WOMEN'S VOICES AND MEDIEVAL SONG: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE AZÉMA AND SHIRA KAMMEN

In Fall 2001 I taught a course on “Medieval and Renaissance Lyric” in the program in Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon. Integrated into the course were concerts and class visits from two world-class early music ensembles, Anne Azéma and Shira Kammen performing medieval music, and La Venexiana, a vocal ensemble from Italy, performing Renaissance music. The texts which were sung in both concert programs were incorporated into the syllabus, so that in attending the concerts students had already read the poems and some background on them, and understood how they fit into a lyric tradition as verbal art. This enriched their experience in the concert hall immeasurably, but even more important in my view was the goal of multiplying the dimensions in which they experienced the lyric texts. For non-musicologists and non-musicians it is difficult to know how to integrate the musical, communal, performance dimension of medieval lyric texts, and in my experience, listening to 100 CDs cannot equal the experience of seeing live musicians, especially in an informal setting, become vehicles for the songs we were reading on the page.

In addition to performing an extraordinary concert of Marian lyric (whose program I include here), Azéma and Kammen spent three hours fielding questions from my students and performing medieval music from other programs they offer, including a program of Crusader lyric entitled “Chanterai por mon corage.” What follows is a transcription of that conversation, with a few clarifying details added; the musicians are identified by their initials, and their UO interlocutors by their full names. (For information about booking, discography, scheduled concerts and E-mail links, consult http://members.aol.com/aazema/ and http://www.geocities.com/shirakammen/).

Program:
NORTH STAR: MIRACLES AND MARVELS OF MEDIEVAL FRANCE

Anne Azéma, voice and hurdy-gurdy
Shira Kammen, vielle, rebec, and harp
October 9, 2001
Gerlinger Alumni Lounge, University of Oregon

Of the star ... I will sing always

1. Rose cui nois ne gelee
   Gautier de Coincy (1177/8–1236)
   BN, f fr 24406, 151r-v

2. Nouvel amour qui si m’agree
   (instrumental)
   Rogeret de Cambrai (13th century)
3. De l’estoile, mere au soleil  
Anonymous (13th century)  
BN, f fr 24406, 154r

Of Saint Leocadia

4. Que de memoyre me dechaie  
Gautier de Coincy:  
BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 110
5. Las, las, las  
BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 111r
6. Quatre jours plains  
Petersburg Hermitage, f fr XIV, 136-13 and BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 111v
7. Sur ce rivage  
BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 111v
8. N’est pas merveille  
BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 111v
9. De Sainte Léochade  
BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 111v

Gate of heaven and fount of honey

10. Ma vielle  
Gautier de Coincy  
BN, Nouv Acq 24541, 118
Dou cierge qui descend au jongleour  
Gautier de Coincy
11. A Virgen Santa Maria - Cantiga 8  
Attr. Alfonso el Sabio (1221–1284)

Marvelous and merciful

12. Gran’ dereit - Cantiga 56  
Attr. Alfonso el Sabio  
(instrumental)
13. Un brief miracle  
Gautier de Coincy
14. Dou tres douz nom a la virge Marie  
Thibaut de Champagne (1201–1253)  
BN, f fr 846, 36e
15. Maravillosos e piadosos: Cantiga 139  
Attr. Alfonso el Sabio

Research, transcription, edition, and creation: Anne Azéma and Shira Kammen  
Edition of literary sources for Gauthier de Coincy: Koenig  
Edition of the Cantigas de Santa Maria: Anglès, Mettmann

Interview:
Anne Azéma and Shira Kammen began the class with a performance of Thibaut de Champagne’s “Ausi comme unicorne sui.” Their performance, like the song’s text, re-eroticizes the famous image of the animal laying its horn in the maiden’s lap—that image which the moralizing / theologizing bestiary tradition had allegorized out of all physicality. Their rendition sounds nothing like the repressed, stolid, and rather metronomic musical renditions we hear in some recordings of medieval monody. When they perform Anne has only the texts to consult, and Shira plays from no score or notation. The dramatic variation in their performance from strophe to strophe tells the emotional arc of the text, without our needing to understand the words.
Gina Psaki: Why did you choose to open the interview with this piece?
AA: Thibaut de Champagne’s “Ausi comne unicorne sui” reviews all the stages and symbols of courtly love: the images, conventions, tropes, etc. It is considered to be exemplary in both its poetic and musical dimensions, although the versions are not exactly alike: two quite different versions come down to us, well worth comparing, though they tend to be fused by editors. In Ms. O they are notated with square neumes: these give us melodic but no rhythmic information.1 The first strophe is written with each line of text under its line of music; the rest follows in a text block. There is an historiated initial showing a unicorn with its head in the lap of a maiden. This manuscript [O] is generations later than the original oral tradition through which this song would have circulated when it was new.

