Transcript of the Introductory Video for the Website Companion to

Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera by Sarah Kay

I'm Sarah Kay. I'm a professor of medieval studies and the author of Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera.

And I'm Christopher Preston Thompson. And I'm a performer and scholar of medieval song and the artistic director of this website, that accompanies Sarah's book. We are in the Tom Bishop library at the French House of New York University. And we're recording this conversation as an introduction to our collaboration and the website that resulted from it. It began when you approached me to discuss it back in 2019.

SK: Yes. At that point, I was halfway through writing this book. I've written three out of the six chapters. They were shaping up as a series of experimental readings of medieval songs, in an attempt to capture something of what they might have sounded like from the perspective of somebody who is not a musician. And it just occurred to me that it would be transformative ... it would really increase the interest and impact of the book

if these experimental essays could be accompanied by experimental performances. They would trying to carry out in actuality, some of the ideas that I was playing with, and which would also be an opportunity to test them and see if they worked.

CPT: Yes, and that's exactly what we ended up doing, but the concept of what the website would become really took off after we started talking about it. It went from what was at first, just going to be a depository space for several hours of recorded music. It went from that to a really interdisciplinary multimedia websites that has become an e-resource to accompany the book. And it not only includes the recordings, but it also includes performance reflections that tie each chapter to the recordings. It contains performance scores and manuscript transcriptions. It also has, along with the audio recordings, two video recordings, that were created to sort of further enhance the concepts talked about in the chapter they're associated with, and they feature medieval manuscript illuminations. Original art work by the artist, Benjamin Thorpe, and a little bit of stage scene work.

SK: Yes. I think when I first approached you, I mean, I've heard you sing the night, worked with you on Russia Conference, on Russia studies that you organized, but I hadn't yet met the rest of your ensemble, and you brought them on board.

CPT: I did, I did. I thought it would get awfully long-winded if it was just me the whole time performing the songs. So having the ensemble along with really, I think, enhanced the collaboration. And it also gave us an opportunity to really explore some of the polyphonic songs that you discuss in the book. And so we got to engage with that material and we also got to experiment further with how we accompany a medieval monophonic song. You and I began with some experimental recordings at the beginning.

SK: Yes. I mean, among the first group of songs that we performed was the Lion's song, which is in chapter three, Rigaut de Berbezilh Atressi com lo leos, which is often performed in a way that brings out its connections with eternity and with liturgy, it makes it sound very solemn and ethereal. And the very first time you sang that in rehearsal with me, and I heard the lion roar in the opening stanza, I thought, "My, this is really going somewhere quite new." And I think it's continued like that. We've constantly found new sounds in these songs, Thanks to the innovative way you've been willing to perform them.

CPT: I appreciate that. What great fun it was to work on that song with you, and let myself, as much as I can, roar like a lion. What great fun. I've never approached this repertoire with a sort of light-handed, delicate touch, and I've never been concerned with the idea that it has to be pure and beautiful all the time. I really am much more interested in approaching these songs as if they're sung dramatic monologues, with all of the heart and soul that we would put into any staged dramatic performance.

SK: Yeah. I remember in your performance of reflections to chapter two, where you're talking about the Giraut de Bornelh alba, you referenced the influence that Stanislavski had on you.

CPT: Yes. In the Bornelh- and I also referenced that in Atressi com lo leos- I speak about Stanislavski in both of those instances. With the Bornelh, I didn't want to do yet another recording of the alba. It's something that's been widely and very successfully recorded. So I decided instead to make it a video, and to perform the piece as if I really were doing it as a dramatic monologue. Similarly with the Atressi com lo leos, I wanted to approach it with all of this sense of realism that Stanislavski theories really grounded

theatrical performance in, dividing it into units with unit objectives and making it as sincere and realistic as possible, as opposed to overblown, rhetorical gesture or insincere, hammish acting.

SK: The other alba that you maximize in chapter two, the Fleury alba, is another piece that resulted, I think, in a very original performance, because that's a little new piece of the culture that I don't think has been performed before, right? But you knew as a result of my interpreting it and the way then you set to work with your ensemble on the basis of that interpretation, one hears a whole series of different voices in it: the Watchman and the Herald, the voice of the Dawn, and the breath of the beasts of the constellations as they slink away when the sun finally rises.

CPT: Indeed. And it was such an original and inspiring, closed reading of that piece that you give in the chapter. I thought we really must bring out all of the storytelling that we could in our performance of that piece as possible and create, not only the soundscape for what the music might have sounded like, but also the scene and the character work, dividing it into roles, and creating a sense of group singing through unison, and organum collective singing through instrumentation, etc.

