"Une aventure vous dirai": Performing Medieval Narrative

Anne Azéma

Singing is a dangerous enterprise; singers are often tempted to focus their efforts on peripheral issues. It is best for performers to have a clear idea of priorities. For me, the potency of the word, the strength of the poetic gesture,[1] and the act of storytelling are what is central to singing medieval music. These seem much more important goals than that of simply attaining a beautiful sound (however one chooses to define that notion). The combination of word with poetic gesture and sound makes for an interesting dialogue—a complex series of dance steps into which the public is ultimately invited to participate. Medieval storytelling lives in a space of freedom won from two kinds of bondage: that of seeking either beauty or entertainment for its own sake. Some of this freedom resides in the wide variety of medieval narrative forms, a repertoire which includes the *reverie, pastourelle, alba, chanson d'ami, chanson de croisade, chanson de toile, chanson de mal-mariée*.[2] All of these offer excellent opportunities for performers.

I have also been interested in taking less traveled roads—namely performing narrative texts without music, especially in French, my mother tongue. It seems clear that these purely narrative texts were in fact performed, or *contés.*[3] Gautier de Coincy himself tells us at the beginning of his *Miracles de Nostre Dame* [*Miracles of Our Lady*]: "Translater voel en rime et metre / que cil et celes qui la letre / n'entendent pas puissent entendre" [I want to translate into verse so that men and women who do not know how to read can apprehend].[4]

Without entering further into the scholarship that justifies modern perform-

[1] In my experience, poetic gesture is defined by metrical and linguistic structures (rhymes, rhythms, assonance and so forth) combined in a "musical manner" with an emotional content, resulting in an aesthetic pleasure.

[2] See Pierre Bec, *La Lyrique française au Moyen Age, XIIe–XIIIe siècles: contribution à une typologie des genres poétiques médiévaux: études et textes*, 2 vols. (Paris, Picard, 1977–78).

[3] On this subject, see Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental Practice and Songs in France, 1100–1300* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986) and Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1999).

[4] *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*, ed. Frederic V. Koenig, 4 vols., Textes littéraires français (Geneva, Droz, 1955–70), I Pr 1 (D.1), lines 7–9. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

ances, I would like to present a number of issues and reflections arising from my work on medieval song narrative. I draw from my own experience as a performer and editor with references most particularly to the following works: two by Gautier de Coincy from his *Miracles de Nostre Dame* (the Leocadia story[5] and *Dou Cierge qui descendi au jongleour* [*The Candle Sent Down to the Minstrel*]),[6] and the well-traveled production of *Tristan et Iseult*.[7] Other remarks derive from my performances of Marie de France's *Guigemar*, various fables, a Provençal Passion play, Philippe de Thaon's poetry, *Le Roman de Fauvel* [*The Romance of Fauvel*], and several of the narrative *Cantigas de Santa Maria* by Alfonso X el Sabio.

The creators

We all have the notion of the poet as a primal creator. While this idea is still quite present in the mind of modern singer-interpreters, it is naïve and oversimplified. We know that these narratives are multiform, and that they were reshaped and retransmitted any number of times. The medieval performers themselves faced the same challenges as we moderns; there is no definitive version of a story, only various enlightened and informed solutions in the here and now. The enmeshing of the inherently fluid oral tradition with the strictness of the written word is frequently evident in the medieval sources themselves. However, there again lies the great privilege of working with narratives and medieval storytelling; the performer becomes, for the duration of the performance, the poet. With each presentation before a public, the work is created anew in the spirit of *mouvance* and *mutation* described by Paul Zumthor.[8]

Narration in the first person is a compelling element for a vocalist. The *je lyrique* [the poetic I] of the medieval poet provides a wonderful driving force for a contemporary performer. Many French medieval narratives use a personal reference in the opening and closing. For instance Marie de France writes: "Les contes que je sais verais / dont li Bretons on fait les lais / vos conterai assez briefment" [The tales—and I know they're true—from which the Bretons made their *lais*];[9] or "Dit vos en ai la verité / du lai que j'ai ici conté" [I have given you the truth about the lai that I have told here];[10] or "Une aventure vos dirai" [I shall tell you an adventure];[11] or Chrétien de Troyes: "Je seuls come païsanz / aloie querant

[5] *Miracles*, I mir 44 (D. 49), and Anne Azéma, *L'Unicorne* [*The Unicorn*], CD, Erato, 1994.

