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Medieval Singing

Performing the Medieval Lyric: a Metrical-Accentual Approach

Roger Pensom

I will attempt in this essay to bring to bear on the performance of the songs some recent developments in the theory of language and metric in medieval poetry.

A majority of recent recordings follow the protocol formulated by van der Werf for the performance of the non-mensural repertoire, whereby performers use their innate musicality to make metrical sense of the text in terms of a given version of the melody. After a review of the long-running critical debate on the interpretation of non-mensural notation, his key conclusion is that the verse should be treated as though it were purely syllabic for all musical purposes, and by implication that any non-cadential musical accentuation should be left to the discretion of the performer.¹ This, in effect, implies that the verse-text has no inherent metrical structure in the sense that we perceive one in, say, Longfellow's *Excelsior*. Recent musical scholarship pays lip-service to the notion of accentual pat-

¹ Hendrik van der Werf, *The Chansons of the Troubadours and Trouvères: a Study of the Melodies and Their Relation to the Poems* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1972), 44.

turning in Provençal and Old French verse, but when it comes to detailed interpretation, it is clear that no one really knows what the idea implies for a performance. For example, we find Leo Treitler writing as follows:

Much of medieval lyric is strophic; the patterns of syllable-count, stress and rhyme are the same for all stanzas . . .²

Alas, what is true of syllable-count and rhyme is not necessarily true of stress (accent distribution). Linguistic/metrical accent at the phrase-end rhyme is indeed uncontroversial, but there is a menacing fly in the ointment: accent *within* the phrase, which accounts, for example, in the octosyllabic lyric, for up to 75% of possible accent-positions. The currently accepted doctrine, accurately summarized by Treitler, is that there is a tendency for any verse-line with a given number of syllables to have a given number of metrical accents, e.g. 4-syllable lines have two accents, 7-syllable lines have three. The problem is: where do the non-cadential accents in the verse-line belong?

Let's take Bernart de Ventadorn's best known song:

Can vei la lauzeta mover
 De joi sa alas contra.l rai
 Que s'oblid' e-s laissa chazer
 Per la doussor c'al cor li vai,

This is quoted with music (and a linguistically bizarre verse-text) by Treitler, who is very careful to say absolutely nothing about the meter of the verse. I have marked the rhyme-accent, which are, of course, observed by all performers. Canonically speaking, the 8-syllable line has four accented syllables and different performers move them around according to individual taste:

Can vei la lauzeta mover
 Can vei la lauzeta mover (etc.)

² Leo Treitler, "Medieval Lyric," *Models of Musical Analysis: Music before 1600*, ed. Mark Everist (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 1-19.

Now few readers of poetry would dispute the idea that the art of verse is the creation of metrical patterning that amplifies the meaning of the words that the poet selects. It follows irrevocably that the metrical values are a part of the poetic meaning, that is, that their positioning is semantically critical and thus an integral aspect of the poetic text. The problem is that, unlike the words of the text, the accent-positions are not notated. The result is that singers, who would not dream of reinventing the words, feel perfectly free to reinvent the meter of the texts.

Performers thus find themselves in an impasse: they know that there are accents within the musical/linguistic phrase, but they don't know where they are. The solution implied by Treitler's summary is that the performer should impose an invariant metrical matrix on the verse-text, which is maintained from stanza to stanza, thus providing a rhythmical basis for the realization of the melody. But we have already agreed that it is a feature of art-verse that its metrical patterning will change with the sense of the poem's content. It follows irrevocably from this that a fixed metrical scheme would subordinate sense to accent, leaving us with doggerel, in which meter and sense are at odds.

There does exist a possible solution to this problem, buried though it is in a seldom visited periodical of medieval language and literature.³ It goes something like this. Historical linguistics identifies word-accent for polysyllables in Provençal and Old French. Thus "lauzeta mover" will be accented as follows:

v /v v /
Can vei la lauzeta mover

But, critically, it is silent about the way in which the old languages distributed accents on monosyllables (Can vei), which are notoriously plentiful, especially in Old French, e.g.

