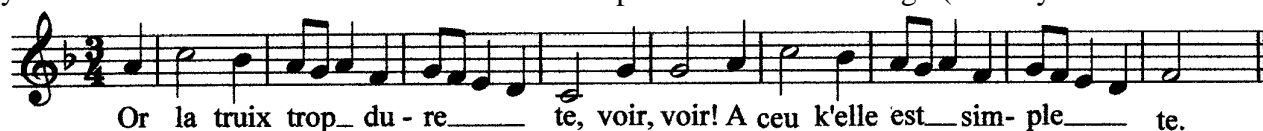


5. SECULAR SOLO SONG IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Little is known about secular solo song. From the late tenth century, there were bards in France, creating epic poems known as *chansons de geste*. These had many stanzas of different lengths. The creators were uneducated, so the words were in the vernacular. However none of the music has been preserved. We do have a collection of songs dating from France in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries called *Carmina Burana*. It included songs of various types written by *goliards*. There are people who moved about a lot - students, who moved from one school to the next, or clergy who had broken their vows or were not happy to live as monks. These were educated people, so texts were in Latin. Unfortunately the music is indecipherable. In order to make a living, wandering musicians often had to develop other entertainment skills (e.g. juggling, acrobatics, etc). They were known as *jongleurs*. As well as singing, it is thought that most were expected to be able to accompany themselves or others on instruments. However they were often performers rather than creators. In the early fourteenth century some of the better ones had become attached to a particular household or court. They were known as *minstrels*.

Most songs that have survived were created by poet-composers called troubadours and trouvères. The former worked in Provence (southern France) and wrote in the Provençal language. The latter worked in the north and wrote in old French. All the music is monophonic. Their poetry was lyric rather than narrative, and shorter and more accomplished than bardic poetry. They were of noble birth, and often they hired jongleurs to perform the songs rather than descend to public performance themselves. Some jongleurs rose to the rank of troubadour by virtue of their talent. Some were women.

The songs written by troubadours and trouveres use modes, or major and minor scales. They had several stanzas. Trouvère songs have a more clearly defined rhythm. However because the manuscripts that survive are notated with neumes, in the manner of plainsong, we don't know much about the rhythm. However the poetry of the various stanzas was often quite intricate and varied, so it seems clear that the syllables did not exactly fit the notes. There was little word-painting. Melodies appear in different shapes in different manuscripts, so it is believed that singers were permitted considerable freedom in how they realised the melodies. Here is a realisation of part of a Trouvère song. (The rhythm is uncertain.)



The troubadours spread throughout Europe. In Germany, this led to the tradition of the Minnesinger. Minnesinger songs tend to be more angular, and more metrical, and of course the words were in German. These were eventually succeeded by Mastersingers, nobles who wrote music in a highly regulated pattern, so that it is often stiff and inexpressive. In Spain in the thirteenth century many religious and secular poems were written in Galician. These were set to music as verses to the same melodic line, often with refrains. Most were written in mensural notation. They have clear rhythms which may suggest that they could have been danced.

It is not clear whether and how or whether solo singers accompanied themselves. There are few precise references to instrumental accompaniment in the surviving literature of the period. Presumably the performer was permitted to make his own choice as to whether or not to provide accompaniment. There is some evidence that one or two instruments were used for accompaniment. These are thought to have been mainly vielles and small harps - but other soft (*bas*) instruments may have been used. Instruments could supply a drone, using the main tones of the melody, or they might double the melody - perhaps ornamenting it. In some cases a the instrumental line may have strayed so far from the vocal line as to be virtually a separate entity. They may also have provided introductions, interludes and postludes. From the voice, a strong, clear and sweet tone was expected.

The tradition of secular solo song continued into the fourteenth century. Machaut wrote many solo songs, as well as polyphonic ones, especially ballades, rondeaux and virelais.