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The Off-board String on the Medieval Fiddle

Linda Marie Zaerr

Iconography, literature, theological essays and music treatises make it clear that fiddles had a very high profile during the Middle Ages. They were involved in dances, banquets, sacred music, journeys, and private entertainment. One theorist describes the fiddle as the most versatile of all instruments, capable of performing every kind of composition.¹ From what is known about the fiddles' tunings and physical setups, however, there are serious questions about the actual technique employed in performance. This essay looks at the characteristics of one type of fiddle, attempts to show how it might have served in various kinds of compositions and situations, and suggests that notions of historical fiddle performance may need to expand to accommodate the aesthetics and techniques implied by the off-board fiddle.

The fiddle was so prominent in late medieval culture that Albertus Magnus explicated Aristotle's *Ethics* with fiddle analogies and employed two abstract nouns for playing the fiddle—*viellatio* and *viellatoria*.² Minstrels relied heavily on the instrument; in Beauvais, for example, the authorities might confiscate a fiddle from a minstrel remiss in fee payment.³ Yet minstrels were not the only ones who played the fiddle. In literature, many noble musicians favor the fiddle; and in art, the instrument appears in the arms of lovers and ladies, angels and animals.

The medieval fiddle has been intelligently explicated. Werner Bachmann has provided a comprehensive treatment of the many forms and purposes of bowed stringed instruments in medieval Europe.⁴ Mary Remnant has narrowed the scope to Great Britain, and Howard Brown to fourteenth-century Italy.⁵ Christopher Page has elucidated the

1. Johannes de Grocheio, *Ars musica*, ed. Constance J. Mews, et al. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), 12.2–3, p. 72.

2. Albertus Magnus, *Ethica*, ed. Augustus Borgnet (Paris, 1891), pp. 4, 30, 164–65, and 404.

3. B. Bernhard, "Recherches sur l'histoire de la corporation des ménestriers ou joueurs d'instruments de la ville de Paris," in *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1841–42), 398–99.

4. Werner Bachmann, *The Origins of Bowing and the Development of Bowed Instruments up to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Norma Deane (London, 1969).

5. Mary Remnant, *English Bowed Instruments from Anglo-Saxon to Tudor Times* (Oxford, 1986); and Howard Mayer Brown, "The Trecento Fiddle and its Bridges," *Early Music* 17.3 (1989): 309–29.



tunings provided by Jerome of Moravia and other theorists, and he has assembled references to stringed instruments in medieval French literature.⁶ Most recently, Timothy McGee has discussed the bridges and tuning of the five-string fiddle in some detail and suggested that the off-board instrument would have been particularly well-suited to accompanying poetry.⁷

It is worth looking further at the off-board fiddle. Jerome of Moravia describes a form of fiddle with one string positioned laterally off the fingerboard, and a number of contemporary images portray this off-board string. It has been widely assumed that the pitch of this string remained constant while the player plucked it with the left thumb or bowed it in conjunction with the other strings. An alternative interpretation of the complete body of evidence, however, indicates another possibility: the pitch can indeed be modified if the player uses the thumb to stop the string rather than to pluck it. The resultant pitch can extend the melodic range of the instrument down to a step below the tonal center or it can produce a consonant interval with the adjacent strings. By applying pressure with the thumb, the player can cause the pitch of the off-board string to waver in tension with the stable neighboring strings, providing potential for non-diatonic ornamentation.

This instability of pitch and other special effects facilitated by the instrument provide a palette of narrative enhancement: sighing and moaning, hurrying and laboring, yearning and trembling, fighting and marveling. These are the elements of medieval romance in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the time yielding the greatest evidence of the off-board fiddle. If we take seriously the strong evidence that late medieval narrative was often accompanied by the fiddle, and if we accept that the off-board fiddle was particularly suited to the performance of poetry, then we may gain access to narrative performance by understanding the characteristics of this fiddle.

In the same way that narrative invites ancillary emotional enhancement, so iconographic representations align the off-board fiddle with passionate love or devotion, corroborating the valorization of the instrument we find in theoretical sources. Also in art we find verification of notions of technique and a range of performance contexts.

The off-board fiddle is capable of participating in a wide variety of musical genres, and this diversity is evident in contemporary documents and images. What this instrument sacrifices in range, it gains in subtle sonic effects.

6. Christopher Page, "Jerome of Moravia on the *Rubea* and *Viella*," *Galpin Society Journal* 32 (1979): 77–98; and Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental Practice and Songs in France 1100–1300* (London, 1987).

7. Timothy McGee, "The Medieval Fiddle: Tuning, Technique, and Repertory," in *Instruments, Ensembles, and Repertory, 1300–1600: Essays in Honour of Keith Polk*, ed. Timothy J. McGee and Stewart Carter (Turnhout, Belgium, 2013), 31–56.

Thirteenth-century Paris

Much of our understanding of the medieval fiddle comes from scholars in the second half of the thirteenth century in Paris. Jerome of Moravia's *Tractatus de Musica* provides the most specific, and perhaps the only, written description of the off-board fiddle.⁸ Jerome offers three ways to tune a fiddle, the first and third of which involve an off-board string,⁹ and he is explicit about the way this string is fixed laterally away from the body. He offers these tunings:

Tuning 1:	d (off-board)	G	g	d'	d'
Tuning 2:	d (on-board)	G	g	d'	g'
Tuning 3:	G (off-board)	G	d	c'	c'

Jerome uses the term *bordunus* to refer to the off-board string, but this word has a broader meaning than is usually recognized. In a marginal note, Pierre de Limoges also uses the term to describe the first string in Jerome's second tuning,¹⁰ where the string is explicitly positioned over the fingerboard and is fingered like the other strings.¹¹ Elsewhere, Albertus Magnus calls the large pipes of an organ *burdones*,¹² and the term may have applied to the tenor line in organum.¹³ The term *bordunus* is derived from Old French *bordon*, bumble-bee, and it suggests a low-pitched buzzing sound, whether produced by a bowed string, an organ pipe, or a human voice.

8. References to Jerome of Moravia's discussion of the fiddle are from Christian Meyer and Guy Lorchichon, eds., *Hieronymi de Moravia: Tractatus de Musica* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012). With an aim of accessibility, i/j and u/v have been normalized. Translations are from Page, "Jerome of Moravia," 77–98.

9. Jerome is not explicit about the position of the strings in the third tuning, but he presents it in opposition to the first tuning (*oppositus est primo*, p. 269), so we can infer a similar involvement of an off-board string.

10. In Jerome's discussion, the strings are numbered from left to right, the opposite of our current practice.

11. The term *bourdon* was later used for an octave course on the guitar, where it would be fingered.

12. "Videmus in burdonibus qui sunt magnae fistulae organorum musicorum, gravem esse sonum" (We see that the *burdones*, which are large pipes on a musical instrument [organ], have a low sound). Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus*, ed. Hermann Stadler (Münster, 1920), 19.1.9, p. 1269. The term *bourdon* still describes an organ stop.

13. Anonymous IV's comparison of a stable G "ut in burdone organorum" could be interpreted as referring to an organ drone or the sung tenor line in organum. Elsewhere in the treatise, the writer himself points to the ambiguity of the word *organum*, which can mean either *organum purum* or the musical instrument. Fritz Reckow, ed., *Der Musiktraktat des Anonymus 4*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1967), 80:4 and 70:26–29.

