesting to note à propos of the *trobairitz* that A. Jeanroy in a work from 1934 dismissed the women writers' contribution as "des exercices littéraires" indicating "une certaine paresse d'esprit, une évidente faute de goût" and a "choquant oubli de toute pudeur et de toute convenance" (p. 317). The study of the *trobairitz* oeuvre viewed in the perspective of the late twentieth century has led to a re-evaluation of the feminine voice, and this example serves to suggest that each generation of critics leaves not only a record of the texts studied but a record of that generation's own perspectives as well.

In this paper I propose to concentrate on critics' interest in the performance aspects of troubadour poetry and the resulting awareness of the contribution of singing itself. It is not my intention to discuss music/text relationships but I would like to acknowledge the work of Roger Dragonetti and that of Hendrik van der Werf.<sup>1</sup> Their work on musical construction and the correlation of texts and music has opened a new field of intertextuality combining music and words.

The question of why such intimate secretive poetry was performed in public has led to an interest in the circumstances surrounding the performance of the *canço*, and to the long overdue recognition that this was poetry destined to be sung.

Why was the contribution of music and singing forgotten for so long? In 1982, Matthew Steel wrote:

Anyone attempting a serious investigation into the text-melody relationship in troubadour lyric will wonder at the generations of scholarship in which the poem and the music have been considered as separate and distinct entities. For in its own day, such a distinction scarcely existed; the work was called a song, and the composer was called a poet (p. 259).

"After my *vers* I wish immediately to weave a simple, playful *chanson* in similar subtle rhyme", wrote Raimbaut d'Orange (Pattison, 1952, p. 88); "since I feel like singing I will compose some lines [un *vers*]" began Guillaume de Poitou (Bec, 1979, p.72)<sup>2</sup> *Air* and *vers* were born together. For the writers of the Middle Ages, a lyric creation was a musical creation. We must remind ourselves that *lyric* comes from the ancient Greek *lyrikos* meaning "suitable for singing to the lyre or for being set to music and sung" (Webster 1983), and that *lyric*, meaning a poetic style in which the poet communicates his/her intimate emotions, is a definition which postdates the Middle Ages.

Since *lyric* in later generations of scholars became equated to a poetic style of writing, it is quite possible to forget the presence of the music. The troubadours themselves used the word *sing* in a variety of contexts - "I sing", "I say," "I versify," "I love" - and *singing* in scholarly research became relevant to the versification process rather than the musical process. In *Ja mos chantars no m'er onors*, the poet Bernart de Ventadorn begins by describing the creation of his song.

Never will my song be an honor worthy of the great joy I have won. For I always need to make my song better than it is, although it is good. Just as the love in which my heart is improved and cured is superior, so the verse I make should be superior to all songs either intended or sung. (Bernart de Ventadorn, 1965, p. 102)

In the first line of the stanza Bernart de Ventadorn says that his *song* [mos chantars] springs from the joy in his heart which is overflowing with love; his song is born to serve and honor this love and is a natural extension of his joy. But in the seventh line, the poet's *chantars* becomes *lo vers* [the verse], and *lo vers* in the final line of the stanza becomes once again the *song* [totz chans], illustrating the exchangeability of the words *song* and *verse* for the poet. Bernart also conveys a certain competitiveness of spirit by pointing out that the song that he produces must be and will be better than any other, composed or anticipated. This insistence on the value of the product has led researchers to investigate the construction of the verse and the circumstances of the performance.

The troubadours prided themselves on their craftsmanship, on the intricacies of the rhyme schemes for example, and the incorporation of key words into the poetic fabric. Robert Guiette in his *D'une poésie formelle en France au Moyen Age* written in 1947 asserted that the expressions of love for the Lady were merely

formal conventions and that the real individuality and creativity lay in the structure of the poem, not in the amorous or ideological content. As Simon Gaunt says "language preceded desire" (1995, p. 126). The real love was the love of poetic creation and performance, and Gaunt suggests that the singing was part of a masculine competition for status (1995, p. 144).<sup>3</sup>

In a performance situation the singer is heard by a group of listeners (the audience) whose reception reflects the community's comprehension and appreciation of the song. (Kay, 1990, p. 161- 63). Medieval audiences took shape in a oral/memory-based culture and the listening audience valued and participated in the entertainment provided by the troubadours and *joglars* who were the professional entertainers of the time. Songs were transmitted orally from performer to performer. Neither performer nor listener had a score or a written program with which to follow the performance of the singer and the medieval audience was as highly skilled and as interested as the poet/composer himself in discerning the *tours-de-force* of verse construction that he had achieved.

