

## ENGLISH SECULAR AND ECCLESIASTICAL MUSIC IN THE XIV<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: SOME LITERARY REFERENCES

**Rodrigo Pérez Lorido**

*Universidad de Oviedo*

It has been frequently stated by historians and musicologists that music in 14th century England suffered a considerable delay in its development as compared with other European countries, especially Italy and France. In fact, while those countries were leaving the *ars antiqua*, with figures such as Vitry or Machaut and a rich secular polyphony, England was still moored in earlier and therefore simpler musical styles, if we are to rely exclusively on the extant musical documents.

Thus, by the end of the 13th century, France had already attained a high level of sophistication in the methods of composing polyphonic music, as reflected –among others– in the Montpellier Manuscript, which contains more than 300 motets in two and three parts with both Latin and French texts, and –what is more important– those sophisticated musical devices were applied to both ecclesiastical and secular music. In this way, we find in the 13th century a good number of French secular motets whose upper voices quote texts and notes from *trouvère* songs, which were very appealing to the popular taste, superimposed to texts in Latin from *plain chant*. In the 14th century, the number of motets with French texts and profane –if not openly satiric or erotic– themes equals that of religious ones. Nothing barely similar is found in England, however, until the very end of the 14th century, or at least we do not have documentary evidence of it. Before that date, the number of artful vernacular part-music is surprisingly scarce. And it is even scarcer the number of vernacular secular polyphonic music, to the extent that we have only two polyphonic motets extant with vernacular texts. The first one, considered the earliest motet with English words, is entitled *Worldes blisse, have good day* (tenor: *Benedicamus Domino*), and it dates from the beginning of the 14th century. Its text, despite being in English, is not secular but moralizing. Its technique, however, is a relatively sophisticated one, which suggests a certain acquaintance with the current continental methods in polyphony on the part of both its composer and audience. The second one, entitled *Sancta Mater Graciae* (tenor: *Dou Way Robin*) has English words in the tenor or upper part, but in this case the theme is secular. This tenor has been said to come from a popular refrain in the way the French composers of the 13th century did with *trouvère* songs. Be that as it may, in spite of these two exceptional examples, it is a fact that the development

of polyphonic music in England followed its own and particular path during greater part of the 14th century, moving away from France and favouring the genuine native style, which had its late origin in the Winchester *organa* and the music of the Worcester cathedral, and which has been called English descant. The first descants were strictly functional liturgical pieces whose most outstanding technical characteristic, as compared with the French models, was their rhythmical simplicity and their predilection for parallel movement and intervals of sixths and thirds. The simplest descants were built on a melody taken from *plain chant* (cantus firmus), to which one or two upper voices were added at fixed intervals. To each note in the *cantus firmus* corresponded one note in the other voices, and to each note in whichever voice corresponded only one syllable. In that way the text could be easily understood by the listeners, which was precisely what the ecclesiastical orthodoxy aimed at: the comprehension of the holy texts and not the enjoyment of the music. John Wyclif was one of those who defended the prevalence of words on music, and did not hesitate to abide by St. Augustine's words by saying:

As oft as the song likith me more than doth the sentence that is songen, so oft  
I confesse that I synne grevously.<sup>1</sup>

In some descants, an upper and a lower voice were added to the *cantus firmus* instead of two upper ones. In these cases the lower voice was considered the *descant* strictly speaking and was named like that, although sometimes it received also the name *bourdon*.

Of course, these incipient polyphonic forms suffered a constant evolution in the course of the 14th century, growing in technical complexity and incorporating elements from the Italian and French models, as we can observe in the pieces collected in the Old Hall Manuscript, even though they never lost completely their distinctive features: the parallel movement and the intervals of thirds and sixths, which would finally become very popular during the 15th century when cultivated by Dunstable, and which would likewise exert a considerable influence on the continental musicians in the long run. This continuous evolution from the simple parallel-movement descant forms of the beginning of the 14th century to the refined *chansons* and motets of its last decades was reflected –more or less straightforwardly– in the works of a good many English writers, such as Wyclif or Chaucer, and it is precisely the aim of this paper to revise some of those references and discuss the level of accuracy with which they bore witness to the musical activity of the age.

