

~MUSIC FROM THE 1300s~

ARRANGED, PERFORMED, AND RECORDED BY JOE GORE

MIXED AND MASTERED BY COUNT
GRAPHIC DESIGN BY GARETH WALTERS

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- 2. Gloria (from La Messe de Nostre Dame) ~ GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT
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  - 15. Organ Estampie ~Anonymous
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# Beautiful Sounds from a Bad Century

#### **BY JOE GORE**

I've been obsessed with 14th-century music since I first encountered it at age 17. Back then I wanted to be an early music scholar. Life decreed otherwise, but I've always loved the icy beauty of this ancient music.

or decades I've dreamt of revisiting this repertoire, and COVID provided the push. Partly it's about the ways our modern plague echoes the far worse Black Death of 1347–51, which killed as much as half of Europe's

population. I'm also haunted by current events: faltering democracies, scorn for science and education, and fellow citizens who crave authoritarianism and theocracy. We're living through some seriously medieval shit.



This famous image from the "Très riches heures du Duc de Berry" (Early-15th-Century) seems to summarize a disastrous century.

#### Then and Now

I'd say this music struck a chord in my teenaged heart, except this repertoire predates the very notion of chords. In fact, it omits many characteristics we take for granted in music while emphasizing concepts that seem bizarre to modern ears. It can sound more Martian than medieval.

As a kid, my focus was historical accuracy: How was the music originally conceived, performed, and consumed? But this time around, I sought a dialog between late medieval Europe and today. I wanted to explore how this ancient music makes us perceive modern music in new ways. Maybe it's akin to the way Shakespeare productions are sometimes staged in modern settings.

#### My Rule Book

This inspired my simple but strict "rule book": Play only the original notes and rhythms, but no restrictions on instrumentation, production, rhythmic accompaniment, or octave transposition.

This approach isn't as radical as it may seem. Medieval composers rarely wrote for

specific instruments. They simply provided the notes, which musicians would perform using whatever collection of voices and instruments they could muster. Drums and percussion were routinely added, though they weren't indicated in the notation. Granted, the composers never envisioned electric guitars and drum machines. But they expected the instrumentation to vary from one performance to another.

#### THE FOUR HORSEMEN

This music blossomed in the worst of times. If you could live at any point in human history, 14th-century Europe should be near the bottom of your wish list. The Black Death was the era's greatest horror, but far from its only one. *A Distant Mirror*, a riveting overview of the 1300s by popular historian Barbara Tuchman, is subtitled *The Calamitous 14th Century* for good reason.

In 1315, a volcano erupted in what is now New Zealand. Climate scientists theorize that it caused years of low temperatures in Northern Europe, resulting in famine, cannibalism, and infanticide.





EUROPEAN
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This was also the time of the Hundred Years' War, a boneheaded power struggle between English and French monarchs. It claimed millions of lives, mostly among peasants with the bad fortune to reside in the path of army after pillaging army. Lofty concepts like "chivalry" and "courtly love" were thin veneers of civility over incalculable cruelty and chaos.

Both church and the nobility cared more about power and riches than the welfare of the bodies and souls entrusted to them. The wealthy could buy their way into heaven. The clergy was selectively celibate. The papal seat drifted from Rome to Avignon, and soon rival popes were duking it out for supremacy. (Such

shenanigans eventually inspired the Protestant Revolution, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and lots of no-fun-allowed music.)

It was even worse if you weren't Christian. Anti-Jewish violence was vicious and relentless. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives to pogroms and mass executions. Town after town would annihilate its Jews and seize their property. Greed was as powerful a motive as antisemitism. The plague years were especially brutal, because Jews were incessantly accused of creating the pandemic on purpose. According to one 14th-century observer:

This was shameful Judea, the evil, the disloyal, who hate good and love evil.... In many places they poisoned the wells, streams, and fountains that had been clear and healthy, and so many lost their lives because all who used them died quite suddenly.... But He who sits on high and sees far, who governs everyone and provides all things, did not wish for this treason to be hidden any longer; instead He revealed and made it known.... All the Jews were put to death, some hanged, others burned alive, one drowned, another beheaded by the axe's blade or sword.

