

## The Late Medieval Chanson

This essay will discuss three different late medieval chansons. The first is a 13th century trouvère chanson entitled “J’aloeie L’autrier Errant” by Thibaut de Champagne, the second is a chanson entitled “Je Vivroie Liement” by Guillaume de Machaut, and the third is a chanson entitled “Navre Je Suis D’un Dart Penetratif” by Guillaume Du Fay. These three composers all lived and worked in different time periods and produced a generous output of writing and music. Though each composers’ style varies significantly, there are some meaningful correlations between their work that suggest inspiration derived from their predecessors.

Thibaut de Champagne lived from 1201-1253 and was a later southern France trouvère of the 13th century. He was known as Thibaut IV, count of Champagne and King of Navarre, a province of southern France, though he was born in the province of Troyes. Thibaut was the posthumous son of Thibaut III, Count of Champagne and Blois, and Blanche, sister of Sancho VII, King of Navarre <sup>1</sup>. A productive French poet, and responsible for setting his verse to music, Thibaut is regarded as one of the greatest lyrical poets of the thirteenth century. His rhythms are uniquely harmonious, his combinations of meters show distinctive creativity, while his musical phrases are filled with true poise, clarity and emotion. His complete published verses consist of sixty-six poems, divided as follows: thirty-nine love songs, twelve jeux-partis, or debating songs, four Crusade songs, and eight serventois.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Taruskin. *The Oxford History of Western Music*. 6 volumes. New York: (Oxford University Press, 2005).

His chanson “J’aloie l’autrier errant” is considered a pastourelle, or typically an old French lyric form concerning the romance of a shepherdess. In most of the early pastourelles, the poet knight meets a shepherdess who bests him in a wit battle and who displays general coyness. It is often slow in tempo. Thibaut’s poem recounts the story of a scholar, possibly Thibaut himself out riding, who spots a young woman pleasing to him and inquires her name. She, as in all pastourelles disdains to even look at him and warns him to leave immediately for she is in love with another. Troubled by her behavior and his growing love, he asks her to treat him differently. This causes the girl to weep and triggers him to “ride straight off” with her in the saddle until two shepherds shout and run after him, forcing him to leave her behind and take flight, for “I had no interest in such people.” The poem consists of five verses, all with exactly twelve lines. There is no rhyme scheme and no obvious pattern of line length except that the first line of each verse is longer and more narrative than the following. It is strophic, as in each verse is sung along to the same exact melody.

This chanson is monophonic and appears to be intended for one singer. Rhythmically, this pastourelle is rich in ornamented rhythms. The rhythm follows an ABABCD format. The last two lines of each verse present a new rhythm not present in the ABAB pattern preceding. There appears to be little or no syncopation but pickups appear at the beginning of the first and third lines. The melodic style is overall melismatic, though parts of the song are neumatic. “J’aloie l’autrier enfant” does not have formal repetition within its strophe as there is no rhyming and the pattern ABABCD is simply repeated five times for each verse. The

rhythm is not notated in the manuscript, but some scholars think *trouvère* pastorelles, because of their “folk” flavor, may have been metrical.

Following Thibaut de Champagne came 14th century troubadour legend Guillaume de Machaut who lived from ca. 1300-1377. Educated in the region around Rheims, he was employed as secretary to John I, Count of Luxemburg and King of Bohemia, from 1323 to 1346; in addition he became a canon in 1337. Machaut was one of the most prolific poet/composers; his lyrical output comprises around 400 poems, including 235 ballades, 76 rondeaux, 39 virelais, 24 lais, 10 complaintes, and 7 chansons royales, and Machaut did much to perfect and codify these fixed forms.<sup>2</sup> He is a part of the musical movement known as the *ars nova* (New Music). Machaut composed in a wide range of styles and forms and helped develop the motet and secular song forms (particularly the lai and the formes fixes: rondeau, virelai and ballade). Machaut wrote the *Messe de Nostre Dame*, the earliest known complete polyphonic setting of the Ordinary of the Mass attributable to a single composer. As a composer of the 14th century, his secular song output includes monophonic lais and virelais. He also worked in the polyphonic forms of the ballade and rondeau.<sup>2</sup> The lyrics of Machaut's works almost always dealt with courtly love.

Machaut's chanson “*Je vivoie liement*” deals with refined love or “*Fin'Amors*” in which a man is speaking to his unrequited love, owing all his sadness and misery to her blithe ignorance of his love. The refrain states simply “I should live happily” if only the object of his desire truly understood his love and showed

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Raeney, *Guillaume de Machaut* in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 11 (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980).

him some mercy. The text could be autobiographical, though there are little to no specific facts regarding the pair that could confirm any autobiographical content. The text form appears to be ABAABA. A is the first five line verse which acts as a sort of refrain. Essentially, the song is structured refrain, verse, refrain and then repeat. Each verse, or B, has exactly 9 lines of roughly equal length, though there is no rhyme scheme or rhyming involved.