(1) Mas eu, que planh e plor . . .

(2) Ainz en voz bains que Deu por vos i fist.

³ Roger Pensom, "Thibaut de Champagne and the Art of the Trouvère," *Medium Aevium* 57 (1988), 1-26.

I have, over the last fifteen years arrived at a comprehensive theory of the relation between linguistic accent (that is what native speakers do by way of accenting words when they are talking) and metrical accent, which is the patterning which poets make out of the raw material provided by linguistic accent. Generally speaking, good meter looks for a match with the natural spoken rhythms of the language:

♀ / ♀ / ♀ / ♀ / ♀ /
 Within a thick and spreading hawthorn bush
 ♀ / ♀ / ♀ / ♀ / ♀ /
 That overhung a molehill large and round . . .

The problem previous theorists have run into, as much in the context of the modern languages as of the old ones, is that the same words do not seem to behave accentually in the same way from context to context, that is that words which may be accented in one context, lose that accent in another and vice versa. This is just another way of saying that the distribution of linguistic accent in discourse is a property of the phrase rather than of the word itself. The problem is therefore to look for rules which will order words and their accents within the phrase. Readers who want to investigate the small print of my theory will find it in a forthcoming book.⁴ Although the argument is laborious, the conclusion, which consists of a brief set of rules, is quite straightforward. It will enable readers and performers to arrive at an intelligible metrication of any verse-text in Old French (and, with minor modifications, Old Provençal).

Since we have mentioned Bernart de Ventadorn's famous text, why not start there with its first two stanzas:

(1) ♀ / ♀ ♀ / ♀ ♀ /
 Can vei la lauzeta mover
 ♀ / ♀ / ♀ / ♀ /
 De joi sas alas contra.l rai
 ♀ ♀ / ♀ / ♀ ♀ /
 Que s'oblid'e.s laissa chazer
 / ♀ ♀ / ♀ ♀ / ♀ /
 Per la doussor c'al cor li vai,
 / ♀ / ♀ / ♀ ♀ /
 Ai! tan grans enveya m'en ve

⁴ Roger Pensom, *Accent and Metre in French: a Theory of the Relation between Linguistic Accent and Metrical Practice 1100-1900* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1997).

De cui qu'eu veyà jauzion,
 Meravilhas ai, car desse
 Lo cor de dezirer no.m fon.

- (2) \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 Ai, las! tan cuidavà sàber =
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 D'amor, et tan petit en sai, =
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 Car eu d'amar no.m posc tènèr *
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 Celeis don ja pro non aurai. *
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 Tout m'a mon cor e tout m'a me. *
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 E se mezeis e tot lo mon; =
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 E can se.m tolç, no.m laisset re *
- \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark / \checkmark /
 Mas dezirer e cor volon. =

The metrication of the text here, which follows the rules posited by my theory, creates new rule-governed possibilities for performers who have been trying to make sense of the doctrine that “stress . . . [is] the same for all stanzas.” In the extract above “=” marks verse-lines in stanza two which have an accent-pattern identical to the corresponding line in stanza one, while “*” marks those which are different. Half the lines in stanza two have a different accent-pattern from corresponding lines in stanza one. This means that, although repeated configurations are discernible, we can generally expect each stanza of any of these lyric texts to have a unique overall patterning of its phrase-internal accents.

The plot thickens when we remember that each stanza is sung to the same melody. If it is agreed that verse-rhythm changes from stanza to stanza and that the melody is repeated from stanza to stanza, then the rhythmic structure of the melody must either change from stanza to stanza OR contradict the metrical patterning of the evolving

verse-text.⁵ Anglican churchgoers are familiar with the dismal experience of having to accent a weak syllable in a piece of verse on account of the metrical pressure exerted by the hymn tune:

\vee / \vee / \vee /
 Soldiers of Christ arise

How much more dismal would it have seemed to a cultivated 12th-century ear to suffer systematic metrical violations of the natural rhythm of their native speech, above all in an art-form in which the matching of meter with language-rhythm was a founding principle.

