

## *Chapter 6 Performance Reflections*

Continuing in a line of thought from the previous chapter, Chapter 6 expands on what it might mean to imagine the sound of medieval song, framed by an Aristotelian concept of imagination where sensory information is stored away in the mind and then recalled for use as *species* (shapes or forms) and *signa* (impressions or imprints), like wax seals that leave not only the shape of what pressed against them, but also their essence.<sup>1</sup> Kay writes that “an imprint comes into being through a process of touching—that is, impressing over time—before it can be perceived across space; and so it can articulate sensations that are more time-based, like hearing, with those that are more spatial, like vision. This potential triangulation of hearing, sight, and touch offers promising terrain for reflecting on the perception or imagination of performed song.”<sup>2</sup> Such impressions that fuel the imagination are examined throughout the chapter through analysis of songs by two troubadours, Bernart de Ventadorn and Marcabru, whose performance is steeped in the imagination, and of songs imagined and transmitted in manuscript form through notation, illumination, and intertextuality by Machaut. In the case of the two troubadour songs, the imaginings arise without visual aid, and are therefore termed *acousmatic*, whereas in the Machaut they arise through visual impetus and are therefore termed *phantasmatic*.<sup>3</sup>

### **Acousmatic imagination and performance**

In chapter 4, we recorded our new contrafact, “Can lo boschatges es floritz” with both text and melody by Bernart de Ventadorn, and the beginning section of this chapter takes up the

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<sup>1</sup> *De Anima*, 2.11.12, as described by Kay, *Medieval Song*, 198-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Medieval Song*, 199.

<sup>3</sup> *Medieval Song*, 203 and 213.

song again, this time focusing on appetite and its resultant imaginings. The song's protagonist "imagines his lady listening with affection to his song, and her [imagined] response impressing itself on him, so he has a perfect sense of her, or even a feast of impressions...Bernart's song imagines a playback loop of imagination, whose rational outside, if it even exists, is never voiced but only gestured toward in the despair of the closing lines."<sup>4</sup> As imagination is freely exercised and utterly fallible,<sup>5</sup> he creates a fantasy world surrounding the conjured image of his love, replete with romantic exchanges and fulfilment of desire, which likely leads to his destruction in the real/unimagined world.

In the performance reflections for Chapter 4, I explain how "Can lo boschatges" and the text for its host melody, "En consirer," create a cohesive pairing serving as bookends for the love story between the lyric "eu" and the lady. Contextualized by the inner workings of imagination laid out in Chapter 6, the connection between the two songs deepens. In my own imagination of how the songs might be performed, I see the two as the beginning and end of an entire musical drama where "En consirer" is performed, either in reality or in the protagonist's fantasy world, by a younger version of himself, full of optimism and hope for a potential future of realized love with the lady. As the play I imagine unfolds, his obsession over her festers and propels him into fits of paranoia alternating schizophrenically with admiration for and lust over her, the soundtrack for which is the original song that accompanied his initial profession of love to her, but in which the lyrics gradually change over time. By the end, the melody remains the same, repeating on loop as a bitter reminder of his unrequited love, but now with the lyrics of "Can lo boschatges" hurling him towards death. This play is, obviously, one which I have fabricated in my own imagination, and such a dramatized performance scenario might seem extreme. I offer

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<sup>4</sup> *Medieval Song*, 212.

<sup>5</sup> *Medieval Song*, 202.

the idea here, however, as an example of how the enquiry into imagination in medieval song that is taken up in chapter 6 might inspire a modern performance, not to mention how it might inspire a modern performer's imagination to run rampant with inspiration to create.

While this hypothetical musical drama exists in my mind as my own performance of imagination more than in primary source material, Marcabru's parodic "D'also laus Dieu" provides an example of the troubadour's acousmatic imaginings that exists for the modern performer in source material, and one that provides another interesting opportunity for the performer to stretch their dramatic/imaginative engagement. This boastful, crude, metaphorically vibrant, and at times violent song is in many ways the "diametrical opposite"<sup>6</sup> of his other songs. Kay suggests that Marcabru, as first-person-subject, imaginatively mocks himself as a tactic to expose "the loose-living aristocracy for exactly the kind of behavior flaunted [in the text of this lyric.]"<sup>7</sup> In a parodic twist that at first seems paradoxical, the rhyme scheme employed by Marcabru connects the poem to Latin liturgical song, with its three-part tail-rhyme and evocations of God and St. Andrew in its exordial lines.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, we borrowed a St. Andrews Day hymn tune as a host melody for this un-notated text.

