

Chapter 3 Performance Reflections

While Chapter 2 focuses on moments of enlightenment and their dramatic impact in song performance, Chapter 3 turns to ecologies of breath as interpenetrative *pneuma*, or spirit, and how “in-spiration” inspires song, specifically through depictions of the breath of the lion and the panther. Singing relies on breath, and where there is breath there is potential for not only voice, but also song. Breath’s function within the overall structure of medieval song is far more impactful than the mere mechanical process singers tend to focus on today. As Kay notes, “both terrestrial beasts and their celestial counterparts are at times characterized by their breathing, variously understood as a source of divine life, an animating spirit, a means to voice, and even to song. Such breath is literally in-spiring, in that what is breathed in from the outside produces life, spirit, voice, or song in the one who breathes, the human singer.”¹ Kay’s virtuosic readings of two troubadour songs—Rigaut de Berbezilh’s “Atressi com lo leos” and the anonymous “Ensement com la panthere” (which is possibly also by Berbezilh)—are contextualized by medieval thinking about bestial constellations in the celestial realm, and then read alongside Nicole de Margival’s *Dit de la Panthere* and Guillaume de Machaut’s *Dit dou Lyon*, where the same beasts circulate within the terrestrial zone. These readings reveal how cosmic *pneuma* meets divine spirit in courtly song to animate both heavenly spirit and bestial soul.

We offer performances of both lyrics, but not of the *dits* since the *Panthere* is not transmitted with notation (only blank staves) and the *Lyon* does not contain actual songs. However, Machaut draws a connection between the mute but adoring lion, whose eloquent discourse is delivered to the lyric “je” by means of a mere inspirational look, and the small body

¹ *Medieval Song*, 84-5.

of repertoire called the *chantepleure*. As Kay observes, the connection is justified insofar as “the genre of the *chantepleure*, in which breath is understood as alternating between melody and inarticulate sobbing, claims common ground between the voices of man and beast.”² By way of illustration of what it might sound like to cry-sing, as envisaged by Machaut in response to the lion’s glance, we offer a recording of the anonymous *chantepleure*, “En esmai et en confort.”

The Lion and the Panther

The two troubadour songs at hand are transmitted in manuscripts G and W, respectively, with exact musical notation, at least where pitch and melody are concerned. Given Kay’s airtight and in-spired analysis of their respective ecologies of breath, little additional commentary is necessary here. The question that remains for the performer is: How might we take such analysis and use it to animate our own ecology of *performance*, as it were? A reading of the entirety of “Atressi com lo leos” reveals the role of the lion not as an actor in the scene, but as an inspiration that the lyric “eu” recalls and imitates in order to advance towards his ultimate goal. In order to move the lady to return his love, he alternates between expressions of devotion, application of guilt and pressure, and anxious complaints about his well-being, thereby saving himself from his current state of living death. Drawing anachronically, as Kay would say, from a Stanislavskian approach to scene and character analysis, the flow-chart³ below breaks down the first stanza of poetry into units with correlative unit objectives, as if it were a dramatic monologue, and prescribes a descriptive inspiration to each.⁴ When applied to the entire song in performance, the cumulative effect of this series of in-spired breaths as components of a network of processes—

² *Medieval Song*, 119.

³ Original text edited by Várvaro, translation by Sarah Kay.

⁴ For more information on dramatic units, objectives, and scene and character analysis, see Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1948).

inspiration, action, and musical vocalization—has the potential to resound as a complete portrayal of celestial, terrestrial, and courtly inspired lyric.

<i>Original Occitan</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Unit Objective</i>
UNIT 1 – breath of woeful mourning		
Atressi com lo leos que es tan fers quant s'irais de son leonel, quan nais mortz ses alen' e ses vida	Like the lion that is so wild in its grief for its cub, stillborn and unbreathing,	I am conjuring the spirit of a lion lamenting in order to evoke a sense of gravitas.
UNIT 2 – breath of feral rage		
et ab sa voz, quan l'escrida, lo fai revivre et anar	and then brings it back to life and movement with its voice when it cries out to it,	I am mimicking the lion's roar in order to embody the pain my love causes me.
UNIT 3 – breath of self pity		
atressi pod de mi far ma bona domn'e Amors e garir de mas dolors	so Love and my lady could do for me and cure me of my sorrow.	I am placing guilt on my lady in an effort to move her spirit to return my love.