Jerome's statements about pitch production are often a bit convoluted. His discussion comes in the context of a treatise on music theory, and this theoretical perspective colors his instructions. In his detailed explanation of how to apply fingers to stop the strings, he specifies only pitches that are represented on the monochord. When he describes how the pitches ascend from G to a'' in the first tuning, he states that the fingers do not touch the off-board string, which maintains a constant pitch d. Then, recognizing that e and f are now missing from the scale, he suggests that these notes can be supplied an octave up on the unison high strings.¹⁴ If this principle were put into practice, it would result in improbably abrupt octave leaps, but it accords with the theoretical tenor of his discussion.

Similarly, Jerome concludes his description of the first tuning by observing that the fiddle, as he has shown, contains the power of all of the modes.¹⁵ At a theoretical level, he has demonstrated that all the notes used in the church modes can be achieved, but at a practical level, the arrangement of the strings suggests a very different aesthetic. The concordant reentrant tuning implies the persistent use of g and d drones in various octaves.¹⁶ Even if it were possible to isolate each pitch of a melody, the positioning of the lowest string G between the higher d and g would make it awkward to play sequences of pitches that crossed between those strings. If drones were pervasive, as they appear to be, they would clash with melodies played in some of the modes. The modes can be transposed to a tonal center of g where they accord well with the surrounding open strings, but to do this a player must employ finger placement outside the scope of Jerome's specifications. Even so, not every melody can accommodate drones.

It would seem, then, that Jerome ignores the presence of ancillary pitches when he explicates the instrument. Nonetheless, he assures his readers that they will be able to acquire the entire art of fiddle playing through practical application of the guidelines he has presented (*arte usui applicata*).¹⁷ These terms, *ars* and *usus*, are instructive in understanding Jerome's perspective on the fiddle. Albertus Magnus, writing somewhat earlier, distinguishes between those who play the fiddle *ex usu* (by practical experience), and those who play *ex arte* (from learned perusal of music theory). He observes that many fiddle players who learn *ex usu* play very well. Although he says that playing *ex arte* is

14. Jerome, *Tractatus*, 269.

15. "Vim modorum omnium comprehendit." Ibid., 269.

16. The shape of the bridge has been much discussed in relation to this topic, but, as Timothy McGee has demonstrated ("Medieval Fiddle," 33–36), a similar playing technique can be applied whether the bridge is flat or curved. It is not until around 1487 that Tinctoris, while nodding to an earlier tradition of fiddles tuned concordantly, explicitly describes a fiddle with a curved bridge that is tuned in fifths. Anthony Baines, "Fifteenth-Century Instruments in Tinctoris's *De Inventione et usu Musicae*," *Galpin Society Journal* 3 (1950): 23.

17. Jerome, *Tractatus*, 270.

better because it is more rational, he never says that those who do so play particularly well.¹⁸

Pierre de Limoges comes to Jerome's treatise slightly later, apparently anxiously holding an actual fiddle and ready to play *ex arte*.¹⁹ He worries that he cannot produce a *b* in the third tuning, where Jerome has failed to mention the inconvenient gap right in the middle of the range of the instrument. Pierre stops cold when Jerome ends his discussion of the fiddle by describing a difficult and worthwhile technique:

Ut scilicet sciatur cum unicuique sono ex quibus unaqueque melodia contextitur cum bordunis primis consonanciis respondere.

(To know how to accord with the *borduni* in the first harmonies any note from which any melody is woven.)

Jerome adds that skilled players do this easily by using a second hand (*manu secundaria*). The most likely explanation of the passage is that the melody itself must be transposed so that it will accord with the *bordunus*, and this can be done by referring to the Guidonian hand, which follows in Jerome's treatise. By this approach, the third string on the fiddle would provide a stable tonal center—*g* for the first and second tunings, and *d* for the third.²⁰ But the passage remains puzzling. Does Jerome expect every note to accord with the *bordunus*? Is there another version of the Guidonian hand? The bemused attempts at explanations of this passage are beyond the scope of this discussion,²¹ and Pierre, too, seems out of his depth. At this point, he adds a lengthy note in his characteristically cramped hand about the *d* *bordunus* of the first tuning and the *G* of the third tuning: do not apply either the thumb or the bow, Pierre says, unless you can achieve a consonance—a fifth or an octave or a fourth—with the other strings touched by the bow.²²

Jerome has said nothing about touching the *bordunus* with the thumb, but apparently Pierre has seen fiddle players do this, and he attempts to reconcile Jerome's instructions with what he has observed. Pierre specifies that the off-board string may be "touched" with the thumb and/or with the bow (*pollice vel arcu*). It has been widely assumed that Pierre is distinguishing between plucking with the thumb and sounding with

18. *Ethica* 2.1.10, p. 4b.

19. Christopher Page has compellingly identified this annotator of Jerome's treatise as Pierre de Limoges ("Jerome of Moravia," 78–79).

20. For the capacities of each tuning, see Page, *Voices and Instruments*, 126–31; and Linda Marie Zaerr, *Performance and the Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 234–52. Table 1 below provides an expanded understanding of the range of each tuning.

21. Christopher Page has offered particularly useful explanations in *Voices and Instruments*, 72.

22. Jerome, *Tractatus*, 270.

the bow, since Jerome has explicitly stated that the off-board string does not change pitch. But Jerome's theoretical focus has caused him to leave out a number of details. He has not mentioned the thumb in his discussion, and until his final description of advanced playing, he has ignored the ancillary pitches of adjacent strings.

While plucking may have been employed at times, there are drawbacks to this technique. Plucking with the thumb interferes with left hand fingering. Pat O'Brien has demonstrated that "tip-flexion of the thumb also has unexpected effects on the surrounding fingers," especially the index and middle fingers.²³ This difficulty is exacerbated because the left hand is also required to support and stabilize the instrument. Furthermore, plucking or bowing at random moments of consonance with the melody creates an unregulated rhythm. While thumb plucking may have been employed at times as a special effect, it seems unlikely that it would have been used in conjunction with a bowed melody.

If, however, the thumb is used to stop the off-board string, Pierre's concern with consonance is very natural. Having seen fiddle players stop the string in this way, he tries it, and realizes that it is possible to create wrenching discords if the thumb is inaccurately positioned. In Jerome's first tuning, the most natural placement of the thumb on the off-board d produces g, the tonal center of the instrument.²⁴ This makes an octave with the second string and a unison with the third. In Jerome's third tuning, however, if the thumb is placed in the same position on the G *bordunus*, the resultant pitch is c. Although this forms an octave with the top strings, those strings cannot be bowed at the same time as the *bordunus*. The neighboring strings that can be reached by the bow (*cetere corde arcu tactu*), however, can combine with fierce dissonance. If the player includes only the second string G with the stopped *bordunus* c, the resultant interval is a consonant fourth; if the middle string d is added, however, it forms a dissonant whole tone interval with the c. Alternatively, when the thumb stops the *bordunus* closer to the bridge, a d results, in unison with the middle string, and a consonant fifth with the intervening G. Table 1 below charts these pitch relationships between the thumb-stopped *bordunus* and the neighboring open strings. This interpretation provides a consistent explanation for both perspectives on the *bordunus*. Jerome is concerned that melodies be transposed to accord with the drones, and Pierre introduces the notion of thumb stopping, stipulating that the resultant pitches be harmonious.

Although neither Jerome nor Pierre discuss it, another possibility would be consistent with their discussion. The thumb can be placed further from the bridge on the

23. Pat O'Brien, "Observations on the (Re)creation of Techniques for Historical Harps and their Potential Consequences," in *Historische Harfen: Beiträge zur Theorie und Praxis historischer Harfen*, ed. Heidrun Rosenzweig (Basel: Musik-Akademie, 1991), 114.

