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Musical Historiography and Oral Tradition

The present essay is an abstract of my book published in Russian: *Menestrel'i: očerki muzykal'noy kultury zapadnogo Srednevekov'ja*, Moskva 1996 (Minstrels: An outline of Western musical culture of the Middle Ages, Moscow 1996).¹ This study offers a new conception of medieval music, first of all through analysis of so called oral musical professionalism (minstrel professionalism), which was not (as far as I know) taken into consideration in medieval studies.

Medieval musical culture was predominately oral. Written music was a rarity at the time. Nevertheless the today's attitude towards medieval and renaissance musical culture is rooted in "opus-psychology" and modern analysis of early written music is based on "opus presumption." The "codex-centrism" of modern musicology does not make it possible to comprehend the music of the Middle Ages authentically. We regard medieval authors of polyphonic pieces as "composers," but they all were merely clerics and music was only one of their many functions. Today's specializations in the field of music (non-performing composers, non-composing performers, soloists, orchestra musicians) are rudely forced upon the peculiar medieval reality. But they were unknown in the Middle Ages, with their minstrel music, based on self-sufficient poetics. Medieval musical culture as a whole was a minstrel culture. The scenes of professional musical performance as described in medieval poems, chronicles and other documents, are based on the art of minstrels, not clerics or church singers. The professionalism of minstrels (instrument players, singers, etc.) was an oral musical professionalism of the kind, comparable to classical improvisational traditions of the Orient.

In their spoken language instead of the Greek-Latin word "music" (used in modern times), medieval people used the word "minstrelsy." In medieval vulgar languages in general the lexical expressions related to musical performance and perception differed from that we use today and in many ways reflected jongleur esthetics.

First of all, the words "jogleor (jongleur)," "minstrel," "trouvère," "troubadour" were used as synonyms. The modern usage of the terms "troubadour" and "trouvère" is often historically incorrect. According to the long established opinion of music historians, "the troubadours" are a distinct group of "elite composers," "elite poets," which seems to be clearly different from jongleurs – those "performers," "accompanists" at troubadours' disposal. Such modernized specialization was invented by the generation of the early romanticists, the contemporaries of young Goethe, for example, by Jean Baptiste de la Curne de Saintes-Paloyes et Claude-François-Xavier Millot

¹ 360 pages including bibliography with 615 items.

in three volumes of their book, published by Durant in 1774.² Here the word “troubadour” was revived and, for the first time in history, used as a social category – the usage unknown before that date. The names of Old Provençal authors were mentioned during XIV-XVIII centuries, e. g. by Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, by Giovanni Maria Barbieri (1519-1574) in his *Arte del rimare*, by Giovanni Tiraboschi (in the third volume of his *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Modena, 1773), but they did not call those poets “troubadours.”

The medieval Provençal *vidas* (biographies of song-makers) and *razo* (stories concerning the origin of the song to be discussed in current document)³ prove that at the time the words *trobador* and *trobaire* (*trobayres*) designated personal qualities, talents similar to such attributes as “good speaker,” “good lover,” etc., but never a profession or social status. All *vidas* are structured in formulaic order: the first section of it contains names, origin and social status; the second section tells about personal qualities and main biographical events. Thus Bertran de Born is presented as *castelan* (in another manuscript – *vicomte*), but the second section describes him as *bon domnejaire, e bons trobaire, e savis e ben parlanz* (i. e. a good company for women, a good song-maker, connoisseur and a good speaker).⁴ The same in other *vidas*: designations of social status are clearly isolated from descriptions of personal artistic skills. The word *trobador* can be seen only in the passages of the last type. It is an astonishing fact that students of old Provençal texts paid no attention to the obvious fact that in *vidas* information concerning social status practically never included words like *trobador* or *trobaire* (*trobayres*).

Moreover, the designations of artistic (musical-poetical) activities are also given with the help of peculiar expressions of their own. The Provençal singer always “made” (*fetz, faz*), “found, invented” (*trobava*) his songs, but never “wrote” them. The verb “to write” was used only together with the official sphere of script, book culture (*letras*) of the clergy. The both spheres – *arte de trobar* and *letras* – (i. e. oral and written) are sharply distinguished as two rivaling mentalities, two very different careers. Thus in *vida* of Uc de Saint Circ we find out that he was a son of a poor vassal (*vavasseur*). His brothers wanted him to be a cleric and sent him to the school of Montpellier. They hoped he would study *letras*, but he got interested in quite another art – in *cansos, versos, coblas* and epic singing; “and having obtained such knowledge he became a *jongleur*” (*et ab aquel saber el s'ajoglari*), i. e. he changed his career radically. Then he made (*faz*) good songs (*bonas cansos*), melodies (*sons*), and strophes (*coblas*).⁵ Another example: Arnautz Daniels was an educated nobleman (*gentils hom*), he had studied very well writings (*amparet ben letras*), but then he

² Jean Baptiste de la Curne de Saintes-Paloyes et Claude-François-Xavier Millot: *Histoire littéraire des troubadours, contenant leurs vies, les extraits de leurs pièces & plusieurs particularités sur les mœurs, les usages, & l'histoire du XII & du XIII siècles*, Tomes 1-3, Paris, 1774.

³ Manuscripts I (Paris BN Fr. 854) and K (Paris BN Fr. 12473), published first in 1950, then in a revised edition: Jean Boutière et Alexander H. Schutz: *Biographies des troubadours. Textes provençaux des XIII et XIV siècles*, Paris, 1964 (= Bt).

