

“By Ear and In the Memory:”

Vernacular Music Processes and the Pedagogy of Medieval Music

For many years, the teaching of western music history relied upon an evolutionary paradigm in which medieval music—actually over seven hundred years of diverse repertoire—was relegated to a role analogous to the proverbial one-celled organism from which subsequent life-forms arose. In truth, a great deal of the earliest western music is no less musically and rhetorically sophisticated than later music; nor is it characterized by one homogeneous style whose trajectory leads directly to the Common Practice period. A study of the processes, procedures, and transmission of many medieval music repertoires will reveal more commonality with vernacular musics than with the “classical” music of later eras: aural acquisition and retention in the memory, oral transmission from one musician to another, reliance on the agency of the performer rather than on the composer for its content, and evidence of improvisation, variation, and invention on the part of the performer. As musicology continues to move away from an evolutionary paradigm of music history to an approach more attuned to context and process, I propose that those of us who are scholars and performers of medieval music need to change the way medieval music is understood within the continuum of western music history, and to create new paradigms for teaching it, in both the classroom and the ensemble rehearsal studio.

Medieval music is not “primitive”

Several decades ago, I and about a dozen of my Indiana University Early Music Institute colleagues were sent to a small Catholic college in northern Indiana to provide historically informed musical presentations as context for a music history lecture. It transpired that the class was at eight in the morning, and populated by mostly-somnolent undergraduates. The professor was an elderly man of the cloth who in the course of his lecture referred to medieval music as “the primitive beginnings of western music.” Such a statement is a classic example of the evolutionary paradigm, implying an improvement in quality or functionality over time.

The first thing we can do to re-boot our students’ experience of medieval music is to do away with the idea that the music or its notation is a “primitive” form of anything. The term “primitive” itself can carry racist and orientalist overtones, and has been used to describe everything from the “driving rhythms” of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* to African drumming, the singing of traditional folk ballads, punk rock, and medieval monophonic song melodies.

Oxford’s online dictionary defines primitive as “relating to or denoting a preliterate culture,” or “relating to, denoting, or preserving the character of an early stage in the evolutionary or historical development of something.” This in itself is not pejorative; however, the word has acquired additional negative connotations. Merriam-Webster’s definitions of primitive, for example, include not only the benign “coming from an early time in the very ancient past” and “not having a written language, advanced technology,” but also “very simple and basic: made or done in a way that is not modern and that does not show very much skill.”¹ “Primitive” can therefore imply “simple” or “rudimentary” in a negative or judgmental context.

¹See http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/primitive, accessed July 3, 2015; and <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/primitive>, accessed July 3, 2015.

It is often wrongly applied to music that possesses subtleties and complexities not understood or acknowledged by the listener (the annual beer-fueled St. Patrick's Day declaration that "all those Irish tunes sound the same"), or to a traditional vernacular music that exists outside of a postcolonial or privileged frame of reference (western tourists plunking away on souvenir-shop *mbiras*, with no concept of the instrument's intricate, sophisticated, and deeply spiritual performance practice). Likewise, "primitive" is certainly not an accurate description of medieval music; goodness knows plenty of medieval music comes from a provenance that was in its own time characterized by both literacy and privilege. Yet the idea that medieval music is more "primitive" than later music is perpetuated, not necessarily by scholars and certainly not by performers, but by an evolutionary model of western music history that views medieval music as a precursor to later classical music styles with which it has little in common in terms of process and transmission.

The process versus the object

We can help students in both music history classes and ensembles to understand and appreciate medieval music more deeply by teaching it in terms of its processes and not its objects. Western classical music from the Common Practice period onward has come to be characterized by an object-oriented conception of performance in which the "work" is a fixed and static object waiting to be vivified by the performer, who executes what she finds in the score. For most of the world's vernacular music traditions, however, this object-oriented conception of music is foreign, and this applies to medieval music as well. Here are several concrete examples that demonstrate the presentation of a medieval music topic from a process- rather than object-oriented conception:

- **Notation:** A score written in early notation is a prime example of a musical “object.” But what does the object tell us about process? Instead of immediately presenting the object in terms of its “deficiencies” in comparison to modern notation, one might ask the student to examine the reasons that a medieval performer might notate music in a certain way. What information is *not* present in the notation, and why do you think they found it unnecessary to include? What does this tell us about expectation in terms of either the memory or the inventive capacity of the performer? What information *is* contained in this notation that is *not* contained in modern notation? Why do you think they found it necessary to include it? (For an excellent recent text that explains the development of notation as it developed organically from musical processes, see Thomas Forrest Kelly’s *Capturing Music*).²
- **Variants:** When first introduced to medieval monophonic song and multiple melodic variants of the same piece, students (and professors) accustomed to an object-oriented approach often proceed immediately to the assumption that one of the manuscript variants is the “right,” oldest, or most “authentic” one. A process-oriented approach would present variants as strong evidence for both oral transmission and a cultural acceptance of performer embellishment or personalization, just as we find in later folk ballad traditions. Encouraging performance students to create their own variants as an exercise would help to internalize the understanding of that process, especially for those who have no prior experience with vernacular repertoires.
- **Form:** a) Instead of simply presenting the student with the score of an instrumental piece such as an *estampie*, teach them the formal parameters and have them co-create one before hearing or seeing an actual medieval example. Is there room for improvisation in this piece they have created, or will it affect the form? Is there any kind of embellishment or improvisation that would not affect the form? How would this differ idiomatically from one instrument to the other? b) Instead of teaching the *formes fixes* by memorizing arcane strings of section-denoting As and Bs and trying to work out the forms from the scores or the listening examples, ask each student to replicate the medieval process by creating a poem in that form and then setting it to a very simple melody. This solitary process, which contains an element of contemplative practice, creates a “deep learning” experience in which the form is more easily held in the memory, and thus recognized and appreciated when encountered in the medieval repertoire.³
- **Mode:** Preface a theoretical text assignment or discussion of mode by presenting the students with the mnemonic formulae used by medieval students to facilitate familiarity and aural identification of the church modes. We tend to aurally identify modes according to how the scale intervals differ from our major and minor scales, but what would the medieval musicians’ process have been? Can those formulae be found in actual chants? Secular songs? What about medieval musicians who were not “schooled” but still created

² Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Capturing Music: The Story of Notation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015).

³ For more on the field of contemplative education, see Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013). Additional resources can be found on the website for the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), <http://www.acmhe.org>.

modal music—what was the process of acquiring and internalizing the gestures, cadences, and character of the modes?

These are just a few examples. Notice that to some degree, they are all participatory, and direct the student's focus away from the object and the timeline and toward examination of the processes involved in the music's creation, performance, and transmission.

Improvisation and fluid composition

When medieval music is approached in this way, it becomes clear that it has a great deal in common with vernacular music, particularly when vernacular music is defined as music that is **“learned, taught, shared, and passed-on by ear and in the memory.”**⁴ Because so much medieval repertoire was transmitted either orally or by way of notation that left a lot to the performer, the door is also open for an exploration of the role of improvisation and what I call “fluid composition,” which I define as a basic musical framework that is sketched out in advance of a performance, but then is altered, varied, or expanded in the course of the performance itself.

The role of improvisation or fluid composition in the performance of medieval music is another area that is neglected in our music history classes, even while we give the students listening

⁴ Mission statement of the TTU Vernacular Music Center, <http://www.vernacularmusiccenter.org/mission.html>, accessed 7.3.15. The definition in the mission statement is important to consider when reconceptualizing medieval music as western “vernacular” music, because “vernacular” has other meanings that could confuse the issue. In the world of medieval western literature, for example, “vernacular” implies “not Latin,” and yet a great deal of music that arose through the same processes as vernacular or popular music was created in the service of setting Latin texts. Notation begins as an aid to memory, and those who were trained to wield a pen were also those who could read and speak in Latin, thus skewing the extant repertoire in favor of “literate” texts even though the processes involved in the music-making were still closer to that of vernacular music. The early notation and modal formulae of chant and the unheightened neumes of a bawdy goliard song both give evidence of the oral transmission of musical material that is then held in the memory, and the fact that the text is Latin does not detract from that evidence.

