

Imagining the un-encoded: staging affect in Blondel de Nesle's Mes cuers me fait commencer (RS1269)

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Introduction

The present article forms a complementary companion piece to an article I published in *Music Analysis* in Spring 2019, with the title, 'Do trouvère melodies mean anything?'.¹ In that article I examined three songs by the early trouvère Blondel de Nesle whose melodies and poetic versification are so highly wrought and patently compositionally structured that the answer to the question was a clear 'yes'. With the examples considered there, the dice are loaded: given that only pitches and poetic text survive from these songs, when those aspects are clearly a compositional focus, diagnosing meaning in pitch or text structure is relatively easy. Here I want instead to consider a different kind of case, a song in which the meanings are not fully—perhaps not even mainly—encoded in the structure of pitches but might arguably have existed in other aspects of performance that are harder to get at given the nature of the surviving notated trace. As I show below, the song in question, another song by Blondel, *Mes cuers me fait commencer* (RS1269), is, as far as the pitches of its melodies goes, very generic, and its poetic structure is also a very standard one.² It has none of the fancy 'grammatical rhymes' in its text or competing palindromes in text and music that drew my comment in the *Music Analysis* article.

The analytical procedure here will be to investigate ways in which the performative aspects of this very generically structured song might have contributed to—might indeed have specifically enabled—its meaningfulness in performance. Because I am therefore talking about the performance of trouvère song, a topic about which we have virtually no secure historical information, the method here is essentially speculative, creative, and imaginative, relying on the musicological and musical imagination of a contemporary medieval musicologist, working in combination with real and imagined modern performances and performers, rather than any medieval information.

Such a method is perilous. As Daniel Leech-Wilkinson argues, rather than performers learning from historical musicologists, historical musicology has arguably

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3 been affected by modern performance practices.³ Ever since the critique of
4 authenticity in performance, led by the trenchant analysis of Richard Taruskin, these
5 practices have been deemed to be fundamentally modernist.⁴ Musicologists have
6 thus been very wary of claiming that modern performances of historically remote
7 repertoires transmit any historical knowledge, noting instead their reliance on
8 economic factors like modern marketing categories and strategies, on the wish-
9 fulfilment of the groups performing them, and on the personal convictions and
10 nationally inflected training of their directors and members.⁵
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19 The way out of what is now a decades old new musicological impasse that I propose
20 here is by means of the more recent serious reappraisal given in historical studies to
21 're-enactment'.⁶ In the twentieth century, modelling themselves on European folklore
22 museums, outdoor historical sites in North America, such as Williamsburg, Virginia,
23 reconstructed buildings, which they staffed with costumed interpreters and used for
24 demonstrations of historically appropriate crafts.⁷ Parallel with musicological critiques
25 of authenticity in early music performance, critiques of these animated facsimiles of
26 culture in 'living museums', enthusiastically praised in the early 1980s, were
27 denigrated soon thereafter by those sceptical of claims such authenticity.⁸ Similar to
28 Taruskin's view of 'authentic performance', detractors of 'living museums' and
29 other re-stagings of the past saw re-enactment as a 'dys-simulation' and claimed that
30 'the authenticity the reenactors unconsciously seek actually has to do with self-
31 realization, with establishing a pocket of narrative coherence in an alienated and
32 dislocated modernity'.⁹ As with critiques of musical authenticity, the historians
33 alleged that 'behind the search for the authentic lies the quest for the dollar ...
34 reenactments are moneymaking ventures'.¹⁰ Nonetheless, historians working with
35 social-constructionist models pointed out that a rigid distinction between authenticity
36 and inauthenticity is ultimately untenable, while ethnographers have been able to
37 show that while the idea of authenticity remains important, historical reenactors are
38 aware they are approximating and constitute authenticity contingently.¹¹
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55 As Anne Brædder, Kim Esmark, Tove Kruse, Carsten Tage Nielsen, and Anette
56 Warring have discussed in their accounts of various re-enactment cultures in
57 Denmark, re-enactments are performed not to claim historical authenticity but to
58 approach a kind of provisional truth that might, by unsettling current narratives, open
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new perspectives on the historical material.¹² Scholars, mainly historians, who have theorized re-enactment point to its potential to offer access to affective kinds of knowledge, of knowledge *about* the past rather than knowledge *of* the past. In particular, they note that it is an embodied kind of knowledge that muddies the Cartesian division between mind and body by incorporating intellectual knowledge recursively and reciprocally.¹³ For all these reasons, treating imagined (or real) performances as re-enactments seems to me to be a good fit for the purpose proposed here: doing so recognises that both musical performances and their associated scholarship are embodied, performative, and affective. This approach thus rejects Cartesian duality in favour of what medieval philosophy would have recognized as the hylomorphic soul, that is, a soul that is the form of the body's matter, a fundamentally embodied mind in which emotion and knowledge are tightly intertwined. In this sense, scholarship itself becomes a kind of re-enactment, real or imagined, in which the scholar accesses affective knowledge *about* the past without claiming knowledge *of* the past. While necessarily provisional, this approach seems to me to offer a useful way of advancing the discussion beyond the impasse of authenticity.