[6] Hereafter called the Rocamadour miracle, since it takes place at the pilgrimage town of Rocamadour in the south of modern France. See Anne Azéma, *Etoile du Nord*, CD, Calliope, 2003.

[7] I performed Iseult in *Tristan & Iseut*, dir. Joel Cohen, The Boston Camerata, CD, Erato, 1989, reissued 1995.

[8] *La Poésie et la voix dans la civilisation médiévale*, Collège de France: essais et conférences (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) 21–2.

[9] Marie de France, *Guigemar*, lines 19–20. All text citations for Marie de France are from *Poètes et romanciers du Moyen Age*, ed. Albert Pauphilet, Bibliothèque de la Pléïade 52 (Paris, Gallimard, 1952); translations from *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (1978; Grand Rapids, Labyrinth-Baker Books, 1998).

[10] Marie de France, *Chievrefueil*, lines 117–18.

[11] Marie de France, *Laostic*, line 1.

aventure" [I wandered alone like a peasant seeking adventure].[12] Gautier, however, moves far beyond such a convention. His voice seems more present, truly a *partie prenante*, a full participant, in the development of the story. He is happy to share with us his emotional state: "Pourquoy me remuai / quant je ma dame perdue ai / la vierge leocade / qu'amoye de tout mon cuer" [Why did I change when I lost my lady, the virgin Leocadia, whom I loved so much with all my heart].[13]

In this sense, medieval narrative is a form of self-revealing song. However, it combines several "voices": those of the composers, of the performers and of the characters. All are sustained by a form, a musical line, and sometimes accompanied by an instrument. I choose narratives based on my evaluation of their appropriateness to such treatment. Above all, the crucial determining element for me in choosing to perform this repertoire is its potential for musical expressivity.

Vocal performance

Both secular monody and medieval narrative are problematic, as no treatises are directly linked to this repertoire, no recordings, and no living performance traditions from distant generations exist to be emulated! Only sound archives from recent generations seem to lead the way for some modern performers. Both public and artists have many expectations concerning vocal performance. Singers and performers want to make sure that their vocal abilities are used to best advantage. The public on the other hand expects to be rewarded with a "beautiful" sound. Of course, standards of vocal beauty have varied a great deal across the centuries and even, in the same generation, among different genres. Recent early music performances of early secular monodies have tended to be dogmatic in their choices. Frequently performers have chosen either to reject or emulate previous interpretations. By necessity these performances are linked to the personality of the singer/performer.

Some early sources of medieval narrative do provide important hints concerning different sorts of vocal timbres, even indicating that a range of approaches might be possible. One can imagine different types of sounds, different timbres and volume depending on the situation and the singer: "Dunc chante haut et cler" [Thus (the mermaid) sings loud/high and clear];[14] or "Ysolt chante molt dulcement / la voiz acorde a l'estrument / les mains sunt beles / li lais buens / dulce la voiz e bas li tons" [Ysolt sings very sweetly, her voice in tune with the instrument. Her hands are fair, the *lai* good, her voice sweet and soft/low-pitched];[15] or "Ouch sanc diu saeldenrîche / suoze unde wol von munde" [The

[12] *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, *Poètes et romanciers* 173, lines 2–3.

[13] In his song "Las! las! las! par grant delit" [Alas! Alas! Alas! Through great delight], liner notes, *The Unicorn*, trans. Peter T. Ricketts.

[14] Philippe de Taon, "Serena en mer hante," *Poètes et romanciers* 267, line 10.

[15] Thomas, *Tristan*, in *Les Tristan en vers*, ed. and trans. Jean Charles Payen (Paris, Garnier, 1974) 171, lines 843–6.

beautiful maid sang to them sweetly and full throated].[16] These examples of idealized singing (in the case of the mermaid) or of public singing of secular monody show how many choices and different approaches to sound—intensity, pitch, colour and volume—are available to the performer.

Narrative genres in general seem to free up expectations regarding vocal qualities, and this generalization holds true from Gautier to Wagner and beyond. Listeners to performance of narrative will allow for a wider range of vocal sounds, and will qualify a good performance primarily by its value as entertainment. We are no longer in the realm of Mozart arias, and nor are we within the aesthetic of the troubadours' *cansos*. For all participants there is an informality, a relaxing of boundaries in narrative that is not always possible for other types of singing.

Potency of the word

If a modern performance is to be effective, the underlying text must be strong. In the stories of Tristan, or *Guigemar,* powerful archetypes involving sexual passion, jealousy, betrayal, quest or death carry in themselves most of the weight of the performance. By virtue of these primal forces these stories have a strong appeal to the human imagination. Performers and their performance are carried along by the inherent appeal of the material. Some other texts, while beautiful, speak less powerfully to the subconscious, but might appeal for other good reasons discussed later.