And guess what? These are the words of Guillaume de Machaut (1300–77), often regarded as the century's greatest European composer. (I perform four of his works here.)

POSSIBLE PORTRAIT OF GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT: GENIUS COMPOSER, RENOWNED POET, AND ANTISEMITIC FUCKHEAD.



#### Not Gregorian Chant

This music is from France, the Low Countries, Italy, and England. These aren't folk tunes – they're complex compositions written by and performed for intellectuals. These *chansons* and *motets* (let's just call them "songs") included texts (let's just call them "lyrics"). Most of the titles are simply the first few words of the lyrics. Some texts are religious (clue: they're in Latin) but most are courtly love poems in French or Italian.

This is intensely polyphonic music. That is, it consists of multiple simultaneous melodies

that interact in complex ways. Don't confuse it with the earlier monophonic style of church music known as Gregorian chant or plainchant, exemplified by the music of 12th-century composer Hildegard of Bingen. In plainchant, choirs sing a single melody in unison.

Multiple parts create harmonies, but these sonorities predate chordal harmony by several centuries. There's nothing resembling a modern chord progression. Modern chords are most often constructed from notes separated by intervals of a third, but in the 14th century, thirds were considered unstable dissonances. The music emphasizes octaves, fifths, and fourths, which accounts for its characteristic "hollow" sound.

#### FROM GREAT COMPLEXITY TO EXTREME COMPLEXITY

Nowadays the century's art music is usually grouped into two styles: ars nova ("new art" or "new technique") and ars subtilior ("subtler technique"), with Machaut's 1377 death serving as the dividing line. The first term was coined early in the century, possibly by Philippe de Vitry, a composer heard here. It truly was a new sound relative to the preceding century's ars antigua ("old technique"). A more flexible

approach to rhythm permitted parts of greater independence and complexity, and for the first time secular music acquired the sophistication of the loftiest sacred music. You may suspect that some of these strange harmonies and math-nerd rhythms are my embellishments, but no – that's really what they wrote.

AN ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT OF GRIMACE'S "A L'ARME, A L'ARME". IT MAY LOOK LIKE A SINGLE MELODY, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY SEVERAL SIMULTANEOUS PARTS. IT WAS COMMON TO NOTATE A COMPOSITION'S PARTS ONE AFTER THE OTHER, AND NOT ALIGNED ON A MUSICAL GRID AS IN MODERN SCORES.







### 1. Fresh Strawberries (On parole/A Paris/Frese nouvele) ~Anonymous

The oldest composition here, probably from the late 1200s. It's "poly-textual" – that is, a piece with multiple simultaneous sets of lyrics. Here, two sets of words are about partying in Paris with wine and women, while the third part is a Parisian street vendor's cry: "Fresh strawberries! Nice blackberries!"



# 2. Gloria (from La Messe de Nostre Dame) ~GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT

The "gloria in excelsis Deo" section from Machaut's midcentury Mass setting. Many musicologists cite Machaut's Messe as the greatest composition by the century's greatest European composer. We know more about Machaut than any other 14th-century musician because he was a prolific and celebrated poet/composer employed by numerous noble bigwigs. In fact, he's the very first European composer whose biographical details we know in depth.