The song I analyse here had not, to my knowledge, been performed or recorded by modern performers before I began work on it early in 2013; indeed, I do not think earlier musicological scholarship had considered it seriously beyond the act of editing it.¹⁴ The 're-enactment' on which my analysis here relies was 'performed' first in my own imagination, eventually aided sonically by my entirely untrained singing of it to myself in the privacy of my own office. Having decided to cut this song from the *Music Analysis* article on account of it not fitting the analytical methodology advanced there, I gave versions of the current article as conference papers in Wurzburg and Oxford.¹⁵ Then, in 2019, Joseph W. Mason performed it to my students in a class at Oxford, after which further performances took place at a workshop that Mason organised to pursue experiential engagement with late-medieval song. While my conclusion here will argue for the fundamentally live nature of medieval song performance (a feature which renders the acousmatic nature of modern recordings problematic as useful re-enactments of these works), there is, for those interested, an online selection of audio-visual documentation of this song as sung by Matthew P. Thomson in the concert at the end of Mason's workshop, in one

version solo (see <https://youtu.be/-hpQzx917fA>) and in another accompanied by Jacob Mariani on the fiddle (see <https://youtu.be/z9tKqYEdBIY>).¹⁶

Analysis: *Mes cuers me fait commencer* (RS1269)

Mes cuers is musically and structurally quite straightforward, even compositionally 'flat'. Table 1 gives the first stanza and shows how it is structured in terms of rhyme, final pitches, and stanzaic form. It is a song of the most common formal type, often called 'pedes cum cauda', with a repeat of the opening musical section, the 'frons' being made up of two identical pedes (AA), which set four poetic lines, rhyming abab. The pitches which terminate these four lines establish provisional tonally open and closed pitches, here, as often, a tone apart. As in the most normative examples, the rest of the song, the cauda (here of three lines), confirms the finality of the closed pitch.

<INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE>

The text is thus in seven-line stanzas, with the initial quatrain, the pedes, rhyming abab, followed by a three-line cauda, rhyming bbc. The only even vaguely unusual thing in the verse-structure at the level of the stanza is the status of the c-rhyme, which is a so-called *rim estramp*, meaning that its status as a rhyme relies on there being multiple stanzas, that is, it rhymes with the same line in subsequent stanzas rather than with any line within the same stanza. In addition, the c-rhyme is the paroxytonic version of the b-rhyme and the sole paroxytonic rhyme in the entire song. In one of the songs I analysed in my *Music Analysis* piece, *En tous tens que vente bise* (RS1618), Blondel used the interplay of oxytonic and paroxytonic versions of the same rhyme as a deliberately pervasive and significant feature.¹⁷ Here, by contrast, there is no clear interplay and the use of this feature is limited and local. The short homorhythmic lines in the stanza, all seven syllables, give a matter-of-fact tone, a feature augmented by the largely syllabic setting of the melody, especially in the pedes (see Example 1, which gives the melody in F-Pn fr.844 (hereafter **TrouvM**)).

<INSERT EXAMPLE 1 NEAR HERE>

As Example 1 shows, the melody of the opening two lines is repeated exactly for lines 3-4. Lines 1 and 3 have secondary terminations on *a*, while the primary tonal focus, confirmed by terminations in lines 2 and 4, is *G*; this tonal scheme continues in the rest of the song, which ends of *G*. The overall range of the melody in the entire stanza is quite restrained: a seventh, *F-e*. Only line 6 has a final that is not one of the tonal goals of the pedes, *F*.

While I will go on to make more important claims about meaning and affect in performance that do not rely solely on the patterning of the pitches, it is still possible to say something about this aspect, albeit in a manner more attenuated than in more melodically complex examples. The organization of the melody is tightly structured around very short motives found in the first two lines, which are re-combined in lines 5-7, as marked in Example 1.¹⁸ The opening gesture, a rising third from *G* (+3*G*), is associated at the outset with the singer starting to sing; it appears four times in the pedes but not thereafter. Its reverse, the descent of a third to *G* (-3*G*), forms the closed cadence of the even lines of the pedes, a cadence extended so as to descend a fourth to *G* (-4*G*) for the final cadence of the piece, a motive itself anticipated—but used non-cadentially—in the middle of the even lines of the pedes.

The descent of a third to the open pitch *a* (-3*a*) forms the open cadence of the odd lines of the pedes. Its reverse (+3*a*) connects those odd lines to the start of the even lines in the pedes; an extended version of the ascent from *a*, this time a fourth, connects the next odd line (l.5) to the following one (l.6). Despite this cross-line connection between lines 5 and 6, when considered as bounded by their poetic lineation, all the lines of the cauda start with an ascent from *b*, of a fourth in lines 5 and 7 and a third in line 6. In each case, the second half of the line has a descent. In line 5 this is a descent of a fifth to the open tone, *a*; in line 6 it is a sixth, all the way down to the lowest tone, *F*; in line 7 the descent is one that goes directly back to *b*, and then additionally appends the final cadence's descent of a fourth to *G*.