SK: Well, speaking of instrumentation, yes. I mean, one of the most remarkable experiences for me listening as these songs were rehearsed and then finally recorded, was the music you're able to make of the improvisational accompaniments by your musicians. I loved, for example, in chapter four, the performance of Bernart Marti's "Amar dei", which is a song of hopeless frustration and despair, which the image of the troubadour thrashes the air, it is unable even to sing. And then in the sole manuscripts of the work, in fact, one line is missing. So there's a whole line which he literally can't sing. And the vielle takes over and thrashes around in his place for that line. It really

sustains, I mean, all the way through the performance, the extraordinary emotional anguish of the piece. And the vielle has a similar role, I thought, too, in the complainte from the "Remede de Fortune", which you sing in the "Remede" sequence in chapter one.

CPT: Which is also filled with such anguish and emotional thrashing, as it were. And Niccolo playing the vielle in those recordings, he really did thrash at times and brought out that atmosphere from the text. It's always been a priority for us as an ensemble to make a couple of mental choices that are not only historically informed, but also that prioritize the storytelling and creating an atmosphere, where we can dramatically interpret the songs in the texts, the music in the texts.

SK: I think the, I mean, it would also be true of the way you used the recorder, particularly in chapter five, which is a chapter about sirens, because recorders are a form of wind instrument and associated with sirens.

CPT: Yes, indeed. And you speak of that in the chapter. We wanted to really emphasize that association, so we used the recorder, improvising countermelodies, improvising melodic fragments to go along with the siren figure in "Joie, plaisance", a chant royal, and in "Volez vous que je vous chant?", the siren figure in that song. I think it really emphasizes, again, the storytelling.

SK: One of the major challenges that we had to face was my insistence on constantly writing about songs that had no surviving music, and then expecting you to perform them.

CPT: That was difficult, I will say, but in the end, it actually proved a very fun challenge. And we had a few different directions that we could go. We could have composed new melodies to go along with the text. We could have improvised melodies, or we could choose to make, what we might call, new contrafacts for the texts. And that's ultimately the route we decided to take.

SK: That means taking the melody of an existing song and adapting it to the song you want to sing, right?

CPT: Yes, yes. Adding the text that you want to sing to the existing melody. And I thought it would be nice to go that route because it allows us to come up with a melody that is wholly plausible, wholly authentic, if I'm allowed to say that word, from the time. Something that we know happened then. And also give us the opportunity to look at relationships between this extent song's text and this song's text that we don't have a melody for and form a connection between the two, which actually was a very fun process.

SK: Uh-huh. Which would you say was the song where that interaction between source and realization was the most striking?

CPT: Oh, I would say "Can lo boschatges", the Bernart de Ventadorn,

SK: In chapter four?

CPT: In chapter four. Yes. That song, as you so wonderfully discuss it in the chapter, is about this person who's crumbling in-between articulate song and inarticulate emotional despair. And that text gives the impression that he's sort of at the end. So I

chose a Bernart de Ventadorn song melody, where a similar story is told, except it's almost from the beginning perspective. So the two songs together could become like bookends of a story. And I write about this in the performance reflections. But it's almost as if they could be the same singers singing the same melody with different texts, from a perspective at the end of this relationship's journey, as opposed to the beginning.

SK: The piece I enjoyed, I think, working on the most from that point of view, was the Marcabru in chapter six, which is an outrageously rude and awful song in many respects. But one that seems to want to, what it seems to imply that it's tacked on a St Andrew's Day hymn. We set out on the search, didn't we, for a St Andrew's Day hymn melodies?

CPT: We did. And we found one. And it was really interesting to see a melody that I knew it was liturgical, but seeing this very, well, as you said, rude, and sort of bawdy text along with the melody, and have that sort of juxtaposition working together. And it was very fun, Indeed.

SK: I guess the other major problem that I've created for the performers of this website, and you in particular, was the sheer chronological range of the pieces that I had, because the oldest text that get sung is the meter from Boethius' Consolation. And the most recent text is a 19th century aria, or romance rather, "Deserto sulla terra", From Verdi's Il Trovatore which you sing to go with my conclusion. I remember when I first suggested singing the Verdi to you, you looked very horrified.

CPT: Well I did, I was horrified! I thought to myself, I'm a light near tenor. I would never get hired to sing Verdi. I'm actually going to put that out there to the universe and open myself up to that kind of criticism?

SK: But what did you learn from singing it?

CPT: Well, singing it in relation to your wonderful explanation of it, in the conclusion was a magnificent experience. Of course I can sing the notes and it's not an issue of whether it's possible to do or not to do it. But in this process of finding and refinding and rediscovering that the piece, in its operatic context, was a part of itself. I really enjoyed reconceptualizing it from the perspective of what we might think of troubadour song and how it would have been performed now, which was what Verdi was doing then, and sort of respinning it, as it were, for my voice, using a 13-string medieval harp, which is quite different from the concert grand harp that it's scored for in the opera, and singing it as if I were singing any of the other troubadour songs. And in the end it was gratifying and maybe a little quirky, but I think it worked.

SK: Yeah and it really bears out the title of the volume, which is Medieval Song from Aristotle ... - we don't actually sing any Aristotle, but Boethius is quite close, he translated most of Aristotle - from Aristotle to Opera.