The value of form

Formal structure is more than an element of interest for a performance of medieval narrative. It is also a necessity. To be efficient, and memory-friendly, a story needs to operate within very strict formal boundaries. We see formal matrices at work in certain kinds of modern performances such as the oral poetic joust of Corsica.[17] In that repertoire the length of the phrase and the sustaining "cantilation" formulae are very much respected by the performers—even if slightly ornamented. Not only can the improvising poet display virtuosity in that way (showing who can best "create" within these formal boundaries), but also, form is a mnemonic device for further creation. Meter and formula are sustaining frames for the next poetic idea and its rhyme. Similarly it is impossible to memorize any of Gautier's long renditions of miracles, without having internalized its versification and meter.[18] The spontaneity of an interpretation in front of a live audience can only happen in the context of the formal shell—verses, rhymes and meter. I find that internalizing this matrix is critical to the performance of versified narration. Performers of purely prose texts may have other observations to give.

[16] Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*, in *Tristan und Isold*, ed. Friedrich Ranke (Leipzig, Reclam, 1980) lines 7996–7.

[17] See *Chjama é rispondi, Centre national des lettres-Academia di Vagabondi*, Bastia, Scola Corsa, 1986.

[18] On octosyllables, see Vitz, *Orality and Performance* 8–25.

The possibility of creating a story within a story is a formal device that has appealed to me, as it provides an effective performance mode. In the Rocamadour story (one of the episodes of Gautier's *Miracles de Nostre Dame*), the miracle story and the song we have chosen to pair with it are notated quite separately in the sources. Despite the clerical separation of the song ("Ma viële" [My vielle]) and the text (*Dou Cierge qui descendi au jongleour* [*The Candle Sent Down to the Minstrel*]), Gautier does seem to want the story to be told out loud: "Un mous grant livre en est fais / plusieurs fois leüs l'ai / d'un jongleor, d'un home lai / un mout courtois myracle I truis / pour faire entendre a aucune ame / la cortoisie Nostre Dame" [A great book was written about it, I have often read it. In it I find a very noble miracle about a minstrel, a layman, which I wish to tell if I can, to help all souls understand the courtesy of Our Lady].[19] Although Gautier's miracle text is given without music, I chose an accompanying song, "Ma viële," which is transmitted with musical notation elsewhere in the manuscript. I created a modern performance by combining elements of both of these pieces, interweaving stanzas of the song with a shortened, edited narrative text. In our performance of the Rocamadour story, we have a mixture of the narrative in pseudo-epic style punctuated by the chosen song. Since the narration of the miracle contains descriptions of a jongleur singing and playing, this new synthesis seems appropriate. Juxtaposing and combining these elements allows the performer to retell Gautier's story for modern audiences in a new way, based on words and music from his hand. We are aiming, as I have said above, for a unified conception of Song. To cite Paul Zumthor: "The final aim of medieval writing is vocal communication, with (at least in principle) all the sensory stimulations that are linked therewith."[20]

As in the best films of Hollywood, a good medieval story includes suspense, action and other proven recipes of storytelling. In this way it creates a dynamic space for the performer. This process of narrative tension and release is evident for instance in Gautier's Leocadia miracle. The actual loss of the statue, the pain and heartache of the poet, followed by the quasi-erotic climax of the recovery are performance opportunities too good to be passed over! "Quant les noveles en oy / Si joyeusement m'esjoy / Qu'il m'ert avis que je voloie / Quant vins a li, si me doloie / Faillue ja m'estoit l'alainne / Ains n'embraca Paris Helainne / Si doucement con je le fis / Mon duel eu tot enseveli / Tout maintenant que je la tins" [When I heard this news, I felt such joy that it seemed to me I was flying when I came to her, and I was suffering so much that I almost stopped breathing. Never did Paris kiss Helen so sweetly as I. My pain was quite buried as soon as I held her].[21] In this case Gautier has himself composed songs that mirror the narrative action. Here, the miracle text and songs follow each other closely in the main sources. The songs, some of which carry their own storytelling, are included in our performance, interspersed into the narrative text.

[19] *Miracles*, II Mir 21 (D. 69), lines 4–9, and liner notes, *Etoile du Nord: Mysteries and Miracles of Medieval France*, trans. F. Regina Psaki, CD, Calliope, 2003. On reading and performance, see also Vitz, *Orality and Performance* 164ff.