So, it is possible to talk through the song as if performing it in a temporally unfolding sequence from the opening line. Line 1 rises from *G* in the first half (*G-a-b*), turns back in the middle (*a*), and then leaps up a third (*a-c*) from which it falls to the

secondary tonal focus on *a* (*c-b-a*). Line 2 rises from that *a* final to the *c* that was the upper boundary in line 1 (*b-c*) before falling from there to *G* (*c-ba-G*), rising as at the very opening and then falling again to *G* (*G-a-ba-G*). Both first two lines thus rise, fall, rise, and fall, always by step except in the first line, whose second rise is the leap of a third, *a-c*. Most of the step-wise rises and falls also outline a third, with the exception of the descent from *c* which occupies syllables 2-4 of line 2.

The undulating contour (rise/fall/rise/fall) becomes established through the exact melodic repetition of lines 1 and 2 as lines 3 and 4. It also continues into the opening of the cauda. Line 5, at least in the version in **TrouvM**, also rises, falls, rises, then falls, starting on the same pitch as lines 2 and 4 (*b*), rising to a new upper boundary pitch, *e*, from which it falls to the secondary tone, *a*.

Line 6 starts similarly to line 5, rising *b-c-d*, but then falls steadily and further to a new lower boundary, *F*. Between them, therefore, the opening two lines of the cauda expand the narrow range of the pedes first upward and then downward. Line 6 is, in the version of **TrouvM**, the only line that does not follow the pattern of rising, falling, rising, falling, and the only line with the pitch *F*; it also has the most extensive stepwise descent (a sixth) in the whole song. In the first stanza it sets the phrase 'si ne m'en doi merveillir' (so I must not be surprised), the surprising *F* for the rhyme—surprising, I think, regardless of whether or not it is inflected with a ficta 'mi' (i.e. *F#*)—perhaps undermining the speaker's self-avowed lack of marvelling, by suggesting some surprise. This surprise, perhaps furthered, when the explanation of what the singer must not be surprised at—having torment and grief—involves an unprecedented leap of a fourth (again, surprising whether this is a perfect fourth from and inflected *F* or a tritone from a recta *F*), anticipating the interval class that which will introduce the final cadence on the word 'ire' (shown by upward arrows on the example).

(In the workshop, we tried both flavours of *F*. Initially *F#* seemed easier to sing, since it fitted with our aural training in tonal music, making the song into a kind of G-major. While the tritonal leap from the recta *F* to the following *b* was initially 'harder', it forced the singer's (and listener's) ear to hold mentally on to the repeated motive that starts the lines of the cauda, keeping the pitches *b-c-d* in mind and lending them

emphasis. There seem equally good reasons for being suspicious of both options: the proto-tonal inflected version makes a familiar Middle Ages that is arguably anachronistic; the recta version just replaces this with a Middle Ages that is ‘Other’—shouting ‘pre-tonal’. The ‘surprise’ of the F final in line 6 is arguably present in either case, however, just in slightly different ways.)

The version in F-Pn fr. 12615 (hereafter **TrouvT**) has a slightly different reading for line 5 in that it provides only a single *d* for the third syllable of the line, removing the turn that aligns line 5 with the other rising, falling, rising, falling lines. This reading makes line 5 rather closer on one hand to 6, which it then resembles in having a simple rising and then falling contour, and on the other hand to 7, whose direct initial rise *b-c-d-e* it then anticipates. Manuscript **TrouvM**’s version, with the turn, by contrast, maintains the contour pattern of the pedes and also attains the upper limit, *e*, by means of two step-wise ascents of a third: *b-c-dcd-e*.

Despite the surprising leap of a fourth to get there, line 7 starts with the same three pitches as all the lines in the cauda, *b-c-d*. It then rises directly to *e* (like line 5 in **TrouvT**’s version), then falls—initially by step through a fourth back to *b*, but then down by the leap of a third to *G* (*ed-cb-G*), after which it performs the second and last upward fourth leap of the song (up to *c*) and finally falls stepwise to cadence on *G*.

The melodic structure of this song thereby emphasizes the initial quatrain abab with a musical ABAB. The similar openings of lines 5, 6, and 7 also draw the tercet of the cauda together in musical similarity. Overall, the very generic form of the piece is made clear in the melody. But the tiny size of the motives and the restrained vocal range make the song sound as a generic and rather restricted rendering of the possibilities that lie as background defaults here. These default expectations are, first, that the opening pedes structures a song tonally, with opening and closing tones on the odd and even lines respectively. Then, the first line of the second part of the song, the cauda, typically explores a higher range, it may be more florid, and can present a new tonal termination or terminations. The line most likely to depart from anything set up in the opening pedes is usually the penultimate line. The final

line can provide a summative function motivically and is most likely to use the same pitch for tonal closure as that established in the pedes.

Mes cuers is particularly restrained in a number of key respects, a feature that makes an implied projection of affect possible. I envisaged the performer sing as if hampered by the limited expressive possibilities, perhaps allowing excessive emphasis where even a tiny window exists. Most significantly the song has nearly entirely stepwise motion, which is also mainly syllabic in its text setting. There are only six leaps in each stanza, fewer than one per line. Two of these are between syllables 4 and 5 of the odd lines in the pedes. Two more are at the juncture between the end of one line and the start of another: the leap of a third occurs between the end of the pedes (line 4) and the start of the cauda (line 5); a fourth leap occurs between the penultimate and final lines. Arguably in both these cases, the leap separates sections in the song and thus serves a function of formal articulation. The final two leaps occur sequentially in the final line: the first, uniquely, is a descending leap (*b-G*); the second rises a fourth from that *G* to *c* to introduce the final cadence figure, a minimally extended version of the closed cadences of the frons. The density of leaps in the final line in such an otherwise conjunct song, lends finality to line 7 and prepares for the unique *c*-rhyme, uniquely paroxytonic and, as a *rim estramp*, unique in its rhyme sound within each stanza.