To begin with, the aforementioned Wyclif provides us in just two lines of his *De Officio Pastori* (137-139) with a very interesting list of musical practices which somehow summarize the history of the English church polyphony, labelling them as vane and sinful and therefore opposed to the policy of sobriety and humbleness he proposed for the church and its celebrants. He abused hence:

Deschant, countre note, and orgon, and smale brekyng, that stirith veyn men  
to daunsynge more than to mornynge;<sup>2</sup>

Two of the first items he mentions in the text are *orgon* and *countre note*, which were (organum and counter note) some of the earliest manifestations of polyphony in

the history of music, consisting of parallel stepwise movement of just two voices, note by note. Therefore, if Wyclif's account was intended to be an account of *current* affairs and not a more or less historical one, we should infer that church music in England was in an undisputed state of underdevelopment.

Certainly, it was not only in England that church music was held up in its development; other countries suffered a similar delay, due in most cases to the reluctance of the ecclesiastical authorities to accept any novelty in the liturgy. Thus, in 1325 Pope John XXII proclaimed an edict forbidding the complicated devices of secular polyphony from being used in church, and –regardless of the acceptance of the edict– church music went no doubt at a slower pace than secular music all over Europe. That way, it wouldn't be surprising that Wyclif's account was an up-to-date one on reflecting the survival of somewhat archaic musical practices.

Before *orgon* and *countré note* we find in Wyclif's list of condemned musical activities a reference to the descant (*deschant*). In this case there is little doubt that he faithfully reflected the high importance of that style in church music, since strictly musical evidence seems –as we have said– to prove so. This is demonstrated as well by a considerable number of other literary references in the works of other writers of the age, among whom we have to mention Chaucer. Chaucer's references to the descant are –on the other hand– very interesting from the point of view of the musicologist because they are in most cases connected with *secular* descants, of which there is a very small number of settings extant.

Thus, in one of the most celebrated passages from *The Reeve's Tale* (ll. 4165-4166), Chaucer satirically describes the miller and his wife lying in bed and the loud snoring of the latter by saying:

His wyf bar him a burdon, a ful strong  
Men mighte hir rowtyng heere two furlong.<sup>3</sup>

The term *burdon* might –as we have said– correspond to the one the treatises on descant of the age used for designating an extemporized melody that was added to a given tune at a distance of a lower third. Nonetheless, sometimes the descant could be added above or below the given tune. A descant a fifth higher than the tenor or basic melody was called *mean*, a descant an octave higher was called *treble*, and a descant a fifteenth higher was called *quinible*. Sometimes the choice of the descant above or below the tenor depended on the pitch-range of the singer. This way, Chaucer's mention to the miller's wife "bearing his husband a deep burdon" could well be a finely ironical way of suggesting the masculine and rude quality of her voice. We cannot, however, be absolutely positive about that strict interpretation of the term *burdon*. It could as well refer simply to some pedal-like sustained note in the low region, like the one produced by bagpipes and chifonies. Be as it may, what is undeniable is Chaucer's awareness of the technical term and the way he fittingly used it in his description.

We come again across the term *bourdon* connected with the descant style in the last pages of the *General Prologue*, in Chaucer's account of the Pardoner (ll. 672-674):

Ful lowde he sang: "come hider, love, to me"  
This Somonour bar to him a stif burdoun  
Was nevere trompe of half so greet a soun;<sup>4</sup>

In this case Chaucer tells us explicitly about a melody extemporized by the Summoner to a tenor provided by the Pardoner in the way it must have been done at the time. The hypothesis about a strict interpretation of the term *burdoun*, is moreover supported by the fact that Chaucer actually gives us the title of the tune that serves as tenor, namely *Come hider, love, to me*, even though that tune has not been so far identified and it is fairly probable that he had invented it. An interesting interpretation has been suggested by Davis & al. (1979: 19), who point out to the possibility that the word *burdoun* had been intended as an indecent pun on the basis of its also meaning “pilgrim’s staff”, in order to satirize the lecherous character of the Summoner.