24. Throughout, this discussion is informed by experiments using an instrument built by Timothy McGee after the off-board fiddle in Andrea di Bonaiuto's fresco *The Church as the Path to Salvation* (ca. 1365–68) in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (see fig. 5).

Table 1. Jerome's tunings.

TUNING 1					
Open string	d (off-board)	G	g	d'	d'
1st finger	[gap: e]	a	a'	e'	e'
2nd finger or thumb	f (thumb)	b	b'	f'	f'
3rd finger or thumb	g (thumb)	c	c'	g'	g'
4th finger		d	d'	a''	a''
TUNING 2					
Open string	d (on-board)	G	g	d'	g'
1st finger	e	a	a'	e'	a''
2nd finger	f	b	b'	f'	b''
3rd finger	g	c	c'	g'	c''
4th finger	a'	d	d'	a''	d''
TUNING 3					
Open string	G (off board)	G	d	c'	c'
1st finger		a	e	d'	d'
2nd finger or thumb	b (thumb)	b	f	e'	e'
3rd finger or thumb	c (thumb)	c	g	f'	f'
4th finger or thumb	d (thumb)	d	a'	g'	g'
[gap: b']					

bordunus to extend the melodic range down by a semitone or even a tone, allowing the idiomatic drop to the note below the tonal center so important in many medieval melodies. When this occurs, the off-board string can be isolated, since it is positioned at the extremity of the instrument outside the other strings, and in this way dissonance with neighboring strings can be avoided. Table 1 indicates how thumb stopping extends the ranges of Jerome's tunings. The chart assumes sharps and flats may be employed as needed. Normally the middle string produces the tonal center, though alternatives are sometimes possible.

Gautier de Coincy's "Ma viele" demonstrates the value of thumb stopping. The song implies fiddle performance (The text begins "My fiddle longs to fiddle a beautiful song"),²⁵ but it can be played in Jerome's first fiddle tuning only by stopping the thumb on the off-board string to produce f.²⁶ While it is possible to play "Ma viele" in

25. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds français 25532, fol. 109r.

26. John Haines, "A Sight-Reading Vielle Player from the Thirteenth Century," in *The Sounds and Sights of Performance in Early Music: Essays in Honor of Timothy J. McGee*, ed. Maureen Epp and Brian E. Power (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 13–26, draws attention to a historiated capital representing Gautier de

Figure 1. Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, MS Lit. 115 (formerly Ed. IV.6) (Bamberg codex), fol. 63v, detail. Reproduced with permission from Bamberg Staatsbibliothek.



Jerome's on-board second tuning, the *d bordunus* is sometimes dissonant and harder to eliminate. Tuning three can accompany the song with concordant pitches, but it lacks the range to produce the melody. The off-board first tuning seems best suited to playing this melody, but it can only be done with thumb stopping.

At this point, it may be helpful to consider implications for polyphony. Much of the basis for instrumental involvement in complex polyphony has rested on seven untexted motets in the late-thirteenth-century Bamberg Codex (Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Lit. 115), which was probably produced in Paris.²⁷ The absence of text for this group of motets has sometimes been cited as evidence they were performed instrumentally, though the texts could have appeared elsewhere. The tenor line of one of these motets is labeled "In seculum viellatoris," the *In seculum* of the fiddle player (fig. 1). This has led some to suggest that the motet may have been intended for performance by fiddle players. A rubbed space in the middle of *viellatoris* suggests it may originally have read "vigellatoris," which could still refer to a fiddle player, but could also be a variant of "vigilatoris" with reference to the Easter vigil, the season when *In seculum* tenors were most abundant.²⁸ Furthermore, the word refers to one fiddle player, but there are three untexted

Coincy playing a fiddle while reading music, and he indicates the possibility of other early-thirteenth-century music-reading instrumentalists. Although the image is remarkably detailed, it is too small to determine if the instrument has an off-board string.

27. Patricia P. Norwood, "Evidence Concerning the Provenance of the Bamberg Codex," *The Journal of Musicology* 8.4 (1990): 503.

lines. Perhaps a fiddle player composed the motet, in which case the reference would have nothing to do with instrumentation.²⁹ Despite these reservations, *In seculum viellatoris* can serve as a test case for how the fiddles Jerome describes might render a motet.

A fiddle in Jerome's third tuning cannot produce b, which is required in every line. This fiddle was probably used to produce consonant clusters of sound with a sung melody or limited-range narrative melody.³⁰

Somewhat surprisingly, the accordatura which seems most promising, the on-board second tuning (d G g d' g'), which can produce every pitch on the Guidonian hand, is less tenable than the off-board first tuning. The second-tuning fiddle can play the notes of every line, but the surrounding drones, d and d', introduce unpleasant dissonance, especially with c', which is prominent in every line. Because the *bordunus* is positioned over the fingerboard, it sounds with pitches on either G or Gg. Similarly the top string g' interferes with pitches fingered on d'. With graduated bridge notches, it is possible to isolate the middle strings, but only at a very soft dynamic. It would seem that tuning two achieves its greater range at the cost of diminished capacity for string isolation.

A fiddle in Jerome's first accordatura, however, can play every line of *In seculum viellatoris* if the thumb stops the *bordunus* to produce f in the tenor line. This instrument also facilitates isolation of pitches. With the bow at one angle, it plays just the top two strings d'd', which can be fingered together as a course. At another angle, the bow plays the middle Gg; because the *bordunus* is positioned away from the instrument, the bow does not have to touch it. At a third angle, the *bordunus* d can sound alone. If a player fingers Gg together, unintended intervals invade the motet, and the shift in texture from an octave course to single pitches on the strings below and above creates unsettling disjunctions. It is possible to isolate the g string, and thus produce a single pitch for all notes that require that string, but, as with tuning two, the dynamic would have to be soft; with more bow pressure the surrounding strings are engaged. The string pairings, however, need not be set up as actual courses; the strings can be played separately, as Jerome

28. David J. Rothenberg, *The Flower of Paradise: Marian Devotion and Secular Song in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 58–60.

29. Jacques Handschin proposed the notion that this motet may have come from a document previously owned by a fiddle player or that the *viellator* could have been a composer who happened to be a fiddle player, "Über die Laude: 'à propos d'un livre récent,'" *Acta Musicologica* 10.1/2 (1938): 29n19. Peter Jeffery, "A Four-Part *In seculum* Hocket and a Mensural Sequence in an Unknown Fragment," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 37.1 (1984): 1–48, also expresses doubt about the meaning of the labels on the motets, 16–19.

30. See McGee, "Medieval Fiddle," 42; and Christopher Page, "Le Troisième Accord pour vièle de Jérôme de Moravie: Jongleurs et 'anciens Pères de France,'" in *Jérôme de Moravie: un théoricien de la musique dans le milieu intellectuel parisien du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Michel Huglo and Marcel Peres (Paris: Editions Créaphis, 1992), 83–96.

describes, or together when the drones would otherwise be infelicitous.³¹ In this case, the G drone is not invasive and provides a comfortable grounding for the piece as long as it is dropped whenever the f sounds. Jerome's solution of playing the f an octave higher is out of the question here as it would result in a desperate leap of a seventh and spoil the contour of the line. Only with thumb stopping is *In seculum viellatoris* playable on this fiddle.

