

24b. Imagining the Early Medieval harp

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Everyone has his own ideas, usually corrupt, about the Middle Ages. (Umberto Eco)

One of the strangest aspects of performing a music we have decided to label “medieval” is that the quantity of iconographical information about instruments and the debates on performance practice are rarely matched by the quality of actual music-making. Among today’s passionately dedicated players of medieval instruments (and not a few singers), many seem confronted with a feast of information and opinion which they cannot convert into useful musical nourishment. As a result, coherent and thoughtful schools of playing have been slow to emerge, whereas superficial imitations of non-European musical traditions are hailed as “innovative research.” We risk arriving at a permanent state of indigestion as less dedicated players mindlessly begin to copy the performances and recordings of others, creating something which seems reassuringly like a tradition, but which merely completes a self-referential circle. What is the missing element which might allow us to nourish ourselves as musicians so that *ratio* and *anima* can work in harmony with hands and ears? Where is the missing link between information and intuition?

The following are personal reflections on these questions, specifically as related to the use of the medieval harp. Since scholarly sources of information about the harp are relatively easy to locate, I will limit my narrative to the current state of my own relationship with this small instrument and its potent musical voice. If my ideas are corrupt, as Prof. Eco assures us they probably will be, I hope they might at least nudge a few brave players to find out for themselves, the hard way, how the harp can sing again for us today as an authentic musical instrument.

I’ll begin with a passage from a story which delighted courtly European audiences in the thirteenth century:

do begunde er suoze doenen
und harpfen sô ze prîse
in britûnischer wîse,
daz maneger dâ stuont unde saz,
der sîn selbes namen vergaz.
dâ begunden herze und ôren
tumben unde tôren
und ûz ir rehte wanken.
da wurden gedanken
in maneger wîse vuer brâht...

jâ sîne finger wîse
die giengen wol ze vlîze
walgende in den seiten.
si begunden done breiten,

daz der palas voller wart.
dane wart ouch ougen niht gespart,
der kapfete vil manegez dar
und nâman sîner hende war.

("He played such sweet tones and struck the harp so perfectly in the Breton manner that many who stood or sat nearby forgot their own names; hearts and ears began to lose touch with reality, like mesmerized fools, and thoughts were awakened in many ways...With determination and agility his white fingers went into the strings, so that tones were created which filled the whole palace. And the eyes were not spared either: many who were there intensely watched his hands.")¹

This passage, excerpted from what is arguably the most famous description of a harp performance to have survived from the Middle Ages, is single-handedly responsible for my own involvement with the instrument. When I read it for the first time, I was like a listener at Tristan's performance: my "thoughts were awakened in many ways." Without ever having touched a harp before in my life, this scene made perfectly clear to me the essential nature of the instrument, its power over hearts and senses, and the magic role it still embodied in the collective memory of Gottfried's early thirteenth-century courtly audience. I felt that it must be possible to experience the essence of such harp playing in our own day.

And yet, the passage offers very little of what we would call "useful historical performance information" about the instrument; its specific tuning, materials, size, playing technique, and the pieces being performed are all shrouded in mystery and vagueness. We are not even sure if the harp performance described here reflects contemporary practice, or if it is the poet's idealization of some dimly-perceived, mythical courtly yesteryear.

We know only that the player is an attractive 14-year old boy, Tristan of Parmenie, a charming stranger of noble bearing who has arrived at the castle of King Mark of Cornwall. One evening after the meal, the boy is enchanted (to put it mildly) by the playing of a Welsh harper entertaining the royal audience, and after a certain amount of adolescent squirming he begins asking well-informed questions about the music. Of course, the Welshman lends him the instrument to see what he can play, and we learn that "it fit his hands perfectly" (any player who has ever borrowed a stranger's harp knows that this is a good sign). Tristan, the boy-harper with perfectly-formed white hands, first does a bit of expert re-tuning: a ritual of self-assertion common to this literary genre, since clearly he has his own personal repertoire of pieces, each of which will require specific string configurations and tunings (and besides, what harper ever accepts another's tuning?). This is followed by a series of warm-up passages and preludes which are strangely sweet, so that word begins to spread that magic is being created and the whole household comes running to hear. The harp and the harper, now one, begin to play so sweetly that everyone falls under their spell during the ensuing performance, which includes instrumental *lais* as well as accompanied singing in four languages. Later, while answering questions posed by

his royal host, Tristan confesses that he studied harp with Welsh masters for seven years, and that he plays a variety of other instruments as well.