In performance, the restrictions of pitch and motive, and the unshowy— perhaps even rigid—adherence to generic norms can be used to project a similarly restrained, but perhaps forcibly and incompletely restrained, affect. Arguably the short seven-syllable lines, syllabic presentation, few leaps, and very narrow range provide the perfect canvas for the singer to become a ‘je’ who is trying to control himself, limit his desire, keep his love secret, and, in particular, prevent his song from revealing his emotional torment.

<INSERT TABLE 2 NEAR HERE>

The complete French text and two different English translations (the singing translation used in one of the workshop performance, and a more literal one) are given in Table 2. As can be seen, the song presents a first-person singer who is

trying—but failing—to rein in his emotional state and prevent it breaking out in song. He thus does produce a song, but a song marked by traits which points to him trying not to sing. This familiar ‘inexpressibility topos’ here receives a musical setting that could enable a skilled performer to represent this emotional state in a manner that could seem variously comic, poignant, and/or true-to-life.

The first two stanzas present a unit that itself seems a rather generic poetic statement of the inexpressibility topos. The ‘je’ at the outset of the first stanza is made to sing by the love in his heart for his lady, even though the sorrow this causes him should make him stop because it saps his strength. He tells his listeners that she does not know of his desire, which is why it causes him such grief and torment. The second stanza has the ‘je’ note that anyone else would die from the level of desire that he is experiencing, but that he is comforted to some degree by hope and desire and does not want to leave off from the desire that he has for his lady. Then, the final line of the second stanza is where something very odd and very dramatic happens, as the singer tells his little song to go to his lady. This abrupt sending of the song relies on the more normative placement of such a move in an envoy—a partial stanza (sometimes a full stanza) at the very end of a song. It’s a move that is terminal, shifts the subjective focus and reveals the artificial nature of the song as song.¹⁹ But this song does *not* end here, but instead breaks down into a discussion between the ‘je’ of the lover and the ‘je’ of the song itself. I will discuss this further below, but first I want to consider how the first two stanzas might be performed.

The singer can readily exploit the highly restricted melody of the pedes, which do not depart from a linear presentation of the pitches *G*, *a*, *b*, and *c* except for the fifth syllables of lines 1 and 3. In line 1 this perhaps enables the idea of being made to begin (‘commencier’) to be emphasized in performance by being slightly detached from the surrounding linear pitch movement, whether that detachment is conveyed with a specific articulation (whether a minute pause, or a more staccato or legato treatment of one or both pitches), a change in dynamics (suddenly loud, for example to ‘begin’), or tempo (rushing on to get started, or holding back as if to start afresh). In line 3 it provides a similar break within the word ‘doleur’ (sorrow), which readily nuances the first presentation of the reason that the lover should both begin and end (I suggested that the singer might articulate a slight ‘break’ in the voice then, making

this word 'grainier' by voluntarily engaging the cricopharyngeus muscle in the throat, which typically spasms at moments of emotional stress). The lack of leaps continues in the cauda, even between lines, until the leap from *F* to *b* between the end of line 6 and the start of line 7. This leap provides a clear break for the final line of each stanza. Within the last line itself are the series of two concatenated leaps already mentioned—one down, one up (*b-G-c*). These leaps isolate the tonal final that is immediately afterwards achieved by linear descent and can make the final line stand out in performance. In each stanza the last line carries a great deal of semantic weight: in the first stanza it reveals the anguish of the 'je'; in the second it is the place where the premature envoy-like line is performed, as the 'je' asks the little song to go tell his lady ('Chançonete, va li dire').

Between stanza two and stanza three I imagined there being a pause: the 'je' thinks his song is done, but the song knows that the end of a second stanza, in a sudden abbreviated and peremptory 'envoy', is too soon for a song to end, especially a song that has behaved so normatively to that point. At the performance workshop, Thomson ends the second stanza with a hand gesture telling his song to 'go', and then smiles and relaxes, facing the audience as if the performance is over. In the version with fiddle accompaniment (<https://youtu.be/z9tKqYEdBIY>), Mariani (the 'song') continues with a baffled 'till ready', which Thomson gradually notices, when, with a puzzled and slightly imperiously angry expression, he starts the third stanza. The third stanza thus opens as the 'je' realises that the song hasn't gone, he swears at it ('Pour dieu!'), and worries that it will delay so much it will be too late—effectively 'why are you still here?!'. The song meekly addresses his dear lord ('Biaus sire') and, seemingly in some confusion, formulaically says he's at his lord's pleasure and asks if the lord would like to charge him with some other task. In the version with the fiddle, Mariani, the fiddle player, sings the song's part in a quavering and shocked voice. In the solo version (<https://youtu.be/-hpQzx917fA>) Thomson plays the two voices by standing in two different places, each turned to the other: as the song replies, he switches physically to a music stand marked 'song's voice', and looks up humbly, almost frightened, at his lord, wringing his hands. At this point (l.4) the 'je' comes back in and begins to harp on about his suffering again and starts to worry that his deep feelings will mess things up: he asks the song to beware of saying the wrong thing. This 'wrong thing' is arguably contained in the first two stanzas of the