It is possible, then, for fiddle players to perform this motet using Jerome's first tuning, but the designation *viellatoris* suggests that fiddle involvement in sacred polyphony would be the exception rather than the rule. If it were common, it would not need to be specified.³² Jerome does not help on questions of repertory. Although he establishes the fundamental principles of playing the instrument, Jerome says little about how the fiddle might be used, only that the second tuning (the on-board accordatura) is necessary for secular songs and others that require a greater range.³³ For the context of fiddle playing, we must turn to another theorist.

Johannes de Grocheio, while also geared toward the theory of music, was intrigued by the musical culture he found surrounding him in Paris. He provides a taxonomy of vocal and instrumental forms, describing purely instrumental forms as *sonus illiteratus*, "unlettered sound," because they lack a text. They can inspire listeners to dance, and, in the case of the *stantipes*, distract both the player and listener from depraved thought because of their difficulty.³⁴ Apparently instrumental music was normally

31. Page, "Jerome of Moravia," assumes the strings are paired in courses, but the possibility of paired strings need not be an issue. The strings can be fingered together or separately, as the player chooses, and in other contexts this flexibility provides a means of variation.

32. Anonymous IV frequently mentions instruments, but usually in contrast with voices, not necessarily in combination. Instruments have a greater range than the voice (86:8–12), and they can produce quicker notes (23:8–12, 39:15–19, 45:7–8). In one place there is a possible implication that stringed instruments engage with voice in a sacred context:

Finis in nomine sanctissimi omega multiplici modo finitur. Quidam finiunt cum puncto solo aut in diapason vel unisono vel diapente, raro autem in diatesseron, nisi fuerit in instrumento cordarum. (88:18–20)

(The ending in the name of the most holy Omega can finish in many ways. Some people finish with a single note either in an octave or a unison or a fifth, but rarely on a fourth, unless it is a stringed instrument.)

In any case, Anonymous IV assumes in his introduction to notation that instrumentalists can read music, since among other uses, notes "utuntur in quolibet genere omnium instrumentorum" (are used on any and all kinds of instruments), 40:27. Translations throughout are by Jeremy Yudkin, *The Music Treatise of Anonymous IV: A New Translation* (Hänssler-Verlag: American Institute of Musicology, 1985), 80.

33. "Necessarius est propter laycos et omnes alios cantus, maxime irregulares, qui frequenter per totam manum discurrere volunt." Jerome, *Tractatus*, 269.

34. de Grocheio, *Ars musice*, 12.5–6, pp. 72–74.

neither as difficult as the *stantipes* nor as distracting. Texts, not instruments, were typically the focus of attention in music performance.

String instruments, de Grocheio suggests, have primacy among all the instruments because their strings can be shortened and lengthened, and among these the fiddle prevails because it contains within it all the other instruments in the same way that a square contains a triangle or larger numbers contain smaller ones.³⁵

While instruments like the drum and trumpet create a stirring sound, he goes on to say, all the musical forms are more subtly discerned on the fiddle.³⁶ Jerome, too, has admired the capacity of the fiddle, but Jerome's description of the pitches that can be achieved on the instrument does not explain how the fiddle might provide a more "subtle" rendition of all the musical forms. All the other stringed instruments de Grocheio lists—psaltery, cithara, lyre, and Saracen guitar—are sounded by plucking the strings, and the pitch of each string is fixed except in the case of the Saracen guitar, where the pitch is incrementally governed by frets. The two distinguishing features of the fiddle are the production of sound by bowing, and the capacity of the instrument to produce non-diatonic pitches by adjusting the position of the left-hand fingers. It seems likely, then, that subtleties possible on the fiddle have to do with variations in bowing and ornaments that involve non-diatonic pitches.

De Grocheio supplies an essential link between playing the fiddle and composing music for a text, and this may help explain his high regard for the fiddle. A good fiddle player (*bonus artifex in viella*) presents every musical form; similarly, a composer starts with a text as raw material and gives it form by applying a suitable melody.³⁷ In each case, the musician *introducitur formam* (introduces form). The process of composing and performing is blurred in the Middle Ages,³⁸ so de Grocheio may be describing both playing the fiddle and composing melody for a text as performance arts.³⁹ It may be that setting a text to music and playing the fiddle with that text are not always separate functions, but sometimes a simultaneous process, dimensions of the same endeavor. In considering the role of fiddle playing in connection with narrative, this perspective is invaluable.

35. Ibid. 12.2, p. 72.

36. "In viella tamen omnes forme musicales subtilius discernuntur." Ibid.

37. "Bonus autem artifex in viella omnem cantum et cantilenam et omnem formam musicalem generaliter introducitur," Ibid. 12.3, p. 72; "Modus autem componendi hec generaliter est unus quemadmodum in natura. Primo enim dictamina loco materie preparantur. Postea vero cantus unicuique dictamini proportionalis loco forme introducitur." Ibid. 11.1, p. 70.

38. See Timothy McGee, *The Sound of Medieval Song* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 8.

39. This is all the more likely since there is clear evidence *chansons de geste* and romances were performed, but we have no unambiguous extant melody.

Both Jerome of Moravia and Johannes de Groccheio draw explicitly on the work of Johannes de Garlandia. Considerable controversy surrounds the identification and the dating of this figure,⁴⁰ and the attribution of some sections of his *De Mensurabili Musica* is problematic. The Parisian version of this treatise, however, is included in Jerome of Moravia's compilation, so the provenance in late-thirteenth-century Paris is unambiguous. This version includes an elaborate notion of *colores*, embellishments.⁴¹ An assumption that musicians will embellish music runs through his discussion of ornamentation, and his terminology draws on language used in rhetoric. This work demonstrates a way of thinking that might have inspired de Groccheio's comment about the "subtle" capacity of the fiddle. Johannes de Garlandia uses the same word to describe an adjustment of pitch to adapt a tenor line to accord with the higher lines in a polyphonic composition.⁴² Although this probably refers to a semitone adjustment, this lends support to the notion that flexibility with pitch was one of the attributes admired in the fiddle.

The music theorist Johannes de Garlandia has sometimes been identified with the rhetorician of the same name, who also taught in Paris in the thirteenth century.⁴³ Some of the terminology is the same. The term *color*, used in *De Mensurabili Musica* to mean musical embellishment, is a term drawn from rhetoric; and *Parisiana Poetria* uses *colores rethorici* to refer to figures of speech. The operative aesthetic in both disciplines

40. See, for example, Pamela Whitcomb, "Teachers, Booksellers and Taxes: Reinvestigating the Life and Activities of Johannes de Garlandia" (*Plainsong and Medieval Music* 8.1 (1999): 1–13.

41. For a discussion of the use of *color* in Johannes de Garlandia's *De mensurabili musica*, see Guillaume Gross, *Chanter en polyphonie à Notre-Dame de Paris aux 12^e et 13^e siècles*, Études sur la Faculté des arts dans les Universités médiévales 14 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 108–19.

42. *Istae regulae tenentur in cantu plano, sed aliquotiens restringuntur in discantu propter habitudinem concordantiae ipsius discantus, quia subtilis debet cantum suum conformare respectu superioris cantus vel inclinare vel acuere, ut melius conforme[n]tur concordantiae, in quantum poterit supradictas regulas observando [my emphasis].*

(The rules which are maintained in plainchant are sometimes suspended in a discant because of the nature of a concord in that discant, as a *subtlety* ought to shape the melodic line [of the tenor] with respect to the higher voice either by raising or lowering [the pitch of the tenor], so that the concords are better formed, as much as is possible by observing the above-mentioned rules.)

Johannes de Garlandia, *De mensurabili musica* 15.9, ed. Erich Reimer, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1972), 95; unless otherwise indicated, translations are by Stanley H. Birnbaum, *Concerning Measured Music* (Colorado Springs: Colorado College Music Press, 1978).

