The *Trobaritz* and *Women Trouvères*:

Their Culture and Music of the Middle Ages

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Music History to 1750

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From the Middle Ages there have been many accounts of the \textit{troubadours} and \textit{trouvères} in music history, and though it may seem only men of the time were involved in writing poetry and compositions, women were also active. Even though we have some records of the women composers during this time, many details about them are still unclear today, such as what the societal conditions of the \textit{trobairitz} and \textit{women trouvères} were, what affected their poetry and compositions, what topics were commonly covered in their compositions and poetry, and how involved the male \textit{troubadours} and \textit{trouvères} were in poetry and music written either by or about women.

There are three main terms used to describe the women who were prominent in creating and performing poetry and music during the Middle Ages. They are the \textit{trobairitz}, the women \textit{trouvères}, and the \textit{jougleresse}. The \textit{trobairitz} were female poets and/or composers from southern France who were primarily active during the mid-twelfth through the mid-thirteenth century. Essentially, these twenty or so women were the counterparts to the male \textit{troubadours}, also active in the same time and place.\textsuperscript{1} Just as the \textit{trobairitz} were composers in southern France, the women \textit{trouvères} were the poets and composers of northern France.\textsuperscript{2} Finally, the \textit{jougleresse} was a term given to a female musician in the Middle Ages; these women appear to have fallen into the category of performers as opposed to composers or authors.\textsuperscript{3} These women wrote and performed works which were similar in style and topic, but varied mainly by location.

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\item \textsuperscript{3} Jane M. Bowers and Judith Tick, \textit{Women making music : the Western art tradition, 1150–1950} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 46.
\end{itemize}
During the earlier part of the Middle Ages, a woman possessed many legal rights, such as the ability to hold land, even if she was unmarried, and held a high role within society. Many of these rights and roles for women came about because the men in their lives were away battling in the Crusades and women were forced to live independent lifestyles. However, shortly after this time, women lost the right to hold land, gained through inheritance, because of Philip the Fair’s death. Philip the Fair died in 1314 and the French did not want to lose his kingdom to his nephew, through the inheritance of Philip the Fair’s sister. In order to prevent this, French men decided it was no longer appropriate for women to be able to inherit land, and thus gained control of the land, ensuring the nephew would never hold the throne. While Bowers and Tick’s *Women making music: the Western art tradition* gives a specific date and social evidence as to what is occurring in history during this time period, Matilda Bruckner’s *Fictions of the Female Voice: The Women Troubadours* states, during the time of the trobairitz, 1180-1230, there was, “a kind of renaissance in women’s status.” While women did lose some of their social standing and power, they did not lose the right to compose. Troubadour, as stated by the *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* was a, “characteristically a serious, well-educated and highly sophisticated verse-technician.” While this definition does apply to both men and women, many of these women were expected to have been educated in their own right. Educated is not quite the way to term it, however, instead these women were cultured, focusing on languages, music, and other talents. The noble women of northern and southern France, who formed the groups of

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7 Bruckner, “Fictions of the Female Voice,” 868.
trobairitz and trouvères, were expected to hold a strong background in music, thus it would not have been inconceivable for these women to have composed both poetry and music.\textsuperscript{10}

The women troubadours and trobairitz wrote poetry and composed music mainly for two topics, courtly love and fin’ amor, a love similar to that of courtly love. While courtly love and fin’ amor are extremely similar, one of the main differences is courtly love existed between a man and woman within the court, a particular place, and fin’ amor, the idea of a dramatic and fanciful love, which could exist both inside the court and outside the courtly relationship. Oftentimes both fin’ amor and courtly love would drastically elevate the woman’s role in her relationship with a man.\textsuperscript{11} Courtly love was said to have, “elevated the idealized aristocratic woman to a pedestal of power.”\textsuperscript{12} The “pedestal of power,” the woman was placed upon falls right in line with fin’ amor’s fanciful and dramatic love. Love, within these poems, was considered to be a puzzle or a game in which the man and woman were participants.\textsuperscript{13, 14} The woman of the Middle Ages was often seen as “two-faced,” either a, “saint or temptress,” leading to the strong display of erotica within these writings, where the woman was considered temptress.\textsuperscript{15} Courtly love and fin’ amor were extremely popular poetic and literary topics of this time, yet while the ideas played a part in the canso, the poems or texts of the trobairitz, these topics were not as candidly addressed.\textsuperscript{16}