song being sent to the lady, since they reveal the love of the 'je', his sorrow at that love, and his resignation to that sorrow, from which he does not seek relief. The masochism inherent in courtly loving is very much to the fore here, casting the lady as a perverse object rather than a sublime one, which might be interpreted as a criticism of her, and thus definitely a form of mis-speaking ('mesdire'). Thus if the song does go off to the lady at this point and sing her the first two stanzas, it would undermine the love of the 'je'.

The interpretation and concomitant performative handling of the final stanza then becomes particularly pertinent. The last stanza opens with an impersonal, almost proverbial statement about 'the one who' [*qui*] loves without treachery. The entire stanza lacks any first-person statement, is clerkly and sententious in tone, and makes a generic and ultimately paradoxical statement about the lover and courtly love: the courtly lover must serve without repenting the cause of his torment because Love is both the malady and the cure. Who is speaking here? This could be the voice of the original 'je', finally getting a tight grip on his emotional outpourings and shifting sideways into generic statements that could not possibly offend his lady since they reveal nothing of himself. Alternatively, this could be the song that the song decides to sing to the lady as a way of avoiding mis-speaking, an anodyne and worthy statement from his 'biaus sire' that will avoid revealing, except very obliquely, the pain of the lord's desire.

These interpretative possibilities offer different performative options, two of which are explored in the performance workshop concert. The first with singer accompanied by instrumentalist, has the latter as the silent partner of the singer in the first two stanzas and then surprised into voicing the 'je' of the song in the dialogue that animates stanza III. In this performance, the lover (Thomson), voices the final stanza in a final moment of acute self-control after the breakdown that started at the end of stanza II: the lord has finally pulled himself together and sings in a rather 'impersonal-but-beautiful' way. In a solo version, like the second one recorded at the performance workshop concert, the ambiguity of whose voice the final stanza represents is potentially preserved, since Thomson sings both parts throughout, stepping across and turning to his former position to inhabit the song's 'je' and back again to be himself. Nonetheless, in the version on the video, he chooses to stand in

front of the 'song's voice' music stand and act the humble, 'good servant' persona of the 'song', presumably envisaged here as some kind of singing servant who can be sent on missions with musical missives. The final stanza becomes the song as an embodied sonic servant, sending an inoffensive version of the lord's love towards the lady.

The paradox expressed in the final line mirrors the paradox of inexpressibility: revealing in song the very feelings that one claims to be keeping secret. The audience for the song is split here because the song is clearly for the lady (it is being sent to her), but we—the non-lady audience members—have already heard it and get to hear the entire emotional torment that the 'je' is keen to keep from her, while relying on it to generate his song to her in the first place. This in turn is dramatised by the indecision of the singer about sending his song so prematurely and then recalling it.

This song has one further poetic oddity, which its literary editors have diagnosed as an error, but which I think the performative understanding of the song advanced here would suggest could be a significative and intentional feature.²⁰ The a- and b-rhymes are reversed in stanza II compared with the other three stanzas, suggesting that such a pattern would continue (a form of stanza-to-stanza rhyme relation that goes by the modern designation of *coblas retrogradadas*).²¹ Stanza III does indeed fit this pattern, but stanza IV has the same rhymes as stanzas I and III. The proposed solution of text scholars is that the copies that exist all lack a hypothetical penultimate stanza that would also reverse its a and b rhymes as stanza II does.²² Once one thinks of the song as staged, however, another reading is possible. Stanza II is an attempt, abandoned finally in stanza IV, at a new stanza-to-stanza relation. It is also an attempt, also abandoned in stanza IV, to send the song of the first two stanzas to the lady. The 'je' sends his song away at the end of stanza II, intending that this be the end of the song; he then, in an 'unplanned' stanza III, calls the song back and warns it against mis-speaking; the song then performs an entirely orthodox, clerkly sententious stanza about Love (stanza IV), papering over the lover's former emotional volatility. In this reading, stanza II is a false ending: just as the 'je' is forced to sing when he wants to stop, the song is forced to stay (and sing) when it wants to go. And stanza IV is a new voice again, an impersonal safe

statement on love that could now be sent to the lady, which could be the voice of the song or the voice of the 'je' having got a grip on himself. Stanza IV might follow swiftly after stanza III as the 'je' rapidly paper over the premature and now abandoned ending of stanza IV to provide a rather abrupt actual ending, or it might follow after the emotional breakdown portrayed in the intense dialogue of stanza III is resolved by a lengthy silence that effectively detaches the final stanza from the rest of the song, its emotional situation, and its rhyme scheme, as the two voices take time out to recover and reset.