43. See Mews et al., ed., *Johannes de Groccheio: Ars Musice*, 8–9 and 25.

is a value placed on variation carried out by manipulating either music or text for the purpose of pleasing an audience.⁴⁴

Whether or not we assume common authorship for the two treatises, the rhetorical tradition in Paris at this time is relevant to the study of music. Treatises on both rhetoric and music follow the same Aristotelian taxonomic structure, and the two disciplines are strongly linked in the scholastic tradition. Albertus Magnus, for example, discusses how grammar and music operate in similar ways.⁴⁵ In *Parisiana Poetria*, the rhetorician de Garlandia asserts that metrical poetry is a branch of music (*rithmica species est musice*). Quoting Boethius, he observes:

Isque est musicus cui adest facultas, secundum rationem et speculationem propositam ac musice conuenientem, de metris, rithmis, de generibus cantilenarum . . . ac poetarum carminibus iudicandi.⁴⁶

(And a musician is a man who has the skill to assess, by his systematic knowledge and by careful thought coupled with a “feel” for music, meters, rhythms, and all varieties of song . . . and lyric poetry.)

He thus defines a musician in relation to language, expressing the expectation that a musician, like de Grocheio’s fiddle player, should engage with a wide variety of genres.

In *Parisiana Poetria*, de Garlandia uses proportions to discuss verse structure, observing that this kind of proportion occurs in music (*cuius modi proportiones contingunt in musica*),⁴⁷ and he describes verse in terms of harmony:

Rithmus est consonancia dictionum in fine similiū, sub certo numero sine metricis pedibus ordinata. “Consonancia” ponitur pro genere; est enim musica rerum et uocum consonancia, uel “concordia discors” uel “discordia concors.”⁴⁸

(A rhymed poem is a harmonious arrangement of words with like endings, regulated not by quantity but by number of syllables. “Harmonious ar-

44. For detailed documentation of medieval vocal ornamentation, see Timothy McGee, *The Sound of Medieval Song: Ornamentation and Vocal Style according to the Treatises* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

45. *Ethica* 2.1.10, p. 164b.

46. Text and translation from Traugott Lawler, ed. and trans., *The Parisiana Poetria of John of Garland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 6.

47. *Ibid.*, 164.

48. *Ibid.*, 160.

rangement” serves as the genus; for music is a harmonious arrangement of disparate elements and tones—“discordant concord” or “concordant discord.”)

His perception of an elasticity between concord and discord mirrors what we find in *De mensurabili musica*, as in this instance:

Dissonantia, ut [sit] concordantia, est inter duplex diapason et diapente et diapason una dissonantia vel duplex, bene concordat.⁴⁹

(Dissonance [made] so that it is a concord is a single or double dissonance between twice the diapason and the diapason and diapente which concords well.)

In *De mensurabili musica*, dissonance is sometimes employed as a *color*, the motive for which is the achievement of beauty.

Et sciendum, quod numquam ponitur discordantia ante imperfectam concordantiam, nisi sit causa coloris sive pulchritudinis musicae.⁵⁰

(And it must be noted that a discord is never placed before an imperfect concord except for the sake of color or beauty of music.)

In fact, in de Garlandia’s discussion of music, the function of *color* is to render music more appealing to a listener. “Color est pulchritudo soni vel obiectum auditus, per quod auditus suscipit placentiam” (*Color* is the beauty of sound or the auditory phenomenon through the mediation of which the sense of hearing is pleased).⁵¹

49. *De mensurabili musica* 15.23, p. 96.

50. Ibid. 10.22, p. 74.

51. Ibid. 15.10, p. 95; translation based on Gross, *Chanter en polyphonie*, 114. Gross has pointed out that *color* is often concerned with repetition, and the function of repetition is to make a sound more appealing by familiarity. The listener finds beauty in that which is recognized (p. 119). De Garlandia is not the only one to associate *color* with beauty. In a note to his translation of Anonymous IV, Jeremy Yudkin observes that the term *colores* “is used in the treatise as a descriptive term of approval, and five times out of seven in conjunction with, or as an alternative for, the word *pulchritudines*,” p. 13. Anonymous IV, like de Garlandia, allows ornaments to incorporate dissonance:

Item sunt quandoque longae plurimae ratione coloris vel pulchritudinis melodiae, sive fuerint concordantes sive non, quod quidem per se patet in operando. (88:3–5)

(Also there are sometimes several longs by reason of the color or beauty of the melody, whether they are concordant or not, and this is clear by itself in the performance.)

We see, then, a close link between the practices of rhetoric and music in thirteenth-century Paris, and a sense that the two disciplines are difficult to extricate. Rhetorical terms come from music, and musical terms from rhetoric. In both, we find a similar aesthetic of transformation for the purpose of pleasing. If it was important to adjust received material to render it more pleasing in singing and poetry, it seems likely the same was true of instrumental playing. The off-board fiddle is well positioned for a wide range of performance effect. Within a strong tradition of ornamentation, from fleeting embellishments to sustained transformation, the fiddle is capable of interacting with the voice, adjusting, as the voice does, to the musical and textual context. From this perspective, the *bordunus* can be seen as a potential tool for variation.

Assembling the evidence, we find a valorized perception of the fiddle in late-thirteenth-century France, and observations about the instrument cohere. Jerome praises the fiddle for being able to play in all the modes, not all the melodies; and when de Grocheio acclaims it as able to play every *cantus* and *cantilena*, he may not imply that it would always play the melody line. Rather, the fiddle is capable of participating in a wide variety of music with considerable sophistication. It can play music that cannot be achieved by other cordophones, and it can adapt to a wider range of circumstances than brass or percussion.

Some pieces require additional range, and the on-board fiddle with Jerome's second tuning can play these as long as they accommodate g and d drones. The off-board fiddle of Jerome's first tuning makes string isolation easier and facilitates some special effects, and the third tuning facilitates consonant pitch clusters. The off-board fiddle can accommodate a *bonus artifex in viella* but still sound good when played by an amateur who drones with very simple melodies or accompanies singing with concordant pitches.

Strong bonds between the disciplines of rhetoric and music point to a way of thinking about the fiddle in interaction with voice, though the instrument clearly played solo at times. Like the voice, the fiddle is likely to have made extensive use of embellishment. Faced with an undesirable dissonance, a player could make the kind of adjustment de Garlandia proposes: a change in pitch or some other "subtlety." Treatises in both rhetoric and music point to an aesthetic of performance in which variation is essential, and a process of composition by which a melody is adapted to a text. For a different trajectory on how the off-board fiddle engaged with this tradition, we must turn to iconography.

Iconographic Representations

Visual representations are notoriously slippery, since artists are rarely as concerned with the minutiae of musical instruments as musicians. For instance, it is impossible to tell how many strings are sounded by the bow in an image of a fiddle. At the same time, taken together, images can effectively complement other sources of information. By

looking at a number of representations, we can infer a range in the size of the instrument, typical playing positions, some details of construction and technique, and contexts where a fiddle might be appropriate.

Although it is nowhere the exclusive form of the instrument, the off-board fiddle appears in images throughout western Europe.⁵² The focus of this discussion will be eighteen representations drawn from a variety of sources dating from ca. 1130 to the fifteenth century.⁵³ In these images, fiddle players are represented as angels, men, women, and one goat. Of the fourteen images that unambiguously show the number of strings, eleven portray five strings,⁵⁴ and these five strings are consistently arranged as Jerome describes: four positioned over the fingerboard and one laterally divergent. Jerome's configuration is thus confirmed in visual representations. Every one of the images of the off-board fiddle shows the instrument held up on the shoulder rather than down in the lap, and this adds a dimension to our understanding that none of the theorists address.