⁴ Bt, XI, 3.

⁵ Bt, XXXIII.A, 1-4, 11.

found his delight in the troubadour's artistry (*delectet se en trobar*) of sophisticated qualities. This important change of his life is described as follows: "*Et abandonet las letras, et fetz se joglars e pres una manera de trobar en caras rimas.*"⁶ Similar story could be read about Peire Rogiers. The first paragraph of his *vida* presents him first as an educated canon. The further section deals with his personal qualities. He was a handsome gentleman, an expert in *letras*, but there was one contradiction in his individuality: he had a "natural mind" (*sen naturel*) and sung and made new songs (*cantava et trobava*) very well. So he abandoned forever his canonry and became a jongleur, – changed his profession.⁷ This sharp distinction between written and oral activities, between works of clergy and the art of minstrels reveal itself in all other lexical situations. The word poetry meant only written poetry (text for silent reading or reading aloud before illiterate audiences), and in order to discuss the *trobare* production as a whole, the Provençal author either enumerates the genres (*cansos, versos, sirventes, sons, sonets*, etc) or mentions all this in general as "*tot qant hom cantava*" – "all that was sung."⁸

So my study uses as its material the musical vocabulary of early European languages (Mittelhochdeutsch, Old French, Middle Netherlandish, etc.) as well as many fragments from medieval poems, romances, etc. related to musical performance.

The book also discusses the problems of "minstrel strata" in extant monuments of medieval music (e. g. chansonniers, Liederhandschriften, etc.), of minstrel polyphony, minstrel technique of formulaic motivic variation, the combinatorial "game form."

The medieval text in most cases is an oral communication despite the fact of its fixation on parchment or paper. One can explain the main form-creating principles of medieval music by their oral character alone. "Formulaic games" of oral art may be discovered not only in minstrel songs or in instrumental intabulations, but in developed works by Machaut, Landini and other late medieval musicians, the authors of so called *ars subtilior* manuscripts. Here I write about game form and about such categories as originality, novelty (*so noveyl, novel son, niuwer tänze, anderunge, noviax sons, novella violadura*), laughter and seriousness, mirth (*gle, singen mit freuden, gai, grant joie, guai sonet, cantus laetitiae*), graceful sound (*so leugier, senelich, suoze seitpil, suptils, spaehe wise, cointamen*), *haut* (*grossi*) and *bas* (*sottili*) instruments, etc. considering them to be an essential indication of the medieval minstrel mentality. In support of these ideas I adduce much data from the history of medieval culture and folklore.

The criteria of oral (minstrel) musical professionalism, when taken into consideration, can help us to reveal unexpected qualities even in familiar historical material. Thus under the view of such conception I analyzed two important sources: a music monument (the songs of the Bayeux manuscript)⁹ and a theoretical treatise – *De mu-*

⁶ Bt, IX.A, 2-3.

⁷ Bt, XL, 1-3.

⁸ Bt, III.B, 5.

⁹ Théodor Gérold: *Le manuscrit de Bayeux. Textes et musique d'un recueil de chansons du XV siècle*, Strasbourg (e. a.) 1921.

sica of Johannes de Grocheio.¹⁰ The literature about Grocheio's treatise is abundant, but I tried to offer some new aspects of its interpretation concerning first of all his category *musica vulgaris* or *cantus publicus*, which appeared to mean the minstrel professional music of various kinds. In Chapter Six of my book I pointed on two kinds of melodic structures, specified by Grocheio as belonging to the *cantus* group and on the same melodic realities in most song manuscripts of the late Middle Ages (see my above mentioned book). The second aspect, hitherto ignored by scholars, is that of the origin of Grocheio's musical terminology, which includes not only conventional Latin terms, but also vulgar expressions from everyday minstrel musical practice, translated (perhaps also by Grocheio himself) into Latin. Hence the difficulties, discussions and controversies about the meaning of such terms as *cantilena*, *ductia* or *cantus insertus*. The term *cantilena* can easily be found in Latin-French glossaries of the fourteenth century. There it appears to be translated from the French *chanson* (also *canchon*, *canchonnete*, *canscon*).¹¹ The group *chanson* (*cantilena*) in Grocheio's classification includes the mysterious category *ductia*, which must be one of the results of his personal efforts at translating vulgar expressions into Latin. Here I tried to show the convincing evidence of *carole* (*chanson de carole*) as the French origin of the Grocheio's Latin *ductia*. Similar procedure is done with the category *cantus insertus*, etc. The problem was already discussed in my article on Grocheio's neologisms.¹² All other important aspects of minstrel musical professionalism in context of medieval culture (including parallels with Russian realities) could be available after translation of my study into English or German. I still hope for proposals on that point.

¹⁰ Ernst Rohloff: *Die Quellenhandschriften zum Musiktraktat des Johannes de Grocheio*. Leipzig, 1967.

¹¹ So in manuscripts: Vatican Lat.2748; Paris BN: Lat. 7692; Lat. 13032; Douai 62; all reproduced in: Mario Roques (Hrsg.): *Recueil général des lexiques français du moyen âge (XII-XV siècles)*./ Tomes 1-2, (= Bibliothèque de L'École des Hautes Études. Sciences historiques et philologiques, Vols. 264, 269), Paris, 1936-38, Bd. 1, S. 9, 117, 271; Bd. 2, S. 45.

¹² Mikhail Saponov: *Ductia und cantus insertus bei Johannes de Grocheio*, in: *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 32 (1990), S. 296-299.