[20] *La Poésie et la voix* 92.

[21] *Miracles*, I Mir 44 (D. 49), lines 293–301, and liner notes, *The Unicorn*.

Each of the three songs has its own distinct character. The first and third can be conceived of as commentaries while the second ("Sour cest rivage" [On this shore]) is itself a narrative recapitulation of the miracle. The first ("Las, las, las" [Alas! Alas! Alas!]) utilizes the *je narratif* [the narrative I], and paints the emotions of the poet as he bewails the loss of the statue: "Las, las toz jors mais gemirai / noyer en aisne je m'irai" [Alas, alas forever more I will moan, and I shall go and drown myself in the Aisne].[22] The last ("De sainte Leocade" [About Saint Leocadia]) is a more classic *trouvère* song with refrain, replete with the glories of Saint Leocadia and the Virgin Mary. The delicious world created by Gautier challenges us to re-create a living model of Song.

Language as sound and music

There is a special pleasure in working with a language that is closely related to one's own. Yet there is also another important aesthetic pleasure for the performer: the use of language as a musical sound. In my experience the rhymes and rhythms of the verse forms carry a musical weight which is complementary to, but also to some extent independent of, literal meaning. A declamation with good rhythmic progression creates psychological and somatic expectations in the audience. These expectations may be fulfilled, or creatively thwarted, according to the demands of the text and the concept and creativity of the performer. Performers who successfully internalize the formal structure of their text will inevitably share its musicality with the public.

Furthermore, the sonorous substructures of a text can have their own weight and effect. For example, the conclusion of Gautier's *Leocade*, has an extensive passage of word play and pun based upon the word "Mugue": "Qui ne s'enmugue de son mugue / Enmuguiez est de mugue mugue / Mais tuit cil bien s'enmuguelient / Qui entor aus son mugue lient / Diez doinst toz nos enmuguelit / Et qu'entor nos son mugue lit / Amen" [He who doesn't "balsam" himself with her balsam is "balsamed" with a bad balsam. But all those are well "balsamed" who tie their lily of the valley around themselves. God grant us the grace to be "balsamed" and entwine us with her lily of the valley. Amen].[23] The playful, funny aspects of this passage are first of all apparent to the reader, and secondly, to any performer. Audiences, whether or not they are French-speaking, react with amusement and delight to Gautier's wordplay in performance. For Dutch, American or German listeners, literal comprehension is secondary to the "musical" wordplay.

The question of literal comprehension should never be neglected. We try to help this along by supplying translations, and using of material that is generally well known. Everyone understands that Tristan and Iseult are fated to meet, to drink, to love and to die. But the sheer pleasure in sharing the sonorous details of the language can deepen the storytelling experience, both for the performer and

[22] Liner notes, *The Unicorn*.

[23] *Miracles*, I Mir 44 (D. 49), lines 841–6, and liner notes, *The Unicorn*. This passage plays on the sonority of words and puns on the word "mugue" [lily of the valley; perfume, balsam].

public. In some sense, an isolated focus on the sound of language is manneristic, affected, and could be conceived as a distraction to the performance. But communicating these sonorities to a public leads all involved to another plane of communication. This transcendence of the difficulty of literal comprehension of a text or song deepens the overall experience.

Gesture and space

Storytelling creates a realm of gesture (musical, rhetorical, physical) and of new spatial relationships on stage. Performers occupy an actual physical space (e.g., concert hall, stage), but they must create an area larger in imagination than the physical boundaries of the actual performance space. The means to be used are in themselves simple—sitting, standing, walking, gesturing. When used effectively with texts and music, they enable the audience to transcend the physical place in which they find themselves.

Clearly, none of the material we perform—music or text—was intended for "theatre" in the traditional sense, nor was it "concert hall" material. Nor do we create these performances with costumes, or sets, etc. There is nonetheless an element of mini-drama in the performance of medieval narrative, which unfolds in front of and in collaboration with the public. Of course, good narrative performances of any genre (from Monteverdi monodies to Schubert's *Erlkönig* or Kurt Weill's *Macky Messer*) partake of the same principles. But I would maintain that medieval storytelling allows, encourages, even demands a greater range of freedom than other genres: physical freedom (for one) to alter expectations of spatial relationships on stage, to the instrumentalist, or to the hall; technical freedom as well, to bridge the gap between song and speech, weaving them all together in collaboration with the instrumental accompanist/creator in an interdependent performance. The performers comment on each other's work, as though each one were a singer or a narrator. Some of this dialogue is improvised anew at each performance. The quality of these improvised exchanges has a great deal to do with the ultimate success or failure of a given performance. Such freedom cannot be fruitful without a corresponding and extensive commitment to historical and linguistic discipline. But when discipline and freedom are in balance, we may travel less familiar roads; uncovering material previously unperformed for modern audiences and make it accessible, real and enjoyable for the public.