Similarly to the lion song, “Ensement com la panthere” depicts breath as “a matter of life or death, ruled over by love and the lady, who revive the singer with their breath and voice, or kill him by withholding them.”⁵ In this song, as in “Atressi com lo leos,” the lyric “eu” conjures the seductive-yet-lethal qualities of a panther in order to effect reciprocation from his love-interest, but this time with less guilt association and more praise of her through identification with this alluring, irresistible, all-powerful creature. While the melody of the lion’s song gives the impression of a majestic, declamatory/roaring beast, the melody of the panther’s song casts a much more spellbinding atmosphere. Its contour moves primarily by conjunct motion, but with captivating interruptions by large leaping intervals of a major sixth in the first, third, and tenth melodic lines, almost as if the stalking predator suddenly, but gracefully, leaps towards her prey. The texture is largely melismatic in comparison with the Lion song, and frequent pitch repetition

⁵ *Medieval Song*, 109.

and plicated pitch bending upward and downward all reinforce the panther's enchanting seduction. "The rhythm of meter and rhyme, melodic contours and melismas, are measured in and by the singer's breath, to which they serve as an acoustic double, amplifying and elaborating it for esthetic effect,"⁶ here adding resonance to the panther's "pleasure-inducing breath."⁷

Singing while crying

The *chantepleure* "En esmai et en confort," as previously mentioned, is one of only a handful of pieces belonging to the genre. Found in the *Chansonnier Cangé* (Trouvère O), it is closer in date and style to the music of Machaut than any other of its category, thereby making it a reasonable candidate for an example of how we might imagine the unnotated (and, indeed, unscripted) *chantepleure* of the *Dit dou Lyon*.⁸ Hosting a recording of both "En esmai" and "Tieus rit au main" (the *complainte* from Machaut's *Remede*) on the same website offers the opportunity to listen to the two pieces side-by-side, and indeed, the similarities are striking. In an effort to amplify the similarities, I chose to interpret the style of rhythmic notation found in the Cangé manuscript by using Franconian precepts, as opposed to earlier modes of rhythmic transmission, in order to bring the rhythmic notation as close in temporal proximity to Machaut as possible. This rhythmic realization of what is often described as semi-mensural, *pre-Franconian* notation provides one of several possible interpretations of an as-of-yet inconclusive notational tradition. While I have transcribed the musical figures here using the guidelines

⁶ *Medieval Song*, 86.

⁷ *Medieval Song*, 109.

⁸ *Medieval Song*, 119.

codified by Franco, this is only one of at least a few options for interpretation. Arguments can be made for and against it, but none can claim exclusive authority over it.⁹

For our purposes, this interpretation provides a structure around which to shape a rhapsodic, partly sung, partly cried, partly declaimed expression of animated *pneuma* that is not bound by rigid gradation of rhythm/*tempus*, but instead has the freedom to flexibly move through the emotional peaks and valleys of the lyric “je.” Frequently occurring decorative descending *currentes* and multiple instances of plicated pitch bends shower the melodic contour in crying gestures. Alteration/elongation of constituent ligature elements infiltrate the rhythmic texture with audible hesitations followed by forward rushing patterns, evoking sporadic emotional shifts and outbursts. Notably, on the fourth musical line, the *tessitura* suddenly leaps to the top of the register in an outburst resounding in frustration, in the first stanza, on the text “because the end is so very far off.”¹⁰ The same musical line descends from its highest point down a major ninth from beginning to end, spiraling into despair in a melismatic frenzy with fast moving notes immediately followed by a plicated, sobbing pitch bend. In each stanza, this melismatic passage highlights evocative key words: “termes” (“end”), “charmes” (“magic”), “retaille” (“sharpens”), “travaille” (“suffer”), “ioie” (“joy”), and “ravoie” (“set upon the right road”).¹¹ Descending intervals of fourths and fifths characterize the third, fifth, and seventh musical lines, suggesting moments of emotional plummet. These musical gestures are the aforementioned “acoustic double” for the *chantepleure*.

⁹ For a close examination of performance issues surrounding the *Chansonniere Cangé*, including the question of rhythmic interpretation, see my forthcoming dissertation, which will provide alternate readings of a select corpus from the manuscript, including “En esmai,” and offer a revised approach to interpreting the manuscript’s notational style.

¹⁰ “que trop m’esloigne li termes;” text edited and translated by Kay.

¹¹ Edited and translated by Kay.