Navid Moshtael: The manuscripts offer various versions of the songs, and the program of Marian lyric you presented offers various versions of the same story [in Spanish and in French]. How do you prioritize them, choose which to privilege in the performance?
SK: For the instrumentalist, the experience of accent is really different. Spanish is fundamentally different from the accentuation of French: sounds, sound-play, rhythms. How to arrange or juxtapose them are choices still made by the performers, on the basis of aesthetic criteria. We’ve chosen to perform “Ma vielle” with the miracle-story of the vielle interpolated between the strophes, because the alternation of singing and recitation, of lyric stanzas and narrative verse, works really well.

James Hein: I noticed that in your program of Marian lyric you had passages which were recited or declaimed, but enhanced or intensified over simple recitation. Is there a historical basis for that kind of declamation?
AA: We’ll never know exactly how octosyllabic rhyming couplets were delivered orally, since there’s no exact description, either in the treatises or in literary texts. As a singer, I find that the alternation of the spoken and the sung word is very dynamic. I try to blur the boundaries of each; that works best for me.

SK: For a singer, using all the vocal colors available is important. For an instrumentalist, there is a Johannes de Grocheo treatise, De musica from about 1300, which claims that the vielle is “closest to the human voice;” my goal is for the instrument to sound as human as possible when I play it.

Nancy Hart: Who was the original audience for the Marian lyrics, of Gautier de Coincy for example?
AA: The Marian repertoire is so varied, it’s hard to generalize. These are paraliturgical pieces, not liturgical ones; but there is such interplay, borrowing, resonances, shared imagery, between the two registers [of religious and erotic lyric], that each gains density from the echoes of the other.

Sabina Brown: What aesthetic criteria are most important to you when you perform? For example, are you trying to make the material the most historically authentic in diction and musical styles, or are you trying to make
the music a vehicle to make medieval lyric poetry more accessible to modern audiences?

AA: Whether you’re more oriented toward historical or current performance practice determines what you aim for. I want to be philologically correct (about pronunciation, for example), but I’m not aiming for a slavish reproduction of a manuscript which is not itself definitive, in some cases not even finished.

SK: Yes, after all the Middle Ages was a period without standardization, whether of instrument-forms, of stanza-order in manuscript versions, of pieces, of accompaniment, of styles.

AA: Also, the person you’re performing with changes the way you perform a piece. You want to be consistent with that person’s style as well as with the original music.

Bumper Dames, Heather Reynolds, and Daimeon Shanks: When you confront the manuscript of a poem that has been passed down without music accompanying it, how do you go about assigning music to it? Are there common melodies that traditionally accompany genres from which to choose? Do you decide to write melodies for lyrics without music?

AA: We do turn to various song types: for example, there’s a woman’s-voice alba for which we used the music from “Reis glorios,” an alba by Guiraut de Borneil, and it works well; the imagery common to specific poetic genres often makes another melody in the same genre work. Or sometimes two poems will have the same line lengths and even the same rhymes throughout, like Jaufré Rudel’s “Quan lo rossignols el folhos” [When the nightingale in the leafy wood] and “Del quatre caps,” so we sing the text of one to the melody of the other. Or in the sirventes genre, for example, some poems—Guilhem Figueras’ “D’un sirventes far” is an example—explicitly state that they are borrowing their tune from another song. And when we perform it, we borrow the melody from another sirventes—so it’s a borrowing of a borrowing. [They perform the Guilhem Figueras piece “D’un sirventes far” (“To write a sirventes”)]

AA: Shira, why did you play this accompaniment the way you did?

SK: The text is a denunciation of Rome, and it contains edgy sounds, both in its content and its phonetic profile (itz, ecs, etc.); on the vielle I respond to them with staccato chunks of angry sound, with more or fewer melismas, and by hitting the strings with the bow.

Enrico Vettore and Ryan Rush: Do you ever compose melodies for the poems? On what basis?

