

By LAURA ZOLL

# Troubadours

FOR OUR TIMES

In the crook of the grand staircase of the Capitole de Toulouse rises a vibrant scene of 14th-century troubadours declaiming. The mural depicts the annual competition hosted in Toulouse. As these competitions were occurring, Guilhem Moulinier was tasked with compiling a treatise on Occitan grammar that could stand as a kind of rulebook for the competitions. That manuscript, *Las leys d'amors*, is the earliest grammar text of Old Occitan. The treatise extolls the beauty, elegance, and eloquence of troubadour poetry, providing many examples of specific songs. The competitions summoned audiences drawn to hear the most beautiful music and expressive poetry of the times.

## Let's listen, too.

In 2021, a time of COVID-forced limitations on gatherings and singing, why not recreate one of these troubadour competitions? Troubadour music is the perfect repertoire for our times: solo undertakings ideally suited to the aural difficulties of online platforms. It spotlights music that rarely gets a hearing during “normal” concert seasons. In addition, we are all fighting off Zoom fatigue; this suggested troubadour concert varies singing and declaiming with visions of the notation in illuminated manuscripts and glimpses of *Las leys d'amors*, and it allows split screens with translations to enrich the audience’s understanding. What follows is a blueprint for early musicians seeking appropriate and timely programming, or an armchair musical journey for those intrigued by a modern take on the troubadour tradition.

The pleasure of troubadour song is intensified by an understanding of its historical context. When Carole King and James Taylor went on the road in 2010, they called their show “The Troubadour Reunion Tour” in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the first time they shared the stage at The Troubadour nightclub. This famous West Hollywood café opened in 1957 and was home to the burgeoning folk music scene of the

1960s. King and Taylor, singer/songwriters of our generation, and their venue were paying homage to the authentic troubadours.

### Who were the real troubadours?

The real troubadours flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries in what became the southwest corner of modern France. From there, it was exported in all directions. The poetry was written in Old Occitan, and the music was strophic. The songs are generally divided into genres: *canso* (a basic song), *alba* (a tryst ending with the sunrise), *tenso* (a debate or discussion between two troubadours), *planh* (grief over a death), and *estampie* (a dance).

Our proposed concert spotlights each of these styles. Troubadour songs beautifully conveyed

a full range of human thoughts and emotions: love and grief, but also humor, jealousy, news, anxiety, storytelling, arguments, flirtations, provocations, and delight. The troubadours are credited with “inventing” our concepts and language of romance: courtliness, the ennobling properties of being in love, chivalry, love sickness, serving the beloved as in a feudal relationship, the pain of love unrequited or lost or far away. Troubadours sang it all!



## Performance Practice Considerations

Maddeningly, there is very little information conveyed in the manuscripts about performance practice. The square-note notation provides melodic outline but no instructions of tempo, dynamics, phrasings, breaths, or accompaniment. We know the music is strophic, but even that tangles us into the frustration of determining the text overlay of successive verses. The first strophe is a tight fit to the melody, but where do the words of the following verses fit into the notes? Yet the bareness of the notation allows us expressive license. This was a repertoire designed around the words.

Troubadours were lauded for their rhetoric, the elegance of their poetry, the cleverness of their word choices, and the poignancy of their performance. It is up to the individual troubadour to sing this music as they choose. To employ an instrument to accompany themselves—perhaps a supporting drone—if they like. To enjoy enjambment, ornaments, rubato, altered melodic stresses and phrases. Anything is possible. Emotional expressiveness is highly valued. The audience is drawn in, made complicit in the troubadour's mini drama. We are the witnesses to the public airing of private reflections.

## Women troubadours?

As concert programmers, many of us are grappling with issues of inclusion. Gender parity is particularly problematic in medieval repertoire. Little enough is known about the music of these centuries and even less about the contributions of women. Medieval women were composers, performers, patrons, and audience members, but scant evidence of their involvement survives. For instance, of the 2,000+ troubadour texts extant, we have only about 250 melodies, and just a single one of these, “A chantar m'er de so qu'eu non volria” by La Comtesa de Dia, is attributed to a named woman. This unique example is sometimes aired on the concert stage or recording; other woman-authored songs are hidden. A Zoom concert offers us an opportunity to present women troubadours by interspersing singing with the reading of texts penned by women.