Assuming that Gottfried, a cultured man of his time, is describing not an idealized, imaginary past but a musical experience known to him and his contemporaries, what then exactly did Tristan play that evening and how did he play it? What was the Welshman's harp like? How did those listeners differentiate between playing styles and repertoires, between Breton and Welsh harping? And most important: How can two hands, touching a limited number of tuned strings attached to a resonator, achieve a state of the soul in listeners such as Gottfried has described?

It is this last question which should intrigue us as musicians: when we can answer it for ourselves, we will have begun to find a *modus* and a voice in our own time for this small instrument which once moved the hearts of northern Europe.

But where can we look for help? Almost 800 years have passed since that Tristan scene was written down, and everyone involved with it has oozed through the gene-pool several dozen times, their instruments turned to dust, the pieces they played and sang never put in writing (or if they were, no direct record survives). Of the musical traditions which once enthralled their listeners, most have been forgotten, and of those which might have survived, all were certainly mixed and remixed many times, subjected to the effects of "cross-over," "fusion," "improvement," popular culture, travel and adaptation, so that we can hardly label any current European harp tradition as the genuine inheritor of the Welsh, the Bretons, or any other medieval harpers.

And yet musicians today do play something confidently called "the medieval harp," in ensembles, as soloists, and as singers; builders offer a wide variety of instruments reconstructed from sculpture or painting, and the medieval harp is the object of philological and iconographical studies. Clearly, somebody is interested, somebody knows where to look, knows what to do, and harps are being heard far and wide.

But we are surely fooling ourselves if we think we have re-created medieval harp music or playing techniques. How can we reconcile what we read in an account such as Gottfried's with the blandness of melody-cum-arpeggio playing we have come to accept today as medieval harp? Is this something one would have to study years with a Welsh master to achieve? When is the last time you became a mesmerized fool and forgot your name listening to a "medieval" harper? What is it we have so fundamentally misunderstood, in our noble positivist search for an authentic medieval harp and its music?

I believe the answer lies in our vision of what the instrument is and how it might function; and the answer also lies in the language we use, or do not use, as musicians. These two issues are related; let me tell a story of how they came together for me.

Some years ago, as I was becoming increasingly frustrated with the seemingly limited spectrum of my instrument (actually, the instrument was just fine; I was the limited one), I realized that I was one of the unquestioning inheritors of an ill-defined contemporary usage called "medieval harp," which is actually a Neo-Victorian concoction of delicate melodies played above arpeggiated chords. Somehow I had failed to grasp the imaginal riches offered by Gottfried which had inspired me to pick

up the instrument in the first place. I could not make the connection between my instrument and its essential nature.

In looking for advice and inspiration, I examined the playing traditions of modern-day European folk harps as well as the literature on medieval harp

What could be learned from folk harps? The contemporary folk-harp scene is mostly a world of relatively large instruments (except that in comparison with the concert harp they seem small) performing chordally-harmonized versions of old tunes, with much of that “old” stuff dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The inheritors of Tristan, in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, and elsewhere have reconstructed and carried on their own beautiful and venerable traditions, but they are traditions which have accommodated enormous changes in the harp’s function in musical society, in the way tunings are employed, in playing technique, and in the music being played (these last two owing a great deal to Baroque and later harp traditions); they scarcely contain any remnant of Tristan’s long-since diluted genetic material.

Pl. 24b.1. King David playing harp

(detail) English, ca.1215-20. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, M.791, f. 170.

Scholarly literature on harps provided plenty of iconographical evidence,² scraps of information, and some conjecture, often intriguing but difficult to apply to actual playing; even the best research presents little more than a fascinating smorgasbord of juicy tidbits which leaves the practical harpist just as hungry as before. Unfortunately, the language needed by scholarship is not the language of music-



making. And so while looking for enlightenment I found myself coming up against an army of careful formulations which left me wishing for a language which musicians can understand, one which would give imaginal sparks such as the one I imagine Tristan received from his venerable Welsh masters. However, in examining the research on the harp, I was able to perform one very simple and wordless investigative task: to take a long look at the visual nature of the harp as it was when Gottfried saw and heard it, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Since no instruments from this period have survived, we are obliged to consult manuscript depictions and sculpture. This yielded images of an instrument much at variance with the medieval harps we find in our own concert venues: the harps on the knees of medieval minstrels, and even King David, are very small instruments. On the average harp, the number of strings is quite limited, so that an instrument with 15 strings would have to be considered a super deluxe model, with 10 to 13 strings being more

