

Chapter 5 Performance Reflections

In partial preparation for Chapter 6, which is concerned with imagination in medieval song, Chapter 5 centers around one primary imaginative question: What does the song of the siren sound like? Evocative depictions of the seductive-yet-lethal siren are easy to locate (see Kay's analysis of marginalia in the Queen Mary Psalter and Troubadour MS M), and the siren's song is even mentioned in two passages by Machaut (*Le Remede de Fortune*, line 2106 and *Le Voir dit*, line 8303), which claim both the voice of Esperance and that of Toute Belle to be sweeter than that of a siren. No medieval song, to my knowledge, purports to be an exact replica of a siren's song, but Kay examines three musical instances in which their sound is hinted at or conjured, giving our imaginations at least something to go on. These three instances are prefaced by analysis of Arnaut Daniel's "Si m fos Amors," which is accompanied by a marginal siren in M, and whose formal "virtuosity," while not wholly musical, strikes at the heart of musicality and melodic essence with its "mesmeric use of rhyme [that] could encourage comparison with a siren's enchantments...One might well hear wizardry in such incantatory sounds, and their singer as an enchanter, or a siren, whose seductions are compelling, even inspiring, yet also disturbingly suspect."¹ Moreover, while the three songs do not share any musical material, they do have common features: "They are associated with quasi-females...[they are] projected into a certain remoteness, [and they] also act as quasi-Muses that lead their listeners to sing in response...[And, they] engage in some way with archaism, and involve narratives of transformation, although change, like inspiration, comes at a cost."²

¹ *Medieval Song*, 175-6.

² *Medieval Song*, 195.

Polyphony and enchantment

This chapter of Kay's book is unique for its engagement with and specificity regarding musical material. In particular, her reading of the anonymous motet, *De mes amours/L'autrier m'estuet/Defors Compiegne* sensitively describes concepts surrounding musical cadence and treatment of dissonance-consonance relations in context with text and meter. I refer the reader to pages 183-90 for Kay's analysis. Our performance of the motet is, on some level straightforward, with sensitivity to its innate qualities as (de)emphasized by the dense polyphonic, polytextual structure. In addition to Kay's analysis concerning the song's mesmerizing, incantational affect, the interweaving *tessitura* levels of all three voice parts, which are composed in roughly equal registration, add to the sonic quality of enchantment described in the chapter. At various times, each voice line assumes the highest, lowest, and medial position within the contrapuntal structure, and none stays in its respective position for long. Constant voice crossing blurs the sense of individuality between the lines, adding to the complexity of a motet whose distinguishability amongst voices is already complicated by polytextuality. While this type of voice exchange at similar levels of *tessitura* is not an uncommon characteristic of the polyphonic music of this time, in the context of deciphering the sound of a siren's song, the circular effect of the voices in motion, as if part of a swirling pattern created by the hybrid creatures' fishtails or birdwings in motion, adds to the siren's enchantment.³

Another polyphonic/polytextual motet recording appears on this website in two versions, Philippe de Vitry's *In virtute nominum/Decens carmen edere/Clamor meus*. The choice to record this piece was inspired by Anna Zayaruznaya's reading of the motet as a monstrous hybrid representing a siren-like creature, and my initial creative idea was to employ some level of

³ See Kay's description of the medieval siren, *Medieval Song*, 160: "Sirens are usually described as human females from the waist up and as either birds or fish from the waist down."

affected character voicing to bring out characteristics of the hybrid creature.⁴ Upon further reflection, however, I decided against it in favor of a notion suggested by Zayaruznaya and expressed by Kay: “[I]t might be possible to restore value to the beauty of song, and of the pages, by taking a more positive stance on the sirens. Perhaps, rather than reinforcing the contamination of evil [or, in this case, character] voices, their song expresses heavenly harmony, as Macrobius suggests.”⁵ Accordingly, our recordings prioritize clarity and harmonic proportion. One version follows the notation found in the Ivrea Codex, and the other follows the reading from F-Pn fr. 2444. The difference between the two, as pointed out by Zayaruznaya, is found in measures 67-69 of my modern transcription when both the *triplum* and *motetus* voices sing the word “verborum.” Ivrea transmits the *triplum* line a third lower than F-Pn fr. 2444; the latter follows the expected standard cadential pattern, the former results in several unisons at the moment when both lines sing the same word (though, also causing some passing dissonance) over the course of the three measures.⁶

