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"Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350" By John Stevens

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Reviews of Books

John Stevens. *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050-1350*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

This book (of some 550 pages) affords us a valuable survey of monophonic music for poetic texts of the late Middle Ages. It reaches rather far back (for background), while not proceeding beyond about 1300. The author deals with nearly all bodies of song: the music of the goliards, of the troubadours and trouvères, of the monophonic conductus, the lai, the liturgical drama, and to a lesser degree the English song and the minnelied. The volume is well written, excellently edited, and beautifully produced, with numerous musical examples.

As Mr. Stevens says at the outset, he wishes to prove that all this musico-poetic literature should be transcribed and performed isosyllabically, i.e. with the same time value to every syllable, though with some freedom, allowing more time on some syllables and less on others. Mr. Stevens sees (p. 500) "The first advantage of isosyllabic transcription . . . [to be] that it allows both elements (poetry and melody) to flow *naturally*. The *ordinary movement of formal speech is certainly closer to the isosyllabic* than it is to measured." In the course of the book, however, all musical genres are not consistently treated as isosyllabic. Three general categories are distinguished: (1) high-art songs; (2) lais, pastourelles, and related works; and (3) dance and other light songs. The last, the light songs, is in fact to be treated with meter and rhythm, but the art songs are without either (though just how they are to be realized in isosyllabism is never fully clarified). An explanation concerning how to deal with the middle group, the lais and pastourelles, is never presented.

What Mr. Stevens implies in the earlier chapters but later never explicitly states is that by "simple" he means songs which coordinate mostly single notes with syllables, and by "art melodies" he understands songs with an abundance of note groups on single syllables. The fact is, however, that there are rondeaux with numerous note groups and songs designated as "crowned" that include few note groups. Therefore this is a distinction

difficult to maintain. Nor is it clarified how groups of notes appearing on single syllables are to be realized — one must assume they would need to be done in a free, Chopinesque manner.

Throughout the book much is made of "number" as a central concept of the period; but how, besides syllable counting, numbers affect the songs, remains unclear. In Chapter 1, "The Courtly Chanson," the number concept is buttressed by several quotations and by examples. Unfortunately the application of number to music, although repeatedly referred to, is unconvincing. It exhausts itself in counting the number of syllables in a poem and then (triumphantly) finding that there is usually the same number of notes or note groups as there are syllables — which is hardly surprising. The most important correlate to number is, of course, metric rhythm, whose importance the author neglects or offhandedly denies in this chapter.

There are many other statements, which sound reasonable but are unsupported by analysis. E.g., "a weak ending in the words is respected in the melody." (p. 38) How? In what way? "The overall form (of the lyrics) A A B is mirrored in the musical form." This turns the facts around: The A-A-B form is that of the music; the poem has no "form," as the identical rhyme scheme may have a melody in A-A-B form just as well as be through-composed or have scattered related phrases — which is true of many poems which survive with several different melodies.

Chapter 2, "Latin Songs: *Conductus* and *Cantio*," like later ones, is marred by the failure to recognize the importance of Classical Latin meters. The same failure of recognizing Classic prosody leads, at the end of Chapter 3, "The Sequence," to errors and deductions therefrom. On p. 105 one of Notker's sequences is cited:

Héc est sáncta solémnitas solémnitátum insigníta triúmpho Chrísti
Quíd tu, vírgo máter, plóras, Ráchel formósa, cúius vúltus Jácob
deléctat?

This double versicle leads to the following comment: "That Notker should permit such variation of verbal accent suggests strongly that he did not regard this melodic phrase as having a marked and inviolable rhythmic character of its own." The author fails to note once more that Classical metrics give these lines definite parallelism using a combination of trochees and dactyls:

, , , ,
 _ _ _
 _ / _ / /
 / _ / _ / _ /

The problem of scansion and text rhythm, which might determine the musical rhythm, is frequently touched on but pushed aside. One passage is worth quoting to observe where difficulties reside and what the solutions to these difficulties might be.