common (this string count is often based on the number of tuning pegs depicted). In comparison, even the smallest modern folk harp boasts many more strings than this, and most reconstructions of medieval harps, designed by their builders to satisfy the demands of folk, Baroque and modern harpists, have more than 15 strings, with 21 strings not uncommon. In addition to this, the spacing between the strings, as observed in medieval harp depictions, is quite wide by our standards. We ask ourselves: how could medieval harpists have been satisfied with so few strings? Would not more strings allow for more variety and virtuosity? And finally this: the dimensions of medieval harps (corpus size and string length), measured against average medieval body size, generally would not allow for the effective resonance of a bass register and certainly not more than a few tones below middle C. Gerald of Wales, writing about the Irish harp in his *Topographia Hibernica* in ca.1185, attests to this fact when he mentions “the duller sound of a thicker string”³ in contrast to the brighter-sounding, thinner strings. The highest and the lowest notes would be the weakest, and the resonant strength of the instrument, its true voice, would come from its center: a group of 8-10 strings. What kind of music comes out of such an instrument?

Clearly, a small harp whose middle strings are optimally resonant is not the sort of instrument which invites a technique based on melodies played above arpeggiated chords. There simply are not enough strings to effectively cope with the necessary division of hand-function except for one or two chords, and the natural resonance of the instrument would generally work against a successful sound. An image for Tristan’s harp began to emerge in my mind.

Researchers could not play the instrument for me, and the people who really knew how to make harps sing were playing other kinds of music on larger, much later instruments. So there I was, a frustrated “early musician,” looking in vain for access to the hidden world of a delicate, 13-string instrument perched silently on my knee.

And that’s when fate arranged for a book to fall into my hands. It was not about the medieval harp; in fact it was not even about harps at all, and it had nothing to do with Europe. It was Paul F. Berliner’s *The Soul of Mbira*, a fascinating study of the small, hand-held instrument played in numerous African societies, but particularly by the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The mbira, which typically consists of a number of tuned metal tongues attached to a resonator-gourd and played with the thumbs and fingers, has a venerable history as a solo and ensemble instrument, with a rich tradition of spiritual associations. As I began to read descriptions of mbira music-making and the instrument’s function, musically and socially, something sounded vaguely familiar: the descriptions of this strange, non-European instrument “fit my hands perfectly,” a spark jumped between this book and Gottfried’s and I realized they were using the same language to describe something very similar.

To observe the communicative effect of this language on other musicians, I tried an experiment: during a meeting of historical harpists at which I was scheduled to speak, I informed the audience that I had “discovered a book about the medieval harp” and, replacing the word “mbira” with “medieval harp,” I read aloud several passages

from Berliner's study. The looks on their faces said it all: Finally, someone who speaks our language! (try this experiment yourself with the passages from Berliner's book which follow). The audience of hungry musicians understood immediately the kinds of musical experiences and techniques that were being described, and they could viscerally grasp how those "harps" would sound, how the hands would move, how a music played on so few "strings" could work magic, and what that music could be. By way of comparison, I also read aloud passages which were indeed about the medieval harp, from several musicological studies whose authors had a very different agenda. Obvious to all of us in that room was the confrontation with a language musicians do not speak or process very well. It was imaginally unrelated to our experiences as harpists; instead of guiding our hands to the strings, it gave our minds yet another piece of interesting, indigestible information to help us postpone the decision to pluck the first string.

What did we hear in Berliner's book that struck such a resonant note? It was his eloquent description of an intact instrumental (and vocal) tradition within a tribal society, and a detailed musical analysis based upon intimate contact with masters and their students: we hear them speak to us directly, in a language every musician would understand, just the way we would expect to learn any instrument ourselves under ideal circumstances. We learn how the players think and feel about their instruments, how they function, how boys learn to play, how they describe their techniques, repertoires, and the role of the mbira in the spiritual life of their people. Their language is clear and unequivocal.