Finally, another reference to the descant style is found in *The Miller’s Tale* (ll. 3328-3332), when Chaucer describes the clerk Absalom by saying:

In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce  
 After the scole of Oxenforde tho,  
 And with his legges casten to and fro,  
 And pleyen songes on a smal rubible;  
 Therto he song som tyme a loud quinyble.<sup>5</sup>

As we have seen, the term *quinible*, was applied in the descant manuals to a voice singing a fifteenth above the tenor. However as Dobson & Harrison (1979: 64), have wisely pointed out, such a distance could hardly be reached by any singer, let alone by the clerk Absalom, since we are told that he sang to a note produced by a *rubible* or rebec which was in itself a very high-pitched instrument. Therefore, there is a possibility that Chaucer had used the term simply as a numerical expression that rhymed with *rubible*, though with no practical vocal realization. Once again, the striking point is that Chaucer was acquainted with the musical term (above all if we take into account that this is the only literary occurrence of it, apart from another one by Skelton in the 16th century), and how appropriately he used it to make fun at Absalom’s high-pitched voice.

Going back to Wyclif’s list, we find at the end of it a mention to *smale brekyngge*. *Smale brekyngge*, or the breaking up of notes represented an important step forward in the evolution of the English polyphony following the French models, and consisted of dividing the long notes of one of the upper voices into several short ones by means of runs, trills, and other ornaments. The result of that ornate singing was that now the melody in the *cantus firmus* did no longer have an exact vertical counterpart in the upper voices and, subsequently, that to each syllable in the *cantus firmus* corresponded not only one note in the upper voices but two or more ones, which –in the end– made the text difficult to follow by the audience. That, obviously, ranked the practice among the contemptible ones for Wyclif, who once again bore witness –though rejecting it– to another important advance in the history of English music.

He dwells back again on the topic a few lines later (158-166), substituting the term *brekyngge* by its equivalent *knackyngge*:

But oure fleschly peple hath more lykyngge in here bodely eris, in sich knackyngge  
 and taterynge, than in heryngge of Goddis lawe, and spekyngge of the blisse of  
 hevене; for thei wolen hire proude prestis and othere lorelis thus to knock

notes for many markis and poundis... And thus, bi this nouelrie of song is Goddis lawe unstudied and not kepte, and pride and othere grete synnys meyntenyd.<sup>6</sup>

And later (ll. 172-182):

For whanne ther ben fourty in a queer, thre or foure proude lorellis schulen knacke the most devout serveyce that no man schal here the sentence, and alle othere schullen be doumbe, and loken on hem as foolis. And thanne strumpatis and theuys preisen Sire Iacke, or Hobbe, and Williem the proude clerk, hou smale thei knacken here notis; and seyn that thei serven wel God and Holy chirche, whanne thei dispisen God in his face, and letten othere Cristene men of here devocioun and compuncioun, and stiren hem to worldly vanité. And thus trewe serveyce of God is lettid, and this veyn knackyng for oure iolité and pride is preised aboven the mone.<sup>7</sup>

A similar interpretation of the term “breaking” can be given to Chaucer’s description of the clerk Absolon when he says (l. 3377) that:

He singeth brokkyng as a nyghtyngale<sup>8</sup>

In this case it seems very appropriate for the clerk to sing breaking up the notes, in a lively manner, since he was compared with a nightingale, mostly if we bear in mind that his was supposedly a love song, unlike the ones in the previous examples. References to love and courtly songs are obviously very frequent in Chaucer’s works, having to do in most cases with monodic songs, and we will deal with them in a few minutes, but before that we would like to revise some examples concerning religious monody.

