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`ftp://triples.math.mcgill.ca/pub/rags/ragstriples.html`

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Any corrections in the transcription should be sent to me, rags@math.mcgill.ca. Other comments perhaps should go to rec.music.early or to trobador himself.

= rags =

Article 13200 of rec.music.early:

From: Trobador@aol.com

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A re-post, since this apparently was only received by a few people the first time. I have refrained from removing the Wordstar printer codes — they have a nostalgia value.¹

The article originally appeared in *Historical Performance*.

Trobador

¹I have of course removed them—I hope correctly! - rags.

PEIROL'S VIELLE
instrumental participation in the troubador
repertory

JOEL COHEN

It was assumed, for many years, that the troubadors¹ of southern France accompanied their singing with musical instruments: the stereotyped literary image of the wandering minstrel, lute in hand, has been prevalent in the Western imagination at least since the romantics rediscovered the vernacular poets of the Middle Ages.

Similarly, over the last generation, many recorded performances of medieval song have featured elaborate instrumental accompaniments to these melodies: in recent years we have had zarbs and hurdy-gurdies and Indian sitars weaving their way around tunes of Ventadorn and Vaqueyras. Those kinds of records having proven successful with a part of the musical public, the exotic neo-medieval sounds of those performances have even found their way — ultimate consecration — into costumed movie epics about the Middle Ages.

It is perhaps understandable that there would be a reaction from scholarly quarters to the highly-colored, densely-orchestrated performances of medieval song that we were hearing in the sixties and seventies. The challenge to many received ideas came in an enormously valuable and stimulating book, Christopher Page's "Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages"² Page's essential contribution (aside from the extensive documentation he

¹The total confusion of the poet-composer troubadors with the entertainer-performer minstrels is pervasive in the modern "romantic" view of these repertoires. But in fact, the lines are often blurred in historical reality, if we can give any credence at all to the *vidas*. Many impecunious poets of noble birth became minstrels to earn their living; and many *joglars* of humble origin bettered themselves socially by becoming troubadors. The permeability of the frontier between composers and performers has certain implications for performance practice.

²Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976.

provided) has been to establish useful categories among the various poetical and musical *genres* of the Occitan and French Middle Ages.

Most significantly, in a challenge to received ideas, Page managed to separate out the incontrovertible evidence of instrumental participation in the dance-songs, *descorts*, *chansons de geste*, and other representatives of the “lower styles” of medieval song from the main body of troubador poetry. Clear, direct evidence of instrumental participation in the “high style” of the Old Provençal *canso* is much skimpier than appears at first. Page suggested strongly (and created much controversy in the process) that the subtle, carefully shaded poetry, and the rhapsodic melodies of the troubador *canso* and *vers* belong to another world from the dance-songs, a world most likely, in his hypothesis, of unaccompanied singing. “As far as the twelfth century in the South is concerned,” he writes, “the evidence — admittedly very meagre — suggests that instrumental accompaniment did not have a high style ethos”.³

My purpose in this brief communiqué is, first of all, to introduce from troubador poetry (not the *vidas*, which are open to critical attack because of their fanciful nature and their late date)⁴ a few additional pieces of documentation that Page has somehow overlooked, and second to reflect on this “new” evidence concerning instrumental practice in the light of the other sources we have already been able to study. In general, I think Page has been a little hasty, and somewhat overly schematic, in his banishment of instruments to the nether regions of dance and party-time. While we are still far from having a precise idea of what the troubador songs sounded like — the jury may be out on that question until the end of time — my reading of the available evidence leads me to conclude that, at least some of the time, there was some sort of accompaniment to “high style” songs.

My first text is the opening strophe of a *sirventes* by Uc de Lescura, *De mots ricos no tem Peire Vidal*.⁵ This poem, by the way, is based on the strophic model of Peire Vidal’s *Anc no mort per amor ni per al*, and can (and probably was) sung to the melody of that older work.

De mots ricos no tem Peire Vidal
ni’N’Albertet de sa votz a ben dir

³Page, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴Composed long after the poems themselves, the *vidas* tend to get a bad rap from modern scholars. While they are certainly a source of inexhaustible inaccuracies as to specific facts, they do seem to offer us valuable information, including *musical* clues, about the *general ethos* of the troubadors’ art.

⁵Text from Martin de Riquer, *Los Trovadores II*, Barcelona 1983, p.927.

ni’N Perdigon de greu sonet bastir,
ni’N Pegulhan de chansos metre en sal,
ni de gabar sos chans N’Arnaut Romieu
ni de lausar Fonsalada son fieü,
ni’N Pelardit de contrafar la gen,
ni’N Gualaubet de viular coyndamen.

