
MUSIC: AN INSTRUMENT OF DIALOGUE

CHRISTIAN MEDIEVAL MUSIC AND ARAB MUSIC, OR THE NEED FOR HERESY

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Abstract

Now, medieval music would seem to make sense only as a pleasure for those, who are not able to live in modern times. This outdated music, which is also the victim - in the social imaginary - of a series of clichés that depict it as hieratic and absolute, or as an ingenuous and naive background music for minstrel plays, actually brings valuable inheritances for us. The first inheritance: the wonderful instruments, proper objects of art, worthy of a place of honour in figurative art, whose voices are as ravishing as and more than their shapes. The second inheritance: extreme beauty within extreme simplicity, a rare virtue involving the spirit and senses in a way that modern man has forgotten. The third inheritance, the most important of our times: in medieval music, different cultures and ideologies - which speak of themselves through their fragrance, when they are grasped and emphasized in the right degree by the performer – combine. Through medieval music, the European man can actually acquire important elements in order to draw a boundary line between what his today's portrait is and what it could have been, and understand himself a little better.

Keywords: medieval music, Mediterranean, dialogue, medieval instruments, Anima Mundi Consort

1. Introduction

It is quite legitimate to wonder whether it is right, nowadays, to speak any longer about music dating back to a thousand years ago, especially in a non-musicological context. If medieval music is the passion of a few specialized musicians, and is also the subject of the speculations of musicologists acting with the method of the archaeologist and the sensitivity of the poet, what can it tell us if observed outside these specialized fields? The answer seems to be obvious: we can do nothing but watch with affection this infancy of our culture, we who are living in its full maturity, and place it in the archives. But, we must

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say that an overall view on what we know about medieval music can rather offer us a picture providing some very interesting hints, especially from a point of view underpinned by the intuition (or the dream) of Teilhard de Chardin about a humankind developing as a single body, which learns from its errors and draws the energy it needs to grow from the osmosis of ideas. From this point of view, all the music (with the exception of commercial music) can have a great deal to tell, since the above-described attitudes are the attitudes, on which the standard procedure through which music (real music) generates and develops is based.

Paying attention to these attitudes is a thing that the musicians, a certain kind of musicians, know how to do well. There are some recent examples, among which the most glaring is represented by the musical event that pervaded a good part of the twentieth-century culture, that is to say jazz and its followers.

Jazz was born far from academies; it is the voice of a people. It enters into relationship first with the musical languages that are close to it, and then absorbs and is, in its turn, absorbed, by other musical languages, very distant ones, too. The result is a totally new language. This development – I would almost say the method, with which this process was carried out – is structurally similar to the development occurring to ideas and musical innovations in the Middle Ages.

2. Medieval music

Timing is obviously different, since the contemporary age boasts, for good and for evil, a communication speed with no historical records, but the essence is not dissimilar. Not to mention, out of curiosity only, that the similes between the music characterizing the twentieth century and the music characterizing the Middle Ages concern, in a sense, also the performance practice.

Actually, like jazz themes, in which the inventiveness of the performer is expressed, in the sense both of improvisation development and of the possibility of harmonic reinterpretation provided by the chords that are expressed in abbreviations and not in full, the medieval themes that have survived up to the present day provide us no information whatever, give us no instructions on the instruments with which to perform them, pose frequent problems of rhythmical interpretation and have the heritage of an ascertained improvisation practice, whose features are inferable only through the comparison with the traditional European (and non-European) repertoires that have survived.

This vagueness creates the tolerance margin within which the performer can – but also must – assert his right to give his own interpretation of this wonderful repertoire [1]. However, let us start from a close examination of the relatively few historical certainties that reached us.

3. Instruments

Among them, the most important and in some ways unequivocal is represented by the rich iconography of that age, a valuable and often unique source to come to know the instruments that were used at that age. They stand out in the frescoes of churches and palaces, in the miniatures and initial letters of scores, which allowed us to make up for the lacunas that a way of writing music less precise than ours would otherwise leave, making the performance sometimes even impossible. Actually, in medieval 'scores', as previously mentioned, it is never clear which instrument the piece was intended for, chiefly because almost all the music that survived up to the present day is vocal music [2, 3]. According to the mentality of that age, it was not even worth transcribing a music thought only for instruments, confined in the lowest of categories, in which medieval theoreticians used to classify music, and only depending on oral transmission, while, in the vocal field, the instruments, where present, were thought at most as duplications of the voices.

