

Ja nuns hons pris ne dira (1192-1194) by Richard I Lady Tangwystl verch Gruffydd

Methods/Techniques/Authenticity

This song was written by Richard the First of England during the two years he spent languishing in prison after having been kidnapped and held for ransom in what is now Austria on his way home from fighting in the crusades (1192-1194)¹. In it, he complains bitterly about how his friends seem to have all betrayed him by letting him remain in prison, rather than paying the ransom that would free him. Being a lifelong lover of music, and having learned music composition and poetry as part of his early education¹, he occupied his time by eloquently setting his distress to music.

Despite being an English King, Richard, as well as most of the nobility, spoke French². This was because the Normans from the coast of France had conquered England less than 130 years prior, and English was considered the language of the peasantry². People who wished to advance typically learned to speak French as a means to that end². Therefore, it is only natural that he would write the lyrics to his music in his first language.

Medieval French, however, sounds nothing like modern French. While the vowels are similar, for the most part, the consonants are treated quite differently. In modern French, consonants at the ends of words are typically silent, unless they are followed by a word which begins with a vowel. In medieval French, on the other hand, all of the consonants are almost always pronounced³. In addition, the soft *j* and *ch* that we typically think of as being French are pronounced as hard sounds³. I have therefore done my best to pronounce the words the way they were likely pronounced 820 years ago.

Original Notation⁹

a.

Ja nuns hons pris ne di--ra sa rai-son A-droi-te-ment, se

a.

do-lan-te-ment non; Mais par es-fort puet il fai-re chan-

b.

çon. Mout ai a--mis, mais po-vre sunt il don. Honte i a-

vront, se por ma re---an-çon Sui ça deus y--vers pris.

Example 3.6. Ballade: *Je nuns hons pris*. Jean Beck, *Les Chansonniers des Troubadours et des Trouveres*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1927, Vol. I, fol., 62c.

Melodic Interpretation

The clef shown in the notation above is the C clef, or Do clef¹¹. It indicates where “Do” is on the solfège scale, and thus, where the half-steps and whole steps between notes must be¹¹. The clef moves twice during the piece because at this time, there was no such thing as ledger lines, and therefore the writer needed to move the clef so that the notes would not extend past the top or bottom line.

It is difficult to say exactly how the rhythm of this song was intended to go. There are two schools of thought regarding the difference between the square neume (punctum) and the square with the stem (virga)¹¹: one school of thought insists that they are the same length rhythmically and that the virga is a leftover scribal habit from the time before music was written on the staff, while the other school of thought believes that the virga is a half note, or long, and a punctum is a quarter note, or breve. The first theory does not seem to hold true in this case, as many of the neumes following the virga are not lower than the virga. Using the three common modal patterns used in French chansons¹¹, I was able to get something that might be what was originally intended. However, there were a few spots where it simply did not work. In addition, the AAB form no longer held up, as if we assume the virga and the punctum are different durations, the two A sections are no longer the same. This, combined with the fact that I was completely unable to find a single recording where the rhythm followed the 13th century conventions (which may have been applied to this song, due to the fact that many 12th century troubadour songs were written down in the 13th century¹¹), resulted in my decision to treat the virga and punctum the same rhythmically. Since this also implies a free rhythm to a certain extent (as it is the same school of thought that dictates that there were minimal rhythmic conventions as treats those neumes the same¹¹), I have also chosen to sing the piece without adhering to a strict rhythmic pattern.

Performance Elements/Materials

During this time period, there were professional female musicians called *trobairitz*⁵. A handful of songs written by these women still exists⁴. Thus, it would be more than possible for a woman to be found performing a piece such as this one.

Women of the day commonly wore a type of overdress called a *bliaut*, as can be seen in numerous paintings and sculptures from that time period^{6,8}. These dresses have voluminous skirts but are tight-fitting around the waist and bust. The sleeves are fitted to the elbow, then flare out. In order to get them on and off, they may have laced up the sides⁸. As there are no extant garments for us to study, their construction is subject to conjecture. Combining a veil with a wimple became the headgear of choice for women in the late 12th century⁷, when this song was written.

