
IMPROVISATION
AND
INVENTIO
IN THE PERFORMANCE OF
MEDIEVAL MUSIC
A PRACTICAL APPROACH
ANGELA MARIANI

Improvisation and *Inventio* in the Performance of Medieval Music

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A Practical Approach

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for Leo and Betty Ann

for Tom, Barbara, and Ben

. . . and most of all for Chris

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On a mild August day in Vancouver many years ago, I sat in a circle with about a half dozen other medieval music students and Benjamin Bagby of Sequentia. Before us were bits of photocopied chant from the *Liber Usualis*, each representing a different church mode. Having sung them all together a few times and discussed the characteristics of the modes as they were exemplified in the chant, we were invited to choose a mode and sing a spontaneous improvisation. I vividly remember choosing mode 5. Ben Bagby's encouragement of a deep and contemplative internalization of musical and poetic material, of the meeting of theory and practice, and of the creation of a safe space to improvise and invent was transformative for me as both a performer and teacher. During that same week at Early Music Vancouver's Mediaeval Programme, Barbara Thornton helped each of us choose a troubadour song to perform. The prospect of performing five verses of Occitan text was daunting, but she guided us as we learned the notes, studied the translation of the poems, and looked up each word so that we knew what each word meant as we were singing it. We listened to Barbara as she instructed the instrumentalists to "play the poem," a revelatory exercise in what one might call rhetorical improvisation. We followed her suggestions to put the translation into our own words, to adjust those words so that they matched the syllable count of the original, to invent mnemonic images that corresponded to the lines that gave us trouble, and to imagine the entire text plastered onto different locations on the façade of our childhood homes. She told us that "memory was not a function of the mind but of the soul." I turned that statement over and over in my mind, and I am still doing so. At the end of those two weeks, I had not only memorized my troubadour song and a variety of other pieces, but fragments of songs that I had "forgotten" kept surfacing in my consciousness, bubbling up, I suppose, from this thing we call a soul.

A couple of years before that, Thomas Binkley had sent the students in his Medieval Literature and Performance Practice class home with crisp new copies of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's rhetorical treatise *Poetria nova* and told us to come back to the next class with a rhetorical analysis of the music of the Latin *Planctus cygni*. I was a first-year graduate student at the Indiana University

Jacobs School of Music, recently arrived from the world of rock and roll to attend what is now called the Historical Performance Institute. To say that I was puzzled would be an understatement. As I did the exercise, however, to my astonishment and excitement I felt as though I had discovered a new room in my brain. It would take a couple of decades for me to actually complete the assignment to my own satisfaction, but the link between rhetoric and music that can occur in the process of *inventio* had been forever forged in my musical experience.

I could not have written this book had I not been on the receiving end of the pedagogical techniques described above, nor could I perform and teach as I do today. When I sing the first verse of that troubadour song for my music history class, I usually accompany myself on the harp, incorporating bits of the mode 1 melody of the song and some of the melodic gestures that make up the vocabulary of mode 1. I do not plan a single harp pluck in advance. Improvisation and invention are part of the process that is medieval music performance practice, and in order to do that, one must have a storehouse of memorized musical vocabulary, techniques, and repertoire on which to draw.

One might argue that I learned from living models, and that it is perhaps a fool's errand to attempt to document in writing what is essentially an orally transmitted art. To this I would offer the *confutatio* that we live in a literate age, and our teachers do not always live in our village. While it is undeniable that most of the contents of this book were learned as a result of one-on-one interactions with a teacher or a vastly more experienced performer, it is my conviction that there is a place for a pedagogical text that will present medieval music in the context of the process involved in its invention and performance; that will offer the student an organized explanation of the vocabulary, rhetoric, technique, and practices involved in that process; and that will then figuratively hand the lyre back to the student and say, *Now you do it*.

As a longtime performer of rock music and folk music in the Anglo-Celtic tradition, invention and improvisation were comfortable territory for me when I entered the world of medieval music. For others, however, a single line of melody with an ancient foreign text and no musical directive may seem like those ancient maps with vast blank spaces on which a wary cartographer has written "Here be dragons." But if musicians are invited to explore the processes of medieval music's invention and performance and encouraged to build and accumulate a memory storehouse of material related to the content of medieval repertoire, then they may claim mastery of these dragons, producing substantive and satisfying performances and forever changing the way both they and their audiences experience medieval music.

