

Concluding Performance Reflections

Imagining the sound of medieval song requires a continual exchange of loss and discovery. Its original sound is forever lost to us. Even if we knew exactly how it would have sounded those many centuries ago, our historical distance prohibits us from receiving/perceiving it in the same way that one would have then, and it will never enter our consciousness and “inspire” us as it would have a medieval listener. Yet, reimagining its sound world in an effort to discover what medieval song might have sounded like *does* inspire us in its own right, little by little bringing us closer to an adequate realization of our own place in time. As Kay observes, “unconfined to its time, de-realized, displaced, and remade in imagination, medieval song will continue being recreated and heard where it is not, just as Verdi re-created it at the moment of its loss, and saw in it a path to the future.”¹ Our reinterpretation of Verdi’s “Deserto sulla terra” (*Il Trovatore*) for the concluding chapter participates in this process of discovery and loss by *finding* the melody originally composed by Verdi, *losing* its operatic soundscape to cast it alongside a small, thirteen-string medieval harp and a non-spinto, light-lyric tenor voice, in an effort to *imagine* how it might have sounded had it been performed in the Middle Ages, knowing all the while that the melody’s contour and implied harmonic structure are something of a misfit in medieval song aesthetic. The whole process is a thought project that begins with the anticipation of losing while hoping to find glimpses of medieval soundbites—a process that imitates the whole anachronic journey of this book and website.

As a practitioner of medieval performance, I feel in many ways akin to Verdi’s treatment of the troubadour, who “when he ‘finds’ troubadour song he also guarantees its loss.”² Finding

¹ *Medieval Song*, 248.

² *Medieval Song*, 242.

historically well-informed approaches to medieval song reconstruction while allowing the song and its context to animate my own imagination might, at times, lead to historically plausible performances (or moments of performance), but will undoubtedly at other times “lose’ its historical specificity beyond recognition, [while also retrieving] for it a relevance to both present and future.”³ The cyclical process is fundamental to opening up possibilities and (re)discovering the imaginal riches of the repertoire. And, as we have seen throughout *Medieval Song*, an active participation in the imaginative, recreative process is an undeniably valuable and integral part of the performance practice. My intention in all of the music-making endeavors on this website was not specifically to create an authentic reconstruction of a medieval song, although the possibility of historically plausible moments was never rejected, but on the contrary hoped for, glimpse by glimpse. Collaborating with Sarah Kay to discover what sounding potential these songs might have in the hopes of offering unforeseen potential and new possibilities, rather, is the heart and soul of our objective, not to mention a personal honor and joy. And, the collection of work offered here is done in the hope of continual inspiration and reanimation into the future.

— Christopher Preston Thompson

³ *Medieval Song*, 238.