The question of the proper accentuation of Latin in the period is . . . an extremely difficult one; and the question whether Latin accent affects or should affect melody is no easier. (footnote: Many writers assume without demur that rhythm is determined by word accent.) The opening of (the lai) "Omnis caro" will provide a good example or two of the problem:

- (1a) Ómnis cáro péccavérat
viam súam córrupérat
hómo déum réliquérat
léx natúre périérat.
- (1b) Hínc cónditór iráscitúr
íntus dolóre tângitúr
quási de sé conquéritúr
ét ad Nóe sic lóquitúr.

There appears to be a genuine ambivalence in this strophe between iambic and trochaic metre. Of course the ambivalence may arise, in part, from our ignorance of how thirteenth-century Latin was pronounced. But there is an instance here that fortunately removes the doubt from a purely subjective or ignorant position and puts it on solid ground. The fourth line of (strophe) 1a and the third line of 1c (not quoted) use the word *nature*:

4 l  x nat  re p  ri  rat . . .
11 l  gem nat  r   poll  uit

Whether an iambic or a trochaic accentual scansion is chosen for strophe 1, *nature* will have its 'correct' stress violated in one line or the other.

The assumptions which underly this passage are almost all erroneous. (1) "Proper" accentuation of 13th-century Latin (like that of the 12th-century

renaissance) is hardly in doubt, as the rhymes prove. (2) It is absurd to scan *péccavérat* and *périérat*. (3) To assume that poetic rhythm is completely determined by prose accents is obviously contradicted by all Classical scansion, such as that of hexameters, but also by modern poetry, in which the "floating" accent often helps to continue a metric pattern; nevertheless, prose accent is the guiding element in qualitative verse. (4) The assumption that the quoted strophe must follow either a rigid iambic pattern or a rigid trochaic one is the source of all difficulties in this difficult field, where flexibility and ingenious mixed patterns are fundamental factors. It is the assumption of such rigidity which has led to the opposition to modal rhythm. (5) There is, actually, no ambivalence, but a rhythmic pattern which governs the entire strophe. (6) Of course, the rhythm of the poetry determines that of the melody. Whereas the author repeatedly stresses the syllable-to-note (or note-group) one-to-one relationship in medieval songs, he ends this passage by throwing up his hands, so to speak, and sees "various possibilities — either the predominance of the metre following a regular scheme; or predominance of some 'absolute' musical scheme (i.e. a rhythmic pattern inherent in the melody); or a more varied and flexible manner of interpretation in which there is a slightly unpredictable interplay between words and music." But how would this be possible, when, as here, twelve verses correspond metrically to each other?

The solution to this problem demands a little thought, guided by the stress pattern of the rhymes 'ě-rát, 'ĩ-túr, and 'ũ-ít and the prevailing needs of accentuation within the twelve lines. It will then become clear that the rhythm is as follows in all verses as ' - ' | - ' - ', in musical terms ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ (♩) | (the final rest is optional). Now *nature* will scan acceptably both times. This scansion will also give welcome expression to the frequent cadential motif of tone repetition, heard on syllables 3-4 of lines 1 and 2 (5-6, 9-10), as part of a rising, fanfare-like triad. It will also emphasize the key words in this strophe: *caro* (verse 1), *deum* (verse 3), *dolore* (verse 6), *Noe* (verse 8), *turpe* (verse 10), *mortem* (verse 12).

At the end of Chapter 4, "*Lai* and *planctus*," Mr. Stevens speaks of "narrative" melody as typical for *lais*, observing that in long narrative *lais* largely single notes per syllable and a formulaic, repetitive melody prevails. But instead of relating this melodic type to the epic *laisse*, for him "the *lai* is . . . a sort of aural geometry, an *armonia*," a term repeatedly employed but without adding to insight.

It is interesting how suddenly, in the discussion of "dance songs" (Chapter 5), the same notation, which before was supposed to indicate a free, declamatory flow without regular meter, e.g. in *lais*, is now interpreted in strict metric rhythm; and this is done contrary to good word accentuation. Indeed, some very awkward transcriptions are put forward, e.g. (p. 194) *nullám parém habét . . . Aspérnatúr . . . non súperbít*; but mensural notation confirms these accents. And Mr. Stevens in this section justifies such "misaccentuations" as exemplifying *musica rhythmica*: "syllable-counting verse," (does this really have anything to do with syllable counting?) as opposed to "*musica metrica*" which is 'measured' in feet (i.e. quantitative verse)." Does this mean that quantitative verse is not subject to syllable counting? This would contradict everything in this book up to here (p. 197). It is this vague ambivalence which affects the entire work.