The role of the instrumentalist[24]

Most of our experiments with Gautier's *Leocade* were done with the vielle (a recorded performance also includes harp and flute). Based on historical evidence, the choice of a bowed string instrument or the harp seems appropriate for medieval monody. For example in the Rocamadour miracle, the vielle is especially appropriate because in the story itself the jongleur sings and plays the vielle. The

[24] I thank my long-time musical partner, the viellist Shira Kammen for her insights.

Anna Azéma and Shira Kammen in concert at the Musée National du Moyen Age, Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, Paris (Photo: Trobador).

help of an attentive instrumentalist is crucial in the development of the singer's narrative powers. The vielle acts as a sustaining pillar, a commentator, a facilitator and even a mirror of the performer's musical and declamatory decisions. The instrument centers the sung pitches in an appropriate mode and helps to focus all the other choices allowing the text to bloom and develop.

Certain kinds of interpretive decisions can be made independently from the pitches supplied by the instrumentalist and singer. The style of declamation itself can be varied in many ways: it can be incantatory, be fully legato, or it can tend more towards speech. The rhythm of declamation can be slow or fast, the vocal color can be full and rich, or intentionally thinned out, or loud or soft. In contrast to the bel canto aesthetic which strives for a seamless vocal sound from the top to the bottom of the voice, here the vocal registers can be contrasted with each other for dramatic effect. Evolving within this sound world, the vielle creates another lyric or even narrative "voice" that extends and complements that of the singer.

Language will also determine the instrumentalist's choices of articulations and rhythm. The angular sounds of Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* texts—"Ich var dort mit Tristande / und sitze hie by Marke / und criegent am mir starke / beidiu tôt unde leben" (lines 18527–30) [I travel there with Tristan, and sit here, by Mark; and within me life and death lead a fierce battle]—may suggest other approaches to accent and bow stroke than the more liquid sounds of Gautier's Old French: "Le cors la sainte damoysele / la sainte virge, la pucele / la plaisant, la douce, la

sade / qu'apelons virge Leocade" [The body of the holy damsel, the holy virgin, the maid, the agreeable one, the sweet one, the charming one, whom we call the virgin Leocadia].[25]

The performer's responsibility is multiplied when the sources give no musical notation whatsoever. The instrumentalist in collaboration with the singer must choose appropriate modal characteristics such as modal cells and cadence formula. From these fundamental choices flows a selection of other appropriate choices to the piece, as well as a tuning that will sustain these choices. The shape of the instrument and the bridge affect the colors which will be drawn out from both the player and the singer. When combined with a flat bridge, an open tuning based on roots and fifths is appropriate to a drone-like accompaniment, whereas another type of tuning using fourths and fifths, with a rounded bridge, might encourage more melodic participation. The tessitura chosen will also be affected by the personality and the vocal range of the singer, as well as by the morphology of the instruments and the collective will to depict shadings of emotions. These pragmatic choices flow from the expressive goals, and determine the effect of the performance. Yet in the end, these technical concerns are poetic choices. The vielle becomes the singer's ally in creating expectancies of time and pacing. The instrumentalist is truly a co-narrator, a part of the poetic voice. This collaboration is essential to the ethos of Song; all participate to declaim the pathos of human emotions in the space of freedom the performers have created.

Freedom?

We come here to the most interesting aspects of medieval storytelling. These texts, scrupulously researched and re-edited, offer a larger terrain of freedom than one normally finds in sung literature, whether it be medieval or modern. There is freedom to explore one's physical instrument, as well as new sounds, new spaces and new expressive possibilities. Such possibilities are not always permitted in the more structured and conventionally bound landscape of song recitals or concerts. As performers, we have the possibility of conveying a story with all the means available to the instrument contained in one's body: whisper, cries, singing, speech, *Sprechgesang* [speech-song], *coup de glotte* [a type of vocal attack with an overarticulation of the glottis], overemphasized consonants, liquid legati, staccatti, etc. . . . this list is far from exhaustive! The parallel with modern contemporary music performance practice hardly needs to be emphasized. From Gautier to Berg the road is short, and the laurels rest on the head of performers who have the courage to use all the material resources available to them.

