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Music in the Twelfth-Century French Romance *

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Twelfth-century romance is associated with the rise of courtly ideas and the spread of courtly behaviour reflecting the lifestyle of an aristocracy which was gradually becoming more refined and civilised. In such a society music could be expected to occupy a prominent position, and the popularity of the lyric first in the south of France and then in the north suggests that music did have a role to play in the life of society.¹ Some troubadours were more appreciated for their music than for their poetry according to the far from trustworthy *vidas* and in the north nearly half the melodies composed by the trouvères have survived, so that it is clear that an audience did exist which appreciated music.² In the thirteenth century some romances confirm this with considerable attention devoted to music, but the position in the twelfth century is less clear and seems to have been studied less frequently.³ There are, however, the Tristan romances and the *Romance of Horn* in which music is prominent, a large group of romances in which there is little or even no mention of music and towards the turn of the century some romances in which music again has a larger role.

For the Tristan legend I have taken the five French versions, although scholars who have previously looked at this aspect of Tristan's culture have tended to look at the legend as a whole drawing heavily on Gottfried von Strassburg, the Norse version and so on to demonstrate clearly how music is an essential element in Tristan's life. Madeleine Cosman in *The Education of the Hero in Arthurian Romance* draws nearly all her examples of Tristan's musicianship from Gottfried arguing 'Far more learned than Tristan is in Thomas' poem, Gottfried's hero is an erudite musician with the qualities of composer and performer.'⁴ It is one of the many arts in which he excels and in which he outshines all his contemporaries, but it is also used by the poets as a narrative device to advance the development of the plot.

Thus it is through music that Tristan gains the favour of Mark, like David before Saul;⁵ it is through music that Tristan wins back Iseut when Mark has lost her to Gamarien. Only Tristan's superior skill in the duel of the harp and the rote can regain Iseut for his uncle. Cast adrift in his boat Tristan takes his harp to console him and it is he who instructs Iseut in the higher skills of musicianship. As Danièle Buschinger has suggested, they become a couple united not only in love but in artistic perfection.⁶

When the surviving fragments of the French texts are considered, however, there is not much evidence to link Tristan with music, although it must be stressed that most of the episodes to which I have just referred, which are the most important ones from a musical point of view, are missing. In Beroul the only mention of music in the whole fragment comes on the night before the taking of the Ambiguous Oath. Flutes and shawms (*calemel* and *troïne* 4111) were heard in Arthur's camp. The author introduces a peaceful note into the narrative before the drama of the actual oath ceremony. In Thomas music is associated with Iseut and not with Tristan. There is no suggestion that Tristan seeks comfort in his music during his exile in Brittany, although in Gottfried's version Tristan had done exactly that. His composing and singing had won the heart of Iseut of the White Hands. He does not use his music to gain access to Iseut in Cornwall nor does he turn to it during his last illness. Clearly if Thomas did include music in Tristan's education, and the evidence of the Norse version must surely be conclusive that he did, he sees no role for it during the period of Tristan's decline. On the other hand Iseut does display her musical skill. When Cariado approaches her, she is singing the lay of Guirun which she had just composed, a lay of jealousy and love betrayed which reflects her depressed and unhappy mood, preparing the way for Cariado's announcement that Tristan has betrayed her (Sneyd, 781-5). Thomas comments approvingly on the sweetness of her singing and the skill of her playing.

La reïne chante dulcement,
 La voiz acorde a l'estrument.
 Les mainz sunt beles, li lais buons
 Dulce la voiz, bas li tons. (Sneyd, 791-4)

She is a great lady accomplished in the arts, belonging to a refined and aristocratic world, who has the skill and the time to practise music.

Her household shares this taste, as when her procession passes in front of Tristan and Kaherdin, the unseen watchers, the knights are singing *pastourelles* and the ladies who are following behind the knights are also singing.

Après lui espesssist li rangs
De chevaliers, de dameisels,
D'ensegnez, de pruz e de bels;
Chantent bels suns e pastureles.
Après viennent les dameiseles,
Filles a princes e a baruns,
Nées de plusurs regiuns;
Chantent suns e chanz delitus. (Strasbourg, 50-57)

Singing in the open air while travelling is a romance topos, but here it adds to the atmosphere of gaiety, refinement and courtly perfection.⁷ The freedom of movement of musicians is suggested by her choice of the messenger whom she sends to tell Tristan that she is wearing her leather shirt for his sake. She chooses a *vieleur* (Douce 772) who would presumably find access to the Breton court easy.