## Historic Performance During the Time of COVID

For more than a year, we have been bereft of live music gatherings. Musicians and audiences alike crave the opportunity to come together in melody and harmony. Healing through music has always been our favorite medicine. The barriers brought to us by our current restrictions can be overcome with troubadour songs presented through an online platform. Musicians and audience can stay separated and safe while reveling in a live performance. As artists trained in historic performance practice, we know the techniques required

to recreate medieval song. As early-music aficionados, we covet performances that combine historic sources and techniques presented in contemporary contexts. Concerts like the one programmed here could be a gateway to performance in the time of COVID.

Why listen to the troubadours nowadays? Their personal musings were always meant to be expressed in a public sphere. We can acknowledge the historic alignment of their time of plague and our own, of their springtime troubadour competition with our own concert scheduling. The solo style of performance is ideally suited to our online platforms. As early musicians, it allows us to explore the earliest edges of our time period. The wisdom of troubadours singing of love has been foundational to our Western view of romance; these texts live on as brilliant and insightful literature. But the bottom line and most important consideration is this: Troubadour songs are glorious expressions of melody and humanity. We are all enlarged by including this music in our lives.

Although we live hundreds of years after medieval troubadours, can't cluster as closely as the audience depicted in the Capitole de Toulouse mural, and aren't experts in the Old Occitan defined by *Las leys d'amors*, a recreation of a troubadour concert is a fitting and special solution to our current performance problems. Purchase your fictitious ticket, click your Zoom link, and join me for this journey of medieval secular song.

## The program

“Non es meravelha” – Bernart de Ventadorn (*canso*)

“A chantar m'er de so qu'eu non volria” – Comtesa de Dia (*canso*)

“Pax in nomine Domini” – Marcabru (*Crusader song*)

“Vos que'm semblatz dels corals amadors” – La Comtesa de Proensa (Garsenda de Forcalquier) and Gui de Cavaillon (*tensò*)

“Reis glorios” – Guiraut de Bornelh (*alba*)

“Fortz chausa es que tot lo major dan” – Gaucelm Faidit (*planh* on death of Richard I)

“Ia de chantar non degra aver talan” – Castelloza (*canso*)

“Kalenda maia” – Raimbaut de Vaqueiras (*estampie*)

(A good source for the music, texts, and translations can be found in *Songs of the Troubadours and Trouvères: An Anthology of Poems and Melodies*, edited by Samuel N. Rosenberg, Margaret Switten, and Gérard Le Vot.)

## The Concert Begins

**NARRATOR:** Each May, starting in 1324, troubadours gathered in Toulouse for a competition of their music and their musicianship. Sponsored by *Académie des Jeux floraux*, these performers dazzled their audience with their eloquence, expressiveness,



"Les Jeux floraux," a mural by Jean-Paul Laurens in the grand staircase of the Capitole de Toulouse in France, depicts an annual troubadour competition.

and musicianship. Sit back and enjoy *our* troubadours sharing their artistry.

### **"Non es meravelha" – Bernart de Ventadorn (canço)**

**NARRATOR:** This remarkable song contains many of the typical components of the most common form of troubadour song, the *canço*. Love is manifested melodically; one sings because one loves; a great singer is made great by a great love. The object of this particular great love is without peer. Lovesickness, that influential invention of the troubadours, is rife through this song. Its only cure is the mercy of the love object. The troubadour in his weakened state conjures a feudal relationship of servitude to his Lady. There are many mysteries in the path of this love story, and its ending is unclear. We are left with a magnificent song to haunt our own heart.

A TROUBADOUR SINGS "Non es meravelha"

### **"A chantar m'er de so qu'eu non volria" – Comtessa de Dia (canço)**

**NARRATOR:** Were there women troubadours? Yes! Of the thousands of troubadour texts extant, and the hundreds that include music notation, this is the only melody credited to a named woman. La Comtessa sings directly to her love object, chastising him for being haughty and turning away from her. She calls on his nobility and reminds him of her fine

qualities. Does he come back to her?

