A general note about the following reflective narratives…

The performance reflection narratives that follow below and on the remainder of this website are intended to connect each chapter of Sarah Kay's *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera* to the recordings housed on the site and to provide insight into our collaborative process in exploring how these songs *might* sound in performance. As such, the narratives are intended for an interdisciplinary audience, at times introducing specific musical and literary terminology, and at other times engaging in general descriptions of performance approach and interpretation. I cite passages of Kay's book frequently in an effort to point the reader to specific elements found in each chapter and help coordinate the website with the book. While the materials found on the site work most effectively as companions to the book, the reader might also find them useful as independent explorations of the book's repertoire through performance. For more information on the website and these reflective narratives, see the introductory video on this website and the introduction to *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera*.

— Christopher Preston Thompson

Chapter 1 Performance Reflections

As Kay describes in Chapter 1 of *Medieval Song from Aristotle to Opera*, the epiphanic sequence in which the touch of a personified, abstract presence leads to thought and then song filtered through Antiquity into the Middle Ages in various permutations. This experience of epiphany is particularly noteworthy in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which is explored in detail in Chapter 2 of Kay's book and the correlative narrative on this website. In Chapter 1, Kay highlights the presence of this epiphanic sequence in two troubadour songs by Aimeric de Peguilhan, "Qui sofrir s'en pogues" and "En greu pantais m'a tengut longamen," and in Guillaume de Machaut's lyric narrative, *Le Remede de Fortune*. Our presentation of both the Aimeric and the Machaut seeks to illuminate this "tangential" event that, according to Kay, "mysteriously transports the author to a higher form of experience where…he is ultimately both enlightened and rendered more creative. He becomes the mouthpiece of the agency that touches him and plays him as its instrument."[1] In the case of Aimeric, the lyric "eu" ("I") is touched by Amor (Love), transporting him from confused lover, torn between his desire for two different ladies to one "gripped by an amorous obsession…intent on singing love songs," less concerned with who they are about.[2] In the case of Machaut's *Remede*, the Lover is touched on two occasions by Esperance (Hope), resulting in a "sensory disturbance" that not only revives him from the brink of death but also increases his capacity to think and sing,[3] reanimating him to continue steadfastly on his path in love, all the while creating more complex song forms.

[1] *Medieval Song*, 38.
[2] *Medieval Song*, 41.
[3] *Medieval Song*, 47.

The Touch of Love in Two Songs by Aimeric de Peguilhan (fl. 1190-1221)

Twelfth-century troubadour Aimeric's song, "Qui sofir s'en pogues" is found in multiple chansonniers, often appearing first in sections devoted exclusively to works of the troubadour himself, as if to suggest that the experience the song describes is the basis for all of Aimeric's songs; that, in Kay's words, "all his thoughts of love and singing throughout his corpus are born of Amor's touch."[4] This is established as a poetic ideal regardless of melody, as none of the manuscripts include musical notation for the song. In order to perform it, we created a new contrafact by borrowing the melody of another song attributed to Aimeric, "Atressi.m pren quom fai al jugador," and fitting it to the text of "Qui sofrir." The unique metric structure of "Qui sofrir," particularly its variation between oxytonic and paroxytonic line endings—both within stanzas and between correlative lines of stanzas—that when sung require a different number of notes, made it somewhat difficult to find a suitable melodic model for this contrafact. The solution presented here uses a host melody with fewer but longer lines, excepting the similarly patterned final two lines of each. Some redistribution of melismatic figures was necessary in order to fit the text to the music, but the melody itself remains unaltered, excepting the deletion of one repeated note. (Line 7 of the original melody—or, line 13 of the contrafacted song—originally included a repeated pitch, A, after the third note of the line. Removing the note in this context allows for a more seamless pairing of words and music with no appreciable bearing on the melodic contour.) The diplomatic transcription found here, performance score 1.1.3, largely represents the square notation in Troubadour MS G. However, some interesting details (e.g. *currentes* found in lines 1, 4, and 8 of the original notation) are disregarded. Textually, "Atressi.m pren" provides an appealing host for the inserted guest text, "Qui sofrir," as there is a