Therefore both singer and audience were *actively* involved in the participatory challenge of performance; both were witnesses of the verbal act. Orality requires the physical presence of the speaker and the listener, and "the gesturing singing body of the performer... transform[s] the 'text' to 'act' and permits a specific, yet indefinitely repeatable exchange between individual interpreters and their audiences." (Kay, 1990, p. 5) The "act" is reinforced by the personal commitment of the performer, which is conveyed to the audience through the physical involvement of the performer's body and the auditory presence of the performer's singing voice.

What is exciting in following the development of interest in the performance aspects of this genre is that scholars who are not writing specifically as musicologists comment on the singing and on its physicality: "le sens formel riche d'une voix humaine" (Guiette, 1972, p. 43); "un état chantant" (Guiraud, 1971, p. 423); "la présence physique du locuteur s'affirme dans le chant" (Zumthor, 1983, p. 178). Of the physical power of singing Amelia van Vleck writes:

The voice as the nearest thing to touch,<sup>4</sup> is much more physical than the visual representation of words: in this sense poetry created for oral performance stands in something of a "physical" (more than intellectual) relationship with its audiences. It is also active, in the sense that through speech – and even more through song – one body physically acts on another; the "performance" aspect of troubadour lyric thus takes on new significance. (1991, p. 3).

How can one body act on another through speech, and even more so through song? In order to understand the distinction between speaking and singing, we must understand the bodily process of singing, a process that one can safely assume held true for the troubadours as well. Singing is a physical experience which involves more than the heart's contribution. It is a combination and coordination of breath, resonance, and articulation. The breath rises from the body supported by the muscles of the lung cavity and the lower back. The air passing through the larynx activates the vocal folds and produces not only the functional pitches but the *singer's formant*, vibrations of additional energy. The pharynx enlarges and enhances the resonating space through which the sound passes. The sinus cavities are also involved as resonators. The articulators of the buccal cavity shape the

words and the breath carries the song outward to its listeners. The body does indeed become a lyre: a musical instrument with pinched cords fixed to a resonating box. "All creatures that exist" sang Bernart de Ventadorn, "abandon themselves to joy and sing and resound" (Bec, 1979, p. 144).

Bernart de Ventadorn seems particularly involved with the singing state: "my song throws itself out and rises and my worth increases." (Bec, 1979, p. 137). In *Quan vei la lauseta mover* (p. 132) he describes the flight of the lark as it soars toward the sun and then falls gently to the earth. As a singer, I perceive in these two examples of throwing out and rising an image of the breath carrying the song out to its listener and then gently falling away. Bernart also acknowledges the total engagement of himself:

It is no wonder that I sing better than any other singer, for my heart draws me more toward love and I am better suited to its command. In it [his singing] I have placed my heart and body [cor e cors], my knowledge and mind, my force and power (Bernart de Ventadorn, 1965, p. 133).

The troubadours themselves point out the importance of the timbre and the expressivity of the voice which participates in the message carried by the singer. They were interested in the qualities of the singing tone and they appear to be unforgiving when the singing is bad. In a *serventes*, *Cantarai d'aquestz trobadors* (Bec, 1979, p. 122) the composer, le Pèire d'Alvernhe, roasts his fellow performers "to the sound of bagpipes among much laughter and singing":

I will sing of these troubadours who create songs of all colours, and the worst ones imagine to themselves that they write very good verses. But they should sing somewhere else; they're no better than a hundred shepherds; not one of them knows whether his voice is rising or falling.

The second, Giraut de Bornelh, resembles an old dried-up otter skin with his thin little laments; he sounds like an old woman carrying water. (3rd.)

The fourth, Lemozis...you would say a sick pilgrim; when he sings it's enough to make you feel sorry for him.

The fifth is Guilhem de Ribes, as bad outside as he is inside. His barkings are so disagreeable that a dog could do better.