Conclusion

Different performers can deliver the same text, with the same versification, in entirely different ways. The written version of a text only records and thus only mandates some of its aspects. This is perhaps most familiar when the musical aspect is absent: Shakespeare, for example, has certainly put *in* some of the elements (rhyme, meter, alliteration) in his play texts, but actors can choose to wait, press on, and use vocal pitch and stress to aid the delivery, or—alternatively—work against its semantics to convey a specific underlying emotion and/or motive of the speaker, despite their words. In *Mes cuers* an adept singer could deliver this song in a way that emphasizes its basic paradox: desire making the lover sing a song when he should not sing and the song itself addressing the song to send it to the lady from whom it must remain a secret. The restricted pitch palette, syllabic setting, short lines, predominantly oxytonic rhymes of two rather bland kinds (verbal infinitives, so rather 'easy' rhymes) are provided by the poet-composer. These opportunities are arguably there, 'composed in' by the poet-composer as a resource for performance, but they must be exploited by the singer.

Nor does the stanzaic nature of the musical setting present a problem for the creation of performative meaning. The flexible semantics of melody enables the performer to afford signification in specific stanzaic contexts, in collaboration with the text. For example, the closed cadence at the end of line 2 in the first stanza of *Mes cuers* will readily give a musical depiction of the 'je' beginning to start when he ought to stop. The idea of stopping is sung to a cadence formula that un-sings the song's very opening gesture by reversing its pitches (+3G becomes -3G). It also stops

tonally by closing the open cadence that sets 'commencier' (the verb 'to begin') at the end of line 1. The singer could pause for thought there. Then the singer's great sorrow makes him announce ('noncier') to the open cadence, as if beginning again, the thing which then makes him languish ('languir'), set to the closed cadence, as if falling back into finishing, languishing, dying. In the later stanzas, this meaning simply does not present itself but is replaced by other possibilities and opportunities for articulation.

In this repertoire analysis must inform performance because the emotional content of the songs lies in the murky interface between the written trace and its interpretation, something about which we have no medieval information. This repertoire is, in my view, yet to accumulate a significant history of sound recordings performed by stand-out interpreters. This is, I think, because it needs to bring together scholarly, performative, creative, and imaginative perspectives—rarely present with equal depth and communicative articulation in a single individual—and also because these meanings come from performerly co-presence (that is, the performers are in the same room as those listening) and sociability, which are antithetical to the usual way in which music is transmitted today—acoustically, in sound recordings. In the descriptions above, I have noted a few of the aspects of visual affect in the workshop performances—facial expression, movement, hand gestures, and so on—which are all lost in sound-only recordings. But even in the video recording, the key aspect of being in a shared space with live humans is absent; one can start or stop the recording, leave the room, listen to it while doing something else. With live co-presence, the contract between performer and audience suggests a degree of attention that at least opens up different kinds of communicative possibilities. And ultimately the ephemeral nature of live performance makes it, like life, emphasise the experiential, unrepeatable, and temporal in a way that a recording obfuscates.

I am pretty sure that no one had bothered to record this song before because it looks like a pretty boring song on account of its melodic restraint and generic cast. There seems to be nothing special about it musically. Its simplicity makes it underperformed in two related ways: underperformed in having limited performative inflection leading and thus underperformed in having too few performances. Bringing out what does make it special necessitates considerable serious analytical

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3 engagement, and, ultimately, the performative representation of that engagement
4 sits ill with the modalities of modern musical life, which depends on sound recordings
5 that separate performing bodies from listeners. And while there are live concerts,
6 there are relatively few of this repertoire, perhaps because performers today are
7 economically reliant on linking the repertoire of concerts to that of recordings, so that
8 only pieces that are well served by recordings are worth programming in concerts.
9 Thus while we cannot really stimulate a new performance craze for this repertoire,
10 we can propose that through re-enactment, even when we are forced to record it in
11 precisely the kind of acousmatic way that I am arguing denudes this music of its
12 meaning, the meanings of this song can be known, at least intellectually. We can
13 know *about* the affect or emotions, even if we don't experience them from a
14 recording because the restrained nature of the music's encoded sonic aspect (the
15 pitches) resists it.
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27 One interesting result of the workshop was the generation in over half the
28 participants of a *Mes cuer me fait* earworm. We do not know these trouvère melodies
29 memorially in the way that most musicologists (and other music lovers) might know
30 later music, such as the opening of favourite Beethoven symphonies or the choruses
31 of Beatles' songs. Being able to allow these melodies to inhabit and animate our
32 bodies and voices can reveal just how 'sticky' they are. Given how long the copying
33 history is for many repertoires of medieval songs, I think we can assume quite
34 considerable embodied (performative, listening, memorial) knowledge of melody and
35 associated texts for musically interested medieval listeners. While we can never be
36 these people, we can, through workshopping their songs, re-enact them in ways that
37 offer kinds of embodied knowledge that can form a necessary, if contested,
38 complement to the affective and creative intellection of the musicologist.
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52 * I would like to thank Don Grieg for his useful comments on an earlier draft of this
53 paper. I would also like to thank Joseph W. Mason for organising the Medieval Song
54 Performance Workshop at New College, Oxford, 6-7 June 2019, the performers
55 Jacob Mariani and Matthew P. Thomson, and all those who attended the workshop
56 for hours of useful discussion. See also n15 below.
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¹ Elizabeth Eva Leach, 'Do trouvère melodies mean anything?', *Music Analysis* (2019), pp.3-46.