The texture is monophonic. The rhythm is notated in 6/8 time signature and employs dotted quarter and half notes, unlike the rhythmically un-notated trouvère song. The text is strophic as the two different verses follow the same melody as indicated by the score. Beyond the overall outer repetition of the refrain and verse melody, the rhythm does not repeat itself within each section. There exists no syncopation. The melodic style is almost entirely neumatic with a few syllabic notes usually sung as two dotted quarter notes in a row. This chanson follows a virelai form, as the first and last sections have the same lyrics and there is a refrain of sorts, "Je vivroie liement..." "Je vivroie liement" is one of Machaut's finest earlier works of monophonic courtly love chansons.

Following Guillaume de Machaut's death in 1377, influential Franco-Flemish composer Guillaume Du Fay who lived from 1397-1474 graced the 15th century chanson renaissance. Du Fay was most likely born in Beersel, in the vicinity of Brussels. At an early age, Dufay's musical gifts were noticed by the cathedral authorities, who evidently gave him a thorough training in music. In 1428, he became a member of the Papal Choir, serving first Pope Martin V, and then after the death of Pope Martin in 1431, Pope Eugene IV. In 1434 he was appointed maistre de

chappelle in Savoy, where he served Duke Amédée VIII; evidently he left Rome because of a crisis in the finances of the papal choir, and to escape the turbulence and uncertainty during the struggle between the papacy and the Council of Basel.

Most of his songs are for three voices, using a texture dominated by the highest voice; instruments likely played the other two voices, unsupplied with text. Occasionally Dufay used four voices, but in a number of these songs a later, usually anonymous, composer supplied the fourth voice<sup>3</sup>. Typically he used rondeau form when writing love songs. Dufay wrote in most of the common forms of the day, including masses, motets, magnificats, hymns, simple chant settings in fauxbourdon, antiphons within the area of sacred music, rondeaux, ballades, virelais and a few other chanson types within the realm of secular music<sup>3</sup>. He wrote polyphonic chansons (80+) in all three formes fixes: virelai, rondeau and ballades. His chansons were longer and more rhythmically elaborate than his predecessors.

Du Fay's chanson "Navre je sui d'un dart penetratif" is set to a poem whose author is unknown. Du Fay was not known to be a poet, so it can be assumed he is not the author of the text. The structure of the text is AaBACAa. A is the line "Wounded I am by a penetrating dart Which has pierced my heart through and through." A is followed by a new line in the same stanza (a), and the second stanza begins with another new line (B), followed by A. C is the entire third stanza and contains completely new lyrics. The fourth stanza is an exact replica of the first, or Aa. The second stanza has five lines, while all the others have six. The text recounts a

3. J. Peter Burkholder, *Norton Anthology of Western Music, Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque*. 6th edition.

(New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010).

“penetrating dart” through the heart of the poet whose lady wounds him with a sweet and kindly look. The only one that can heal the wound is the lady herself, and the poet is lamenting his doom if she decides to resist his needs.

This chanson is polyphonic though the score indicates three different voices, which if sung, would create polyphony. As the only part that’s texted is the cantus top line, it can be assumed that the contratenor and tenor are instrumental. The cantus is much more florid than the contratenor and tenor; the contratenor and tenor are equal in note amount and follow similar rhythms but at different times. There is no real rhythmic or melodic repetition in the contratenor part; since the text is strophic and the same melody is used for each stanza, neither the tenor nor contratenor repeat melodic or rhythmic patterns. However, when the tenor and contratenor do sync up, it always occurs with either a quarter note followed by a half note, or a half note followed by a quarter.

This chanson is in triple mensuration and there are a few syncopated notes in the contratenor such as in measures 8, 11, 17, 22 and 27, which have accents on the weak beats. The chanson is mostly neumatic; there are a few melismatic phrases but they are infrequent, excluding the long melismas at the ends of each half. It appears to follow the authentic church mode #3, because the final is e in the tenor, and the range exists between the b above e, and the d below e as in accordance to church mode 3. “Navre Je Sui D’un Dart Penratif” is in rondeau form. The rondeau form calls for a rigid pattern of repetition of verse and refrain, following the evolving rhyme-scheme of the poetic form.

Through analyzing these three chansons of different time periods, one can begin to grasp the true development of the medieval chanson. Beginning with early, simplistic, though harmoniously rich counterpoint of composers as Thibaut de Champagne, it is evident how greats such as Machaut arrived almost a century later and used early composers as Thibaut's techniques and infused them with more complex rhythmic phrasing. Beyond the beginnings of rhythmic experimentation displayed by Guillaume de Machaut, composers such as Du Fay further built upon his predecessors through employing syncopation and instrumental lines below the texted melody. Despite the evolution of the medieval chanson, refined harmonies and melodies, and the enduring topic of courtly love resounded in all three composers' works; it would not be an understatement to say that the ideas rooted in these rich chansons formed the basis for all topical music that has arrived ever since.

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