

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization

Prof. Smey

Fall 2017

Session 3: Tuesday, Sept 5

Secular Medieval Music + Medieval Instruments

Up until now all the music we've discussed has come from the "the Church" and has featured texts of religious significance. In the later Middle Ages we also see the emergence of secular music at "the Court" for the entertainment of the elite ruling class.

I. Minstrels

As European society became more sophisticated (from the 1100s on) it was able to support traveling musicians known as *minstrels*. We watched a brief video (from *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*) which made a few interesting points about these performers. We learned that the word minstrel means "little servant," and that the typical minstrel was expected to play a variety of instruments and do other tricks.

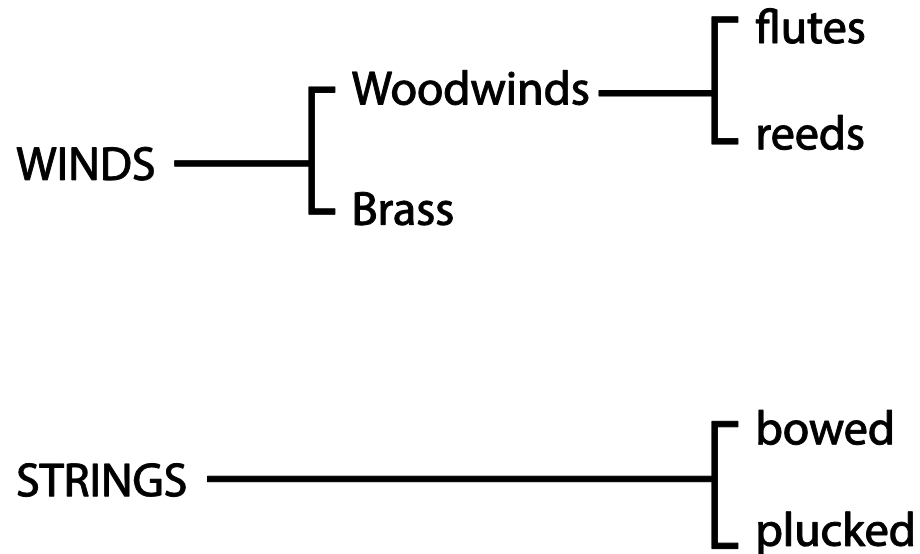
We saw in the clip that the minstrels would often sing *chansons de geste* or "songs of great deeds." These focused mostly on the theme of glory on the battlefield. Minstrels were often a sort of P.R. person, tasked with singing about how extraordinarily brave their employer was.

Illustrations and other sources also tell us that these servants played early versions of wind, string, and percussion instruments. However, because most of this activity was not written down in musical notation we don't know exactly what it sounded like. Modern performers will often add instruments to their performances of monophonic Medieval music, making up additional parts that fill out the sound and make it more interesting.

We listened to one of the few notated instrumental Medieval works that survive, a dance called a saltarello. This dance is written down as a simple monophonic melody for unspecified instruments, and we looked at how a band "brings it to life" by using a variety of winds, strings, and percussion, including some extra drones and drum parts that aren't in the original score.

II. Interlude: The World of Instruments

At this point we veered off into a long exploration of the world of musical instruments. We divided the instruments into a few different families that are categorized according to the mechanism they use to make sound. Here is our map of instrumental families:



PERCUSSION

KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS?*

(Keyboards have an asterisk because this is my own, somewhat unconventional categorization. Pianos and similar instruments are often grouped with percussion. But, a piano has strings inside, and organs are air-driven and can even include reeds. I think the keyboard mechanism is unique enough to make this its own category. Anyway, all of this is irrelevant to our current interests, because keyboard instruments are pretty rare in the Medieval period.)

(You can also look at how our textbook divvies up the world of instruments on pp. 34-40 eighth edition, 33-41 seventh edition.)

Medieval Instruments

We then walked through each category and looked at the Medieval version of these instruments.