SK: Sure, sometimes a modern musician will compose an original tune for a lyric. One way a musician can help a melody to emerge that is really organic to the medieval text is to recite the poem aloud over and over.

Lisa Nelson: Do you ever write your own lyrics?
AA: We both do.

SK: A wonderful musician I worked with, John Fleagle, tried to “find” missing verses of Middle English poems. Composing “in the style of” is an excellent exercise, which puts you deep into the making of music and verse, and sharpens your craft tremendously.

Kristin Smith: Did poets and musicians work closely in the eleventh and twelfth centuries?
SK: It’s a good question. The Monk of Montaudan wrote a song (“Pois Peire d’Alvergn’a chantat”) trashing various poets/players on various grounds, and it’s clear that poets and musicians were often the same person, but not always.

AA: The *vidas* of the troubadours are a set of retrospective bios attached to the *oeuvre* of each troubadour in some of the manuscripts. Sometimes troubadours wrote good melodies but bad texts (Albertet de Sisteron), or sang badly but composed good music and words (Gaucelm Faidit); some did almost everything badly but compose: “Elias Cairel . . . sang badly and wrote verse badly; he played the vielle badly and spoke worse still, but he wrote words and melodies well.” The *vidas* distinguish between the functions of singing and playing, composing and copying, writing words and writing tunes, and still other roles.

SK: A favorite book of mine by Werner Bachmann, *The Origins of Bowing*, quotes Guiraut de Calançon on the ideal minstrel: “He must be ‘good at story-telling and rhyming, and acquit himself creditably in trials of skill. Know how to strike drums and cymbals, and to play the hurdy-gurdy. Know how to throw and catch little apples on knives, to imitate birdsong, do card-tricks and be able to jump through four hoops. Know how to play citola and mandoline, know how to handle monochord and the guitar, string a rote with seventeen strings, be proficient on the harp, accompany well on the gigue, so as to enhance the spoken word. Jongleur, you should be able to handle nine instruments (vielle, bagpipe, pipe, harp, hurdy-gurdy, gigue, decachord, psaltery and rote); and when you have mastered these, you will be equipped to deal with every eventuality. And do not neglect the lyre or the cymbals.”

So it seems there were some minstrels who weren’t expected to compose as well.

Cissy Jones: Do you have a favorite troubadour?
AA: Bernart de Ventadorn; Peire Cardenal; and as for the Jaufre Rudel canso “Lanqan li jorn sont lonc en mai,” it moves me to tears; I have never performed it for that reason.

Laura Berryhill: Is there a modern genre whose lineage goes back to medieval monody?
AA: Georges Brassens is completely in that tradition. His poetry is phenomenal; the music is often average, and the accompaniment is very simple. The *vidas* I read aloud to you before could be of Brassens or Jacques Brel.
Laura Berryhill and Tanya Flores: As interpreters of troubadour / trouvère texts, do you find any differences between male-authored and female-authored texts? If so, how do you treat them musically and dramatically? How do you think these factors relate to your own gender as performers?
SK: As women interpreting the utterances of women, whether technically written by men or by women, we are part of a tradition, there’s no doubt about that.

AA: How many women troubadours there were, and whether individual lyrics in the woman’s voice were authored by women or men, is paradoxically both fundamentally important, and completely unimportant at the same time.

[Kammen and Azéma perform “Chanterai por mon corage” (I will sing to cheer my heart), a woman’s-voice lyric about a lover away on the Crusades]

Lisa Nelson, Jennifer Myers, and Aimee Akwai: How did you come to this profession?
SK: It seems the obvious career for me. It’s a profession that combines rich, diverse, and beautiful poetry and multiple aesthetic universes. It’s very individual, with lots of improvisation. It’s a multidisciplinary art, not just music: it’s quasi-theatrical. It’s also not tonal, like modern music, but rather modal. It blends the worlds of high art music and traditional music. It’s music from the inside out; it’s scholarship and treasure-hunt, but it’s also creative exploration, where nothing is strictly set.

AA: Music was always part of my life, and I happened to become a singer. The stories these poems contain show the strength and the relevance of poetry. We perform a program of music of the Crusades, for example, and that repertoire has never not been relevant to the state of the world. A lot of our everyday life has been imprinted by this repertoire. As I singer, I can imagine no greater thrill than manipulating all those elements Shira talked about.