However, the altarpieces, frescoes and miniatures make it plain. A hundred examples are possible, and all have been amply classified and studied. The miniatures of the *Cantigas de Sancta Maria*, a fundamental item of Spanish sacred music, are a catalogue of the instruments, which were used at that age and which are also reproduced in a way that can tell us something, also from the point of view of the study of musical instruments. The Madonnas by Spinello Aretino have before them 'ensembles' of angels with wind instruments, drums, and rubbed- and plucked string instruments. The 'Effetti del Buon Governo', a fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, is peopled by figures engaged in the daily activities of a well-run town, including, among other things, the practice of dance and music, accompanied by large-size rattle drums [4]. And the list can continue much longer, with a surprising common feature: almost all the instruments depicted have Middle Eastern origins.

Even the names of the instruments bear witness to that. For instance, it is extremely well known – but, in my opinion, it is still potentially heralding developments that have not yet been treated enough - that the main instrument of European music in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the lute, is called from the Latinization of the Arab name of origin, *al-lud*, and that its shape, performance practice and manufacture features remained almost unchanged since its appearance, ascertained in Europe around the year 1000, up to the middle of 1500, when the extraordinarily polyphonic development of occidental music required the introduction of some essential changes (see the Musical Still-Lives by Baschenis).

The instrument, which is very often held by the angels in the visual representations of the glory of the just in Heaven is a *rebeck*, the Latinized name for *rabab*, an instruments that is still used in some areas of the Mediterranean basin. The figures, which fill up the cornice of the portal of Chartres, just to give an example, are holding the same instruments that are still used nowadays by the traditional music groups of the Middle East. Also here the list can continue

much longer and a fact, which will strike with horror many renowned thinkers of our time, that is to say that the Madonna was surrounded by the same instruments with which the music of Arabs was played a bit more South, becomes more and more evident.

There also were, of course, autochthonous instruments, which continued to be used along with these Middle Eastern ‘imported’ instruments, as well as instruments that originated in other parts of the world but in the Islamic territory, therefore creating instrumental groups becoming in this way typically European, and with an amazingly evocative and ravishing sound, almost unrivalled in history: listen to believe. The impression could be that of a complete subjection of European musicians to the musicians of the rest of the world, at least as far as the study of musical instruments is concerned, but things are not so simple: the subject is more complex. It is actually true that “nearly all the musical instruments of medieval Europe came from Asia either from the South-East through Byzantium, or from the Islamic Empire through North Africa, or from the North-East along the Baltic coast; the direct heritage from Greece and Rome seems to have been fairly negligible” (this sententious opinion is a literal quotation from the famous German musicologist Curt Sachs [5]), but this is the picture of a period where things were such.

Immediately after, the situation is completely different. We spoke above of the lute, imported and adopted with no essential changes until the XVIth century. The Spaniards only increased a little bit its dimensions, improved its tuning system and added a bigger central ‘rose’ (which almost always is an engraved art masterpiece) in addition to the traditional small and decentralized sound-holes, in order to have more sound. The ‘inventors’ of the *ud* appreciated this change, so much so that a reverse exportation of the modified instruments towards their countries of origin (in particular, Egypt), where the typical and unbelievable virtuositities are performed up to now during the concerts cheering Friday eve, occurred.

We can make it clearer through another more drastic example, still quoting Curt Sachs [5, p. 303]: “The migration of the *psaltery*, a stringed instrument of Persian and Iraqi origin, was rather peculiar. The Arabs brought it through North Africa, where it is still played by the Jews, and from North Africa to Spain. Here, its first trace was found in a bas-relief dated 1184 on the portico of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Later, it arrived into the continent and became a popular instrument in the Southeast of Europe. In 1850, this ‘*Psaltery of the Franks*’ was attested in Turkey along with the authentic Turkish psalteries, whose manufacture was similar and which had directly come here from Persia. Nowadays, only one model belonging to that family still survives, it is the *cymbalom* of Spanish gipsies. During the nineteenth century, it migrated East till China, where it is still called *yang ch'in* that means *foreign cittern*, and from here it was transmitted to the Japanese and Mongols. In Korea, a local tradition claims that the instrument arrived in that land around the year 1725”. This story, which has almost the flavour of a legendary tale, really is very enchanting. It shows us how there actually was a continuous exchange that it is

nice to imagine as a huge common breath. It is as if the psaltery, which also is in itself an instrument having a peculiar appeal, was the trace left by a thought migrating from one people to another, from one age to another, and from one music to another. We can go further: the question, as we have seen, concerned only instruments up to here.