Physical gestures and body language are a part of narrative performance. It is difficult to imagine an effective rendition without the help of the hand, the gaze, the language of the body in general. If appropriately performed, a sigh, a foot moved forward or a hand opening can do more to enhance expression than the

[25] Miracles, I Mir 44 (D. 49), lines 186–9 and liner notes, *The Unicorn*.

aggressively forced timbre of late-twentieth-century *verismo* singing. Although we can perhaps learn much from medieval iconography,[26] I do not here propose to codify a repertoire of medieval gestures along the lines of the Baroque or Romantic body "Esperanto" as seen in opera houses. Combining knowledge of iconography with awareness of the instinctive tendencies of the human body, while telling a story, we can begin to create elements of a physical language with which to support and sustain medieval storytelling projects.

Another freedom within this repertoire is the possibility of reshaping and re-forming a new object within the boundaries of scholarship and taste, crafted from pre-existing source material. Performers neither can nor should replicate a previous performance. Yet neither do they invent something totally original. Like the medieval scribes, modern performers interpret and edit a body of material that is already present. Modern versions can be seen as part of a continuity—one link in the long chain of ever changing forms, texts and melodies. Like the manuscript sources, any sound recording or video is merely a snapshot of one moment in such a continuing process.

When interpreting primary sources we need to know their history, their importance (or perhaps unimportance), as well as the process of their construction. Knowing these things will have an enormous influence on our contemporary performances. By internalizing written sources, which may to some degree be based on oral tradition, and by re-oralizing them in performance, we liberate important dimensions of the original material. We treat the medieval scribe(s) as collaborators in a continuous process, in some sense as performers like ourselves, shaping and interpreting the material to the best of their ability.

The cases of Leocadia and the Rocamadour miracle

I believe that Gautier de Coincy intended live narration of both the Leocadia story and the Rocamadour miracle. The particular versions we present to the public can never replicate Gautier's precise intentions, nor could exact replication be our goal. The modern concept of time and the contemporary public's attention span require condensation. We need to adapt the lengthy and sometimes prolix texts, if only because perception of time in our day is so different from that which prevailed in the Middle Ages. For instance, members of a religious community living in a priory in the thirteenth century would have experienced this narration in real time in a more leisurely way than any modern concert audience can. Given the social constraints of the modern concert world, no concert organizer would allow more than a certain amount of spoken narration in an unfamiliar language! In preparing the material, we are thus obliged to abridge it to fit the conventional temporal spaces of modern concert halls or compact discs. Gautier's entire Leocadia poem runs to 872 lines. It was reduced to approximately 100 lines for our performances. Once again, we see that the performers assume the role of creators; by selecting the elements to be presented, they bring into being something which is new.

[26] François Garnier, *Le Language de l'image au Moyen Age* (Paris, Le Léopard d'Or, 1982).

The structure of the Leocadia story makes this task easy: there is a beginning, a crisis (the theft of the statue) and a happy ending (the recovery of the same statue). The simple and effective story line helps to ease the editor's task. Within this simple scheme, there is a first-person narrative that is easily transmittable in performance: "Que de memoyre ne dechaie / Talens me prent que vos retraie / Une merveille que je vi / Queque prieus ere de Vi" (lines 1–4) [Before it disappears from memory, I have the desire to tell you of a wondrous thing I saw, when I was prior of Vic]. Throughout the poem, Gautier intersperses personal asides into the narration. He frequently becomes the active subject of the story: "Pour moy honnir, pour moy grever / Pour moy le cuer faire crever / . . . / Si me fist ravir et embler / Le cors la sainte damoysele" (lines 181–2, 186–7) [To pour contempt on me and make me suffer, to break my heart … (the Devil) had removed and taken away from me the person of the holy damsel]; "Mais cele a cui m'en atendi / Devant cui piez m'en estendi / Plus de cent fois a tous le mains / Droit au quint jour entre les mains / Nos renvoia no damoysele" (lines 223–9) [But She to whom I directed myself and at whose feet I lay down, more than a hundred times at the very least, gave us our damsel back into our hands].