This book will be useful to musicians whose primary teaching and performing activities are both inside and outside the area of medieval music. It is also intended to be useful to advanced students who want to tackle medieval music

performance practice but desire guidance when it comes to providing all the musical content that is not on the page but is still necessary in order to create a convincing performance. It provides usable models for performance while offering sufficient historical and theoretical information to enable the reader to understand the models. A certain amount of individual volition and proactive energy is also assumed; in many areas the content of the book points the way down the path but does not hold the hand of the walker.

It is also my intention that this book should juggle the practical and the theoretical; that it will be challenging to a student but accessible enough that one could require it for students taking a workshop in medieval music improvisation. I imagine it also as a helpful tool to use in conjunction with a course in medieval music performance practice, perhaps along with a more traditional medieval music textbook and scores, so that one might engage the performers in the class and remind them that medieval music is not some opaque collection of musical arcana, but rather a vehicle for their own performance and invention.

Taking all of that into consideration, it is still important to state that no written pedagogical treatise can take the place of learning by imitating a living model. I would encourage any student who uses this book to do so in conjunction with actual teachers of medieval music. In turn, I hope that it might be of use to those who teach medieval music in the contexts of applied performance, music history and musicology classes, and ensembles. I hope that it may also provide an approach to understanding medieval music through the process of its creation and transmission, and inspire us to teach it accordingly.

There are many people without whom this book could not have come to fruition: teachers, colleagues, students, family, and friends. I was fortunate to be born into a family of musicians; my parents, Betty Ann and Leo Mariani, a church musician and a jazz musician respectively, encouraged musical invention in both me and my sister, Deva, a gifted jazz singer and instrumentalist. I am grateful that after putting up with the loud rock and roll in the basement and, years later, with the Irish traditional tunes, they did not appear to think it was insane to become a practitioner of medieval music. I only regret that Leo is not here to read this book on improvisation and invention.

It is nearly impossible to express the extent of my gratitude to Benjamin Bagby and Barbara Thornton. Many of the techniques, approaches, and exercises described in this book were transmitted to me directly from them or inspired by their teaching methods. Both Ben and Barbara, when she was still with us, communicated in their teaching the process of medieval music performance, bringing the same intensity to the classroom that they always put into their transcendent performances. For me and for many other students of medieval music, they were the "living models" that we strove to emulate. I thank them for their mentoring, kindness, friendship, and support.

And then, of course, there is Tom Binkley. I can still hear his voice saying, "What do you need to know to be able to play this piece?" He left us over twenty years ago, and yet I find when I read this book some part of him is still present. From the first time he opened a medieval song manuscript and asked us to tell him "what was not on the page," to his admonition to "play what the instrument wants to play," to his mind-boggling demand to know "why you played an F#" in that particular spot in your improvised prelude, he was the ultimate advocate for *inventio*.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all the faculty of the Historical Performance Institute, formerly the Early Music Institute, at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, especially to Wendy Gillespie, who has been a deeply appreciated and admired teacher, mentor, and musical model to me for many years; to Paul Elliott, who through his skill, support, and patience, taught this rock and roller to sing early music; to Elisabeth Wright, whose fluent and spirited performance and teaching skill showed me a completely new way to love and experience Baroque music; and to Thomas J. Mathiesen, for his encyclopedic knowledge, support, and mentorship. I am also endlessly grateful to J. Peter Burkholder, who spent many hours reading and editing the original version of this book, for his encouragement; his insightful comments, criticisms, and suggestions, which improved the book by several orders of magnitude; and for his friendship.

My work on the book was also facilitated by my Texas Tech School of Music faculty colleagues and our director, William Ballenger, all of whom were unendingly helpful and encouraging. I am indeed extraordinarily fortunate to work in such a collegial environment. That good fortune has also manifested in the opportunity to know and work with the numerous students in the Texas Tech Collegium Musicum, who for many years have patiently and enthusiastically allowed themselves to be on the receiving end of many of the pedagogical approaches enumerated in these pages.