But how can we justify analyzing descriptions of the twentieth-century mbira traditions of the Shona to understand the harp playing of a 14-year-old white boy in medieval Cornwall? Is this not just another case of the "superficial imitation of non-European traditions" which I criticized earlier? No, and here's why: I am principally interested in finding a spark which will ignite our imaginal feel for the *function* of the medieval harp, to give us a new musical perspective for the instrument's role in our hands; but under no circumstances do I hear mbira music resonating in King Mark's castle, nor am I planning to transcribe mbira riffs for the harp. I would simply like to examine, in this brief space, what the Shona masters can teach us about our own lost art.

Why the mbira instead of an African harp? Is not Africa the continent with the greatest variety of harps and performing traditions in the world, played by people in over 50 cultures?⁴ The simple reason is that Prof. Berliner was captivated by the mbira, and his book made ideas about the mbira accessible. Detailed studies of African harps would surely provide yet more welcome input, but the essential differences would not be that great. The mbira is an instrument which functions in a similar way to the harp as I have described it: a small instrument with a limited number of sounding elements (metal keys) attached to a resonator, played by both hands. Each individual sounding element, and each group of elements, has a particular name and function, and the player feels an enormous sense of companionship, even dialogue, with his resonator. It is played as a solo instrument and in ensembles, and often the player sings as well.

The repertoire of pieces is personalized by each master or group, and young people must memorize their particular patterns, through long years of dedicated study with teachers and observation of older players, before being considered mature members of the tradition. People playing and listening to mbira music are regularly transported into altered states of consciousness (remember the “mesmerized fools?”), and the greatest players have a shamanistic power within Shona society. The similarities with the harp as described by medieval authors are astonishing.

Based on what we learn about the mbira, even superficially as described here, what image can we make of an instrument which has a limited number of sounding elements, and how might this apply to the harp?

Briefly summarized, Berliner’s study describes an instrument of patterns and structures which can be endlessly varied: “Shona mbira music consists of a continuous stream of subtly changing musical ideas; its texture is like a fabric of tightly interwoven melodic/rhythmic lines that interact with each other....”⁵ so that “...the complexity of the mbira’s music often gives the impression of more than one instrument being performed.”⁶ The complexity of what the listener (including the performer) hears often seems unrelated to the actions of the hands, which are combining relatively simple two or three-note patterns in such a way as to create an illusion:

...musicians themselves observe that a single mbira can produce the effect of two or more instruments being played simultaneously. One explanation for the apparent complexity of the music lies in a phenomenon known as ‘inherent rhythms.’ Inherent rhythms are those melodic/rhythmic patterns not directly being played by the performer but arising from the total complex of the mbira music. They are the product of the psycho-acoustic fact that the ear does not perceive a series of tones as isolated pitches, but as a gestalt.⁷

This kind of patterned playing has a characteristic which is particularly eloquent: irregular or chance shiftings of finger patterns (we used to call them “mistakes” in conservatory) can yield openings into new registers of the mode, new patterns, and ultimately inspire the player to develop an idea in a different way than was originally planned:

The origin of other new compositions is unanticipated discovery in performance. While playing a sequence of pitches, for instance, a musician sometimes reaches for a particular key but misses it, hitting another instead...Such accidents during the performance of mbira music can lead to the creation of new versions of older pieces or to new pieces altogether.⁸

And this situation arises partially from the nature of the instrument: “...Because of the limited number of pitches on which mbira pieces are based...changes such as the substitution of one or two pitches in a melodic sequence can cause whole new phrases to appear....”⁹ The importance of this function is seen as an aspect of the instrument’s intimate relationship to the player:

"Other musicians...personify the role of the mbira in the performance of mbira music. In this context the mbira is said to be capable of making musical suggestions to the player during the performance of an mbira piece. If as the musician plays a particular finger pattern he inadvertently strikes a different key than the one for which he has aimed, it is not necessarily viewed as a mistake. Rather, if the mbira player likes the new pitch he can interpret it as the mbira's suggestion for the next variation and can incorporate it into his performance."¹⁰

These descriptions resonate in the words of the American jazzman Clark Terry: "One object of jazz is to redefine 'mistake'. There are no mistakes *per se*. The trick is to find graceful exits from unexpected situations. The only inexcusable error is not swinging."