Monodic hymns and antiphones in Latin from the past were still in full force in Chaucer’s times, for reasons already mentioned, to the extent that they were generally preferred in church to more complicated polyphonic versions, and therefore it is no strange thing that references to them do abound in the literature of the age.

Thus, a very popular hymn of the time, the *Alma Redemptoris*, is, for example, chosen by Chaucer as the nucleus of his *Prioress’ Tale*. The hymn had been originally composed in the 13th century and later became the source for several polyphonic versions. Chaucer, though possibly aware of them, however, probably referred in his tale to none of these but to the original monodic piece, because, among other reasons, we are told in the story that it was heard by the little clergeon “...as children lerned there antiphoner”. Another hymn is mentioned by Chaucer in *The Miller’s Tale*, in his description of the clerk Nicholas (ll. 3211-3216):

On shelves couched at his beddes heed;  
His presse ycovered with a fadyng red;  
And al above ther lay a gray sautrie;  
On which he made a-nyghtes melodie  
So swetely that all the chambre rong;  
And *Angelus ad Virginem* he song;<sup>9</sup>

The hymn *Angelus ad Virginem* had been composed as a monodic song in the late 13th century, and was the source for three subsequent polyphonic versions: a two-voice setting of the late 13th century and two three-voice settings from the first half of the 14th century. There is good evidence to believe, however, that Chaucer again referred to none of these but to the previous tune version. One of the reasons is that we know that its original instrumental accompaniment was the psaltery, the *sautrie* that Chaucer explicitly mentions in his tale as owed by Nicholas, which ultimately suggests that the earlier version still was *in vogue* by the time Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* and on the other hand that he was well aware of that.

Nevertheless, references to monodic religious music are by no means so numerous in Chaucer's works as are those to secular music, even if we consider that he was, in the words of Sisam (1921: xx), "... the first layman writing in English for secular purposes". Therefore, we must consider the possibility that the relative abundance of references to secular monody corresponds to an undeniable external reality. Indeed, lyrical songs and dance music –for instance– were deeply rooted in England since the times of Henry II, when his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitany brought to England the craft and the teachings of the Provençal *troubadours* and didn't cease to gain the favour of the audience for centuries. In spite of that, while we have a relatively high number of extant lyrical pieces from the 13th century, among which we have to mention the splendid *Sumer is icumen in*, the number of surviving musical documents that contain lyrical songs from the 14th century is much lesser, and we have –to a certain extent– to count on indirect literary evidence to demonstrate their existence. Thus, references to traditional dance songs in *carol* form appear, among others, in Chaucer, the Gawain Poet, and Robert Mannyng of Brunne.

In *The Canon Yeoman's Tale* (ll. 1344-1345) Chaucer depicts the "sotted prest" by saying:

Was never noon nightingale that lust bet to synge,  
Ne ladie lustier in carolyng<sup>10</sup>

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ll. 1025-1026) we are told that, on St. John's day, the guests of the castellan:

Forthy wonderly thay woken, and the wyn dronken,  
Daunsed ful dreily wyth dere carolez...<sup>11</sup>

A few English vernacular carol texts from the first half of the 14th century survive, however, in written form, like the famous *Lullay, Lullay. Als I lay on Yoolis Night*, and we know that some of them were sung by pilgrims when they kept vigil in the churches, and that dances and shows had been performed in churchyards and churchgrounds since the 13th century. In addition to this, non-ritual songs in Latin with a refrain in carol form were sung on important celebrations, especially at Christmas. That intrusion of popular entertainment and non-ritual singing in church was criticised by some defenders of the religious orthodoxy like Mannyng or Rolle, in a parallel way as Wyclif had condemned elaborate polyphony.