² The RS number pertains to the listing in Hans Spanke, *G. Raynaud's Bibliographie des altfranzösische Lieder, neu bearbeitet und ergänzt* (Leiden: Brill, 1955).

³ See Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The modern invention of medieval music: scholarship, ideology, performance* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁴ See especially Richard Taruskin, 'The pastness of the present and the presence of the past', in *Authenticity and early music*, ed. by Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford, 1988), in Richard Taruskin, *Text and act: essays on music and performance* (New York and Oxford, 1995), pp.90-154 at 140 for the statement that 'historical' or 'authenticistic' performance is 'the avant-garde wing or cutting edge of modern performance' having 'conceptual and aesthetic congruence with other manifestations of musical modernism'.

⁵ See Richard Taruskin 'Report from Lincoln Center: The International Josquin Festival-Conference, 21-25 June 1971' in Taruskin, *Text and act*, pp.322-343 at p.343: 'The claim of authenticity becomes an earnest of "objective" consumer value. Could there be a better marketing ploy?'; and Leech-Wilkinson, *The modern invention of medieval music*, p.3.

⁶ See the arguments in Katherine M. Johnson, 'Rethinking (re)doing: historical re-enactment and/as historiography', *Rethinking History*, 19 (2015), pp.193-206.

⁷ See Jay Anderson, 'Living history: simulating everyday life in living museums', *American Quarterly*, 34 (1982), pp. 290–306.

⁸ See Anderson, 'Living history' and Patrick McCarthy, "'Living history" as the "real thing": a comparative analysis of the Modern Mountain Man Rendezvous, Renaissance Fairs, and Civil War Reenactments', *ETC.: A review of General Semantics*, 71 (2014), 106–23, cited in Anne Brædder, Kim Esmark, Tove Kruse, Carsten Tage Nielsen, and Anette Warring, 'Doing pasts: authenticity from the reenactors' perspective', *Rethinking History*, 21 (2017), pp.171-92, at p.172.

⁹ Brædder et al., 'Doing pasts', p. 172.

¹⁰ McCarthy, "'Living history" as the "real thing"', p. 107 reported in Brædder et al., 'Doing pasts', p. 172.

¹¹ Brædder et al, 'Doing pasts', p. 172.

¹² See Johnson, 'Rethinking (re)doing', pp. 196-200.

¹³ Brædder et al, 'Doing pasts', p. 186.

¹⁴ For the poetic text, see Yvan G. Lepage, *L'Œuvre lyrique de Blondel de Nesle: Edition critique, avec introduction, notes et glossaire*. ed. by Jean Dufournet, *Nouvelle bibliothèque du moyen âge* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1994), no. XXVII, pp. 393-402; for the music see Hans Tischler, *Trouvère Lyrics with Melodies: Complete Comparative Edition*. 15 vols, *Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae* (Neuhausen: American Institute of Musicology and Hänssler-Verlag, 1997), vol. 8, no. 720; and also in Avner Bahat, and Gérard Le Vot, eds., *L'Œuvre Lyrique de Blondel de Nesle: Mélodies* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996), no. 6, pp. 67-69.

¹⁵ 'Versification suggesting musical structure in trouvère song: a case study', paper given at conference: A counterpoint of music and text(s): Redefining musico-textual relationships in late medieval repertoires, University of Würzburg, December 13-14, 2018; and 'Imagining the un-encoded: staging affect in Blondel de Nesle's *Mes cuers me fait commencer* (RS1269)', paper given at the workshop on medieval and digital musicology, Maison Française Oxford, 5 June 2019.

¹⁶ See <https://torch.ox.ac.uk/article/performing-medieval-song> and, for an introduction to the whole set of performances, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLbPH9ZxV_xgwexUrsINesQDVIB2JGaogJ. I would like to thank all participants at this workshop for useful discussion and comments. All the individuals performing the songs discussed here are current or former doctoral students, whom I have worked with on medieval topics, but they are variously also trained amateur, semi-professional, or professional performers. My thinking about performance, stemming first from my own mental (not just intellectual, but affective and creative) engagement with medieval music as a musicologist has been critically shaped and altered by working with these performers on their own musicological projects. The mutual exchange and collaboration of the learning process for all of us is central here: as their performances have been influenced by their own musicological work and discussion of it with me, so I have moulding my thinking from hearing them perform or discuss performance.

¹⁷ See the analysis of *En tous tans que vente bise* (RS1618) in Leach, 'Do trouvère melodies mean anything?', pp. 26-30, where the pairing of oxytonic and paroxytonic rhymes sets up a 'grammatical rhyme' that cut across the actual rhyme structure.

¹⁸ The analytical notation here notes the greatest extent of each ascent (+) or descent (-), giving the pitch of the lowest note and the number of pitches in the pitch-string (but not necessarily number of notes, since repetitions are ignored) in the figure, so +4G is the pitch-string *Gabc* and -4G is *cbaG*.

¹⁹ The same goes for the equivalent move in the troubadour repertory, the *tornada*; see Judith A. Peraino, *Giving voice to love: song and self-expression from the troubadours to Guillaume de Machaut* (New York, 2011) and Anne Adele Levitsky, 'Song personified: the *tornadas* of Raimon de Miraval', *Mediaevalia*, 39 (2018), pp.17-57.