The problem with the verse-metrical principle as stated by Treitler is that it extends the principle of the dance-verse or game-verse:

/ \vee / \vee / \vee /
 Quand trois poules vont aux champs
 / \vee / \vee / \vee /
 La première va devant.

to the informationally complex patterning of the lyric. But by dodging Scylla, we fall into Charybdis. Aubrey referees the debate between textualists and melodists as follows:

In the final analysis, though, the structure and style of the melodies themselves are the best guide to their rhythms.

The very presence of a melody alters the audible effects of a song.⁶

But in so doing she totally discounts the stylistic role of the text's metrical structure. Are we really to believe that the verbal artists who modeled the rhyme and syllable-count of their verse with such notable care, were entirely unconcerned with its metrical structure? If so, they are a puzzling exception in the history of Indo-European literature. If not, why should a poet-composer who must be aiming for a successful marriage of text and melody perform his poetic-musical text in a way which obliterates the stylistic function of his

⁵ The possibility of different stanzas having different rhythms is envisaged by van der Werf in "The Not-So-Precisely-Measured Music of the Middle Ages: in *Performance Practice Review* 1 (1988), 42-60, and strenuously discounted by Elizabeth Aubrey in *The Music of the Troubadours* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 253-4.

⁶ Aubrey, *Troubadours*, 253.

own verse-metrical practice? This state of affairs was neatly summarized by Lewis Carroll:

But I was thinking of a plan
To dye one's whiskers green
And always use so large a fan
That they could not be seen.

Let's take two examples from recent discography to illustrate the problem at the performance level. First an older recording of "Vos que.m semblatz del coral amadors" from *Cansos de Trobairitz* by Jordi Savall and Hespèrion XX.⁷ The performance strategy in this case assumes a blanket application of the dactylic third rhythmic mode (/ v v), which is strongly suggested by the clear accentual patterning of the opening lines:

/ v v / v v / v v /
Vos que.m semblatz del corals amadors
/ v v / v v / v v /
Ja non volgra que fossetz tan doptanz.

The difficulties begin with the lover's reply in the second stanza of the song:

/ v v / v v / v v /
[Bona dompna], vost'onrada valors
/ v v / v v / v v /
[mi fai temeros] estar, tan es granz.

Here, the imposition of a third mode grotesquely distorts the linguistic accentual rhythm of the first phrase of each verse-line. The verse-scansion must certainly go as follows:

/ v / v / v / v v /
Bona dompna, vost'onrada valors
v / v v / v / v v /
mi fai temeros estar, tan es granz.

To go to the opposite extreme, Gace Brulé's "De bien amer grant joie atent" by Christopher Page (with Gothic Voices)⁸ presents to the ear a musical landscape destitute of rhythmic structure. What-ever one's instinctive response to the featureless monotony of this

⁷ Virgin Classics CD remastering of 1978 recording no. 7243 5 61310 2 6.

⁸ *The Spirits of England and France 2* (Hyperion, 1995 CD A66773).

style of realization, one can assert without hesitation that there is in this verse a whole world of structured metrical variety which is ruthlessly obliterated by this reverentially syllabic approach to the song. Against Page's realization, in which even the mute *e* has accentual status on a par with tonic vowels, we find in this text the following rhythmic/metrical patterning:

De bien amer grant joie atent

Car c'est ma greignur envie.

Et sachiez bien certainement

Qu'Amors a tel seignorie

Qu'a double guerredone et rent

Celui qui en lui se fie.

Et cil qui d'amer se repent

S'est bien travailliez por nient.

