

A Troubadour Crib Sheet

The word *trobar*, the root of *trobador* (Occitan, or Old Provençal), or troubadour (French and English) means *to find*. I shall tell you why this is important in a moment, but first let me just say that the northern French equivalents of the troubadours were the *trouvères*, whose root, *trouver*, also means *to find*. Troubadours and trouvères were, above all else, poets (Keep in mind that medieval poetry was always sung), and composers of melodies as a secondary occupation. This is by no means to imply that melodies were unimportant (A composer of good melodies was bound to be in greater demand than someone whose tunes were mediocre), but just that the melody was considered to have been of secondary importance to the poem.

The troubadour, or finder, *discovered* the music, rather than composing it. The music was felt to be already out there, just floating around in the ether, as, say Boethius' *music of the spheres*. The troubadour just *tuned it in*, as we would tune in a radio frequency. This point of view would cause medieval people to have a very different attitude toward ideas like authorship, plagiarism, and so forth. As I shall describe below, *contrafaction* was considered to be a normal, even laudable approach to composition.

I am just writing this off the top of my head. When it comes time to write the program notes, I shall be much more rigorous in my research, and will probably discover a host of things in this letter that are just plain wrong. Forgive me for this. The point of this letter/essay/whatever is just to familiarize you with some of the jargon that will be used in rehearsal so that it doesn't take you completely by surprise. I promise that there will be no Final Exam.

Fixed Forms:

- *Tenso*, or *partimens* (*jeu-parti* in Old French) - A poetic dialogue, often between male and female (as in the case of a *pastorela*), and often between two troubadours (sometimes written by two troubadours). These fixed forms frequently overlap. The *tornada* at the end of *Reis glorios* would make this *alba a tenso* as well.
- *Alba* (*aube* in Old French) - A dawn song. In the case of *Reis glorios*, the faithful friend warns the lovers of dawn's approach. *Sanc fuy bèla ni presada* (also in the program) is the other surviving troubadour *alba* (with melody). Both melodies are based on the Gregorian chant *Ave, Maris Stella*.
- *Pastorela* (*pastourelle* in Old French) - A dialogue (*tenso*) between a knight and a shepherdess. The knight's intentions are, ahem, somewhat less than honorable. The shepherdess (whose name is always Marion - her lover (not the knight) is always named Robin, and, yes, this *is one* of the roots of the Robin Hood legend) tries to defend her honor for a while (It must be said that a shepherdess' honor wasn't considered to be worth much in 12th-13th-century Europe), but *usually* (but not always) succumbs to the knight's advances, either through seduction or outright rape.

- *Sirventes* - A satirical song, created through *contrafaction*. As a modern example of this technique, *The Capital Steps*, a satirical ensemble that used to perform on N.P.R. (and also *Weird Al Yankovic*) would take a popular song and write new, amusing lyrics for it that parodied the original. As a satirical vehicle, this could often be quite biting, and was considered one of the basic skills of the troubadour.
- *Planh* (*complainte* in French, *planctus* in Latin) - A lament.
- *Canso* (*chanson* in French) - A song, thereby incorporating all the other forms. The French term *Le Grand Chanson Courtois* (This term does not have a precise analogue in Occitan, but dance songs and songs with refrains would definitely have been considered to be 'low style') describes the highest form of Trouvère and Troubadour art song. Most of the songs in our program would fall into this category. *Fin' amor* is the term used to describe 'courtly love'.

A brief interruption to discuss two terms from above that may be unclear. The *tornada* (*envoi* in Old French) is a little parting shot that concludes the high-style art song, often in the form of a dedication, but sometimes as a statement to person(s) known to the troubadour. *Contrafaction* is a procedure that was as popular with medieval musicians as it now is with modern performers of medieval music. There are about 400 surviving Troubadour melodies, but over 2000 Troubadour poems. One way to put this melody-less poems into song is to find one of the existing melodies (with a similar syllable count) and to swap the lyrics. This was really commonly-done in the 12th-13th centuries. One of the problems in putting on a program of Minnesänger (German) songs is that there are so few melodies that are actually German - They are almost all of French origin.