Tuning of the instrument is also an important aspect of the mbira and is essential to the nature of each player's identity with his repertoire: "The tunings that players of mbira dzavadzimu adopt either as individuals or collectively as members of the same group can vary considerably, and players differ greatly in their commitment to a particular tuning."¹¹ Shona players use the word *chuning* to refer to "...a number of interrelated aspects distinguishing the overall sound of certain mbira from that of others. These include tone, sound projection, pitch level, tuning, variation within octaves...."¹² In many medieval descriptions of harp performance we read about a harper changing the tuning of his instrument.¹³ Tristan is not alone in this story-telling convention, and there's a reason for it: In a patchwork of musical societies which knows no common practice but can best be described as clannish or tribal, it would make sense that each player, coming from a different master and a different milieu, would bring along a personal as well as a clan repertoire, with the personalized modal tunings needed to realize those pieces. Tristan was acutely aware that the Welshman's *chuning* would make it impossible to play his own pieces, and as he re-tuned to establish his own *chuning*, the listeners were already falling under his spell.

In twelfth-century Wales or Cornwall, just as in the Shona lands of Zimbabwe today, it was this spell which proved music's power in a tribal society, and the almost magical function of instruments, be they a small harp or an mbira. And as the player creates a world of beautiful illusion, he must himself be transported, letting the instrument speak to him and lead him, so that "...many who stood or sat nearby forgot their own names." Or, as Berliner tells it:

The mbira player, enveloped by the sound of the music, entranced by its repetitive, cyclical nature, and captivated by its subtle variations, may find his state of consciousness transformed. Several performers reported that playing mbira music made them feel 'dreamy' or 'sleepy.' Another player remarked that the effect of playing mbira was sometimes like that of smoking marijuana, and once, after I had been playing the mbira with a great deal of force, I was jokingly warned by other mbira players that I would one day be found wandering in the forest, *not knowing my own name*. [italics mine] Furthermore, non-musicians among the Shona sometimes imitate mbira players by staring blankly into the space before them, totally absorbed in their own thoughts....¹⁴

Tuned to enhance a given piece's special mode, its *chuning*, the small medieval harp with its few strings can actually serve as a huge repository of melodic gestures which bounce around one another in seeming complexity, creating tones which "fill the whole palace"; as the hands perform a series of simple, varied patterns, crossing and re-crossing ("many who were there intensely watched his hands..."), a texture can be created which mesmerizes the listener and the player as well with its inherent rhythms. Anyone who has gazed at illuminations from such manuscripts as the Book of Kells knows the power of pattern, repetition, illusion and the weaving of simple elements into a complex whole. Even Gerald of Wales knew the feeling, when he described the Irish harpers, who "...the more their concealed art delights them, the more luxuriously they caress the ear so that the greatest part of their art seems to conceal the art..."¹⁵

I feel that this imaginal, densely-patterned world belongs to our search for "medieval" instruments more genuinely than the dainty melodies with chordal accompaniment and other such techniques which colonized the harp several hundred years ago and haunt it still. But we can reclaim that world and in doing so rediscover the magic of a medieval instrumental tradition. We will gain a music that is our own, that has been within us all along.

Notes

- ¹ Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan, nach dem Text von Friedrich Ranke* (Stuttgart, 1980), lines 3588–97 and 3601–08 (English translations by Benjamin Bagby).
- ² See Martin van Schaik, *The Harp in the Middle Ages: The Symbolism of a Musical Instrument* (Amsterdam & Atlanta, 1992).
- ³ J.F. Dimock, ed., *Girardi Cambrensis Topographia Hibernica*, Rolls Series 21:5 (London, 1867), pp. 153–54. English translation: Hibberd/Page; see Christopher Page, *Voices and Instruments in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 229–30, 153.
- ⁴ Sue Carole DeVale, "African Harps: Construction, Decoration and Sound," in *Sounding Forms: African Musical Instruments*, ed. Marie-Therese Brinard (exhibition catalogue), American Federation of the Arts (New York, 1989), p. 53. See also Philippe Bruguère *et al.*, eds., *Song of the River: Harps of Central Africa* (Paris: Musée de la Musique with the assistance of the Société d'Ethnologie, Nanterre, 1999).
- ⁵ Paul F. Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira. Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 53.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ¹³ See also Page, *Voices*, pp. 112–14.
- ¹⁴ Berliner, p. 131.
- ¹⁵ Dimock, p. 154.