

“The Middle Ages gripped me only because it had the near magical power to displace me, to rescue me from the troubles and mediocrities of the present, and at the same time to make it more ardent and clear.”

Jacques Le Goff, *À la recherche du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 2006)

The magic of displacement: this beautiful expression conveys the feeling many of us – performers and listeners – get from our experience of medieval music. Those remote times, from which so very few documents survive that tell us about men’s and women’s individualities, or about their way of perceiving emotions, gave birth to an artistic production only a tiny part of which has survived through the vagaries of time. To revive this musical heritage, we need to give back their voices to those who made courtly love their favourite source of inspiration: beyond the combined beauty of words and sounds, what better approach to consider the relationship between men and women? While painting and sculpture remain frozen representations, music lets us hear the plausible reality of a world forever lost, satisfying our fascination for a distant past and our quest for our origins. All we have to do is close our eyes and think back to the countless Romanesque and Gothic remains buried in our memories, which through sound come back to life in their original splendour.

This programme is a triptych featuring a range of contrasting female figures.¹ While the *bella donna* first evokes the “fair lady” praised in the courtly tradition, it is also the name given to a plant, the “deadly nightshade” or “belladonna”,² which, as known in particular through Hildegard von Bingen’s thirteenth-century description, has the ability to heal or to kill. Doesn’t the spurned lover in the *ballade Ha, Fortune, trop as vers moy grant tort* say that he awaits death with resignation? This is a fitting return after the heart-rending *canço* of the betrayed but passionate Comtessa de Dia – a very rare example of a piece where we actually hear a woman’s voice. The women featured here refer to a number of identified characters, with references that belong to an art of metaphor, whether mythological (the magician Medea, the beautiful Helen of Sparta), allegorical (Fortune) or fantastic (the serpent Phyton, the siren). At a time when text and music were part of the same craft, narrative art found in tales its ultimate achievement, personifying women in their deeds and words, as in *Santa Maria amar*, the *cantiga* that relates the deliverance of a pregnant abbess by the Virgin Mary, or in the story of the “belle” sitting at the foot of her tower, who is refused the hand of her beloved, whom hanging awaits. Beyond the abstract narratives, these portraits are true *tableaux vivants* of an era and its social realities.

Music of the unsaid

Our knowledge of the past is not a certainty, but a representation; the same is true of our vision of the sound world of the earliest times. The Middle Ages sweeps away our habits as early music performers, whose credo is that returning to the sources is a prerequisite for performance – historically informed performance. The Baroque revival, for example, was first built in opposition to an essentially instrumental standard, and its results no longer sound exotic to our ears.³ Instruments are both the most tangible and the most accessible evidence: it is thus easy to study from all angles, and discover the secrets of, say, a violin from the workshops of the most famous sixteenth-century luthiers in Cremona or Brescia that is still played today. But with rare exceptions we only know

¹ See Geneviève Brunel-Lobrichon’s text for an explanation of each sung text.

² The scientific name of which is *Atropa belladonna*.

³ Bruce HAYNES, *The End of Early Music. A Period Performer’s History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 11-12.

medieval instruments through the representations that appear on the portals of cathedrals or the paintings of famous masters, and it is impossible to X-ray their entrails. The Middle Ages remains and will always remain partially outside our quest for truth, because the sources are so fragmentary. The knowledge accumulated by the best specialists can only lead to quarrels, since interpretation of the sources plays such a large part, regarding either questions of accompaniment and rhythm specific to the great corpus of secular monodies, or the reconstruction of implicit alterations (*musica ficta*) in the late repertoires of Ars Nova or Ars Subtilior (fourteenth century).⁴

So what are we to do? Should we refrain from any attempt at restitution, for want of sufficient knowledge, or at least stick to an archaeological vision of art, which takes no sides when it comes to addressing the many aspects that remain obscure? Should we, for example, forbear to perform the *ballade Ha, Fortune, trop as vers moy grant tort* simply because the source of its sung text comprises only one stanza?⁵ Our conviction as performers is rather to consider the source as a material with which to engage, experimentation remaining the key word. The term “interpretation” therefore takes on its full meaning and is pushed to its paroxysm: we try to offer the listener a work according to our own taste and our own understanding of the sources. Could our proposal have existed seven hundred, eight hundred or nine hundred years ago? Probably not, and it should only be perceived as a plausible reality, or at most as a hedonistic vision of a world that is far too old for us to grasp its sound reality. Authenticity is now a largely dated concept, even more so for the oldest music in our heritage. Nevertheless, it is crucial to perpetuate the performance of this repertoire in order to ensure its survival, whether shedding new light on a given piece or unearthing the beauty of some hitherto neglected piece, through the performers’ unique expressiveness.