The position of the left thumb is clearly represented in ten images. Of these, the thumb rests on the neck or laps over the fingerboard in three cases (as it would with an on-board fiddle), and it rests on the off-board string in seven cases, suggesting a perception of off-board fiddle technique involving frequent or persistent thumb contact with the *bordunus*. In two instances, the string is deflected by the thumb, indicating a prolonged pressure against the string, and one image portrays an alternate technique that would render plucking impossible. This strikingly detailed off-board fiddle appears in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 638, fol. 17r (fig. 2). Here the thumb clearly rests on

52. Although practices could vary between neighboring villages, we find considerable cultural continuity throughout Europe. Because of the cultural fluidity of the late Middle Ages and the paucity of direct evidence, images from a broad geographical range will be considered here. The images discussed here are chosen for their clarity in showing the off-board string and their diversity.

53. These images are Cividale de Friuli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, St. Elizabeth Psalter, fol. 295 (Spanish, ca. 1220); Exeter Cathedral Minstrels' Gallery (ca. 1325–50); Andrea di Bonaiuto, *The Church as the Path to Salvation*, Florence, Spanish Chapel (1365–68); Lincoln Cathedral spandrel carving (ca. 1280); London, British Library, Additional MS 28681 (Grandison Psalter), fol. 100 (English, thirteenth century); London, British Library, MS Arundel 83 (de Lisle Psalter), fol. 134v (English, ca. 1310); Lunel, Bibliothèque municipale, MS I, fol. 6 (English, ca. 1130); Madrid, Academia de la Historia, reliquary triptych (Spanish, fourteenth century); Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Cod. C. 128, Inf., Plate 3a (?Italian, ?thirteenth century); Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, Cod. V A 14 (Italian, fourteenth century); Navenby (Lincolnshire), Church of St. Peter, south aisle corbel (fourteenth century); New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 638, fol. 17r (French, 1240s); Niederhaslach, Église paroissiale Saint-Jean Baptiste (formerly Florentiuskirche), John the Baptist window (ca. 1360); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 131, fol. 20 (English, ca. 1340); Parma Baptistry, West door tympanum (1196); Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Maestà*, Siena, Massa Marittima, Municipio (ca. 1335); Sano di Pietro, *Virgin and Child with Angels*, Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale, no. 224 (fifteenth century); Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1179, fol. 86r (French, 1220–26). Many other images appear to represent off-board fiddles, but the instrument is not distinct enough to make a reliable determination.

54. Of the remaining three images, two show four strings, and one portrays three.

Figure 2. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.638, fol. 17r, detail (French, 1240s), purchased by J.P. Morgan (1867–1943) in 1916.



Figure 3. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.638, fol. 17r, detail (French, 1240s), purchased by J.P. Morgan (1867–1943) in 1916.



the *bordunus*, but on the fingerboard side of the string, between the neck and the string, pressing the string outward with the back of the thumb. This position could not possibly represent a plucking technique, but it is a realistic representation of a feasible alternative thumb-stopping technique.

In this collection of images, most represent minstrels or angels celebrating the glory of God by playing the off-board fiddle, but the context of the Pierpont Morgan fiddler from a *Bible moralisée* from Paris in the 1240s also shows evidence of more secular applications. Folio 17r shows scenes from Judges 21 and Ruth, two consecutive stories about marriages that reunite groups of Israelites. In the top scene (fig. 3), the fiddle player appears in an architectural arch. Above, a smaller musician in a turret plays pipe and tabor. They provide music for the dancing girls of Shiloh, and the fiddler, in the same scale and orientation as the characters, participates visually in the narrative. To the right, the Israelite elders, bound by an oath never to give their daughters to the tribe of Benjamin, advise the Benjamites to obtain wives in another way. In the center of this simultaneous narrative, the Benjamite soldiers hide behind a palisade of grape vines and then leap out, clothed in full mail, and seize the dancing maidens to be their brides. In this scene, the off-board fiddle is visually associated with dancing girls in a sexual context, a sanctioned abduction. This becomes more significant in conjunction with related representations.

A woman dancing to a fiddle appears again in a stained glass window from ca. 1360 portraying the beheading of John the Baptist in the Florentiuskirche, Niederhaslach (fig. 4). In the left panel Herod and Herodias sit in majesty, and in the right panel the executioner resheathes his sword behind a freshly decapitated John. The middle panel, with narrative efficiency, represents Salome both dancing before Herod (with her headdress flying behind) and carrying John's head on a platter to her mother. Salome's timbrel doubles as a platter for the head of John the Baptist, and a fiddle player hunches under the outstretched arms and grisly platter.



Figure 4. Niederhaslach, Église paroissiale Saint-Jean Baptiste (formerly Florentiuskirche), John the Baptist window (ca. 1360), detail. Image from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niederhaslach_StFlorent59.jpg.

The fiddler's clothing (perhaps Herod's livery) bears a striking similarity to that of the executioner, and these two characters serve similar functions in enabling Salome to dance pleasingly and to carry the head. Here the off-board fiddle is intimately bound up with a destructive response to sensual pleasure.

Andrea di Bonaiuto's fresco *The Church as the Path to Salvation* (ca. 1365–68) in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, may suggest a similar association of maidens dancing to the off-board fiddle with moral decadence (fig. 5). Following the tradition of liturgical drama, scenes to the viewer's right (Jesus's left) are associated with sinfulness, and those on the left with divine bliss. On the side of subversion, earnest heretics are persuaded to leave their faith, and youths climb trees to gather nuts. Here a maiden playing a hand drum leads women dancers, and a bagpipe player in a larger scale strides nearby. Larger still, on a platform above the maidens, sit four allegorical figures, two men and two women, and the woman on the left plays a fiddle. These four figures may be associated with vain pursuits; they are far removed from the gate of salvation.

Figure 5. Andrea di Bonaiuto, *The Church as the Path to Salvation*, Florence, Spanish Chapel (1365–68), detail. Image from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrea_di_Bonaiuto_fresco_01.jpg.



Thus we have three instances—from France, Alsace, and Italy—in which a fiddle player is associated with female dancers, and in each case some form of drum is present. This could reflect contemporary practice, a widespread use of the off-board fiddle together with percussion as music for dancing,⁵⁵ particularly dances performed by women. The images also suggest a powerful emotional force evoked in response to women dancing to the fiddle, one that can be potentially destructive.⁵⁶

This negative emotional resonance is suggested in a somewhat different context in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1179, fol. 86r, produced in Paris 1220–