In the *Folie de Berne* Tristan refers briefly to Gamarien when trying to convince Iseut of his true identity (378). This is probably a reference to the harp and the rote episode. Shortly after he reminds her that he was once her harper when he visited Ireland to be cured of his wound (395-6). Both comments are meant to convince Iseut that he is the person he claims to be, as he recalls episodes which only Tristan could know about. He does not, however, play any instrument or use his music to gain access to her. Similarly in the *Folie d'Oxford* Tristan reminds Iseut that he had taken his harp in the boat when he was cast adrift after the fight with the Morholt and after his rescue he taught her Breton lays in Ireland.

Mais jo fu naufrez e chitifs.
Od ma harpe me delitoie,
Je n'oi cunfort ke tant amoie.
Ben tost en oïstes parler,
Ke mult savoie ben harper...
Bons lais de harpe vus apris,
Lais bretuns de nostre païs. (352-62)

Later there is a reference to the harp and the rote, but, as in the *Folie de Berne*, Iseut remains unconvinced (765-76). Only in Marie de France's *Chevrefeuille* is Tristan an active musician, as Marie tells her readers that Tristan wrote the lai to commemorate the lovers' meeting and was able to do so because he was such a skilful harpist.

Tristram, ki bien saveit harper,
En aveit fet un nuvel lai;(112-3).

It is clear that four of the five French Tristan poets were well aware of Tristan's legendary ability as a musician, but none of them felt any need to demonstrate this feature in the poems or the fragments which have survived. Marie uses Tristan's ability as a composer and harpist because it is part of her technique to claim an ancient, usually Celtic source for her lais. Elsewhere in the *Lais* she makes almost no mention of music. Only in *Chaitivel* and *Guigemar* does music figure. In *Chaitivel* the lady, who is the object of the love of the four knights, is said to have written the lay but Marie's aim is not to comment on her musical skill. The lady's choice of title revealed her selfishness. The alternative title suggested by the only surviving knight revealed the true tragedy of the situation. In *Guigemar* Marie mentions that a version of the lai exists to be sung to the *harpe* and the *rote* which is very pleasant to hear (but that line is there mainly for the rhyme) (883-6).

A romance which closely parallels the Tristan legend is Thomas of Kent's *The Romance of Horn* which is very difficult to date, as are the Tristan poems. *Horn* is before 1170 according to Miss Pope but she then goes on to say "and we may therefore presume that his [Thomas] formative period fell in the last years of the reign of Henry 1 and the turmoil of that of Stephen", which puts Thomas in the late 1130s and 1140s.⁸ Christopher Page has shown how very closely linked the Horn and Tristan stories are and that both resemble remarkably the older story of Apollonius. According to Page Apollonius is the source of the harper hero, as there is no Celtic analogue, and the Apollonius legend was well known in twelfth century France.⁹ It would be interesting to be able to date *Horn* more precisely because if one puts Thomas' *Tristan* at towards 1170 and Beroul, at the earliest, in the 1160s with the two *Folies* at some point after the two longer poems and Marie de France as a contemporary of Thomas, then *Horn* might precede them all and be the source of the harper-hero.¹⁰ Be that as it

may, the harp is very much a Celtic instrument and it is interesting that it is associated particularly with characters such as Tristan and Iseut who are clearly Celtic. In *Horn*, too, the scenes most concerned with music take place in Ireland (Westir in the poem). Horn disguised as Gudmod is a refugee at the court of Ireland. The Irish princess Lenburc is a highly skilled harper and when asked by her brothers to play, she talks about a new lai which she half knows, for the rest of which she would give one of her cities. It was composed by Baltof, the brother of Rigmel with whom Horn is in love. Once she has played as much as she knows, Horn-Gudmod is persuaded to play and finishes the piece so brilliantly that Lenburc is eager to have lessons from him. He will not agree, however, as he is not a professional musician. He came to Ireland to bear arms and his presence in her rooms might be misinterpreted (2774-875). He is a courtly amateur, like Lenburc, although both are most accomplished. Later in the poem he uses music as a tactical disguise to gain entrance to an enemy stronghold. He and his warriors are disguised as jongleurs, forming a group of one hundred, which greatly impresses the porter who admits them as no emperor can equal that. They are harpists, rote players and singers who can move you to tears.

