

A Medieval Music Box: the Cantigas de Santa María as Sound Technology in the Age of Alfonso X

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Abstract

Each of the essays in this month's "Medieval Sound" forum focuses on sound as it, according to Steve Goodman's essay "The Ontology of Vibrational Force," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, "comes to the rescue of thought rather than the inverse, forcing it to vibrate, loosening up its organized or petrified body (70). These investigations into medieval sound [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), History, Medieval Sounds, Memory, Sound Studies, Soundscapes



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Each of the essays in this month's "Medieval Sound" forum focuses on sound as it, according to Steve Goodman's essay "The Ontology of Vibrational Force," in [The Sound Studies Reader](#), "comes to the rescue of thought rather than the inverse, forcing it to vibrate, loosening up its organized or petrified body (70). These investigations into medieval sound lend themselves to a variety of presentation methods loosening up the "petrified body" of academic presentation. Each essay challenges concepts of how to hear the Middle Ages and how the sounds of the Middle Ages continue to echo in our own soundscapes.

The posts in this series begins an ongoing conversation about medieval sound in *Sounding Out!*. Our opening gambit in April 2016, "Multimodality and Lyric Sound," reframes how we consider the lyric from England to Spain, from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries, pushing ideas of openness, flexibility, and productive creativity. We will post several follow-ups throughout the rest of 2016 focusing on "Remediating Medieval Sound." And, HEAR YE!, in April 2017, look for a second series on Aural Ecologies of noise! **–Guest Editors Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman**

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At a first glance, one might think the sounds of the Middles Ages unrecoverable from the fragmented yet abundant ruins of the past. The voices, noises, melodies seem lost to the present, casting the efforts to reconstruct matters of medieval sound as speculation. However, medieval peoples actually preserved copious traces of their efforts to produce the thing closest to contemporary sound recordings: comments, writings, treatises, music notation, verbal descriptions, music instruments and even [architectural design](#) in the name of sound. Testaments of such efforts– forgotten amplifiers resisting time's erasure–appear in the form of one of the greatest and revolutionary accomplishments of the ten centuries comprising the Middle Ages: the development of the codex. Coupled with the meticulous treatment of writing, the codex ushered in a number of innovations slowly introduced in matters of script, binding, development of materials, the re-thinking of the function and design of the library, and others. During this expansive time, the topic of memory was linked to writing and its repositories as supportive instruments in an active way ([Carruthers](#)). Key to our discussion here, these developments greatly assisted melody, rhythm, the production of music in general, particularly through the slow creation of the written devices and symbols that eventually turned into music notation.

Alfonso X, King of Castile in the 13th century, set to participate in the stream of cultural reflections and productions about music and sound in the Middle Ages. One of his main works, the *Cantigas de Santa María* (sourced from [here](#) and [here](#)), is an awe-inspiring cultural monument, not only for its representation of monarchical values in Castile, but because it provides evidence of all of the efforts toward the careful attention to writing and music, and their links to matters of religious devotion. Among the topics carefully interwoven in the visual, written and musical registers of the

Cantigas is a depiction of the culture of the kingdom of Castile and the Iberian Peninsula in the 13th century. Alfonso's representations of Christians, Jews and Moors as part of the population affected by the presence and constant intervention of the Virgin sets his codices apart as unique examples of what some critics have proposed to see as the world of *convivencia*, a form of social organization in which collaboration and tolerance between peoples belonging to different cultural frames took place ([Américo Castro](#)).



A depiction of Alfonso's scriptorium.

The *Cantigas de Santa María* is better defined as the cluster of four extant manuscripts, written in Galician-Portuguese, that display similar functions, design, topics, and organization ([Fernández](#)). As a whole, the *Cantigas* is the concerted effort to produce a body of materials for devotion to the Virgin Mary on behalf of King Alfonso, a multimedia, multidimensional, and a discursively multivalent groups of codices or manuscripts each organized in what [John E. Keller](#) calls the threefold method: lyrics/poetry, miniatures, and music notation. Of the extant codices, the Codex that is best known for being the most finished—as well as for the richness of the work of miniatures—is the Codex Rico, the basic codex from which I use examples in this article.