I do not fear the elegant language of Peire Vidal, nor Master Albertet’s voice that says things so well, nor Master Perdigon’s composing solemn melodies, nor Master Pegulhan’s adding salt to his songs, nor Master Arnaut Romieu’s singing his lungs out, nor Fonsalada’s boasting about his possessions, nor Master Pelardit’s putting people on, nor Master Gualaubet’s playing the *viola* elegantly.

Here is a list of troubadors and minstrels, most of them known poets (those whom we cannot trace are Arnaut Romieu, Pelardit “the hairy one”, and the instrumentalist Gualaubet). The satirical catalogue, naming each man’s special gift or flair (or weakness), includes authors of “high style” poetry. We might easily imagine (certainly I do) that both singing and playing (and, by extension, self-accompaniment) were part of the performer’s arsenal — while all strove for excellence in various kinds of artistic achievement, some were more distinguished at one thing than another. And, in the case at hand, we have one poet claiming to be unafraid of his rivals, and implying that he can equal all of them at all their skills.

Nonetheless, Page’s objection to this line of reasoning cannot be simply dismissed out of hand. “Much of the literary evidence bearing upon the question of accompaniment,” he writes, “suffers from what might be called the ‘discontinuity problem’: it mentions *this* (singing, perhaps), then mentions *that* (string playing, let us imagine) but rarely allows us to establish whether this and that happen at the same time, whether they happen in the same place, or whether they are associated with each other.”⁶

Simultaneity, one may argue, may in fact be implied in passages like these, even when the descriptive language is vague — but simultaneity cannot be *proved* within this kind of context. To satisfy our consciences, we need to find language of a somewhat more precise nature from within the troubador corpus indicating that playing and singing are going on together. Such simultaneity is strongly suggested in one passage Page seems to have missed, the *tornada* of Peire d’Alvernha’s famous poem *Cantarai d’aqestz*

⁶Page, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

trobadors, a very funny catalog of poet-performers.⁷

Here is the sign-off:

Lo vers fo faitz als enflabotz
a Puoich-vert, tot jogan rizen.

The poem was made to the *enflabotz*, at Puy-Vert, all play and laughter.

Maybe the pipes or bagpipes (probable translation of *enflabotz*) were playing in the background while the poem was conceived, or recited. I think, however, that the text can be plausibly read to imply a singing performance with some sort of wind instrument accompaniment.

Yet this poem, though it deals with composers of *cansos* and *vers*, is not exactly a “high style” work itself: its subject matter is satiric, its regular feet strophic form suggests a regular meter (ternary?) and a dance-tune. Wind instruments themselves are associated with the lower classes in one of the preceding strophes;⁸ the poet thinks little of Master Raimbaut (d’Aurenga):

per so pretz aitan los pipautz
que van los almosnas queren

And so I consider him the same as the pipers who go begging for alms.

So far, then, we have not yet found the “smoking vielle”, the description of a minstrel performing a high-style piece with instrumental accompaniment. But we are not through with the investigation. Page cites⁹ two somewhat “iffy” passages from two different *tornadas*:

The following, from a poem by Guillem Adhemar, reads:

Peironet ab nullet apren
lo uers a dir azaut e clar

Peironet, learn to sing this song with *nullet* in a sweet, pleasing voice.

Page is skeptical of this passage (as am I), since we do not know the meaning of *nullet*, or even if that word refers to a musical instrument at all.

The next, from a poem of Peire d’Alvergne, is more important to us:

⁷in Riquer, *op. cit.* I, p. 340.

⁸Riquer, *op. cit.* p. 338

⁹Page, *op. cit.* p. 174.

Sest uers sabra son pes uiolar adrics
ques daluernhe

Audrics will know how to fiddle this *vers*,
which is by (Peire) d'Alvergne.

This one is placed *hors combat* by Page on the grounds that it is a late reading of the poem found in only one source. He does concede, though, that “at least one manuscript scribe was prepared to let a song by Peire d'Alvergne leave his desk with a call for accompaniment contained in its final tornada”. For my part, I am inclined to accept this citation as positive evidence for instrumental participation in the troubador repertoire. I count this as one documented instance of simultaneity.

But the clearest, least ambiguous reference in a *tornada* to instrumental accompaniment has been, surprisingly, overlooked by Page and other musical scholars in discussions to date. In the poem *Ben chantar far, al gent temps de pascor*, by Albert de Sestairon, himself a minstrel (“The tunes were good, but the words were not worth much”, says his *vida*)¹⁰ we find the following injunction to Peirol, another troubador-minstrel with thirty-two surviving works to his credit:¹¹

Peirol, violatz et chantatz cointamen
de ma chanzson los motz e'l son leugier

Peirol, play your *viola* and sing delicately the words and the lilting melody of my song.