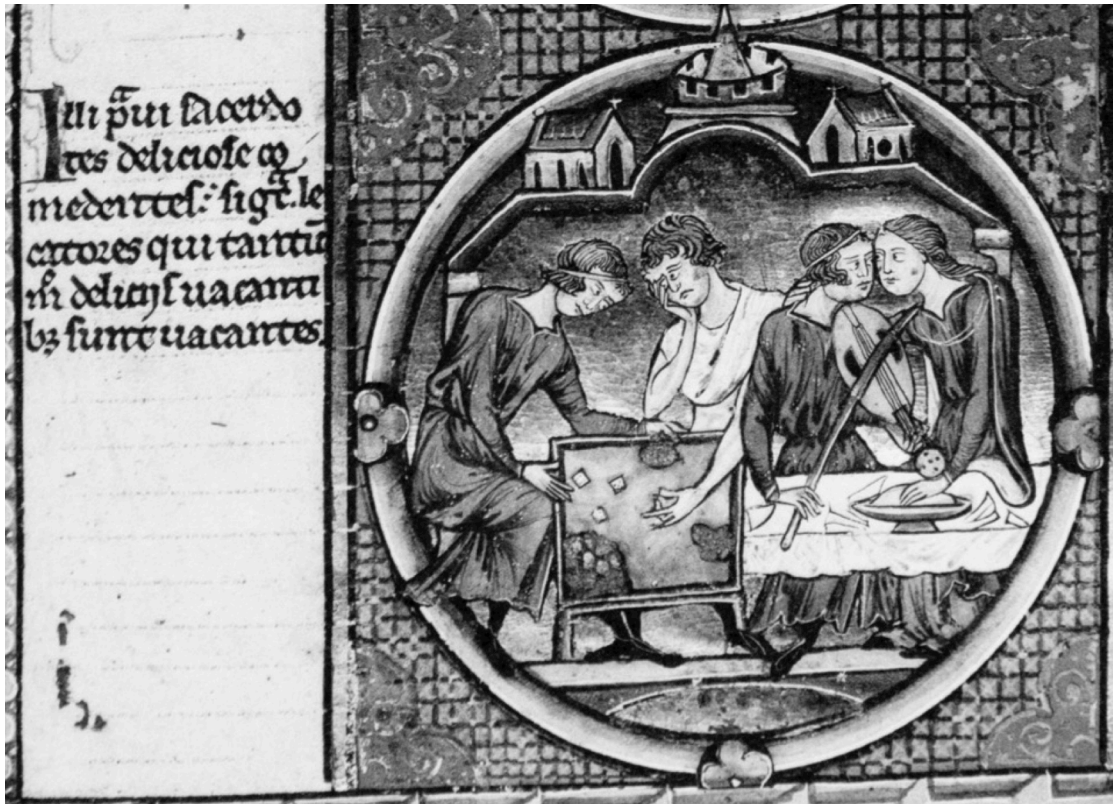


Figure 6. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1179, fol. 86r (French, 1220–26), detail. Image from Warburg Institute Iconographic Database, cropped and reproduced under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license, http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/vpc/VPC_search/pdf_frame.php?image=00026053.

55. McGee, "Medieval Fiddle," 43, has pointed out that off-board fiddles can play thirteen of the French dances printed in his edition of *Medieval Instrumental Dances* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

56. Jennifer Nevile, "A Measure of Moral Virtue: Women, Dancing and Public Performance in Fifteenth-century Italy," in *Sounds and Sights of Performance*, 197–209, argues that in fifteenth-century Italy dancing was seen as an expression of positive or negative ethical states, and she points out that dance performance by women was often associated with wedding celebrations.

26, where pairs of roundels align the rapacious sons of Eli with contemporary degenerates. An off-board fiddle appears in a scene of dissipation in which two languid young men play dice on a gaming board while a man and woman gaze into each other's eyes. He plays an off-board fiddle while she curls one hand around his neck and rests the other seductively on a rather phallic food item (fig. 6). The commentary beside the roundel explains, "Those young priests [the sons of Eli] stand for lechers who, in the same manner, become vacuous by vacuous delights."⁵⁷

The off-board fiddle suggests a less subversive, but equally powerful emotional impact in an historiated capital A in a fourteenth-century antiphonary in Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. St. Georgen 5, fol. 16v (fig. 7).⁵⁸ This miniature portrays Jesus playing the fiddle for Saint Agnes, who swoons in rapture against a drapery. The scene evokes the sexualized passion of divine love prominent in the late Middle Ages. The text of the song initiated by the capital A (from the Office of St. Agnes) confirms this:

Amo Christum in cuius thalamum introi[bo], cuius mater virgo est, cuius pater feminam nescit, cuius mechi organa modulatis uocibus cantant, quem cum amauero casta sum, cum tetigero munda sum cum accepero uirgo sum.⁵⁹

Figure 7. Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. St. Georgen 5, fol. 16v, detail. Image from Badische Landesbibliothek, cropped and reproduced under a CC BY-SA 3.0 DE license, <http://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de/blbhs/Handschriften/content/pageview/1607798>.



57. "Illi parui sacerdotes deliciose comedentes signale lecatore que tantum modo delicijs uacantibus sunt uacantes." Transcribed from a facsimile of the manuscript.

58. This image is not included in the collection discussed above because the off-board string itself is not clearly depicted. It is reasonable, however, to infer an off-board string: two strings are shown running over the fingerboard, but three pegs are indicated in the pegbox, and the thumb of the left hand appears to be resting on a string.

59. Transcribed from a facsimile of the manuscript.

(I love Christ, whose bedchamber I shall enter, whose mother is a virgin, whose father knows no woman, whose instruments sing to me with harmonious voices. When I love him, I will be chaste; when I touch him, I will be pure; when I accept him, I will be a virgin.)

Combined with this text, the fiddle is powerfully associated with sexualized love, in this case the sacred love of Christ. In the margin below, a nun kneels in devotion. The Saint Agnes image provides a reasonable way to understand the divergent representations of the off-board fiddle: explicit adoration of Jesus and Mary, and implicit expression of moral dissipation. The instrument is associated with passion, whether sacred or profane.

But one image in the assemblage suggests a different way of thinking about the off-board fiddle. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 131, fol. 20, an East Anglian psalter from ca. 1340, offers a whimsical representation of the instrument in a chivalric context. A goat plays the fiddle and a dog the shawm while two figures engage in combat with swords and bucklers and a sinuous cat chases a rat. The fiddle may be playing in consort with the shawm, providing music to enhance the excitement of the combat, though a “soft” stringed instrument paired with a “loud” shawm would be unusual.⁶⁰ By an alternative reading, the scene portrays an event at which a shawm has played, and that event is being narrated by the fiddler goat. The goat’s mouth is open as in song or speech. The image is parodic, but parody often bears a close resemblance to reality. A similar cluster of figures, this time human, appears in the Macclesfield Psalter, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, 1-2005, fol. 9r. Here a man with a sword and buckler fights a griffin, while a minstrel nearby plays a fiddle, to all appearances narrating the story of the combat.⁶¹ Narration may well have been an important function of the off-board fiddle.

Narrative Applications

Medieval romances were widely popular during the time when the off-board fiddle was most prominent. These tales of adventure and love were strongly linked with fiddle performance, but we have little evidence indicating how these stories were narrated and how instruments were involved, much less any hint of the type of fiddle commonly used.⁶² Timothy McGee has shown why the off-board fiddle is suited to performance of poetry and how it can be effective in the hands of an amateur. He characterizes this performance as “melodic delivery that was neither speech nor full melody, probably a

60. See Richard Rastall, “Some English Consort-Groupings of the Late Middle Ages,” *Music and Letters* 55.2 (1974): 179–202.