While there are plenty of critical comments and approaches to the *Cantigas* in terms of its poetic composition and content, as well as its miniatures or illustrations, the most puzzling element of its study remains its “sound.” There have been several efforts to analyze the music notation and tradition in the *Cantigas* from different viewpoints. [Julián Ribera](#) and [Higinio Anglés](#), for example, attempted to produce a transcription of its music notation. Others, such as [Hendrik van der Werf](#), made great efforts to analyze the particularities of the music notation and the interpretation of

rhythm. However, musicologists maintain that we still need better working tools to interpret the music with full consideration of the information in the codices, as well as the points of contact and variations of music and lyrics from one of the codices to the other (Ferreira). As we work toward coordinating such a project, we still have several elements to work with to hear and interpret sound in the *Cantigas*.

To listen to the *Cantigas*, the reader/spectator/listener can begin by addressing the codices' composition and construction. The texts not only offer a vast repertory of songs with music notation, but they also make use of miniatures to comment on the topics of sound and music. The codices are self-reflexive, which means that they make constant reference to their own construction and production. In this way, the texts challenge the reader/spectator/listener to consider the multiple layers of construction and meaning. For example, consider the definitions and views of sound and music exposed by the *Cantigas*. Here, the word “cantiga” is usually understood as either a song or short poem set to music, mostly about love, following the vocabulary of medieval courtly tradition (Parkinson). By the 12th century, the kingdoms to the north of the Iberian Peninsula had developed a lyrical form associated with courtly tradition known as the *Cantigas d'amigo*, written in Galician Portuguese, and linked to the troubadour tradition. The *Cantigas* appear to follow this tradition directly, suggesting the title references the form as well as the content of its lyrics. Therefore, the title *Cantigas* refers to the poetical conventions structuring the expression of devotion to a lady—most of the poems follow a particular structure of stanzas followed by a refrain—and it also signals the sound of such devotion.



A codex. Image borrowed from e-codices @Flickr CC BY-NC.

So how to describe the sound of the *cantigas*? What would the medieval reader/spectator of the codex understand just by looking at the music notation, poetic structures, illustrations and miracles about the role of sound, music, and voice as well?

For one thing, the miracles, miniatures or illustrations—as well as the music notation from one *cantiga* to the other—supply an excess of information. The codices present Jewish characters, heavy hints of the influence of Hispanic-Arabic poetic and music traditions (such as “rhythmic patterns from the *muwashshah*,” according to [Manuel Pedro Ferreira](#), miracles from the Provençal tradition, Galician-Portuguese poetic structures and music, troubadour topics, the identification of melodies from secular traditions, profane music, and religious motifs. All of these together suggest that the reader/spectator/listener of the *cantigas* would have been expected to know at least a little of each of these elements.

The contemporary identification of these layers of information has led *Cantigas* scholars to hypothesize on the possible performance of its music. Research shows agreement on the following: the expression of clear melodic lines; the use of mensural notation (the system for European vocal polyphonic music used from the later part of the 13th century until about 1600); the interpretation of rhythm depending on the poetic structure and melodies of each poem; the use of *melismas*—runs of notes made from one syllable—and their function in performance; and the impossibility of interpreting the use of pitch. This last feature renders any attempt to reconstruct and perform the full range of the codices’ music virtually impossible. Any contemporary performance works as an exercise of imagination, an active effort to fill in the blanks of what may be described as an ambitious and extensive archive of and about music in the Iberian Peninsula of the 13th century.



Cantiga 8.

In the meantime, prospective listeners of the *Cantigas*’ music may still reflect on how it comments and represents the function of music and sound: from love and religious devotion, to entertainment, spiritual transformation. Its authors represent music as both skill and gift.