[4] *Medieval Song*, 41.

strong poetic connection between the two songs. Both engage with love for two ladies. The love-gamble that is explicitly described in the opening stanza of "Atressi.m pren" is alluded to in the opening two stanzas of "Qui sofrir," whose lover cannot refrain from returning to the one who brings misery with no relief and whose wrongdoing is so close to his heart. Both songs describe the touch of a single kiss that seizes the lover in an inescapable obsession. Both songs' lovers are consumed by their love, and the act of singing their love song takes priority over consummating their desired relationships.

Teetering between the genre distinctions *canso* and *chanson de change*,[5] the transition into the third stanza of "Qui sofrir" marks a moment of ambiguity wherein the lyric "eu" does not know in which direction to focus his attention. A touch from one of the ladies—which one remains unclear—in the third stanza serves as Amor's "mediator," and it is this personified abstraction that propels the lover into a "serene…dedication to love and song."[6] This turning point is highlighted by use of harp accompaniment in our performance. The first two stanzas of indecision/*chanson de change* are accompanied sparsely by the harp, which provides little more than a tonal framework occasionally sounding between lines of text. Between stanzas 2 and 3, however, melodic excerpts are played, alluding to an inward-turning lover who begins to dissolve into a meditative obsession with his own love song, as if he—prompted by Amor—plays the harp as an amorous expression. At the moment in stanza 3 when one of the ladies takes off her glove and the lover kisses her hand, which is to say the moment when Amor begins to play the lover as an instrument, so too the lover touches the harp and doubles the singing with alternating melody and countermelody, penetrating his being—as the lyrics state—and leaving him unable to distinguish between living and dying. From this point forward, Amor's touch is

[5] *Medieval Song*, 40.
[6] *Medieval Song*, 41.

given sonic embodiment by the plucking of the harp, which remains a constant presence throughout, both in consort with the singing and as reflective interlude.

"En greu pantais m'a tengut longamen" follows "Qui sofrir" on our website in order to highlight the established poetic ideal that infiltrates Aimeric's song corpus.[7] The lyric "eu" in this piece is obliged by Amor to sing in pursuit of his love, despite impending failure. When our performances of the two songs are listened to as a sequence, it is as if Amor forces the lover to sing "En greu pantais," despite the lover's rational awareness of potential loss, reaching out to him vis-à-vis the vielle introduction, which leads him to and through his song. The sequence "echoes those of the late antique prosimetra. Interpreting epiphany in medieval courtly terms, these works of Aimeric's show song as both abstract inspiration—the uplifting power of Love—and as corporeal touch that colors the voice with physical engagement and suffering."[8] The lover suffers at the touch of Amor, yet flourishes in his song.

A sequence from Guillaume de Machaut's *Le Remede de Fortune* (c. 1330)

Our redacted performance of the "touch scene," as it were, from *Le Remede de Fortune* includes excerpts beginning at line 905 of the *dit* and ending at line 2892, including eight stanzas of the Lover's *complainte*, "Tieus rit au main qui au soir pleure," Esperance's *chant royal*, "Joye plaisance et nourreture," ending with Esperance's *balladelle*, "En amer a douce vie," all connected by narrative excerpts. This section of the *dit* takes place largely within the imagination of the distraught Lover, acting as a soundtrack that accompanies all his thoughts.[9] Having embarrassed himself in front of the Lady whom he loves, he retreats to an isolated garden in

[7] *Medieval Song*, 42.
[8] Ibid.
[9] *Medieval Song*, 11.