61. The fiddle is too indistinct to determine if it has an off-board string.

62. See Page, *Voices and Instruments* and Zaerr, *Performance*.

mostly syllabic melody with a small range.”⁶³ He discusses this approach in connection with the Italian *cantare all'improvviso* tradition, but the principles can extend to French and English romances as well.⁶⁴

Although the romances describe improbable events—fights with dragons and daring escapes from dungeons—these events are set in a realistic court context, and the musical culture echoes what documents tell us of the reality. In both French and English romances, noble knights and ladies frequently disguise themselves as minstrels, and in eighty-three English romances, eight knights and twelve ladies are explicitly trained in music.⁶⁵ In these romances, courtiers frequently entertain each other with *romance reden*, a phrase that sometimes “simply means ‘to tell a story,’”⁶⁶ and this term is frequently associated with instrumental skill.⁶⁷

If the off-board fiddle was used primarily to accompany poetry, and much of the poetry of that era was narrative, then the instrument’s structure can reveal quite a bit about how narrative was accompanied. The ability of the instrument to play limited melodic phrases at different pitch levels suits it to the representation of contrasting characters in different ranges. In many of the romances there is a high proportion of dialogue. In the Auchinleck manuscript of *Sir Orfeo*,⁶⁸ for example, 194 out of 554 lines include direct discourse. Thus for 35% of the text, a little over a third, characters speak in their own voices. Either tuning of the off-board fiddle would facilitate characterization of King Orfeo in a middle range, Queen Herodis in a higher range, and the King of Faerie in a low range.

Besides extending the range of the fiddle as discussed above, the thumb on the off-board string can be used to enhance eerie or suspenseful moments that frequently occur in the romances. In the first tuning, the thumb can produce d in unison with the middle string, with the low G sounding between. The pitch of the d on the *bordunus* can be raised by applying pressure with the thumb. In this way the *bordunus* wavers in tension with the unvarying middle string. Jerome calls this ornament *flos armonicus*, a pitch vibration which can take many forms. A note on the organ, for example, can be held and embellished by repeatedly striking the note immediately above it. Like the organ, the

63. McGee, *Medieval Fiddle*, 45–46.

64. Page, “Troisième accord,” associates Jerome’s third tuning with narrative, though he envisions an on-board instrument.

65. Zaerr, *Performance*, 72–73.

66. Ad Putter, “Middle English Romances and the Oral Tradition” in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Berlin, 2012), 343.

67. Zaerr, *Performance*, 72–73.

68. Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ MS 19.2.1, ff. 300r–303r.

off-board fiddle can sustain a pitch and simultaneously vibrate to a higher pitch. Sometimes the vibration “est morosa metasque semitonii non excedit” (is slow and does not extend beyond the limits of semitones).⁶⁹ This slow vibration within a semitone can be accomplished on the off-board fiddle, but not the on-board version of the instrument, and this embellishment is particularly effective in enhancing the emotional impact of moments of tension in narrative.⁷⁰

We have seen iconographic representations of the off-board fiddle in which it is associated with passionate love and with armed combat, and the romances are filled with abductions, dancing, compelling love, and perilous encounters. When heroes and heroines participate in music, the effect is so powerful it is often aligned with magic.⁷¹ The off-board fiddle is well situated to support narrative in this tradition, a tradition that requires variation of a simple melody and an ancillary accompaniment that does not interfere with comprehension of the text. The configuration of strings on the off-board fiddle can facilitate speech at different pitch levels; the bow can ebb and flow beneath the voice or articulate syllables in key phrases; the tuning can offer a range of concordant configurations of pitches; and the off-board *bordunus* can provide special effects, intensifying the lamentation and other-world encounters that typify this genre.

Conclusion

This essay has brought together a wide range of evidence relating to the off-board fiddle: explicit descriptions, pertinent documents, iconographic representations, and relevant context. While we will never have definite answers to questions about repertory and technique, this broad assembly of information can suggest reasonable hypotheses about how the instrument was employed. The physical characteristics of the off-board fiddle—string positioning and tuning—reveal much about the motivations of contemporary musicians. By a kind of backward engineering, we can analyze which techniques and which repertoires are convenient on the instrument, and which approaches to playing are difficult or awkward. While it is possible to isolate strings by raising the relative height of the middle strings, the reentrant structure of Jerome of Moravia’s tuning one, and the

69. Jerome, *Tractatus*, 25 and 171. This class of ornaments is discussed in McGee, *Medieval Song*, 61–67.

70. For applications of these principles of characterization and ornamentation, see <http://youtu.be/0NW4e3nmygQ> and <http://youtu.be/Dt9GU9PM7u8>. A hint of the thumb pressure technique may be suggested in *Bevis of Hamtoun*, the Middle English version of a widely popular story. When Princess Josian disguises herself as a minstrel, she plays “garibles gay.” The term *garible* suggests a warbling or wavering ornament.

71. Linda Marie Zaerr, “Songs of Love and Love of Songs: Music and Magic in Medieval Romance,” in *Words of Love and Love of Words in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 291–317.

doubling of the G in tuning three imply a prominent G drone in the lower range of both off-board instruments. The lateral positioning of the *bordunus*, however, facilitates the isolation of that string, suggesting that it may sometimes have sounded alone. This positioning away from the fingerboard also allows the second and third strings to sound together, G g in tuning one and G d in tuning three. These middle strings can be stopped separately or in unison, and they can be played together with the *bordunus* or with the top pair of string. The top strings, unison in both off-board tunings, can also be fingered separately or together, and they can be combined with the lower strings or played alone, and the top string can be isolated. Thus the off-board fiddle facilitates a wide range of string combinations and left hand finger applications. It demands a pervading G drone, but makes it easy to isolate a pitch below the tonal center on the *bordunus* where necessary.

That lower pitch, f or f# in tuning one and c or c# in tuning three, is necessary for pieces associated with the fiddle in thirteenth-century Paris, pieces that are difficult to play without dissonance on the on-board fiddle. The off-board fiddle can produce those pitches on the *bordunus*, but only by stopping the string with the thumb. This article has demonstrated some advantages of using thumb stopping on an off-board fiddle, and it has provided support for this practice and reasons why plucking is less feasible and less felicitous. This thumb-stopping technique resolves confusion that has surrounded Pierre de Limoges' augmentation of Jerome's text, and it is further supported by iconographic depictions of the instrument.

The thumb on the off-board *bordunus* also resonates with contemporary approaches to ornamentation. It provides capacity for subtle pitch adjustment, not just by repositioning the fingers on the fingerboard, but also by deflecting the *bordunus* with the thumb to raise and lower a pitch. This technique is again supported by iconography, and it complements a general aesthetic compulsion to vary received material, to *introducere formam*.

This study supports and extends Timothy McGee's findings concerning the elusive repertory of the off-board fiddle. The fiddle can play simple polyphonic lines, some monophonic songs, and dances in a limited range, but it is particularly well adapted to accompanying poetry. With narrative poetry, the instrument offers a singer an extensive array of effects to enhance a range of emotional tones and dramatic action, and these effects are available to players with limited experience or ability. Evidence from the English romances supports the notion that non-professional musicians sometimes performed narrative with an instrument.

Iconographic representations supplement information about instrument construction and playing technique and repertory, and it also provides a cultural context for the off-board fiddle. In these images, we see the fiddle associated with passion—intense, sometimes sexual feeling—that can be channeled to religious devotion or potentially destructive decadence. We see women dancing seductively to the fiddle, angels and

minstrels playing the fiddle as expressions of adoration, and Jesus playing the fiddle to evoke passionate love. There is a hint that the instrument may be associated with chivalric literature, an instrument used in minstrel narration.

The off-board fiddle has been acknowledged, but sometimes dismissed as a less capable cousin of the on-board instrument. It is worth considering, however, why it was configured as it was, and why musicians might have developed this instrument. The off-board fiddle has greater capacity than it has been credited with, and it can be salutary to our thinking about the role of the fiddle in medieval music. The off-board fiddle can offer a way of countering our appropriation of medieval music to suit our own tastes by presenting us with a well-defined set of musical priorities, and of these the *bordunus* string offers perhaps the greatest challenge.