Kristin Kelly: Do you ever perform in historical costume?
AA: Over my dead body. As a woman of the year 2001 I dress in clothing that recalls the gap between our time and 1315. I sing medieval music of the year 2001, that’s inevitable. And other musicians don’t wear period costume—maybe when I see a Mozart ensemble dressed in Mozartian garb, I’ll reconsider.

Gina Psaki: Since multiple versions of troubadour lyrics exist in the different manuscripts, how dependent would you say your interpretation is on stanza order and content?
AA: It’s a very nineteenth-century question, isn’t it? There isn’t any one-size-fits-all answer; it has to be done on a case by case basis. It’s a performer’s art.

SK: Yes, for example, sometimes at the end of a piece we close by repeating the first stanza. When we interpret the emotional arc of a strophe we consider it in its context, not as a self-contained unit.
AA: Our choices are affected by the overall program, and by the format: concert or CD, radio program or TV broadcast, junior high school audience or an audience of scholars at a professional meeting.

But you might really be asking whether there are canonical versions of troubadour lyric. A lot of performers turn to CDs, and it’s good to know the performance background of a piece in the recent past; but, a certain version gets recorded and then it gets repeated ad nauseam. My version of a certain canso has been imitated and borrowed lately, the same piece done with the same refrain in a way that’s recognizably taken from a recording we did.

SK: I’m torn. This music isn’t meant to be frozen. I don’t want to set this accompaniment, but also, in the marketplace of music recordings, there are intellectual property issues that there weren’t in the strictly oral tradition.

AA: We’re producing a snapshot, not a permanent conclusion regarding how a song should be performed.

SK: Yes, but we’re not learning by ear from each other anymore; we’re learning from each other’s recordings and scholarship.

AA: For example, I did a concert program recently with Northern African and medieval pieces. There were four women, two with no Arabic, two with some Arabic. All four worked drastically differently: one learned only orally; one not at all orally, but with transcriptions on paper; I did a combination of both.

Gina Psaki: In recordings and performances of medieval music, is there a scrupulous almost-snobbery about genealogy of musical versions, as there is in the folk tradition?

AA: I wish! I’d like to see more honesty and clarity about what’s happening. It should be acknowledged that some personality has forever marked the piece and passed it on. Some light should be shed on the sources and thought processes of medievalist musicians as they make a recording.

SK: What we’re dealing with here is a broken oral tradition—a tradition within a tradition—and if it’s explicit, that’s good. If it isn’t, that’s not so good.

Navid Moshtael: But what do you use in the absence of an oral tradition? I would think it would be helpful to have a standard to start from—a CD to which other performers would add.

AA: The best standards are respect for the material, and trust, not a recorded version labeled as “exemplary.” Strong and beautiful verses and musical organization, such as “Lanqan li jorn” and “Can vei,” can be infinitely flexible.

SK: Maybe this is too general, but you do need to expose yourself as much as possible to how other, living, unbroken oral traditions deal with monophonic, unaccompanied, long narratives. And if I can be allowed a digression about
modern music, we have all music available to us always, but out of context—we’re dealing with these CD’s, and the original context of the music is missing.

Navid Moshtael: But we’re socialized to start out at the beginning, and improve. How do you know you’re improving, if, when improving means getting closer to original singing styles?

SK: It’s your choice. There is no way to quantify authenticity; it’s an opinion, because too much original information is lost. Still, it has to be an informed opinion, based on experience and study.

AA: Shira and I have a mutual student, a search and rescue policeman, who is not a singer but offered a strong performance of troubadour lyric. And another student, a woman, vocally trained, delivered the strongest “Lanqan li jorn” I’ve ever heard. Criteria vary, and the canons are large and moving; we’re happy just to have an impact on them.

Jocelyn Harley: How does the audience affect “authentic experience”? Any anecdotes?

SK: I’ve felt the most direct, “genuine” connection in doing a performance in a language that people can understand—whether mediated by translations, supertitles, etc. or in their native language. Instrumental music is abstract; you can reach people through it in a way you can’t in language, especially a language they don’t know. People have a visceral reaction to music, though, even in the absence of comprehension.

AA: The first time you make an audience understand something in the music, such as the punning sequence on “mugue” in Gautier de Coincy’s “N’est pas merveille,” it’s transporting. By the same token there’s nothing more horrible than when the audience is unmoved and the connection fails. It’s devastating, actually hard to live through. A concert creates a community: the performers and the audience are doing the job together.