The task of recreation is somewhat different in the case of the Rocamadour story. Here only one song of Gautier has been used, instead of the three for Leocadia. The song acts as a continuous thread uniting the various events of the story. Again the modern performer must make important decisions concerning the length of passages of spoken text and the rhythm of the narration, creating a new piece from pre-existing material. Gautier was not a witness to the miracle, and his involvement here is less directly personal. The jongleur Pierre de Sygelar, devoted to the Virgin, asks her for a candle for his dinner. His prayers are heard by the Virgin, who causes a candle to settle on his vielle. The jealous monk Gerard snatches the candle, and returns it to the altar. The Virgin repeats her miracle twice more, to the dismay of the malevolent monk. Despite the accusations of sorcery against him, the minstrel sings and plays better and better, so well that "de pitie fait plorer maint ame" [He made many a soul weep in pity].[27]

Throughout the story, the public has a voice, and comments: "Chascun s'ecrie 'Sonez sonez / plus biau miracle n'avint mais / ne n'avenra ce cuit ja mais'" (lines 160–2) [Each one cried: "Ring the bells! A more beautiful miracle never occurred, nor ever shall, so we believe"]. Just as the witnesses in the text see the Virgin operate the miracle on behalf of the jongleur, the public in the concert hall witnesses the performance of the story performed by a singer and a vielle player. If the alchemy works, the modern public will become an active participant in this performance, and like the witnesses in the old text, will cheer the miracle as it is retold. Such can be the power of storytelling which unites public and performer, Story and Song.

[27] *Miracles,* II Mir 21 (D. 69), line 148 and liner notes, *L'Etoile du Nord*.

The case of *Tristan*

In the case of the *Tristan and Iseult* production, the overall architecture was devised by The Boston Camerata's Music Director, Joel Cohen. The texts chosen for its CD included excerpts from the romances of Gottfried von Strassburg and Thomas; for live performances, excerpts from an anonymous Tristan *Folie* were added.[28] Musical episodes were interspersed within the texts. Most of these episodes came from the well-known *Tristan en prose*[29] which contains several *lais*. Other musical works, not directly related to the story, were incorporated for their appropriateness to the situation. Certain musical episodes were *contrefacta*, combining a portion of the Tristan text with a contemporary, or nearly contemporary, medieval melody. Although I did not have a hand in composing the scenario, I found it a challenging opportunity that mobilized all the performing skills mentioned earlier. But in this performance I was not the omniscient narrator, but rather one character, Iseult, discovering and internalizing the potent and revelatory weight and complexity of that character.

The various medieval sources depict a complex persona for Iseult. She is, of course, passionately in love but also politically astute, vengeful, manipulative and even at times, murderous. These character traits are overtly present in the sources, independent of any modern "psycho-babble." These "new" elements of the story (new because most people in the public are unaware of them) offer enormous opportunities for the performer. The *Tristan* script has had several incarnations; the most successful in my opinion is the version that keeps the original language throughout. There have also been concert versions in which the narrated text was translated into modern English or modern French. These versions performed in translation were less effective. The "word music" of the Old German and French texts bring a sense of completion to the whole, whereas the modern languages, with their very different sonorities, seem somewhat flat in comparison. The unity of music, word and gesture seems better served with the use of original texts throughout.

We also produced two different fully-staged versions of this *Tristan* (including costumes, sets and lights), as well as a semi-staged version (using only minimal gestures and lights, ordinary concert dress and whatever concert space was available). I found the simplified and modernized approach more effective than the conventionally theatrical versions, perhaps because its very simplicity brought the material closer to its medieval ethos.

Over the decade during which the Camerata's production of *Tristan* was performed, a specific Iseult character was born and developed. Both Cohen and Wagner's Iseults are somewhat simplified abstractions. But the Camerata's treatment allows dimensions of the medieval Iseult their place in the story at critical junctures where Wagner suppressed or edited out these traits of her character. Two episodes will illustrate my point: first, Gottfried's narration of the wedding

[28] *La Folie* de Berne, *Les Tristan en vers*, lines 166–83.

[29] *Le Roman de Tristan en prose* [Vienna ÖNB ms 2542], eds. Philippe Ménard et al., 6 vols. to date, Textes littéraires français 353, 398, 408, 437, 450, 462 (Geneva, Droz, 1987–).

night, and second, Gottfried's version of Iseult's lament when the lovers separate. In the first scene, hoping to avoid scandal, Iseult asks Brangäne, still a virgin, to replace her in Mark's bed on their wedding night (lines 12435ff). Brangäne sings "Do wir zwô vuoren von Irlant" (line 12805) [When we both left Ireland],[30] in which the image of two dresses, one clean and the other soiled, serves as metaphor for lost purity/virginity. Once the king has deflowered Brangäne, Iseult surreptitiously takes her place next to Mark,[31] and the two share wine together. In a later episode, Tristan, banished by Mark, leaves the court. Iseult mourns his departure in the passage: "Tristandes zunge und mîn sinn / diu varnt dort mit ein ander hin / . . . / mit disem zwein ist mir vergeben" [Tristan's voice and my mind have left far away together . . . with these two, I am doomed].[32]