²⁰ This causes an error (and hypercorrection) in the two notated sources; see notes in Lepage, *L'Œuvre lyrique de Blondel de Nesle*, pp. 399-401.

²¹ Lepage, *L'Œuvre lyrique de Blondel de Nesle*, p. 401 lists it as 'coblas retrogradadas (I-II-III) and doblas (III-IV)'.

²² See Lepage, *L'Œuvre lyrique de Blondel de Nesle*, p. 400, citing the earlier work of Leo Wiese, *Die Lieder des Blondel de Nesle: Kritische Ausgabe nach allen Handschriften*. Vol. 5, *Gesellschaft für romanische Literatur* (Dresden: Max Niemeyer, 1904), p. 10.

TABLE 1

line	text	rhyme	final pitch	musical form	structure
1.1	Mes cuers me fait conmenier,	a	<i>a</i>	A (pes 1)	frons
1.2	Quant je deüsse fenir,	b	<i>G</i>		
1.3	Pour ma grant douleur noncier	a	<i>a</i>	A (pes 2)	
1.4	Cele qui me fait languir;	b	<i>G</i>		
1.5	Maiz ainc ne sot mon desir,	b	<i>a</i>	B	cauda
1.6	Si ne m'en doi merveillier	a	<i>F</i>		
1.7	Se j'en ai angoisse et ire.	c	<i>G</i>		

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2
3 1.1 My heart makes my joy commence,
4 1.2 When it truly ought to end,
5 1.3 So that my sorrow immense
6 1.4 I'd make known to my sweet friend;
7 1.5 But she cannot comprehend,
8 1.6 That my pain is so intense,
9 1.7 That grief my heart's joy is ending.

I
Mes cuers me fait conmençier,
Quant je deüsses fenir,
Pour ma grant douleur noncier
Cele qui me fait languir;
Maiz ainc ne sot mon desir,
Si ne m'en doi merveillier
Se j'en ai angoisse et ire.

My heart makes me start [to sing], at the very moment when I ought to stop, in order to make my great sorrow known to her who makes me lose my strength;
but she has never known of my desire, so I must not be surprised if I show my torment and grief in it.

10
11
12 2.1 It would cause another's end
13 2.2 If desire made them so tense;
14 2.3 But hope and desire suspend
15 2.4 My pain and so cure offence
16 2.5 From which I seek no defence,
17 2.6 Nor my sorrow swift to mend.
18 2.7 Tell her, my song—you I'm sending.

II
Uns autres deüst morir
S'il fust en tel dessirier;
Maiz esperance et desir
Me font assez mainz gregier
Et mes douleurs alegier,
Dont ja ne me quier partir.
Chançonete, va li dire.

Another person would die of it if they experienced similar desire, but Hope and Desire make me very much less tormented

and lighten my suffering, from which I do not seek to be relieved. Little song, go and tell her.

19
20 3.1 'Good God! Don't delay! Go hence!'
21 3.2 —'I, sir, am your loyal friend!
22 3.3 Do you want to send more thence?'
23 3.4 —'Oh, but I dare not offend,
24 3.5 If I say what I can't mend
25 3.6 I don't know what would make sense;
26 3.7 But take care in not offending.'

III
'Pour dieu! trop i pues targier!
—'Biauz sire, a vostre plaisir!
Volez me vous pluz chargier?'
—'O je, maiz ne l'os gehir,
Car tant me fait mal sentir
Que ne m'en sai conseillier;
Maiz garde toi de mesdire.'

'For God's sake, you are going to be too late!'
— 'Dear Lord, [it will be done] as you wish! Would you like to charge me with something more?'
— 'Yes, but I don't dare reveal it, because she [my lady] makes me suffer so much that I don't know how to find a remedy; but thou, [song], beware of mis-speaking.'

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28
29 4.1 One who serves without pretence
30 4.2 And deceives not his sweet friend,
31 4.3 Should fear not, nor make defence,
32 4.4 Against all that sorrow send.
33 4.5 Love can that sorrow upend
34 4.6 And Love can well recompense
35 4.7 That pain, both things are Love's
36 sending.

IV
Qui bien aime sanz trichier
Et bien veut amours servir,
Ne s'en doit mie esmaier,
Ne pour painne repentir.
Bien a pooir de merir
La dolour et l'encombrier
Amours, qu'ele est mauz et mire.

[—]'The person who loves courteously, without treachery, and who wishes to serve Love well, should neither fear nor repent the cause of the torment.
Love really has the power to reward the sorrow and the pain, [Love] who is at once the malady and the cure.[']

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1. Mes cuers me fait con - men - cier,

2. Quant je de - üs - se fe - nir,

3. Pour ma grant do - leur non - cier

4. Ce - le qui me fait lan - guir;

TrouvT version

5. Maiz ainc ne sot mon de - sir,

6. Si ne m'en doi mer - veil - lier

7. Se j'en ai an - goisse et i - re.

The musical score is written on seven staves, each corresponding to a line of lyrics. The notation includes a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are in French and appear to be from a medieval song. The score includes various musical notations such as clefs, notes, rests, and accidentals. It also includes performance instructions like 'TrouvT version' and 'Manuscript Only' watermark.