Many friends and colleagues contributed to the musical examples, images, and artwork. I would especially like to thank three alumni of the Texas Tech Collegium Musicum, all professionals in their own realms of performance, cognition, composition, church music, and early music, who helped me inestimably with the manuscript. Ryan Best digitized all of the first draft's musical examples from my scribble. Rob DeVet creatively employed the Gregorio software to produce the beautiful chant and psalm tone examples. I am especially indebted to Benjamin Robinette, who worked tirelessly to create the final polished versions of dozens of musical examples, figures, and tables; his creative suggestions and solutions were invaluable, and his generosity with his time, labor, skill, and spirit are deeply appreciated. I am also grateful to photographer extraordinaire Tif Holmes for the creative, beautiful, and evocative photos of my medieval instruments that grace the cover. All

the stringed instruments were built by Timothy G. Johnson; the organetto originally belonged to Sequentia and might be recognized from a couple of photos from their early recordings. Thanks and credit also must go to the Morgan Library and Museum in New York for the Martin Codax *cantiga* image from the Vindal manuscript; to Martin Mayer at the Hochschul- und Landesbibliotek RheinMain in Wiesbaden for the image from the Riesencodex; and to Benjamin Bagby for permission to use an image from one of Barbara Thornton's Hildegard transcriptions.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Oxford University Press and to editor Suzanne Ryan for her encouragement, patience, support, and assistance; to Oxford's editorial team, including Victoria Kouznetsov, Andrew Maillet, and Denise Phillip Grant; to the production team at Newgen Knowledge Works; to copyeditor Ben Sadock, for his detailed and insightful suggestions and comments; and to the outside readers whose thoughtful scrutiny and excellent suggestions greatly enhanced and improved the final product.

Much of this book is ultimately about performance, and I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge and celebrate the friendship, camaraderie, and musical inspiration afforded to me through many years by my fellow travelers in Altramar Medieval Music Ensemble, originally founded back in 1991 at Indiana University by Jann Cosart, David Stattelman, Allison Zelles Lloyd, myself, and, of course, Chris Smith. That leads me to my last and most heartfelt acknowledgement, for there are not enough words in the world to express sufficient thanks, love, and appreciation to Chris, my musical partner, academic colleague, husband, and best friend. His encouragement; exchange of artistic and intellectual ideas; emotional, financial, and spiritual support; marital and musical companionship; thousands of home-cooked meals; and deep and abiding friendship have enriched my life for thirty-five years. This book is for him.

Improvisation and *Inventio* in the Performance of Medieval Music

CHAPTER 1

The Process of *Inventio*

Part of the art of both actors and musicians is to skillfully provide those elements of performance that exist outside the script or the notation. While this is true of music in any period or style, some types of notation are more prescriptive than others. The extant notation of medieval music is in many ways non-prescriptive; it leaves a lot more room for performer interpretation than most modern notation. The fact that some examples of pre-fifteenth-century music were preserved in notation does not unlock the mystery of how the music actually sounded in performance. In many cases, it omits important bits of musical information altogether, such as rhythm and meter, instrumentation, or even specific pitch. At the same time, it may also contain information that is missing from modern notation, like the vocal inflection represented by a "liquescent" neume, or the enigmatic *quilisma*. Some medieval notation appears to have been intended only as a mnemonic device, hinting at content that had been more fully committed to memory, as with unheightened neumes. If musicians from diverse regions in medieval Europe both composed and improvised "outside" the notation, then performers who claim to be proponents of historical performance practice must engage with that process as well, if we wish to create a living performance that is more than a snapshot of accurately carbon-dated bones.

While we may study the musical objects that survived the centuries, diligently read the theoretical treatises, learn innumerable details about medieval performance practice, and strive to incorporate all of that knowledge into our performances, it is not possible to recreate a performance of medieval music exactly "as it would have been done." The elusive element of *inventio*, as the medieval rhetoricians would have called it, must always be provided by the performer in the present. The modern performer, therefore, is better served to try to understand and replicate processes: how musicians of a particular