Iseut participates in each of these scenes, but the challenges to the performer who takes her role are quite different. The wedding night, with its obscene undertones, is mimed by the performers. Here, a few movements by a silent Iseult convey her emotions and advance the action. In the lament, Gottfried's superbly crafted text, spoken to a vielle accompaniment, places Iseut at the epicenter of the situation. It is an inward looking passage, personal in its rendition of separation, and powerful in its depiction of Iseult's pain. For me at this point, the artifices of technique—both poetic and vocal—fall away and some eternal human reality is confronted. From the peripheral participation of Iseult in the wedding to the centrality of her speech in the separation lament, we see the range of challenges to the performer of the role. Neither acting nor singing is the final goal. What is most important is to lead the public into the story, and into its essence, so that those who listen will for a time forget themselves: "Daz maneger dâ stuont unde saz / der sîn selbs namen vergaz" [So that many who stood and sat forgot even their own name].[33]

The public

As we probe new emotional landscapes using these "disciplined freedoms," new possibilities open for both the performer and the public. There is an ease to the storytelling that draws the audience in, maintains its attention, and allows it to savor the dialogue, the alliteration, the rhymes, the wordplay and the outcome. The public can be liberated from expectations too often linked with "classical" vocal performances, from the tired gestalt of "louder, faster and higher."

Freed from the obligation to admire a beautiful sound as such, the public can relax, penetrating deeper in the material at hand, exploring along with the performer other channels of meaning and satisfaction. The archetypical elements in these stories can allow audience members to connect with a deep reservoir of meaning and experience. Joel Cohen's treatment of the Tristan story, discussed

[30] Gottfried, lines 12805ff, sung to a contrefact by Joel Cohen.

[31] Gottfried, lines 12635ff.

[32] Gottfried, lines 18527ff. The "zwei" are Mark and Tristan.

[33] Gottfried, lines 3591–2, describing the reaction of the listeners to Tristan's playing and singing.

above, provides a good example. The Tristan story itself, or some version of it, is already lodged in the consciousness of the performers and the public. But despite our preconceived notions, rarely have any of us confronted the original texts. And so, paradoxically, a presentation based entirely on old sources is received as something fresh and new.

The measure of success

Assessing the success of such projects and their value to others is a difficult and subjective endeavor. It is interesting to reflect on the opinions of medieval writers. Gautier, Grocheo and Gottfried—each reflects on these issues. Like we who are modern interpreters, Gautier sees himself as a link in an ongoing process; he translates and vocalizes for a wider public texts and concepts that would otherwise be reserved for clerics and scholars. "Miracles que truis en latin / translater voel en rime et metre / que cil et cele qui la letre / n'entendent pas puissent entendre" [Miracles which I find in Latin, I want to translate into verse so that men and women who do not know how to read can apprehend].[34] The theoretician Grocheo believes performance should serve the general public interest: "This kind of cantus ought to be provided for old men, working citizens and for average people when they rest from their accustomed labor, so that, having heard the miseries and calamities of others, they might more easily bear up under their own, and so that their own tasks might be more gladly approached. Thus, this kind of cantus is a support of the whole state."[35] Finally, Gottfried's Iseult reading aloud, singing and playing, wakens her audience to new thoughts and ideas: "Von îr wart maneger slahte / gedanke und ahte vür brâht." [Through her (singing) she awakened many a thought and reflection.][36]

No amount of verbalization, dissection, analysis or reading can replace the impact of a vital performance. The editorial and musical choices made during the hours of preparation reveal themselves as successful (or not) in the throes of the action. In the course of these performances we can only hope to have shared worthwhile and important poetic and musical material. These can awaken our listeners and also bring to them both pleasure and a measure of solace. According to our medieval authors, and in my opinion as well, the final measure of value remains the enrichment of life.

[34] *Miracles*, I Pr 1 (D.1), lines 6–9.

[35] Johannes Grocheo, *Concerning Music (De musica)*, trans. Albert Seay (Colorado Springs, [Colorado College Music Press], 1967). Grocheo addresses here the "cantus gestual," from "gesta" [deeds].

[36] Gottfried, lines 8078–9, describing Iseult's performing and its effect on listeners.