SK: Regardless of repertoire, sometimes even regardless of quality, a connection with the audience can result in an ecstatic experience of music-making.

Jennifer Myers: Does the location of a performance matter?

AA: Yes, overall. Once I performed in a church in Angoulême with a tenth-century fresco of the Last Judgment, and it was something extraordinary. Or a basilica in Ravenna, with a chant repertoire. This relies on a lot on a community of cognoscenti who can savor a word, a poetic gesture, a performer’s ability to share. But if that’s lacking, then a cathedral won’t help; the audience itself must have a connection to the music.

Erica Legleiter: When you work up a piece, do you work together throughout, or come together after you’ve been working separately?

AA: It’s gradual, like a dance; we each go through our own line of music and see where they intersect.
SK: Different people work together differently as well. You might try an exercise: read the passage aloud and have your partner speak it back; then he or she speaks it, and you repeat it back, without music. That way whatever interpretation you come to grows organically out of the material. But realistically, not too many ensembles have enough time for this. It’s a lot about process; it’s no fun to sight read, but music becomes fun once you’ve grown to know it. Working with one other person is more gratifying; you have more responsibility, but you have more scope as well, to play with the colors. With five people, there will be a collision unless everyone is together all the time.

AA: Sometimes things just come. Shira was warming up one day and started embroidering a line, and it entered into our version of “Unicorne” permanently.

SK: Musical collaboration is fluid; in the best case nothing would get frozen. Musical renditions must change, not get hardened into habit.

Laura Berryhill: How do you (or do you?) change your vocal technique to deal with music of different periods?
AA: A good vocal production is a good vocal production, period. What I want the audience to hear is the core of the human being, the essence of the voice, two cords joining on supported air, with the resonant capacities of the body. How much voice, intensification is a personal and stylistic choice. Medieval monody and Kurt Weill are not so far apart—unlike medieval monody and Wagner.

SK: As I look at the music I choose to perform, I notice that I’ve chosen genres and periods that don’t really work with a huge vibrato. Vibrato is a natural impulse, but it can become an addictive habit rather than an aesthetic choice. My choices—pitches with pure intervals, strong thirds, fifths, and octaves—these don’t work with a huge vibrato. It would sound like barbershop harmony with vibrato! But I do think that musical decisions are also ultimately based on the kind of poetry you choose.

AA: Yes, so immediately rushing to the “to vibrato or not to vibrato” debate is counterproductive. For me the question is, is the poetry communicated or not? A voce bianca can be moving and expressive—or not; it’s a personal preference. There are medieval and late medieval treatises on liturgical music and vocal production, but overall this was not a world of professional singers.

Matthew House: How much of what we saw last night in your concert was spontaneous, and how much prepared?
AA: How important is that, really? To me it’s all spontaneous. But then again it’s not, because we know each other; we have a frame. Some of our pieces are metered and some aren’t.

SK: Phrasing changes each time; the accompaniment changes; we’re playing around with pieces that we know very well.
Robert Kyr: Could you take part of a song and sing it in two different ways, metered and unmetered, so people could hear it?
[The musicians perform “De l’estoile” (Of the Star) twice. The first version is fluid, with no predictable line length; the second version is measured, even inflexible, in comparison.]

Theresa Cuenca: Do you work primarily with manuscripts or from editions?
AA: It’s aesthetically and musically satisfying to work with manuscripts. Even if the scribe is making big mistakes and the manuscript version itself isn’t the most musically or linguistically useful, he’s struggling the way I am, and it’s tremendously moving; we’re working towards the same thing. I feel like I’m walking alongside that person. But I also consult editions; I need the help of scholars to discover the range of possibilities and impossibilities. You can learn even from a mistaken edition, transcribed into ¾ time! And time pressure also dictates a recourse to editions.

SK: You run the gamut. I have to wait for the singer to get his or her stuff together, before I can do my part. Right now, as an accompanist, I am a reactive musician. I have to be given something in order to give something back. For both of us, though, the question is: how will we best communicate the poetic text to the audience? What will help us best create that sense of community with the audience? We aren’t dogmatic, but pragmatic: whatever makes that happen, we will adopt.

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1 An excellent new digital resource makes consulting various manuscript versions of medieval lyrics unprecedentedly easy: Teaching Medieval Lyric With Modern Technology: New Windows on the Medieval World. A project supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and Mount Holyoke College. Margaret Switten, Director. © 2001: Mount Holyoke College.