Thus, in the preamble to the tale of the *Dancers of Colbek* (ll. 1-16), in Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*, he disapproves of a number of irreverent practices that

were performed in church or in the nearness of church,<sup>12</sup> among which occupies an outstanding place “karolles to synge”:

Karolles, wrastlynges, or somour games,  
 Whoso ever haunteth any swyche shames  
 Yn cherche, other in chercheyerd,  
 Of sacrylage he may be aferd;  
 Or entyrludes, or syngyng,  
 Or tabure bete, or oyer pypynge-  
 Alle swyche thing forbodyn es  
 Whyle the prest stondeth at messe.  
 Alle swyche to every gode preste ys lothe,  
 And sunner wyl he make hym wroth  
 Than he wyl, that hath no wyt,  
 Ne undyrstondeth nat Holy Writ.  
 And specyaly at hygh times  
 Karolles to synge and rede rymys  
 Noght yn none holy stedes,  
 That myyt dysturbe the prestes bedes,<sup>13</sup>

We can infer from Mannyng’s words therefore that singing and dancing in the context of the religious festivities was by no means uncommon in 14th Century England.

This leads us to the last point in our discussion, namely, the evolution of popular and lyrical songs in England. It is surprising that English native songs –despite being very appealing to the public and despite having the same popular origin than their French equivalents– did not undergo the same evolution towards the sophistication and complication of France’s *formes fixes*, the *ballade*, the *rondeau*, and the *virelay*, or at least that we have no documentary evidence of it. This has been a controversial matter for years, and several hypotheses have been suggested to account for the absence of refined courtly music extant in late 14th century England, some pointing out to its non-written transmission, some suggesting its diffusion within very restricted courtly or literary circles. Be as it may, if we had to base ourselves strictly on documentary evidence, we would have to conclude that the kind of entertainment enjoyed by the English court did not include such refinement as the French *formes fixes*.

Literary evidence is somewhat misleading in this respect. Thus, the only 14th century references to the terms *roundel*, *ballad*, and *virelay* are from Gower and Chaucer, which seems at first sight to confirm the hypothesis that the knowledge of the French *formes fixes* was constrained to court and literary circles, on which the French influence was heavier. On the other hand, while Chaucer knew the French lyrical forms and used them for poems in English, his references to those musical terms are not always accurate nor does he always use them fittingly, which might indicate that his knowledge was not acquired from first-hand examples of the *formes fixes* in England, but indirectly based on the continental models, mostly on Machaut’s works, of which he was well aware.

Thus, in *The Legend of Good Women* (ll. 199-202), Chaucer tells us about nineteen ladies who:

... wenten in compas,  
 Daunsinge aboute this flour an esy pas,  
 And songen, as it were in carole-wyse,  
 This *balade*, which that I shall you devyse.<sup>14</sup>

The ballad Chaucer refers to is *Hyd Absalom, thy gilte tresses clere*, and agrees with the French *ballade* in having three stanzas with the same rhymes and the same final line as refrain. There is, however, some inaccuracy in Chaucer's use of the musical term because the French term *ballade* designated a highly refined chamber piece, with a very complicated rhythm, and which by no means could be danced—as Chaucer indicates in the text—“carole-wise”, this is, in the way of a rhythmically much simpler round-dance.

Similarly, the roundel *Now welcom, somer, with thy sonne softe*, included in *The Parliament of Fowls*, though equivalent to the French *rondeau* in its rhyme, was rhythmically very different: Chaucer's five-stress lines very seldom occur in the French *rondeaux*. In addition to this, in some manuscripts there is an indication in the text that the roundel was sung to the line *Qui bien aime tard oublie*, which is the line of a *lai* by Machaut. It is possible that Chaucer might be simply suggesting a suitable tune for the roundel, but the fact is that the music of a *lai* could in no way have been made to fit a roundel text, since they are metrically different. Anyhow, Chaucer explicitly said of his roundel (l. 677):

The note, I trowe, imaked was in Fraunce.<sup>15</sup>

which clearly indicates that he had the French music in mind.