CPT: Indeed, indeed. And that range was really thrilling to work on. I mean, I don't think I've ever done a project where I got to perform such a wide variety of repertoire. This whole process has given me an interesting, new perspective on how we might approach this repertoire. When I first began reading the introduction and saw the term operatic reading for the first time, it came with all of these assumptions, floods of ideas of what that might mean for performance in terms of vocal approach, aesthetic, perhaps

a grandiose, emphatic, declamatory style of singing sort of immediately sprung to mind. But on the contrary, as I read the introduction and continued reading the book, of course, I got the sense that this operatic reading really promotes an imaginative process that turns inward much more frequently than it turns outward and emphatically declaims.

SK: Yes. I mean, partly because I look to opera, because I think the composers of opera have an intuitive and imaginative understanding of earlier songs. Just witness the number of operas that are written with medieval singers as protagonists. But I was also interested in how the songs are recorded in books and how we respond to them when we read them now. Where we encounter the music as part of a visual space, which thrums with other sensory experiences, as well as sight and sound. The touch of the page, the rustle of the, the rustle of all of the life forms that are evoked in these texts. And so, yes, I was interested in thinking about the imaginary dimension of song. For me, in fact, that turned out to be the biggest discovery of this whole book. That medieval song, which I had kind of thought of as court performance, turned outward, always intended to be something that was put out there in order to be heard. But in fact, it's overwhelmingly concerned with the imagination, with songs that are desired, imagined, yearned for, but never actually fully realized, so that the song remains a kind of imaginary surplus, sometimes of beauty and desire, sometimes of monstrosity or bestiality or horror. But the song that you hear is not exactly the same as the song. And it was remarkable working with performers, who also one assumes on the whole there to put it out there, and sing to an audience. How they cottoned to this idea as well, were able to perform things in a way that make them feel like imaginative explorations of something that couldn't be wholly sung. And that was really a remarkable experience for me.

CPT: What piece in particular, or pieces in particular, did you find this the most striking?

SK: Well, to my surprise, I think it was most striking in the polyphonic pieces because you think that, again, you have a group of singers, their job is to sing to people. But in fact, I realized, and naturally you singers have always known this, they sing to one another as aspects of one another. And so the songs have this very highly ruminative quality, as a great quality of inwardness. And that comes across, I thought, particularly strongly, in the ballade from the livre de "Voir dit" that you sing in chapter six, "Nés qu'on porroit les estoilles nombrer", which is sung with this great intensity of imagined otherness, somehow.

CPT: Indeed I had the exact same experience with "Nés qu'on porroit ..." I found that ruminative, imaginative community process really informative, and I'll never perform that piece with any ensemble the same way again. And I also had a similar experience with the chant royal from Le Remede de Fortune. When the ensemble has performed that piece in the past, we've always done it with this declamatory, emphatic, outward-turning approach, thinking of the sorrow and the misery of the protagonist is a very outward expression. But through this process, it really was revealed that this inward turning, imaginative process of the protagonist required us to capture this sort of internal imaginary dimension. And as a result, I think the product is more intimate, more personal, and it's an expression of the protagonist's psyche rather than of some emphatic, declamatory, grandiose sentiment.

SK: Yeah. I think this might be the area of all collaboration, where we each learn the most from the other, in some respects.

CPT: Agreed

SK: Because it was really transporting to discover how song could be made to sound otherwise in performance than simply as performed song.

CPT: Yes, indeed. Indeed. And I'm very grateful for the experience. Thank you for having me on board for this.

SK: Well, thank you. We both learned a lot, I'm sure.

CPT: Yes, we did. And we have some other people to thank as well. First of all, I would like to thank Concordian Dawn Ensemble for Medieval Music, all of my ensemble mates, Karin Weston, Michelle Kennedy, David Dickey, Clifton Massey, Andrew Padgett, Niccolo Seligmann. Thank you for taking on this project with all of the heart and soul and importance that we feel for it. Thank you. I'd also like to thank three consultants, as it were: Sam Beret, who we had conversations with about the Fleury alba and about the Boethius meter. That was a very informative process, Thank you, Sam. I'd like to thank Drew Mentor, with whom we consulted about the Machaut. Thank you, Drew. And I'd also like to thank A. Scott Parry, with who we consulted about the "Reis glorios" alba. Thank you very much to all three of you. I'd also like to give a very heartfelt thanks to Richard Price and Candle with Digital, for your recording, engineering and producing of this material and all of the care that you put into it. Likewise, Oliver Weston, for your videography and compilation of the videos, the two videos on the website. And a heartfelt things also to Benjamin Thorpe, for your original artwork. It's beautiful and much appreciated. Thanks also to Anne Stone and Mary Chandon Caldwell for reading my essays and giving me feedback on them. Very helpful, and I'm grateful. And lastly, of course, we have people to thank for some

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