examples that feature repertoire that has been extensively “arranged” by the performers. As I know from experience, students often become befuddled when they read a definition of “monophonic” as “a single line of melody,” and then receive a listening example consisting of one of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* performed by three voices and four instruments including percussion. The confusion stems from the fact that the above definition does not clarify that in some cases, the single line of melody was the only thing that was transmitted *in writing*. The actual performance practice may be unknown, or may have been dependent upon the situation and the musical forces present at the time of performance, both then and now. Such a composition is defined as “monophonic” because the one element that remains consistent from one performance to another is the melody, either by itself or set to a text—and even then, both may have variants from one written source to another. When medieval “monophonic” music is understood in this way, a listening assignment such as the one described above can open the door to a discussion of improvisation within an idiom, and what is required for its successful execution—the same kind of discussion that would ensue concerning jazz or blues or *raga*.

In turn, any such discussion of improvisation, invention, or fluid composition in medieval music will inevitably open the door to another performance practice issue, and that is the logical fallacy that equates “unwritten” with “non-existent.” If the unwritten is simplistically interpreted as non-existent, then there was precious little to do for the dozens of instruments portrayed in medieval iconography, and no one in the northwestern quadrant of the eastern hemisphere sang a parallel harmony with anyone else until the ninth century. Students listening to the extant recordings of medieval music need to understand that modern performers wishing to engage in historically-informed performance must decide whether to either avoid adding anything to a performance for

which they do not have some concrete written evidence (certainly an option), or to educate themselves about instruments, modes, structures, polyphonic styles, and other medieval practices and processes, and then employ fluid composition or improvisation to create a dynamic performance.

One more point needs to be addressed here: if our goal is to introduce students to a world of repertoire that they have never heard but may well come to love, there is no better way to scare them off than by calling the “authenticity police” on their first attempts to create performances of the repertoire. Many of my medieval music colleagues will not approve of the following statement, but if students are newly fascinated with medieval music yet not particularly concerned with a “historical performance” approach, why would we want to nip their interest in the bud by discouraging them to arrange the repertoire in any way they please? Our job at that point, in my opinion, is to simply help them understand the difference between “historical performance” and “modern acoustic music inspired by medieval repertoire.” The latter need not be anathema to the continued existence of historically-informed medieval music performance, and indeed may lead the students to explore more historically-informed processes as they continue to delve more deeply into the repertoire.

Medieval music as vernacular music: pedagogical implications

If teaching and performance techniques that are pedagogically effective for vernacular music are also pedagogically effective for medieval music, then we must change the way we teach medieval music, whether in the context of a history class or a university ensemble. The above alternate approaches to notation, variants, form, and mode are just a few examples of the

incorporation of aural, mnemonic, inventive, or improvisatory processes into our teaching methodology; the creative instructor can come up with many more. The implementation, however, of aural, memory-driven, improvisation-friendly, and other process-driven methods can present some challenges. While these methods have already been used with great success for many years in elective medieval music workshops by performers such as Sequentia and others, it is another matter altogether to incorporate them into the prevailing academic paradigm of the mandated music history sequence, or even an elective ensemble in a more traditional academic setting. But it can be done. Here are a few suggestions for navigating some of the issues that may arise:

- **Compatibility with an established “music history sequence.”** Regardless of whether your institution treats its music history sequence in the traditional chronological order or has taken a somewhat more progressive approach, the pedagogical paradigm that I advocate for medieval music does not require a complete overhaul of an existing music history sequence. It is still very possible, particularly in class lectures and discussions, to present medieval repertoire as *modal* music that was, as Peter Burkholder once said to me, “transmitted orally and understood aurally.” In fact, an examination of medieval repertoires, genres, and processes provides an excellent model for students to understand the way a musical culture shifts from an aural/oral to “literate” transmission. Such a course might even conclude with a brief unit demonstrating that much contemporary western music—even music that relies on functional tonality, such as jazz, rock, and some folk music genres, or which is experimental in some way—still may utilize the same processes of aural transmission, improvisation, and fluid composition.
- **Compatibility with established ensemble procedures and limited rehearsal time.** Many ensemble directors feel that they do not have time to teach repertoire to students “by ear,” to spend extra time grappling with early notations, to incorporate theoretical exercises such as singing modal formulae, or to explore improvisation with musicians who have no experience with anything other than reading a score. In my fifteen years of experience as a university early music ensemble director, however, I have found that a gradual introduction to these processes works very well. It is extremely important to know in advance exactly how much one can expect the student to absorb in just a couple of rehearsals a week, and to make purely practical choices: introduce a couple of pieces with early notation instead of the whole program; learn a couple of pieces by ear, or all the refrains, before handing out music; introduce improvisation with short exercises and in small doses; break the ensemble into small-group projects that rehearse simultaneously but separately; program slightly shorter concerts but explore the processes involved in the repertoire in more depth; and develop section leaders who have some familiarity with your approach, or are practitioners of other vernacular music repertoires.

- **Students' lack of sonic familiarity with earlier repertoires.** Many music students bring an infamously lukewarm attitude to the “early” part of the music history sequence, or are reluctant to join a medieval music ensemble, because they simply do not know the repertoire. It is difficult to get excited about music one has never heard, and for which one has no point of reference. This is exacerbated by the fact that the earliest music that many *have* heard has not always been presented in a particularly stimulating way. Exercises that engage students in active listening to a wide variety of medieval music, performance of the music, and in-class demonstrations by live performers are all very effective, as are assignments that demonstrate ways in which scholarship informs actual performance.
- **Outcomes and Assessments.** Universities usually mandate an articulate description of a course's expected outcomes and a clear explication of the way in which a student will be assessed. As instructors, it is also important for us to articulate the desired outcomes of both our courses and our ensembles so that we can assess for ourselves whether our teaching techniques have proven successful. When trying out new or unfamiliar learning paradigms, it is even more critical that students know what is expected of them, what you want them to learn, and how they will be assessed, particularly in courses that must receive a letter grade. Nothing will stifle improvisatory creativity as quickly as the fear of receiving a bad grade that, from the student's point of view, is given on the basis of a purely subjective judgment. For many music students, medieval music is uncharted territory, and causes considerable grade anxiety in both ensembles and in the classroom. Many have never been asked to improvise, memorize, or invent any original musical material whatsoever, or to look at early notations and understand modes. What do you want the students to learn from your course? On what criteria will their grade be based? What skills or experiences do you want them to gain as a result of having taken part in your ensemble? How will they be assessed as an ensemble member—effort, punctuality, attendance, preparation, completion of assignments, willingness to experiment? If you are obligated to give them grades, then choose things over which they have control as the basis for grading, and make those criteria as crystal-clear as possible.

In conclusion, there are profound implications to re-framing medieval music's role in the history of western music as part of the same continuum that includes popular and vernacular musics.

First, if we accept that prescriptive notation, the primacy of the score, and the focus of control on composers and conductors has *not* been the dominant paradigm in terms of the long arc of western musical history, this appreciably changes “the big picture” of the history of western music outlined in our textbooks. This alternate (dare I say corrected?) view takes nothing away from the stunning cultural legacy of symphonic, chamber, operatic, and choral repertoires and “masterworks” of the last five hundred years. But the admission that the processes and practices

of vernacular music are an *unbroken* continuum in western music invites us to view the twentieth century's cultural value-shift back toward vernacular music, facilitated by the invention of recording, as a reconnection with the very roots of western music, rather than an aberrant example of the villagers temporarily taking control of the castle. In making this admission, we also honor and validate a student view that holds "classical" and popular or vernacular music to be of equal cultural status, and that values proficiency in either. By exposing our music students to the inventive, improvisatory, oral/aural, and shared aspect of medieval and vernacular music, we de-mystify and elevate both, inviting young musicians to experience a sense of ownership in medieval music rather than perpetuating its perception as an ancient and impenetrable Other.