- *Dansa* - A dance, of which, alas, only one survives. Any song with a refrain, however, was probably meant to be a dance. The most common form of dance would have been the *estampida* (*estampie* in French), but none survive.
- *Trobar leu* and *trobar clus* - *Trobar leu* was considered the 'easy style', consisting of poetry that was accessible and easily-grasped. This style was probably preferred by noble patrons. *Trobar clus*, the 'difficult style', was probably preferred by reflective or philosophically-inclined poets, or perhaps by troubadours who simply did not want to be easily understood. No examples of the *trobar clus* idiom are in this program, but the form is characterized by hermeticism and inscrutability, and the melodies tend to ramble all over the place. The form pretty much faded away with the death of Arnaut Daniel (ca. 1210).
- *Coblas* - Verses, stanzas, or couplets. There were many forms of *cobla* (*coblas doblas*, *coblas capcaudadas*, etc.), and a large part of the art of the troubadour consisted of the cleverness employed in verse construction.
- *Descort* or *lay* (a *lai* in French) - A narrative in the melodic form AA, BB, CC, DD, EE, FF, GG, or variations thereupon. The form is borrowed from the liturgical *sequence*. I know of only one *descort* in Occitan (*Gent me nais*, that almost made it into this program as an instrumental piece, but I decided to save it for a later program), but I could be wrong on this. In looking through a book on the

Troubadours just now, I discovered that I was very wrong - There are several other surviving lays in Occitan.

Other Terms:

- *Vidas* - The biographies of the troubadours, recorded in late 13th-century Italian sources. These bios are perforce speculative, having been written down, in some cases, over a century after the deaths of their subjects, but they are all we've got. My favorite is the *vida* for Gaucelm Faiditz, who was described (This is a paraphrase - I am too lazy to go and look up the actual *vida*) as "*a grossly fat man, a terrible vielle player with an ugly voice, but he wrote good songs. And he married a beautiful prostitute who sang his songs, and who eventually became as fat as he was.*"
- *Razos* - In several *chansonniers* (song books), the song is preceded by a little description of the setting in which it was composed, or first performed. In the case of some troubadours, notably Bernart de Ventadorn and Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, the *razos* are lengthy and very detailed. So lengthy are those for Raimbaut, in fact, that it formed the narrative for a very popular program, titled *Raimbaut the Troubadour*, that we several times in our Atlanta incarnation. It invariably got a standing ovation, and was, in my, um, humble opinion, one of the best programs that we performed. The only reason that I am not resurrecting it now is that it begins and ends with (You guessed it!) the ocean drum - That is a gimmick that must not be used too often.
- *Lo gay saber* - The joyful art, that is to say, the art of the Troubadour.
- *Joglar* (*jongleur* in French) - A minstrel, or literally, a juggler. All minstrels would have been expected to juggle and perform other entertainments (fire-eating, bear-baiting, *etc.*), as well as singing and playing the *vielle*, or other instruments (The *vielle* is the only instrument for which there is evidence as an accompanying instrument, which, of course, proves nothing). Minstrels were right down at the very bottom of the social order. They were often slaves, and even if they were free men, they were really considered to be the scum of the earth, particularly by churchmen. Even though many troubadours were of humble birth (although many troubadours were princes and noblemen as well), they were definitely considered to be of a higher social class than the minstrel. Troubadours often hired minstrels (or owned them as slaves) to perform their songs.
- *Trobairitz* - The feminine form of the word *troubadour*. There were a number of women, mostly from the high nobility, who were *trobairitzes*, but, alas, only one song with a melody survives - That is the Contessa de Dia's *A chantar*, which *is* in the program.

Well, here it is. I hope that this is useful to you. The specific songs mentioned above are in the program, and all will become clear when you receive the set list. For any who are interested, I would be happy to direct you to texts that will describe in greater detail (and, forsooth, with greater accuracy) any of the terms listed above. The moment that I send this to you, I will think of several things that I omitted, but this will have to do for now.