Flutes – We'll define a flute as anything that produces sound by blowing across a hole. These are categorized as woodwinds because (as we saw) the original versions were made with wood. The medieval version of the flute is the *recorder* – it is a wooden instrument that is held straight (as opposed to off to the side like a modern flute.) It makes vibration by forcing air past a little notch near the top of the instrument.



recorders

Reeds – A reed instrument relies on a thin piece of plant material to produce vibrations. The bodies of these instruments were also originally made of wood, so they are grouped together with flutes in the woodwind family. The Medieval period has two versions. The *shawm* is the louder variant, and it works pretty much like a modern oboe. The *crumhorn* hides the reed inside the instrument and is quieter than the shawm.



shawm

Brass – Brass instruments are generally made of metal, and one plays them by pressing one's lips against a cup-shaped mouthpiece and making a buzzing motion. I believe they mostly had *straight trumpets* in the Medieval period, which are simple tubes with no valves. These can only play a restricted number of notes, so brass instruments were not especially useful for making music at this time.



Straight trumpet

Bowed Strings - - the most popular kind of bowed string instrument in the Renaissance appears to be the *viol*, and you can still see these somewhat unusual forerunners to the modern violin being played by early music specialists today. More specifically, this is the era of the *viola da gamba* which literally means “viol for the legs.” The most obvious difference here from modern violins is that these instruments are not tucked under the chin – they are held vertically (in one’s lap) like a cello. (Later we get *violas da braccio* (viols for the arm) which are much more like the modern violin.)

Also, these instruments have frets like a guitar. Since Medieval musicians only had access to gut strings (instead of the complex metal & nylon ones of today) viols tend to have a quieter, buzzy sound.

(The book talks about the *veille*, a Medieval fiddle that is flatter and good for playing chords. We are going to memorize the *viol*, though.)



Viol

Plucked Strings – the main ancestor to the modern guitar is the *lute*. Perhaps the most noticeable differences here are in the construction of the instrument, with its gourd-shaped body and 90-degree bend at the top of the neck. This would have also been played with gut strings. In addition, we see a lot of simple, small *harps* which can be held in one's lap.



Lute, harps

Percussion – We know that they had drums in the Medieval period, but the rhythmic patterns that might have been played on them were never written down. One somewhat unusual drum they would have used is the frame drum, which is round and flat like a tambourine.



Frame drum

We concluded this discussion by looking back at our video of the saltarello, and we tried to name all of the instruments we could see. It features two shawms, a recorder, viol, harp, and percussion.

III. The transition from minstrels to troubadours

We also talked about a newer tradition that also emerged in the 1100s, a sort of “new wave” of secular entertainers. This was a group of musicians and poets who were the “singer-songwriters” of their day, creating monophonic melodies with particularly sophisticated lyrics that shed some light on everyday life in the Middle Ages. In France these composers were known as *trouvères* and *troubadours*, depending on whether they were from the North or South. Both terms are based on the verb *trouver*, which means “to find.”

The video we watched emphasized that these performers were a new breed of aristocratic, educated people who looked down on the more simplistic entertainments of the minstrels. There was also a change of theme – rather than singing about war and bravery all of the time their favorite subjects were love and sex. They did all of this in the local vernacular language, rather than Latin.

In class we usually make a little table that illustrates the three signature differences between minstrels and troubadours.

	class	subject matter	language
minstrels	lower class	glory on the battlefield	Latin
troubadours	aristocratic	love and sex	vernacular languages

The differences between minstrels and troubadours are not really emphasized in our textbook, but I think it’s a pretty interesting story and often write a quiz question about it!

For the quiz we will learn Guillaume de Machaut’s “Douce dame jolie.” This is typical of a troubadour-type song (or, more accurately, a *trouvère* song, since Machaut was from the North of France.) Its focuses on the pain of unrequited love.

Our textbook also features a piece called the *Agincourt Carol*. This is an English secular song which is polyphonic (featuring two voice parts). It is unclear how well this fits into the troubadour tradition. It is an old-school tale of bravery on the battlefield, which makes it seem like the sort of thing the minstrels would have sung. BUT, it’s also pretty elaborate, it uses the vernacular language (in this case Medieval English), and it is from a fairly late date in the Middle Ages. So perhaps it reflects the fact that the English weren’t quite as fixated on the subject of love. See the book, pp. 63-64 eighth edition, 69-71 seventh for more details on this piece.