Furthermore, as the following brief and striking examples show, many other sounds are encoded in the texts: voices, screams, streams, demands, prayer and cries. [Cantiga 8](#) is about a Minstrel from Rocamadour who dedicates his songs to a statue of the Virgin Mary (fols. 15r-15v). He prays to her that she may give him a candle from the church. The Virgin is so pleased with his dedication that she makes a candle to rest on his “viola” (fiddle). A monk, unbelieving of the miracle, takes the candle away and accuses the minstrel of using magic. The miracle takes place for a second time, causing the monk to repent and join the minstrel and others in devotion. This may seem like a simple story of the values of faith communities, however the *Cantigas* underscores the role sound plays in devotion, through the minstrel’s voice and performance with his music instrument:

“que mui ben cantar sabía / e mui mellor violar (fol. 15r, line 10).

(“...as he knew how to sing very well / and to fiddle even better”)

Moreover, the disbelieving monk is described as having understood his error as “aqueste miragre viu” (by “seeing” this miracle) and “entendeu que muit errara,” which may be translated as “understanding that he was in error.” However, in Portuguese, the verb “entender” (to understand) is also associated with the notion of understanding through auditory perception.



Cantiga 89.

Another example of the role of sound in Alfonso’s project is found in [Cantiga 89](#) (fols. 130r-131r). This cantiga is about a Jewish woman who experiences a difficult childbirth. In the middle of the delivery of her baby, she hears a voice asking her to pray to the Virgin. As she moans and cries, she finds the strength to pray aloud to request the Virgin’s help. The poem stresses the quality of the sound of the laboring woman in the description of her suffering:

“Ela assi jazendo / que era mais morta ca viva / braadand’e gemendo/ echamando / sse mui cativa, / con tan gran door esquivia” (fol. 130v, lines 20-25).

(As she lay in this condition/ for she was more dead than alive / screaming and moaning / calling herself unfortunate / with great pain).

The Virgin helps the Jewish woman, who decides to convert to Christianity at the end of the cantiga. The text underscores the role of voice in both the spiritual intervention of the Virgin, but also in the human experience of pain and prayer.



<https://youtu.be/3z7Q5y-AXfs>

Lastly, [Cantiga 103](#), is about a monk who listened to a bird's song for three hundred years (fols. 147v-148v). The monk asks the Virgin to let him glimpse paradise before dying. After hearing his prayer, however, the Virgin grants him not a view of paradise, but the sensation of its sounds:

"Tan toste que acababa ouv'o o mong' a oraçon, / oyu ha passarinna cantar log' en tan bon son, / que sse escaeceu seendo e catando sempr/ alá" (fol. 148r, lines 23-25).

("As soon as he finished his prayer / he heard a small bird sing with such a nice song / that he forgot about everything else remaining in the place forever")

Three hundred years pass, and suddenly the monk remembers to return to his monastery. He finds everything there transformed. After telling his story, everyone shares the wonder of the miracle praising the Virgin. This text suggests a different appreciation of "paradise" not through the notion of "vision" but through aurality, the description of the spiritual well being as a sonic experience.



Cantiga 103.

This small sampling from *cantigas* underscores the value of voice, noise, and music as part of human experience, as central in the experience of religious devotion, and as transformative for the communities represented in the codices. King Alfonso strove to create a library containing all the knowledge available to his world. Additionally, he strove to participate actively in—and innovate—contemporary forms of knowledge production. In many ways, the *Cantigas*, function as a music box, its folios documenting multiple forms of sonic information, making available the experiences, values, soundscapes, and medieval ways of hearing/listening, or the aurality of the Middle Ages.

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Featured image “girl laugh #10” by danor sutrazman @Flickr CC BY.

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Marla Pagán-Mattos earned her doctorate in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include medieval literature, Iberian medieval history and literature, literary theory, and sound culture. She has taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Haverford College, and is currently teaching in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Puerto Rico.

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