Building a sound

The sound identity we have constructed is based on the ambiguity between the flute and the voice, with the same musician in both roles. We include the fiddle, harp and lute to develop an art of accompanying monody with three instruments, whose timbres complement each other marvellously – a practice that is far removed from the clichéd image of the troubadour accompanying himself alone on his harp, which nevertheless remains partially true. Experimentation has also largely validated the observations of our predecessors for the performance of fourteenth-century written polyphonies, where playing the contratenor part on a plucked string instrument proves to be a most appropriate choice. But we should not forget that little or nothing is known about medieval instrumental art, even though the instruments themselves are omnipresent in the iconography. The repertoire dedicated exclusively to them remains rare, with the exception of the corpus of *estampies*, to which *Isabella* belongs. Moreover, the performance of vocal music with fixed-intonation instruments rather than by an a cappella vocal ensemble inevitably poses the problem of tuning. The choice of a Pythagorean temperament, which favours the perfect fifths to the detriment of imperfect major consonances (thirds and sixths), confers a very particular colour to the intervals, underlining the attractiveness of semitone movements from the fourteenth century on.

⁴ Our performance of the *ballade Medée fu en amer veritable* is in complete contradiction with the point of view of Thomas BROTHERS (*Chromatic Beauty in the Late Medieval Chanson. An Interpretation of Manuscript Accidentals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)), who suggests the performer sing or play only the accidentals explicitly noted in the source.

⁵ The degree of completion of a work also raises many issues. Is it not also a construct of our modern minds, in an age when we are only driven by the quest for the ultimate version?

Finally, we have chosen to revisit the material to produce a fresh, consistent artistic proposal, notably by multiplying the sources and approaches. The best example of this is the performance of Guillaume de Machaut's *ballade Honte, paour, doubtance de meffaire*, where we chose to insert a version adapted for the voice of the instrumental diminutions preserved in the Faenza Codex. This allows us to reintegrate the virtuosity so characteristic of fourteenth-century music, also noticeable in the madrigal *O crudel donna* or the *ballade Medée fu en amer veritable*, whereas the traditional historiographical account does not acknowledge its birth until much later, favouring a progressive vision of history that is still all too deeply rooted in our mentalities.

The disturbing Middle Ages

The Middle Ages is a box in which we have conveniently stored everything that preceded modernity, or at least our conception of it: the invention of printing, the Copernican revolution, and more generally the emergence of modern science. The same is true of the music of that “dark age”, confined between an ancient ideal and the Renaissance. Essentially vocal, the music maintains a relationship with its textual support that remains difficult to apprehend: it doesn't paint the words, and there is no “affect” that could make it legible in terms of word-painting,⁶ in contrast to the Baroque aesthetic. The sounds often seem strange to our ears, accustomed as they are to the comfort of tonality, and the first approach to the pieces is more of a philological quest than a simple sight-reading. As a result, medieval music eludes our most basic questions; too few performers have tackled it, and the pieces that have truly entered the repertoire through concerts or recordings remain rare. Similarly, the subjective element is so great that it leads to extremely varied offerings, making a work almost unrecognisable from one performer to another.

Anyone interested in the Middle Ages is therefore confronted with an extremely vast musical production, whose chronological boundaries are immense. Few elements are common to the almost four centuries of music that appear in the programme of this disc, except that of a courtly ideal, in contrast to the Baroque period, which reassures us with its use of the basso continuo, or the Classic period, with its ubiquitous sonata form. The question of auctorality also upsets our modern thinking, largely influenced by structuralism. Faced with the myriad of exclusively male composers elevated to the rank of “geniuses”, how can we make audiences understand that an anonymous *ballade* such as *Medée fu en amer veritable* is a genuine masterpiece?

Music of numbers, music of the senses

We need to remember that music was and remains a sensual art, often decried as such by ecclesiastical authorities.⁷ The role of the performer is to restore its emotional content – for instance that contained in the heart-rending *canço* of the Comtessa de Dia, or that of the “belle” of Dufay's song, who prefers to be buried under the gallows where her friend will hang rather than survive him. Emotion can only come into play once the difficulties of performance inherent in a language such as *Ars Subtilior* have been overcome. Once again, the *ballade Medée fu en amer veritable* represents, in my opinion, one of the most convincing examples: each voice moves in an

⁶ In other words, conveying the meaning of the text by the music itself, by imitating in sound the image suggested by the word.

⁷ See in particular Pope John XXII's decretal *Docta Sanctorum*, issued in Avignon in 1324, which condemned the *Ars Nova* innovations.

independent and varied rhythmic system through a skilful system of proportions, reminding us that music belonged to the quadrivium in the construction of medieval knowledge, alongside arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. Far from being a mannerism, this very particular aesthetic reveals unprecedented sonorities, such as the transition to the *ballade's* verse-refrain (“Ma dame n’a pas ainsy fait a my”), where each voice evolves in strict parallelism, in a nearly suspended time. The coexistence of unexpected sonorities contracts again, before a return to the original order, that of the main mode of the piece. This is a “masterstroke” – to use Marc-Antoine Charpentier’s much later term – by an extremely skilful anonymous author, drawing on a rhetoric of effect. Once again, it is up to the performers to associate the right gesture to highlight the expressive impact. By emphasizing the modernity of the oldest repertoires, do we not make the Middle Ages “more ardent and clear”?

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Translated by Dennis Collins

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