Ebles de Saignes... sounds like his teeth are killing him.

Marcabru also fretted about the quality of his voice: "Great will be your capacity if you manage something here; doubtless fearing to sing with your raucous voice that roars and clucks and can't spin out the high clear notes" (Marcabru, 1909, p. 97).

The troubadours create phonemic situations which may or may not be to their singing advantage. In *Ars resplan la flors enversa* (Bec, 1979, p. 149), Raimbaut d'Orange overturns the world of love and singing.

Snow and ice I hold as flowers  
And warmth is the cutting edge of the cold  
My song is a whistling storm.(Bec, 1979, p. 149, v11-14)

He reinforces the wintry atmosphere of his world and the tension of his emotions by reversing the phonemic needs of the singing voice. The voice can only sing on voiced phonemes; Raimbaut combines the explosive unvoiced phonemes [k] [t] and [t] with the unvoiced sibilant [s] to create an alliterative effect of the voice of the cutting wind: "siscles et giscles" "que'm no'm conquis chans ni ciscles", and he turns the performance of the song into what Pierre Bec describes as "un bruitage plus qu'une symphonie" (Bec, 1979, p. 153).

In *No sap chantar* by Jaufre de Rudel, (1978, p. 222), almost 80% of the phonemes are voiced and singable which compares with almost 73%<sup>5</sup> in Raimbaut's *Ars resplan*. *No sap chantar* uses (in comparison to *Ars resplan*) an elevated number of the nasal phonemes [m] and [n]<sup>6</sup> and almost half the total of unvoiced [s].<sup>7</sup> This results in a much more voiced composition and a better vocal situation for the singer. The two poems could be representative merely of an alliterative experiment on the poets' part, and the differences in percentages are not great enough to conclude that one poet was more sensitive to the singer's needs than the other. However it is clear to the singer that *No sap chantar* is much easier to sing than *Ars resplan la flors enversa*. It is interesting to note that in the above mentioned *sirventes*, the Pèire d'Alvernhe comments on Raimbaut's composing: "it has neither joy nor warmth" (Bec, 1979, p. 126).

Increasingly the text which existed as an oral product susceptible to the modifications which occur during performance became a written act and a fixed object, and the role of the reader was affirmed over that of the listener and of the music. "The written voice" writes Sylvia Huot (1987, p. 208) "does not fade away; it reaches an audience widely dispersed through space and time". With the fading of the performance tradition, the aural memory also faded. The involvement of the body and the singing voice in the delivery of the song was forgotten, and the poetry of the troubadours established a new relationship with the silent reader.

I will sing with rage...(Raimbaut d'Orange), I will sing with bitterness....(Guilhem de Berguedan), I must sing of what I would rather not sing... (la Comtesse de Die), the captive man to console himself must sing...(Richard Coeur-de-Lion), it pleases me to sing and to be agreeable...(Raimon de Miraval), sweet companion, my song is calling you...(Guiraud de Borneil): the collective singing voice of the troubadours and the trobairitz has been safeguarded through time by the written text. But just as the song addresses the "sweet companion" in Guiraud de Borneil's verse, it calls on the critic and the reader to hear the song, and to celebrate the phenomenon of singing in the poetry of the troubadours.

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## Endnotes

1. Dragonetti, Roger (1969) *La technique poétique des trouvères dans la chanson courtoise*. Genève: Slatkine Reprints. Werf, H. van der (1972) *The chansons of the troubadours and trouvères*. Utrecht: Oosthoek.
  2. I have translated the French translations of the Old Occitan text taken from Pierre Bec's *Anthologie des troubadours* and Dejeanne's *Poésies complètes de Marcabru* into English.
  3. It is not established that the trobairitz performed their songs before an audience and so in my discussion of the performance aspects I will be referring to the male composers only.
  4. I have noticed in my work with babies that some of my small clients — between the ages of twelve months and eighteen months — come up to me as I am singing and peer into my mouth. I believe that they are trying to see the voice coming out.
  5. 79.9% *No sap* / 72.9% *Ars resplan*
  6. 29.8% *No sap* / 26.4% *Ars resplan*
  7. 65 *No sap* / 109 *Arts resplan*
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