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Term Paper

Master of the Medieval Musical

Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion, by Adam de la Halle, has been considered a forerunner to French opera. Much of Halle's work was ahead of his time, though he kept up with the styles of music from the period in which he lived. He wrote in all the styles of his time, both in music and in literature, as his plays represent. Halle is one of the only composers from the 13th century to create both monophonic and polyphonic work, making his collection of music a bridge between the two markedly separate, yet still connected, styles. Here, I will discuss Halle's use of music in his play *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, how it personifies and encompasses the characters he creates, and how these qualities are brought to life in a modern interpretation presented by Tonus Peregrinus, an English ensemble specializing in early music.

Adam de la Halle was a French trouvère in the 13th century and an exemplar of medieval minstrels. His story continues to be, within a small handful of composers from the time, one of the few we know anything about. There is little biographical information from Halle's era due to the lack of literacy, and even less common at that point in time was the skill of depicting music in written form. The extent of music recovered and attributed to Halle is quite a feat for a medieval musician. Halle was born in the city of Arras around 1245 and died either in Naples, Italy circa 1288 or in England after 1306 (Hartnoll and Found 1). Discrepancies about his time and place of death are attributed to different sources that both mention a form of his name, which was unique. A nephew mentions his return to Arras and eventual death in Italy, while an 'Adam le Bossu' is listed in the record of musicians present at the dubbing of Prince Edward in

Westminster (Sadie 96). Halle was nicknamed ‘le Bossu de Arras’, or the Hunchback of Arras, though he himself was not a hunchback. The name most likely originated with another family member and continued to be used in order to differentiate Halle’s family from other families with the same surname in the area. Halle most likely studied in Paris and returned to Arras before heading to Naples. There is mention of a Maistre Henri de la Hale, most likely Halle’s father, as well as a Maroie, possibly his wife, in a few historical sources as well as brief mention of similar characters within a few of his works (Sadie 95).

Halle’s music encompasses practically each genre present in the end of the 13th century, including French chansons, rondeaux, and jeux-partis as well as motets, dramatic plays with music, and narrative works. What makes Halle’s collection of compositions stand out above other French trouvères of the time is the fact that his work includes both monophonic and polyphonic music. Some experts claim that Halle was a composer of the past because he continued to write in the monophonic style of his early years through his career, while others say he was ahead of his time, especially with the writing of his musical plays. All experts credit four of Halle’s motets to his name, but the other six continue to be questioned. Modern editors argue that these six disputed motets can be attributed to Halle because of quoted material from other verified sources he did compose. One particular motet is based on a popular secular French tenor and also occurs in Halle’s drama *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, entitled “he, resville toi, Robin” (Sadie 95-98). Halle’s dramas have been labeled as opéra-comique and a precursor to light French opera (Hartnoll and Found 1), though *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion* in particular is better associated to a pastourelle (Sadie 98).

Most historians believe that Halle served Robert II, the Count of Artois, in Italy. There, he wrote the dramatization of *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion* (Sadie 96). Schwam-Baird states

“Adam’s work is most certainly an innovation” (xvii). His dramas were possibly the only theatrical works of the medieval era, and the first attempts at written performance about a profane topic. The shepherd, shepherdess and condescending seducer quickly became stock characters that Halle’s work initially developed into being. Through these characters, the use of vernacular language, and the debatable use and influence of existing folk tunes, Halle gives insight to the actuality of the suppressed peasant world. Not only was the play written about the common class, it was possibly written for armatures to perform. Of the sixteen songs included in *Robin*, only two exceed an interval of a sixth and most of the songs are merely a few lines long, which suggests that Halle’s anticipated singers were untrained. Again, the theory that Halle adapted popular folk songs of the time also suggests he was playing to the common crowd as he wrote his music (Schwam-Baird xxvi).

The first half of *Robin* is characterized as a dramatized pastourelle in accordance with other written forms of the 13th century. The second half is categorized as a sub-genre of the pastourelle, called a dramatized bergerie (Schwam-Baird xvi-xviii). In the first half Marion sings of her love for Robin and is confronted by a knight, who tries and fails to seduce her. Robin and Marion share a meal together and Robin elects to invite friends. The knight finds Marion alone yet again, but is unsuccessful a second time in winning her affection. The second half of the drama depicts typical peasant festivities with singing, dancing and feasting.

Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion begins with a rondeau, No.1, sung by Marion. The tune is catchy and light as Marion sings about her love for Robin. Tonus Pereginus chose to take this song slowly, much more so than the recording included in the Norton Anthology. I don’t think their interpretation captures the carefree personality of Marion that the excerpt from the Anthology has. One might argue that the slower tempo creates a dream-like feel, but I felt the

song dragged and made for a tiresome opening for the Halle's play. The Knight enters singing triumphantly in No.2, but the final pitch e gives the line a modal twist to match the mischief of the text, "and I found lovely Marion all alone" (De la Halle 5), suggesting that the Knight is scheming. In No.3a Marion is merely a carefree girl, unaware of the Knight and still singing of her lover, Robin. In the modern adaptation performed by Tonus Peregrinus, No.2 and No.3a are sung separately, as originally written, and then together, which works surprisingly well. As the Knight approaches Marion, he mocks her little tune in No.3b. After about 60 lines of dialogue Marion, in turn, ridicules the Knight with a reprise of his own triumphant entrance song, but resolves the final pitch back up to an f, staying in tune with her cheery and playful disposition. No.5 is again a sweet and simple tune Marion sings to the Knight as a final testament of her faithfulness to Robin. The dialogue circles around various birds the Knight questions Marion about, and Marion's playful tunes resemble bird songs, as they are light and fluty. After much debate and little response from the virtuous and loyal Marion, he Knight realizes his defeat, and in No.6 Marion sings him away with nonsense syllables, possibly imitating a trotting horse, "trairi deluriu deluriu deluriele" (De la Halle 13). The Knight enters with a new line trying to remain proud, but echoes the lines of Marion, as if realizing his foolishness and poking fun at himself. To close the scene, Tonus Peregrinus inserts two of Halle's rondeaux: Rondeau II: Lidous regars, sung by men, and Rondeau XV: Tant con je vivrai, sung by women.

In scene two, Marion calls out to Robin in No.7 and he replies with the same melody. The words of the second half of each phrase, "leure leure va" (De la Halle 13) are merely playful nonsense words and add to the carefree feel of the line. No.8 strikes me as the first line of music that doesn't really fit well and seems randomly placed among the dialogue of the play. First off, the line doesn't strike any dramatic reason for music, and second it is much more modal than the

other musical lines thus far have been. In terms of form, No.9 is the most difficult yet. There are five separate melodic motives, with the pattern as follows: Abbcc ccdab e. It makes sense for this part to be more intricate because Robin sings to test Marion about whether or not she was truly faithful to him during her unwanted excursion with the Knight. Next, in No.10, Robin entertains Marion with a dance. Robin and Marion exchange lines, Marion sings two phrases and Robin sings four phrases. Tonus Peregrinus speeds up the song as it goes, as if the two get caught up in the dance until it comes to a sudden end, for Robin wishes to fetch some instruments and other people to sing and dance. Here, Tonus Peregrinus inserts Motet II: De ma dame/Dieus/Omnes, which happens to be a piece from our first semester listening quiz, marking the end of the scene. The third scene is short, without musical lines, and is concluded with a motet that incorporates the tune from No.1, Robin m'aime, entitled Mout me fu grief li departir/Robin m'aime/Portare.

The Knight returns to attempt seduction on Marion once more in scene four, but fails to do so yet again. In No.11 Marion declares that she hears Robin, and just as the Knight gives up, Robin puts up a fight, which leads the Knight to kidnap Marion. Gautier, a friend of Robin's, proclaims that the Knight has taken Marion in No.12. Scene four finishes with Rondeau III: Hareu. In scene five the company sings No.13 stating, "with such company one must greatly rejoice" (De la Halle 43). The piece is simple enough that it could easily be harmonized to, as might have happened at a real peasant feast. Tonus Peregrinus freely added their own harmonies into this "chorus number", as it might be compared to. There are over 200 lines in between No.13 and No.14, and Tonus Peregrinus does not have an added piece in between scenes five and six, making it difficult to stay engaged with so much dialogue. These scenes are supposed to represent a peasant feast and party, so it strikes me as strange that Halle would write so much dialogue without any music, though there would most likely be music happening at a peasant

gathering. No.14a and No.14b are the same tune with different lyrics, in the form of aabb. At the close of scene six is a song called A dieu, sung by all women.

In scene seven No.15, sung by Robin's friend Gautier, has a minor and gritty tonality, appropriately coloring the line "Audigier, said Raimbridge, shit on you, I say" (De la Halle 79). While this may be a modern translation, Gautier is trying to get a laugh out of the crowd by using vulgar language. Halle's use of the vernacular language and especially the lower class phrasing here showcases his ingenuity in bringing the peasant life to reality. The final musical piece, No.16, is a final contented line in which Tonus Pereginus has Robin first sing, as written, and the rest of the company joins in, bringing the last scene to a close. The finale of the play is a reprise of Halle's motet Mout me fu grief li departir/Robin m'aime/Portare, yet another motet that quotes the first number of the play.

From the observations I've made analyzing the monophonic lines of music in *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion* combined with listening to a modern interpretation performed by Tonus Pereginus, I believe that Adam de la Halle was a composer and writer ahead of his times in many ways. His music reflects the characters in subtle ways and his ability to write both monophonic and polyphonic music sets him apart from other troubadours and trouvères of the time. Halle continued to write monophonic music even as it faded from the musical world, but also wrote in the rising polyphonic style of motets and the fixed forms of rondeaux. The members of Tonus Pereginus bring Halle's music back to life in a fresh performance with accurate musical innovations that may very well have happened back in the 13th century when this play was initially performed.

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