Complexity/Difficulty

Because music has changed so much in the last 800 years, the melody of this song was somewhat difficult to learn and remember. The flow of the notes does not go where the modern ear might expect. In addition, the piece is in medieval French, and thus the words as well as the correct pronunciation had to be learned. The challenge of trying to understand the rhythm indicated (or possibly not, as mentioned previously) by the neumes also added a degree of difficulty to the piece. All of these things combined to make this a difficult song to learn and perform. For the sake of brevity (and not boring my audience with a long, melancholy song in a language which they do not understand), I have chosen to sing only verses one, three, and five, as this selection of verses still makes the point that King Richard was trying to make without making the performance overly long. In addition, I have chosen not to sing the final two partial verse strains, for two reasons: firstly, I don't consider them to add anything poetically to the song, and secondly, without having any notation to follow, I am not entirely certain as to how they should be sung.

Lyrics in Medieval French and English¹⁰

Ja nus hons pris ne dira sa reson
Adroitement, s'ensi com dolans non;
Mes par confort puet il fere chançon.
Moult ai d'amis, mes povre sont li don;
Honte en avront, se por ma reançon
Sui ces deus yvers pris.

Ce sevent bien mi honme et mi baron,
Englois, Normant, Poitevin et Gascon,
Que je n'avoie si povre conpaignon,
Cui je laissasse por avoir en prixon.
Je nel di pas por nule retraçon
Mes encor sui ge pris.

Or sai je bien de voir certainement
Que mors ne pris n'a ami ne parent,
Quant hon me lait por or ne por argent.
Moult m'est de moi, mes plus m'est de ma gent,
Qu'apres ma mort avront reprochier grant,
Se longuement sui pris.

N'est pas mervei1le, se j'ai le cuer dolent,
Quant mes sires tient ma terre en torment.
S'or li menbroit de nostre serement,
Que nos feïsmes andui communaument,
Bien sai de voir que ceans longuement
Ne seroie pas pris.

Ce sevent bien Angevin et Torain,
Cil bachelier qui or sont riche et sain,
Qu'enconbrez sui loing d'aus en autrui main.
Forment m'amoient, mes or ne m'aimment grain
De beles armes sont ores vuit li plain,
Por tant que je sui pris.

Mes conpaignons, cui j'amoie et cui j'ain,
Ceus de Cahen et ceus dou Percherain,
Me di, chançon, qu'il ne sont pas certain;
Qu'onques vers aus nen oi cuer faus ne vain.
S'il me guerroient, il font moult que vilain,
Tant con je serai pris.

E1
Contesse suer, vostre pris souverain
Vos saut et gart cil a cui je me claim
Et par cui je sui pris.

E2
Je ne di pas de celi de Chartain,
La mere Looÿs.

No man who's jailed can tell his purpose well
adroitly, as if he could feel no pain;
but to console him, he can write a song.
I've many friends, but all their gifts are poor;
they'd be ashamed to know for ransom now
two winters I've been jailed.

My men-at-arms and barons know full well;
the English, Normans, Gascons, Poitevins,
I've no companion, poor though he may be,
whom I'd abandon, leaving him in jail
and I don't say this merely to reproach
but still, I have been jailed.

Now I know well, and see with certainty,
that death holds neither friends nor relatives
when I'm released for silver or for gold
it's much for me and even more for mine,
for when I'm dead they'll greatly be reproached
if I for long am jailed.

It's no surprise if my heart's hurting me
because my father's torturing my land.
If he would but recall the oath we swore,
the one the two of us in common made
I know full well that in this place
I'd not so long be jailed.

While Angevin and Tourangeau are good,
these men-at-arms who now are well and rich,
but I am far from them, in other hands.
They loved me much, now love me not at all,
and now the plain is empty of their arms
and therefore I am jailed.

The company I loved and still I love
all those of Caen and those of Percheraine,
tell me, O song, that they cannot be sure:
my heart is never false or vain to them.
If they make war on me, no villain would,
so long as I am jailed.

E1
O countess, sister, your high price protects
and saves for you the one I claim against,
and by whom I am jailed.

E2
Of her of Chartres, I say not a word,
the mother of Louis.

References

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