There follows a substantial, informative summary of scholarship concerning the performance of "epic and chanson de geste" (Chapter 8), English, German, and French. It is the analysis of the melodies which leaves much to be desired. To take only the best known of the preserved tunes, that to which part of *Aucassin et Nicolette* was recited, we have a *laisse* stanza of 17 metrically identical lines, concluded by one which differs. Anyone reading these lines immediately discovers that they are all trochaic dimeters, except the last one, which, however, can be easily integrated. Here are lines 1-17 plus line 18, with the notes non-rhythmicized, as in the manuscript:



verses 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15;

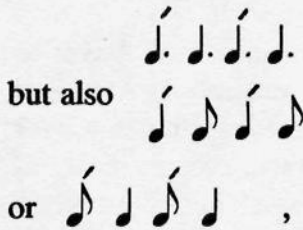


verses 2, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 17;



verse 18: a la ba- tail- le

Any reader will feel that at the end of each line a pause is needed; in other words, 8 rather than 7 time values are required. And though the concluding line comprises only 5 syllables, the first and fourth of these syllables will absorb two time values each. Trochees can be scanned isosyllabically:



the three methods open to a northern French musician of the 13th century, to which this *chant fable* belongs. The distribution of the recurring three-note figures on weak syllables here probably favors the last method:



which also gives the best reading for the final two-note ligatures:



The non-rhythmic reproduction of the pitches hardly does justice to this lively tune nor to the many others quoted in this book. Yet it is near the end of this Chapter, in the discussion of the pastourelle, that the first recognition of rhythmic melody emerges, in connection with the refrains which are involved both in pastourelles (but by no means only in them) and in motets (which are not mentioned here): The refrains "are written out in a clear mensural notation" (p. 233; this is not true at all). The dilemma that these refrains cause, which occur in *all* types of songs, is nowhere truly faced, not even in the immediately preceding discussion of the *chanson de toile*.

Chapter 7, "Saint's Life and Liturgical Narrative," is an excellent summary of the relationships between Saint's Lives and *chanson de geste*, troped epistles, farsing, rhymed offices, and liturgical drama. Again the question arises, whether one can assume that a short, incisive melodic formula, which is repeated many times, would change rhythm every time to accommodate the prose accents or whether the words would accommodate to the tune, as the stable, recognizable element, which would aid the memory in retaining the words.

The conclusion drawn by Stevens as to the performance of narrative poems in the Middle Ages is of "an inconspicuous music." It has been proved, however, that such melodies persist over centuries, much longer than the words. The same ballad melody will resurface, even in different languages. Different textual versions often seem to be slips of memory, filled in on the basis of the repeated tune and its vital rhythm.

For a non-specialist it is very difficult to deal with the uncertainties of "Gregorian chant" (Chapter 8). After a survey concerning scholars who have searched for a relationship between Latin word accents and chant melos, the final conclusion, that "we have come to reject relations between text and music" in chant, is well proven.

Mr. Stevens throughout maintains that prose accents must be preserved in medieval songs and therefore objects to a metric-rhythmic approach to them. He thinks that in a song "words and music may independently be fitted" to each other (p. 413). Yet he quotes Magister Lambertus (p. 422), who writes: "Rhythmica vero est illa, que in scansione verborum requirit . . .," i.e. *ritmus* is that which searches out the scansion of the words. Then he launches into a critique of transcriptions by various editors who took Lambertus at his word and applied the *rhythmic modes* to *trouvère* songs. Later (p. 498) a passage by Grocheo is quoted and translated rather obscurely. It should read:

Someone prepares the text, furnishing the material, and then a melody, paralleling its form, is fitted to it.

And at the beginning of Part 3 Mr. Stevens quotes from one of Archipoeta's songs — the only quotation in the book left untranslated:

Poeta composuit racionem rithmicam,
at Yrus inposuit melodiam musicam.

The poet composed (or created) the rhythmic pattern,
and Yrus added (or accommodated) to it a musical melody.

How much more clearly could it have been put by this contemporary of Bernart de Ventadorn that the poet determined the scansion and the musician adapted his melody to it?

Hans Tischler