Fin’ amor was at one time believed to have had very little influence on the lives of these women due to its fictitious nature. However, this thought has been challenged recently by some

\textsuperscript{10} Bowers and Tick, \textit{Women making music}, 41.
\textsuperscript{12} Bowers and Tick, \textit{Women making music}, 40.
\textsuperscript{13} Morgolis, “Trobairitz,” 2:903.
\textsuperscript{14} Bruckner, “Fictions of the Female Voice,” 869.
\textsuperscript{15} Bowers and Tick, \textit{Women making music}, 39.
\textsuperscript{16} Shapiro, “The Provencal Trobairitz and the Limits of Courtly Love,” 563.
in the research community who encouraged fin’ amor not to be ignored as, “an exclusively literary phenomenon, but as a powerfully influential cultural element in medieval society.”

While fin’ amor is considered to play a large part in the lives of these women, “courtly love was essentially a literary phenomenon and did little to improve the actual status of women.” In conclusion, fin’ amor and courtly love, each of which played a role in the poetry and the texts of the trobairitz, were not equally culturally influential on the lives of Medieval women.

As discussed prior, love was the most common topic among these women, as is evident through their many types of songs and poetry. Their poetry, in particular, has been extremely important to researchers because there are very few actual pieces of music available and most of what is available to us today is the possible lyrics, or the poetry used for the text, these women wrote. The styles of poetry vary from source to source, and therefore many have similar names and similar meanings. Most of the variance is due to the location written, either northern or southern France. There are three basic forms of poems: tenso, sieventes, and planh. The tenso is a poem depicting a dialogue or a debate between two people, typically a man and a woman. A sieventes would be considered a poem of shame, and a planh is a woman’s lament. Besides the poems, different types of love songs also existed. First, there was the chanson d’ami, which was a love song from a woman’s viewpoint, second, the chanson de malmariée, or an unhappy song of a married woman, third, the chanson de toile, or a song that was a romantic love song, or a needle working melody, and lastly aube, or the song sung by a pair of lovers when departing.

18 Bowers and Tick, Women making music, 40.
from one another.\textsuperscript{20} These types of songs, as well as the term \textit{canso}, defined previously, are used to categorize and describe the many settings and scenarios depicted in each form of love song.

While there are many poems and songs written about women, it has been difficult to gauge the actual number composed by women and not men. This is due, in part, to a genre of song writing geared towards women’s lifestyles or, as termed, women’s songs. Women’s songs are not to be confused with songs written by women because women’s songs were a separate genre and often written by men. Examples of women’s songs written by men have been found in written in the male vocal register, but on a female topic, and while it is possible women sang the melody in the appropriate register, there is much controversy on this fact.\textsuperscript{21} Many also dispute that the \textit{tensos}, or debate poem, is not written by a woman, because of, “stylist evaluation: the popular language and humor, the obscenity of the speakers, or perhaps the frame supplied by the male poet’s opening or closing stanza.” As the author goes on to comment, “The pattern suggests we are dealing with long-enduring presuppositions that make it hard for scholars to believe that women of whatever time or place composed poetry…Definitions of the feminine, whether acknowledged or implied, continually interfere with or, at the very least, influence our recognition of these medieval women poets.”\textsuperscript{22} This point is valid in encouraging researchers not to let typical feminist viewpoints, which in the past have been commonly perceived to be associated with the era, cloud the reality of the \textit{trobairitz} and \textit{women trouvères’} works.

The female composers of the Middle Ages, while at one time overlooked, composed many different styles of poetry and songs. The topics of these poems and songs varied, but often times revolved around some form of love. However, the research community is still in debate as

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\item \textsuperscript{20} Bowers and Tick, \textit{Women making music}, 47.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Bowers and Tick, \textit{Women making music}, 50.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Bruckner, “Fictions of the Female Voice: The Woman Troubadours,” 871.
\end{itemize}
to which pieces of poetry and songs were actually written by female composers and not male. Either way, it is important to realize there were women actively composing during this time period, and contrary to much of the public’s belief, should not be judged with the same standards of typical feminism.
Bibliography