Other references to the French *formes fixes* are found in *The Franklin's Tale* (ll. 946-948), when Chaucer depicts the squire Aurelius singing of despair in love:

He seyde he lovede, and was biloved no thyng.  
 Of swich matere made he many layes,  
 Songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes<sup>16</sup>

and in *The Legend of Good Women* (ll. 422-424) in the dialogue between the poet Chaucer, the God of Love and Queen Alceste, the latter saying of the poet that he had among other works composed:

... many an ympne for your haly dayes,  
 that highten balades, roundels, virelayes<sup>17</sup>

The *lai* or “maner song” is also frequently mentioned by Chaucer and he even gives us an historical account of it in the Franklin's prologue (ll. 709-714), pointing out to its Celtic origin:

This olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes  
 Of diverse aventures maden layes,  
 Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge,



Which layes with his instruments they songe  
Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce...<sup>18</sup>

Here Chaucer no doubt referred to the primitive narrative *lai*, even though most of his references to it were much more up-to-date, having to do with the French lyrical *lai*, that by then had reached an unimpaired melodic expression with the dominant French composer of the 14th century: Guillaume de Machaut. Most of Machaut's *lais* were monophonic and dealt with the conventions of courtly love. Their most distinctive feature was, however, an extraordinary rhythmic richness and a very expressive melody. This is why Chaucer decided to relate them in his works to the figure of birds and "smale fuweles", which represented earthly love, and whose singing and chirping resembled the melody of a *lai*.

Thus, we find fowls singing *lais* at the beginning of the *Tale of Sir Thopas* (ll. 766-771), bringing love remembrances to the hero:

The briddes synge, it is no nay,  
(...)  
The thurstle cock made eek hir lay  
(...)  
Sire Thopas fil in love longynge,  
Al whan he herde the thurstel singe.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, in the *Legend of Good Women* (ll. 139-140) we find "smal foules of the seson fayn", some of which were said to sing:

Clere layes of love, that joye it was to here.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in *Troilus and Cryseyde* (ll. 918-922) we find:

A nyghtingale, upon a cedre grene,  
Under the chambre wal ther as she lay,  
Ful loude song ayein the moone shene,  
Peraunter in his hides wise a lai  
Of love, that made hire herte fressh and gay.<sup>21</sup>

This and the previous pieces of evidence seem to demonstrate that Chaucer –though no practising musician– had a more than average knowledge of the monodic French music of the late 14th century, as he had of the polyphonic native music of his time, which, in the end, enabled him to use their specific musical terminology for literary purposes with remarkable accuracy. To a certain degree the same could be said of the rest of the authors examined so far, even though in some cases their acquaintance with music was not so great as Chaucer's. Conversely, literary evidence of this kind turns out to be a useful tool –though not a definitive one– for musicologists and historians of music when they try to support or refute the different theories about the development of mediaeval music, and we would be glad to know that more studies are to be made comprising two arts that for centuries had gone hand in hand: music and literature.

## Notes

1. J. Wyclif, *Of Feigned Contemplative Life* (ll. 142-144), Sisam, 123.
2. Sisam, 123.
3. Benson, 82.
4. Benson, 34.
5. Benson (1987: 70)
6. Sisam (1921: 124)
7. Sisam (1921: 124)
8. Benson (1987: 78)
9. Benson, 68.
10. Benson (1987: 280)
11. Gollancz (1940: 37)
12. Thus, the efforts of the churchmen to prevent popular lyrics from entering the liturgy led Richard de Ledrede, Bishop of Ossory, in the first half of the 14th century to provide Latin pious texts to some 60 popular tunes originally in English and French –now collected in the much renowned *Red Book of Ossory*. Surprisingly enough, though Ledrede objected to the texts on account of their lewd nature, he maintained the rhythms and melodies, which indicates that by then they had acquired an irreversible popularity among the people.
13. Sisam (1921: 4)
14. Benson (1987: 594)
15. Benson (1987: 394)
16. Benson (1987: 181)
17. Benson, 600.
18. Benson, 178.
19. Benson, 214.
20. Benson, 592.
21. Benson, 502.

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