Al porter sunt venuz, prient lui par dulcor
 K'il les lest entrer sus al palais maior,
 Si ert par lur deduit li service forçor.
 Asquans sevent arper, asquant sunt roteor,
 Tels i ad ki de chant sunt si bon cha[n]teor,
 Ja ki.s orat chanter ne se tendrat de plor.
 'Par fei!' dist li porter, 'tels n'ad l'empereor;(5176-82)

Music is part of court life. Rigmel's ladies sing to console her when Horn has rebuffed her love (1246-49). Her brother can compose and sing too. Horn is distinguished by his skill and, as Page suggests, music together with his good looks attracts the interest of the unmarried princesses.¹¹ Although it is not so frequently mentioned as in the Tristan legend, it is an essential part of the life of the court and the courtier, but Thomas feels the need to explain that in that bygone age all courtiers knew how to harp, clearly not a courtly skill in England in the mid-twelfth century (2824-25). Thomas, also displays an interest in the actual technique, lovingly describing how the harp is tuned and played which few other writers do.

Few other poets in the second half of the twelfth century take as much interest in music. In *Floire et Blancheflor*, dated by its editor to around 1150, there are two brief references to music. The first is when an enchanter tries unsuccessfully to distract Floire with a Byzantine-type automaton which can hold a harp and play the lai of Orpheus (860-66) and the second at the coronation of Blancheflor's friend Gloris (3195-8) where music is part of the celebrations.

Similarly in Wace's *Brut*, probably written about 1154, there are relatively few references to music in the Arthurian section. The most developed episode is when Baldulph, brother of Colgrin the ruler of the Saxons of York, needs to join his besieged brother in that city. He disguises himself as a jongleur, but also as a fool, shaving half his moustache and beard. With his harp the disguise is so effective that none can recognise him. He has chosen this disguise because he knows how to sing and play.

Au siege ala come juglerres
Se dist que il estoit harperres;
Il avoit apris a chanter
Et lais et notes a harper. (561-564)

Wace clearly thinks that it is necessary to underline this for his audience, so it seems likely that people of Baldulph's rank would not automatically be expected to be musical, confirming the evidence of *Horn*. Thanks to the disguise Baldulph is able to wander through the besieging army until he is near enough the walls to be drawn up into York by the besieged (573-6). Music is a narrative device to unite Baldulph and Colgrin, but it also shows the degree of freedom granted to minstrels and fools, or else that discipline in the besieging army was extremely lax. Elsewhere Wace describes the influx of wandering musicians who come to entertain the crowds at Arthur's coronation. Rotes, harps, viols, flutes, bagpipes, lyres, drums etc. are all mentioned as are singers and dancing girls and the implication is that the instrumentalists were separate from the singers (1997-2006). Music is part of the ceremony for Wace, as it is for his successor Chrétien de Troyes, writing some twenty years later. Chrétien, however, does not always trouble to introduce music into his ceremonies. In *Cligès* and *Yvain*, which both offer opportunities for music to accompany such ceremonies, there is no mention of music. In *Lancelot* the maidens and young men who attend the Wise Father and his Rash Son pass the

time with singing and dancing as well as wrestling and leaping (1643-48). There is also a brief reference to the playing of the organ in church at the great feasts when it attracted the people.

ausi con por oïr les ogres
vont au mostier a feite anel,
a Pantecoste ou a Noël... (3518-20)

In *Perceval* Ygerne's maidens greet the return of Gawain with singing and dancing in what is clearly a round dance with no instrumental accompaniment (8986-8993). In *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, if it is by Chrétien, dancing and singing are mentioned at the wedding of Gleolais and Gratiennne but it looks as if the words are there for the sake of the rhyme (1289-90). Again there is no mention of instruments which confirms the conclusions of Christopher Page,¹² that such dances were danced to mouth music, although he seems to have drawn his evidence mainly from the thirteenth century.