4. The *Llibre Vermell*

Nevertheless, if we focus our attention on music and not only on instruments any longer, the matter actually brings us even farther [6]. On this subject, I would like to start from a particularly telling example that is fairly known, at least among the persons, who are fond of medieval music. On the mountains surrounding Barcelona, the monastery of Montserrat stands. It is one of the most important pilgrimage places of Spain and a very prominent cultural centre since the Middle Ages: at that time, especially, several monks came from Catalan aristocracy and had studied in the most important universities of that age. The heritage left by these monks is considerable: one of the uncountable treasures preserved therein is a code of the XIVth century, the *Llibre Vermell*, or Red Book, which, among other things, contains ten compositions of unequalled beauty and simplicity. These compositions had to reconcile the need of joyful pilgrims to sing and dance in the honour of the Virgin, on one side, with a behaviour consistent with the place where they found themselves, on the other.

Compromises rarely reach similar results: in the pages of the *Llibre Vermell*, there certainly are some of the most evocative compositions of the whole medieval music. But the reason for our interest is mainly another: these pieces are melting pots of cultures. Sensuality, Arab rhythmic, religious fervour and Marian praises combine all together in a harmonious manner in this extraordinary document. By way of example, let us take one of the pieces making up the *Llibre Vermell*: the wonderful and extremely well known *Stella Splendens*. Scholars tell us that the author is an anonymous monk from Montserrat, who had lived in Rome and could have drawn his inspiration, as far as the text is concerned, from the praises in use at Santa Maria in Ara Coeli, where he used to go frequently. The musical form comes from France, it is the two-voice *virelai*, a musical form that was very often used by troubadours and whose origins also lie in the Southern coasts of the Mediterranean. The rhythmic of this piece certainly comes from across the Mediterranean.

At the bottom of the list (even if it is not the last one), there is a further reason of extraordinary interest that associates this piece with the other pieces of the *Llibre Vermell*: the rhythmic was intended to accompany a kind of dance, of which we have no reliable news, but which certainly had liturgical connotations. Liturgical dance is in use in all the religions of the world and Christianity was no exception until the veto put by the Church. The first mention to dance is contained indeed in the *Llibre Vermell*. Actually, its anonymous compilers took care of reminding the readers that this music thought in the honour of the Virgin accompanied a dance, which they call *ball redon*, or *trepudium rotundum*. To

sum up: music of the Arabs or, in any case, of Middle Eastern origin (especially, the rhythmic), Marian text, liturgical compositional occasion, accompanied by a sacred group dance like in the rites of other religions. What could be farther from the stereotypes we are accustomed to concerning medieval sacred music?

It is certainly true that, due to its extreme mixture of different genres, cultures and artistic disciplines coming from different geographical areas, the *Llibre Vermell* is a peculiar case, but besides it there are plenty of other famous examples of cultural crossover. The melting pot is neither a feature of modern times nor an invention that only contemporary metropolises can boast.

Another very famous example in this sense are the previously mentioned *Cantigas*, which were composed in the Spanish area as well, a wonderful example of Galician-Portuguese literature, where Arab influence is clearly recognizable, and is placed at the service of the presentation of a proper catalogue of miracles, Marian miracles, too. It may be objected that in both cases the proposed examples are Spanish, where the influence of the Muslim conquerors' culture is manifest [7]. However, it is not so obvious to have left such a deep trace in the sacred field, or even, as we have seen, in the liturgical field. Moreover, the phenomenon widely concerned music also in other European areas, including Italy, with regard to both the instruments used and the practice, especially if we take into consideration the field of secular music, too.