How to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater? There is really only one solution. If we accept the principle of a rule-governed verse-metrical structure varying from stanza to stanza in the context of a melody repeated from stanza to stanza, then we must confront the unthinkable: that the rhythmic structure of the melody changes from stanza to stanza in parallel with the meter of the verse.

This idea has profoundly shocked musical colleagues who had been initially enthusiastic about my metrical theory. The revelation of this scarifying corollary struck at the roots of their shared conception of the courtly lyric. How was it that something so serious and grand could be delivered in the manner of a jazz improvisation? On reflection, they admitted that the organizing principle I was proposing was not entirely foreign to them: they had met it (in short fragments of melody) in the tenor color of the isorhythmic motet, in the circulation of motifs in Gamelan, in augmentation and diminution in fugal texture and so forth. But the idea that it could be used as a wholesale basis for the recreation of melodic material went right against their musical instincts.

The fact remains that, if we accept the initial premises,

(1) that the verse has a metrical structure derived from a category of linguistic structure (i.e. that meter and natural speech-rhythm largely coincide in the verse).

(2) that the melody is repeated integrally from stanza to stanza,

then the decisive stylistic contribution of the verse-meter can only be maintained in performance if we consider the hypothesis that I have advanced.

The hypothesis finds (admittedly weak) corroboration in the fact that scribes continued noting these melodies non-mensurally even after Franconian notation became available. The evidence suggests that scribes were diffident about interpreting the melodies mensurally,⁹ probably not only because it would have meant recovering a complex metrical scheme from the verse-text, but also because they must have known that a mensural realization of the melody could only apply to one stanza of the lyric text. It might also help to explain the proliferation of variants within the traditions of transmission of individual melodies and even furnish clues for a possible classification.

At all events, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and the aim of this argument is to encourage competent parties to test my hypothesis in performance. With a view to stimulating experiment I will finish with a fully worked version of "Can vei la lauzeta mover." It goes without saying that the barring (etc.) of this version is not exhaustively pre-emptive, the usual decisions being left to the musical instinct of the performer.

The rhythmicized transcription, which reproduces exactly the melody given by van der Werf,¹⁰ assumes a triple meter and also that the verse-text's metrical "feet" are isochronous, that is that $v/ = /v = /vv = vv/$ with respect to duration.¹¹ These assumptions generate a rhythmicization in which each accented syllable coincides with a

⁹ See Aubrey, *Troubadours*, 248-9.

¹⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 1591, 56.

¹¹ This of course implies that the song was performed in a mixture of rhythmic modes 1 and 6, that is if the melismata are melodically simplified.

bar-accent. While other solutions are imaginable, this one has the following merits:

- (1) it is based on just two simple assumptions, neither of which is wildly controversial;
- (2) it reconciles melody and verse-meter simply and economically.

The only instance in which reconciliation is problematic is found in the fourth verse-line of the second stanza, where the application of my assumptions generates bar-accents on adjoining syllables within the verse-line:

Celeis don ja pro n'en aurai.

This metrical irregularity could have been ironed out in performance by a reduction of the melisma over “pro,” thus accomodating “pro n'en au-” in a single bar of three quarter-notes, with a single bar-accent on “pro.”

*Con vei la lauzeta mover***Rhythmicized transcription comparing verses I and II**

I Can vei la lau - ze - ta mo - ve - r De joi sas a - las Co - n tral

II Ai, las, tan cui - da - va sa - ber D'A-mor, e tan pe - tit en

I rai Ques'o - bli d'e.s lais - sa cha - zer Per la dous - sor c'al

II sai! Car eu d'a - mar no.m puesc te - ner Ce - leis don ja - pro

I cor li vai. Ai! tan gran en - vey - a m'en - ve De cui qu'eu

II n'en au - rai. Tout m'a mo cor, e tout m'a - me, E se me -

I vey - a jau - zi - on, Me - ra - vil - has ai, car des - se... Lo

II zeis e tot lo mon; E can se'm tolç, no.m lais-set re Mas'