Only in *Erec et Enide* does music occur more frequently. At the wedding music of all sorts is provided, while the maidens dance and the others sing (1983-2000) and, as Page suggests, the wealth of music provided is part of the poet's technique for creating an atmosphere of unimaginable luxury. At Brandigan the maidens stop their dancing and singing to admire Erec and after he has successfully completed the adventure, the ladies compose a lai about him and those who are disarming him sing (6131-7).

To welcome him back to the court of Brandigan every kind of musician can be heard but Chrétien says bluntly that he is not going to linger over the description and mentions only a few instruments.

Harpes, vièles, i resonent,
gigues, sautier et sinphonies,
et trestotes les armonies
qu'an porroit dire ne nomer; (6330-33)

The figure of Music appears on Erec's wonderful coronation robe, made by fairies, along with Geometry, Arithmetic and Astronomy. In front of her are all the instruments and it is no surprise to find her in the company of the other parts of the Quadrivium. The implication is that Erec is donning the mantle of learning as part of his accession to the status of monarch. Only in Chrétien's first romance, then, does he

refer at any length to music and even there he treats it with impatience if he feels that it would delay his narrative.

Chrétien's contemporary, Gautier d'Arras, probably wrote his two romances between 1167 and 1184. His editors are not in complete agreement on the dates and in his second romance *Ille et Galeran* there are only two brief references to music. The whole of Rome is en fête before the wedding of Ille and Ganor, both amateurs and professionals making music all night (3981-5). Later in another standard motif Ganor's kidnappers sing as they ride (6435-36). Music is much more important in *Eracle*, however, as it is the means by which the attention of the Empress Athanaïs is drawn to her lover Pariadés. During the week long festival at Rome all the young men of high birth play the harp before the empress because they have learnt the harp from their youth.

Venoient i les damoiseies
 et les dames et les pucieles;
 l'empereïs demainement
 i venoient huit jors plainement
 por plus esbaudir cele feste,
 et li varlés de haute geste
 soloient devant li harper,
 car li baron et li haut per
 metoient lore lor enfans
 as estrumens les premiers ans
 por plus estruire de simplece,
 car je vos di que grant proueece
 n'ert encor preus en jogleor
 ni en chevalier jengleur. (3377-89)

As in *Horn* this custom needs to be explained to the audience and the custom is carefully set in a distant country and long ago. Harpers are not the only musicians on display. Rotes, drums and flutes are also played, and all the young men dance (3430-37 & 3457-68). Pariadés is outstanding for both his dancing and his good looks, and once he realises that he has caught the Empress's eye, his mind is no longer on his playing or his dancing, although he continues to go through the motions. No details are given of his skill or his performance, but his skill as a musician is an essential element of the upbringing of a young nobleman and is responsible for attracting the interest of the

Empress, at a moment when she is in the mood to be unfaithful. It is a pity that Gautier does not develop this idea more as it would have added an original touch to the romance.

Three other romances which are roughly contemporary with Chrétien ignore music. In *Partonopeu de Blois* the only time music is mentioned is when Partonopeu explores the deserted palace of Melior and the poet comments that there is neither harp nor viol to be heard (902). Given the extremely warlike nature of the romance it is not perhaps wholly surprising, but there are scenes such as the description of the court where music would not have been out of place. It is the same in the two romances by Hue de Rotelande, *Ipomedon* and *Prothesilaus*, written between 1174 and 1190, which are both extremely warlike and in which there is no mention of music at all.

Finally three romances from the turn of the century; these are *Li Bel Inconnu* by Renaut de Beaujeu, *L'Escoufle* by Jean Renart and *Galeran de Bretagne* which used to be attributed to Jean Renart by some, but is now thought to be by an imitator of Jean Renart called Renaus. *L'Escoufle* is dated to 1200-1202 by Lecoy, while *Li Bel Inconnu* is after Chrétien and before Jean Renart's other main work, *Guillaume de Dole*, now dated to 1228. *Galeran de Bretagne* is closely linked to the twelfth century because it is based on Marie de France's lai, *Fresne*.

Li Bel Inconnu is a courtly poem full of the Celtic otherworld and music is an essential part of court life where the jongleurs play harps and viols and others sing and tell stories (20-26). Later Hélie, the messenger of the heroine, sings as she leads Li Bel Inconnu to the Gaste Cité (2487-88), but the main musical episode takes place when Li Bel Inconnu penetrates the Gaste Cité to undertake the adventure. He has been warned that in the Hall of a Thousand Windows, each window will contain a jogleor with his instrument and a candle. When they welcome him, he must curse them. There is every sort of instrument there.