The work of a musical genius as great as he is underestimated, such as Jehan de Lescurel, is evidence of the presence of a non-European aesthetics in the Paris of the XIth century [8]. His love songs, which have a definitely Arab flavour, would deserve a greater fame. One of the most important phenomena of French culture as regards both its musical and poetic success, namely the troubadour movement, develops from Arab models. It is not a marginal phenomenon: in France, it lasts two centuries approximately, and its protagonists, especially in its first stage, are not marginalized musicians, but gentlemen of noble descent, and it finds direct successors in the leading men of the Italian culture of that age. The importance of this heritage in Italy is described by the musicologist Massimo Mila in the following way: "In this irruption of fresh and renovating energies, the secular troubadour melody already foreshadows what for some centuries will be the grandiose secret plot in the prehistory of modern music in Italy: namely, the progressive and inevitable exploit of a so-called popular music against the recognized values of the aulic and official - whether liturgical or court - music." [9]

5. Creation of innovations

In other words, the music, which 'will overcome' the comparison with the others thus becoming the music characterizing a people, originates in the people itself and uses musical models and instruments coming from other peoples. However, what has been previously set forth is far from proving, as somebody fears, a European cultural subjection to non-European cultures, namely Islamic ones, and indeed tells us that instruments and ideas were travelling, that there

was an osmosis of innovations, dialogue and peculiarities, and that the result was an original product, a new expressive language, which was particularly suitable for its use and also for the new vulgar language that had replaced Latin. Well, this is the first lesson of these ancient artists: not a cultural colonialism, but the creation of innovations.

5.1. New languages as the synthesis of languages pre-existing in far-away areas

Underlining this feature while we play medieval music, through appropriate interpretative choices but also as regards the suitable instruments to be used, would seem not only widely desirable, but also exciting in some ways, due to the understandable consequences it has not only in the musical field [10].

Incidentally, this enthusiasm is sometimes far from being shared. Some time ago, for instance, I came across a blog, which severely criticized the choices I made together with the ensemble Anima Mundi Consort that I conduct, as regards the instrumental group and instruments used, accusing me of having used instruments defined as Arab *folk* instruments instead of the instruments of our tradition (as though they were two distinct categories!). However, besides the musicological inexactness, what was serious and also a little upsetting, was that an ideological connotation was given to these choices of mine that were all musical choices. The criticism was that I wanted to ‘arabize’ the origins of occidental musical culture, thus making more or less an anti-occidental political propaganda. You can imagine my surprise before statements of this sort. The choices I made obviously are only a humble attempt to make those music pages tell what they have to tell, always explaining, among other things, that they are hypotheses and not certainties indeed. Likewise, we cannot make the mistake of absolutizing what has been set forth above.

Non-European influences in medieval music are a widespread phenomenon, numerically prevailing as regards both styles and instruments, but the overall reality of medieval music remains, however, as it is obvious, many-sided and embellished by regional peculiarities. There also was a great production with its own European features, an evolution of the Gregorian chant (by simplicity, let us say nothing about the Jewish origins of this chant!). Moreover, what has survived from the Middle Ages only is the tip of a musical iceberg, whose submerged part consists in all what was got lost during the centuries and all what has not been written due to the practice of oral transmission and improvisation. But one thing is certain: from East to West, and then from West to East, thought, science and art have been breathed in and out by generations of curious men, who were not frightened by innovation and diversity. We have the impression that our ancient musical forefathers *used to chose* more than we do what they needed, sometimes also beyond and in spite of the political situation, which, overall, went on up there above their heads. The result was a proper creative process, the *creation* of something that before did not exist, but which preserved inside the clear and strong key features of its

origin.

History itself (the history made by persons, of course) has, in short, made some choices, not necessarily the choices that seemed unavoidable, some choices that even seem heretical if compared with the choices that would be more suitable and consistent with the culture of the ruling class. That is may be the reason why – though it seems unbelievable – the use of the *ud* in a performance of medieval music still threatens to start a debate. Our times are, more than ever, the times of the need for *heresy* and for the practice of music (and of art, in general); sometimes it is the ground, on which the practice can be learnt and its positive effects can be tested. May be for this reason, in Italy, in the last years, public funding for this sector has been reduced by more than 60 per cent. That is perhaps the reason why, at a worldwide level, there have been neither new musical productions nor innovations for more than twenty years.

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