A TROUBADOUR SINGS "A chantar m'er de so qu'eu non volria"

### **"Pax in nomine Domini" – Marcabru (Crusader song)**

**NARRATOR:** Not all troubadour songs relate a love dilemma. Troubadours lived in their world, and many of them joined the Crusades, composing music that describes that experience. Latin text begins this beautiful Crusade song, identifying its holy purpose: "Pax in nomine Domini" (Peace in the Name of the Lord). The second line asserts that Marcabru was the composer of both melody and text. This rare and precious attribution introduces the most famous Crusade song. Like others of this genre, "Pax in nomine Domini" amplifies the anti-Muslim sentiment of the author. Our modern ears require us to confront the bigotry inherent in the text.

A TROUBADOUR SINGS "Pax in nomine Domini"

### **"Vos que'm semblatz dels corals amadors" – La Comtessa de Proensa (Garsenda de Forcalquier) and Gui de Cavaillon (tenso)**

**NARRATOR:** There are only four *chansonniers* that include music notation for troubadour songs; the rest—more than 2,000!—exist purely as poetry. Yet no concert highlighting this repertoire is complete without the inclusion of some of these musical phantoms. The closest we have to a troubadour duet is the fascinating *tenso* genre, a conversation between two singers debating an issue. This surviving fragment of a song is a short exploration of the path of love required. How shall the lovers present themselves to each other? Is a hesitant and timid wooer being honorable or annoying? This medieval glimpse of the gender divide in courtship is intriguing.

A FEMALE TROUBADOUR AND A MALE TROUBADOUR DECLAIM "Vos que'm semblatz dels corals amadors"

### **"Reis glorios" – Guiraut de Bornelh (alba)**

**NARRATOR:** This example of an *alba* showcases the defining characteristics of the genre. While an illicit tryst is occurring, a watchman has been instructed to stand guard through the night and awaken the lovers at dawn so they can separate undetected by the jealous husband. The watchman is the singer, and the sun is rising as the song begins. The watchman sings with increasing worry as the lovers continue to sleep. His growing agitation is audible as he notes the lightening of the sky and the singing of the birds. "Awake!" he calls. Typical to the genre, each verse ends with the same refrain: "And soon it will be dawn."

A TROUBADOUR SINGS "Reis glorios"

**“Fortz chausa es que tot lo major dan” – Gaucelm Faidit (planh on death of Richard I)**

NARRATOR: Songs have always been used to mourn the dead. This heartfelt *planh* shares the news that Richard, King of England, has died.

A TROUBADOUR SINGS “Fortz chausa es que tot lo major dan”

**“Ia de chantar non degra aver talan” – Castelloza (canso)**

NARRATOR: This *canso* is a fitting bookend to “Non es meravelha.” Castelloza conjures many of the same tropes, but this time it is in a woman’s voice: the connection between singing and loving, her plea for mercy from a love object, her lovesickness that weakens her body and soul, her offer of fidelity and service. Sadly, the melody for this *canso* has not survived, but its words remain powerful and evocative.

A FEMALE TROUBADOUR DECLAIMS “Ia de chantar non degra aver talan”

**“Kalenda maia” – Raimbaut de Vaqueiras (estampie)**

NARRATOR: Written into the manuscript from which we find the music for “Kalenda maia” is a charming origin story. Raimbaut de Vaqueiras was sad at heart because Lady Beatrice, daughter of his patron, rejected his suit. When she finally showed him the pity he requested, his joy manifested itself with lyrics to a jaunty dance tune, an *estampie*, he heard played on the *vielle* at Court. This rare inclusion of an instrument in the text has inspired many renditions of this particular song to include instruments with or without a vocal. [Option for performers to add instruments and/or dancers, perhaps alternating verses with the singer(s).]

**TROUBADOURS – SINGERS, INSTRUMENTALISTS, DANCERS – PERFORM “Kalenda maia”**

The concert is over. Perhaps the musicians host a Q&A with their virtual audience. Perhaps the armchair readers are inspired to delve deeper into troubadour repertoire. As in 14th-century Toulouse, modern troubadours bring together a community of music lovers.

*Laura Zoll holds degrees in music from Brown University and medieval studies from Harvard University. She serves on the board of directors of Blue Heron.*



A portrait of the 12th-century troubadour Marcabru in a 13th-century chansonnier



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