L'un voit as fenestres harper,
L'autre delés celui roter;
L'uns estive, l'autre vïele,
Li autres gïgle et calimele
Et cante cler comme serainne,
Li autres la citole mainne,
Li uns entendoit au corner

Et l'autres au bien flahuter;
 Li un notoient lais d'amor;
 Sonnent tinbre,sonnent tabor,
 Muses, salteres et fretel,
 Et buissines et moinel;
 Cascuns ovre de son mestier. (2887-99)

When he defeats the first attacker, the jongleurs make music and then after the battle against the second attacker, which is worse than the fight between Tristan and the Morholt or Roland and Oliver, they all depart shaking the palace with their noise and plunging the whole place into darkness as they remove their candles. Later his fairy mistress tells Li Bel Inconnu that the musicians were part of the enchantment which she had set up, but why and to what purpose is never explained. Surely this is an example of an opportunity wasted by Renaus who leaves the reader puzzled as to the significance of the unearthly jongleurs.

Jean Renart treats music as an essential part of court life in *L'Escoufle*. Whenever there is anything to celebrate there is singing and dancing and the suggestion is clear that the two activities are closely linked. There are too many examples to list here but the girls in Rome celebrate the coronation of Guillaume and Aelis with singing and dancing.

Les puceles ont entendu
 A danser et a caroler. (9000-01) ¹³

It is taken for granted that the education of both Guillaume and Aelis will include singing and that both will excel at it (2030 & 2058-9). Musical instruments are mentioned at the wedding of Count Richard and the Lady of Genoa, the parents of Guillaume, but otherwise figure little in the story (1730-33). In fact Jean Renart shows no interest in music outside the descriptions of court life and great occasions. It has no role in the plot and considering how fond he is of descriptions of all sorts, his lack of interest in music is all the more marked.

In *Galeran de Bretagne*, however, music is absolutely crucial to the development of the plot. Both the heroine Fresne and her lover Galeran are skilled musicians able to sing and compose, as well as play the harp. Fresne, in fact, can play most instruments (930-1), but the harp is her favourite and she has a particularly beautiful harp. She can also

sing songs from France, Gascony, Lorraine, Brittany and Saracen songs.

De la harpe sot la meschine;
Si lui aprint ses bons parreins
Laiz et sons, et baler des mains,
Toutes notes sarrasinoises,
Chançons gascoignes et françoises,
Loerraines, et laiz bretons,
Que ne failli n'a moz n'a tons,
Car elle en sot l'usage et l'art. (1166-73)

Her talent is such that when Galeran sings a lay to her, she is able to learn the melody and improvise the accompaniment immediately (2278-324). Renaus describes quite carefully how she plays. Music is so important to Fresne that when she embroidered her portrait for Galeran, she added her harp (3158-61). When she defends herself for falling in love with Galeran, she cites her love of music, chess, falconry and reading as proof of her noble birth (3878-87).

Mon cuer, madame, si m'aprent
Que je ne face aultre mestier
Le jour fors lire mon saultier
Et faire euvre d'or ou de soie,
Oÿr de Thebes ou de Troye,
Et en ma herpe lays noter,
Et aux eschez autrui mater,
Ou mon oisel sur mon poign pestre;
Souvent ouÿ dire a mon maistre
Que tel us vient de gentillesse; (3878-87)

When she is banished from the abbey where she had been brought up, she is able to support herself with her music (4152-55) which she practises morning and evening. Finally when she hears that Galeran is to marry someone else, her harp is her passport to the wedding. Like all great ceremonies, the wedding has attracted all sorts of minstrels (6898-902), but when Fresne starts to sing, all the others fall silent.