In my opinion, the issue of *simultaneity* in an old-Provençal “high style ethos” is here resolved. The limits of language being what they are, one can give two interpretations to this passage:

- The minstrel is exhorted to play the melody (as a prelude), then to sing the song (a capella?) — or, perhaps, to alternate instrumental passages with singing.
- He is asked to play and sing, simultaneously, the words and the music — with or without purely instrumental passages derived from the *son leugier*.

¹⁰“Et Albertet si fez assatz de cansos, que aguen bons sons et motz de pouca velensa”. Riquer, *op. cit.* II, p. 1131.

¹¹J. Keith, *The Poetry of Albertet de Sestairon*, Harvard University, unpublished dissertation, 1933, p.124. Also in Riquer, *op. cit.* II, p. 1113.

In any case, we possess here clear proof that instrument and voice could be associated in the “high style”. To paraphrase the conditions of Page, the “this” and the “that” do happen at the same time, and in the same place, They are associated with each other through the performance of one *canso* by one musician.

With this piece of evidence in hand, many of the more-ambiguous references to instrumental performance in the South take on a different aspect.

The many troubadors who, according to the *vidas*, became minstrels, may well have accompanied their singing, not only in northern *lais* and dance-songs, but also in the “high style” pieces which concern us here. I imagine that those minstrels who were especially expert at playing would have accompanied themselves in a more elaborate way, while others might have settled for a more summary kind of support, or a *cappella* performance. Certainly Pages’ argument¹² — that the *vielle* was introduced to this repertoire later, by minstrels in the North, as a way of overcoming boredom induced by the Provençal-to-French language barrier — seems considerably vitiated. Peirol and his ilk were also fiddling away (and singing!) in the *pays d’oc*. Given the current state of our knowledge, I can perceive no documented difference in “high style” instrumental/vocal practice between South and North.

Few would now contest that the troubador “high style” works are conceived as essentially poetic experiences, and that musical context was by-and-large secondary to concerns of literary content and strophic form. The small number of troubador melodies preserved, compared to the large number of poems, is *prima facie* evidence of this.

But the evidence of literary, rhetorical, and moral priorities of this repertoire does not in itself eliminate the instruments from the performance picture. For if one hypothesis about the (relative) paucity of descriptions of instrumental accompaniments in troubador song are that in poetry-dominated songs the accompaniments would have been *de trop*, another plausible argument was that instruments were so pervasive and everyday that they were not worth talking about that much.

I would like to evoke in support of this hypothesis (ubiquity of instruments as a reason for scarcely mentioning them) our own lived experience of the modern French *chanson poétique*. In the songs of the late Georges Brassens, rich, image-laden poetic language is married to workaday melodies, untutored singing, and take-it-as-you-find-it instrumental accompaniment.

¹²Page, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-33.

In hearing these songs, in reading critical discussions of Brassens' work, or in listening to the author-performer himself discuss his activities, one is struck by the clear priorities:

- the poems, their literary and moral content
- the performer-author and his persona
- (much less important than the forgoing) the melodies
- (least important) guitar and bass accompaniment

You will find little reference to Brassens' guitar in the poems themselves, or in the critical literature surrounding his work. Not too different, in my opinion, from the troubador ethos! Yet the guitar is omnipresent in the actual performances.

To sum up: We know there were many troubadors who were also minstrels. We know that minstrels had to play as well as sing, that their repertoire could encompass all kinds of songs and poems, including examples of the troubador "high style", as well as much "lower style" material.¹³ And we have at least two descriptions, from the poems themselves and not later *vidas*, of simultaneous playing and singing of "high style" poetry.

We can at this point only conjecture on the frequency, or rarity, of such instrumental participation in performances of "high style" repertoire. Troubador songs may have been accompanied in rare, exceptional cases. Or they may have been accompanied very often, as a matter of accepted course. We know nothing about the nature or musical content of these accompaniments.

The only instrument mentioned in conjunction with "high style" song is the *viola* (= old French *vielle*). We have no positive evidence for lutes, harps, hurdy-gurdies, or other string instruments,¹⁴ much less wind instruments or percussion, and no indication whatsoever from these sources that ensembles of instruments might have accompanied one singer.¹⁵

¹³In this respect, the *sirventes* of Guiraut de Cabreira about the minstrel's art (discussed in Page, *op. cit.* p. 18-19), needs to be examined afresh. Page's arguments about the text of this poem concerning instrumental participation in troubador repertoire now appear to me to be overly reductionist.

¹⁴Except, just possibly, an obscure reference to the *lera* in Marcabru's famous poem, *Dirai vous senes dubtansa*.

¹⁵The two vielles that inspired Raimbaut de Vacqueiras' *Kalenda Maya* in the celebrated *vida* were, after all, playing an *estampida*, and not a high style *canso*.

But in any case, we know that the *canço* was not invariably an art for the voice alone. The songs of the troubadors were accompanied at least some of the time.

Perpignan, France
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