abject misery. There, he is compelled by his misfortune to compose a *complainte*, employing the most antique song form found in the whole of *Remede*, during which he rails against Fortune and his predicament. This song marks the beginning of Machaut's reworked Boethian model of touch-song-discourse, in which the Lover's *song* initiates the sequence, leading to touch from a personified abstraction (Hope), followed by discourse, then song, touch, discourse, and finally song again.[10] The entirety of the scene springs from the mind of the Lover, and as the personified Hope revives him with her touch and with her discourse, not only is his spirit reanimated, but also are his compositional resources gradually bolstered, leading from the most antique of compositions in the *Remede* through a progression that ends with one of the most (if not *the* most) complicated musical compositions found therein.[11] The sequence of song—touch—discourse, etc., has "re-ordered" the Lover's mind and body, thus "he sings differently from now on, exploring the fixed-form lyric genres of ballade, virelai, and rondeau, and polyphonic as well as monophonic settings."[12]

Our recording of this "touch scene" hinges on two interpretive approaches. First, as all three interpolated songs are generated by the Lover's imagination, the video presentation cycles between images from multiple Machaut manuscripts and filmed vignettes between the Lover and a personified Hope. "Imagination or desire are free to construct past or future soundings which, since they are virtual rather than actual, permit many different temporal layers or indices to be simultaneously present, in such a way as both to activate temporal difference and deny the subordination of sound to any particular moment."[13] Medieval illuminations mix with modern

[10] *Medieval Song*, 44.
[11] See page 44 for more on the *chant royal*, "Joye, plaisance," whose "musical style is reminiscent of troubadour and trouvère lyric;" and page 47 for more on the *balladelle*, "En amer a douce vie."
[12] *Medieval Song*, 47.
[13] *Medieval Song*, 6-7.

scene play and twenty-first-century reconstructions of fourteenth-century sound, rupturing any notion of what *was* then verses what *is* now. The Lover is both then and now as he cycles through memory and epiphanic creation unconstrained by linear progression of time.

Second, instrumental pairings bolster the reanimation of the Lover and his expanding capacity to create song throughout the scene. His initial (imagined) utterance, emerging from the depths of despair, is purely vocal, laying bare his isolation and heartache. As his *complainte* continues, an accompanying vielle emerges from the initially sparse texture, both reinforcing the common preexisting association between French vernacular song and the instrument and sonically immersing the *complainte* in centuries of tradition.[14] The personified abstraction of Hope 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, and, as we see in chapter 5, flute-playing as well as singing is a traditional attribute of sirens."[15] 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"[16]—reinforcing the *chant royal's* "musical style [as] reminiscent of troubadour and trouvère lyric."[17] 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. Gradually, the accompanimental texture becomes more

[14] For more on performance connections between bowed string instruments and medieval monophonic song, see 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).

[15] *Medieval Song*, 48.

[16] Page, *Voices and Instruments*, 12-16.

[17] *Medieval Song*, 44.

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 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. By the end of the *chant royal*, the Lover's creative process has moved beyond the realm of monophonic song, approaching the polyphony next to emerge as he regains his strength at Hope's touch. The final four-voice polyphonic *balladelle*, "En amer a douce vie," brings the instrumental associations to full realization as "Hope reanimates the protagonist, instrumentalizing him with her touch so that he sings in new ways."[18] The lowest two lines are performed by the vielle and the Lover while the highest two lines are performed by Hope and the recorder. As Kay writes, "in Concordian Dawn's realization, only two of the parts are vocal, cast to represent Hope (who alone sings the text) and the poet-lover (who merely vocalizes): for Hope is the one said to sing the piece, yet "she" is nothing but a personification of *his* capacity for hope. The other two parts are taken by instruments that are played, *toccatz*, the deeper sound of the *vielle* aligning with the lover and the recorder with Hope; the recorder, in turn, echoes its presence in her previous chant royal."[19] The touch of Hope inspires the Lover to think and sing in new ways as a defense against the ever-changing whims of Fortune.

[18] *Medieval Song*, 47.
[19] *Medieval Song*, 47-8.