Et Fresne, sans dire autre chose,
S'en va errant tout a eslaiz,

Ne fine jusques el palays,
 Puis chante quant elle est en my;
 "Je voiz aux noces mon amy:
 Plus dolente de moy n'y va!"
 Ceste note premiers trova
 Fresne, qui de chanter se peine.
 Les doiz en la harpe pourmaine;
 Si va herpant tant doucement
 Que li menestrel erraument
 Mettent leurs instruments arriere
 Car tous leurs sons et leur maniere
 Vallent vers la harpe aussi peu
 Com vers vielle voix de leu;
 S'en sont esbahy touz ensemble. (6972-87)

Singing and harping she can go where she will in the palace. She sings the song that Galeran taught her and filled with remorse, he withdraws to his room in despair. Still playing she goes to entertain the bride and accompanies the bride's mother, as she sings song after song (7106-8). When the mother stops, she recognises the robe which Fresne is wearing as one which she gave to the baby daughter she had abandoned at birth. Fresne is substituted for the bride, her twin sister, and marries Galeran. It is because of her music that this has come about. Music opened all doors to her and brought her into the presence of her mother whose recognition makes possible her marriage to her true love. Music is an essential part of the upbringing of young nobles of both sexes as well as a major part of the plot.

Clearly the role of music in twelfth century romance is very varied. In *Horn* and the *Tristan* romances it was important. Similarly in *Eracle* and *Galeran* it has a major role in the plot. In all these romances it is seen as an important part of the upbringing of the nobility although the comments of several of the authors make it clear that their audience would not have recognised it as such. The heroes are presented as sophisticated, talented, young men, whose fighting skills are beyond dispute and who are also able to shine in the non-military side of court life. For *Horn* and *Tristan* music is a major element in raising them above all their contemporaries. *Horn* and *Pariadés* are more attractive to the opposite sex because of their musical skill. For *Tristan*, *Pariadés* and *Fresne* their music is one of the most important ways in which they attract the attention of and

gain access to their beloved. Horn, Tristan and Galeran are in love with ladies who share their love of music and have a similar talent.. They also are distinguished from the other ladies of the court. This applies to Guillaume and Aelis as well in *L'Escoufle*, although music has a much smaller role to play in that poem. In most of the other romances music is at best seen as part of the ceremonial life of the court and a normal part of events such as weddings. Apart from the authors of *Horn* and *Galeran* there is no evidence of any real interest in musical technique and it is also clear that while singing and dancing went together, instrumental music was not always needed by singers and dancers. When there was a musical accompaniment to the singer, it was usually a harp, occasionally another stringed instrument. It is perhaps surprising that music plays a relatively small role in romance in the twelfth century. A few authors, Thomas, Thomas of Kent, Gautier d'Arras and Renaus, choose to emphasise it as an element in the courtly superiority of the hero and the heroine but for the rest it seems to be the inescapable conclusion that they attached little importance to music or musicians except, as part of the background, and did not see music as an essential part of the young noble's upbringing.¹⁴

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NOTES

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¹ John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge 1986), p. 164, discusses the importance of the *carole* and dancing and singing in the medieval world.

² Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages*, (London and Melbourne 1987), comments on the *vidas*. Richard H. Hoppin, *Medieval Music*, (New York 1978), p. 287 points out that 1700 trouvère melodies survive.

- ³ Page draws many of his examples for northern France from the thirteenth century although he does devote considerable attention to the *Romance of Horn* from the twelfth century.
- ⁴ Madeleine Pelner Cosman, *The Education of the Hero in Arthurian Romance* (Chapel Hill 1966), pp. 18 ff.
- ⁵ Cosman, pp. 22-23, discusses the central importance of music in the legend.
- ⁶ Danièle Buschinger, 'La Musique dans le *Tristan* de Thomas et le *Tristan* de Gottfried; Quelques jalons', in *Musique, Littérature et Société au Moyen Age*, edited by D. Buschinger et A. Crépin, (Paris 1980), pp. 171-85.
- ⁷ Page, p. 157.
- ⁸ Pope, pp. 9-13.
- ⁹ Page, pp. 104-5.
- ¹⁰ For the dates of Beroul see Tony Hunt, 'Abelardian Ethics and Beroul's *Tristan*', *Romania* 98, 1977, pp. 501-40 and M. Dominica Legge, 'Place Names and the Date of Beroul', *Medium Aevum*, 38, 1969, pp. 171-74.
- ¹¹ Page, p. 6.
- ¹² Page, p. 81.
- ¹³ Other examples are at 3100-03, 3798-800, 7766-67, 8220-21.
- ¹⁴ This is confirmed by the pains which those authors who do talk about it take to explain that in the past, music was seen as essential to the education of the young nobles.