Instrumentation and character development

In his *Bestiaire d’amour*, Richard de Fournival, “following the tradition of the *Physiologus*...explains that some sirens sing, others play a wind instrument, and yet others a harp.”⁷ Following this line of thought, we developed associations between characters in the *Remede* sequence and specific instruments in Chapter 1. In this chapter, we continue these associations, now adding the harp and the (singing) voice as associated with the Siren (along

⁴ *The Monstrous New Art: Divided Forms in the Late Medieval Motet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 100.

⁵ *Medieval Song*, 170.

⁶ *Monstrous New Art*, 87.

⁷ *Medieval Song*, 162.

with the flute/recorder, as described in Chapter 1). As a matter of convenience, the following discussion of “Joye, plaisance” (chant royal from *Le Remede de Fortune*) is copied here from the Chapter 1 Performance Reflections, with additions specific to the siren.

The personified abstraction of Hope who sings as a Siren is announced by the recorder at the beginning of her *chant royal*, “which is described in the text as sounding like a siren’s song, as flute-playing as well as singing is a traditional attribute of sirens.”⁸ The first stanza, accompanied only by recorder in order to reinforce Hope’s siren song, is sung rhapsodically and without a strict sense of rhythm (despite the clearly rhythmic *ars nova* notation found in all manuscript transmissions of the piece), as if to conjure both the Lover’s mesmerized, dream-like state and an atmosphere evoking “high style *grand chant courtois*”—the “‘classic’ form of the courtly songwriter’s art”⁹—reinforcing the *chant royal*’s “musical style [as] reminiscent of troubadour and trouvère lyric.”¹⁰ As Hope begins to sing rhythmically (as notated in the manuscripts) in the second stanza, the vielle subtly emerges from the delicate texture, underscoring the Lover’s imaginative process and physical participation in the song’s creation while, at the same time, the harp also emerges to further underscore the presence of the siren. Gradually, the accompanimental texture becomes more complex while maintaining a certain dream-like haziness, implying a subconscious awareness on the part of the Lover of Hope’s intentions for him. Hope’s harshest discourse comes in the fourth stanza, when in essence she accuses the Lover of bringing his grief upon himself. We insert an instrumental interlude between this stanza and the next, during which the vielle takes up Hope’s melody—as if to

⁸ *Medieval Song*, 48.

⁹ Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental practice and songs in France 1100-1300* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1987), 12-16.

¹⁰ *Medieval Song*, 44.

suggest the Lover is beginning to understand Hope's message—while the Siren's recorder improvises a lively counter melody to support the Lover's headway toward cognition.

Our performance of “Volez vous que je vous chant?” uses the same instrumental associations to underscore the song's prescribed “narrative cast, [which] evokes a series of scenarios involving a variety of voices: a narrator, a knight, a group of knights who may but need not include the first knight, and the polymorphous female figure around whom the song revolves.”¹¹ The polymorphous female figure is a hybrid creature, daughter of a nightingale and a siren, with whom the knight falls in love. The song's “popularizing” style¹² is enhanced in our performance by rhythmicization of selected verses and the insertion of instrumental estampie-like passages. Most notably in her analysis, Kay divides the melodic content of each stanza into two parts, each of which represents one half of the hybrid creature's heritage—the first half a symbol of the nightingale, with its fluid and “curling melodic” contour that is, according to Kay, more typically trouvère sounding, and the incantatory second half, with its short and repetitive triadic contour that “expresses the siren's capacity for lulling and entrancing.”¹³ In an effort to highlight this 2-part structure, our performance opens with a solo recorder iteration of the melody announcing the presence of a siren. Transmission of the song leaves the sound of siren song to the imagination, but performers furnish the work of imagination and bring the siren's sound into the actuality of perception.

¹¹ *Medieval Song*, 178.

¹² *Medieval Song*, 178; and Eliza Zingesser, *Stolen Song: How the Troubadours Became French* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹³ *Medieval Song*, 182.