Despite its religious connotations and its cunningly well-crafted meter and rhyme scheme, the song, according to Kay, "conjures an imaginary sound-world of macho swagger, rough sex and animal baying, a world ruled by sensual appetites and experiences rather than by reason."<sup>9</sup> Structurally, each stanza describes a unique scenario, floating from one sensory-motivated activity to the next, in effect creating a string of individual imaginary vignettes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Medieval Song*, 206.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Medieval Song*, 208.

<sup>9</sup> *Medieval Song*, 209.

<sup>10</sup> *Medieval Song*, 210.

Approaching a performance of such a song, with its vagarious topical architecture, its seeming contradictions between the liturgical and the vulgar, and its ostensibly unsympathetic lyric “eu,” poses unique challenges for the performer. Turning again to a Stanislavskian approach to dramatic analysis, as in Chapter 3, the first step I took towards embodying this character was to divide the text into units with correlative unit objectives that cohere within an overarching goal. If that goal (as the performer assuming the role of protagonist) is, for instance, to expose the base actions of the cultural elite that I mock, then all of my actions in performance must work to achieve that end, and I must therefore embody each character I mimic as wholly and genuinely as possible, regardless of my personal feelings/biases towards them. For, if I were to do the opposite and cast judgement on them while purporting to portray them, the parody would fall flat and I would fail at my task of, literally, broadcasting their abhorrent—to use a word I imagine Marcabru would approve of—ways. To shape the performance of such a piece, it is helpful to (re)establish some guidelines based on Stanislavski’s principles of acting:

- 1) All action in [performance] must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent, and *real*.<sup>11</sup>
- 2) Gather all materials that have any bearing on [the role], and supplement them with more and more imagination, until you have achieved such a similarity to life that it is easy to believe in what you are doing. In the beginning forget about your feelings. When the inner conditions are prepared, and right, feelings will come to the surface of their own accord.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *An Actor Prepares*, 49, emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> *An Actor Prepares*, 57.

- 3) By avoiding action and aiming straight at the result you get a forced product which can lead to nothing but ham acting...Act with truth, fullness and integrity of purpose...by choosing lively objectives.<sup>13</sup>

By setting these parameters in place before approaching this complex network of parodic mockery within a world of sensual appetites and irrationality complicated by liturgical metrical and musical structure, I found what I hope comes across as a convincing mode of performance fueled, most importantly, by an imaginative process that is bolstered with analysis of the song's medieval context.

### **Phantasmatic imagination and performance**

In Machaut's *Le Voir dit*, the character called Toute Belle sends the Narrator, her love interest, the *complainte* "Mes doulz amis" in the form of a letter, the essence of which imprints upon the memory of the Narrator and infiltrates his response to Toute Belle, the *ballade* "Nés qu'on porroit les estoilles nombrer," with imaginative resonance. The two pieces are presented in succession on this website in order to emphasize performance decisions made for the *ballade* based on phantasmatic imaginings/remembrances (i.e., imaginative recall of Toute Belle's words instigated through visual impetus from her letter) of the *complainte* (which, in this recording is intoned, as no musical notation for it exists). "If, in Marcabru, the sounds of imaginary blows, hounds, and cuckoos could be called acousmatic, Machaut links imagined sound phantasmatically with elaborate mental configurations and often exquisite visual images. The result is that, like earlier singer-composers, Machaut conflates composition with performance; unlike them, though, the performance envisaged is often the result of the imaginative resources

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<sup>13</sup> *An Actor Prepares*, 128.

of writing and their impact on the textual ‘audience,’ the reader.”<sup>14</sup> In terms of textual content, the *ballade* has all the characteristics of a *complainte*, as the narrator bemoans his unfulfilled desire to see Tote Belle again, archetypally blaming Fortune for his pitiful state. Snatches of text from Tote Belle’s *complainte* infiltrate the *ballade*, and Kay’s analysis suggests that the *ballade* could be a song that is imagined by the Narrator, who hears Tote Belle’s voice as he uses her own words to craft his *ballade*.

This analysis has direct impact on the performance decisions we made for the piece, specifically vocal registration and pacing/tempo. Traditionally, “Nés qu’on porroit les estoilles nombrer” is performed by an ensemble of male voices (or a male voice with two accompanying instruments, or some combination thereof), but our performance of the three-voice *ballade* casts the song as an expression of the innerworkings of the Narrator’s mind, who imagines it as sung in the voice of Tote Belle. This all-treble configuration resonates in a fresh way, especially if one is accustomed to hearing it sung in a male Narrator voice. Moreover, thinking in terms of an operatic reading—not in the sense of grand vocal timbre and stereotypical aesthetic expectations, but instead of creating a resonant reading motivated by the striking visual components of the manuscript folios—our performance has an air of introspection and isolated rumination embodied in a slightly slow tempo and reflective pace.

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<sup>14</sup> *Medieval Song*, 213.