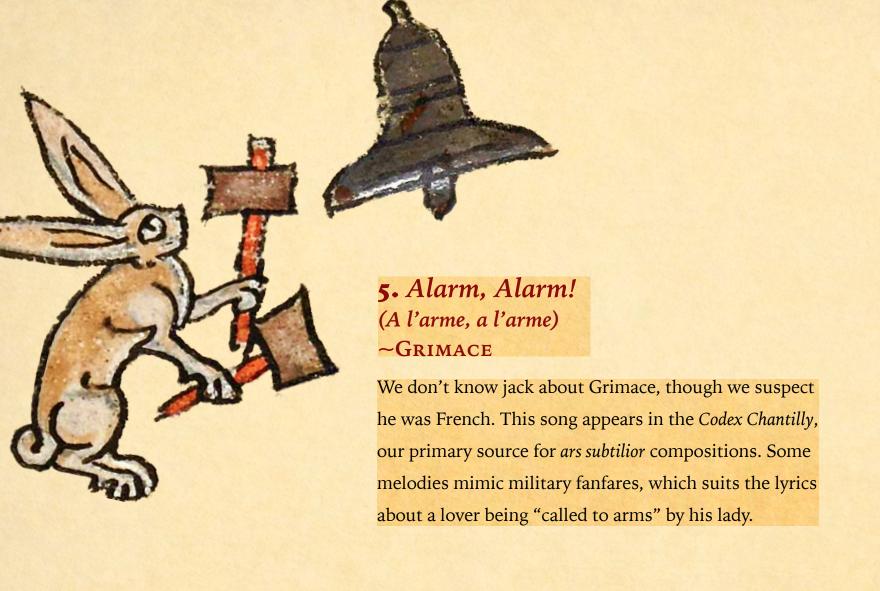
### 3. My Sweet Nightingale (Ma tredol rossignol) ~BORLET

Unlike with Machaut, we know little about most of the composers heard here. Borlet's name may be an anagram of Trebol, a contemporary composer. Or maybe he was the composer Trebor, whose name is probably an anagram of Robert. Maybe they were all the same guy! We don't even know whether Borlet was French or Spanish. This ars subtilior masterpiece is organized around a repeating bass phrase of six measures (if we count in 12/8 time).



4. The Harp of Melody
(La harpe de melodie)
~JACOB SENLECHES

This complex piece exemplifies *ars subtilior*. It's a strict canon — that is, every note heard in the left channel gets echoed one measure later in the right channel, accompanied by a bass line that ties the whole room together. The rhythms are shockingly complicated. Senlesches may have been born in a French village of that name, though he gigged mostly in Spain — first for Eleanor of Aragon, Queen of Castile, and then for Cardinal Pedro de Luna. Pedro later became Benedict XIII, one of the "antipopes" squabbling over the papal throne. Famously, this song about a harp is notated in the form of a harp.





6. The Smoker Smokes Through Smoke (Fumeux fume par fumée)

Another *Codex Chantilly* highlight. Musicology professors use this bizarre composition to freak out their students. It's so dark ... so low-pitched ... so frickin' chromatic! The lyric is as strange as the music: "The smoker smokes through smoke, a smoky speculation." These words probably refer to a mysterious artistic clique known as the Smokers ("les fumeurs"). And what were they smoking? Tobacco wouldn't arrive from the New World for another century. When I was young, scholars speculated that the Smokers indulged in the hash and opium that arrived in Western Europe with the returning Crusaders. Sadly, the current thinking is that "smoke" is merely a metaphor for a confused state of mind. But I'll always picture Solage (about whom we know zilch) with a quill in one hand and a bong in the other.



7. Some People See
(Pluseurs gens voy qui leur pensee)
~Solage

Another of Solage's *Codex Chantilly* compositions, this one in a conventional style, relative to the freak show that is "Fumeux fume."



# 8. While Hunting One Day (Cacciando un giorno) ~JOHANNES CICONIA

Ciconia was a Flemish composer and music theorist.

He probably worked in the court of Pope Boniface IX

in Rome. (Boniface was the rival of the above-mentioned
Benedict XIII, the Avignon antipope.) The use of the word

caccia (Italian for "hunt") is a play on words: It's a love

song using the metaphor of the hunt. The piece is also an

example of a musical form of the same name. Typically for a

caccia, it includes imitative counterpoint. That is, one part

follows the musical footsteps of the other, like a hunter

pursuing prey.



### 9. Rose, Lily, Springtime, Greenery (Rose, liz, printemps, verdure) ~Guillaume de Machaut

One of Machaut's greatest hits. This, for me, is a perfect example of what happens when we hear 14th-century compositions with 21st-century ears. It's easy to perceive modern "chord changes" oscillating between C major and C minor. But to medieval ears, those harmonies were simply a byproduct of the intersecting voices, not a musical framework in their own right.



#### 10. Orpheus's Lyre Didn't Sound So Sweetly

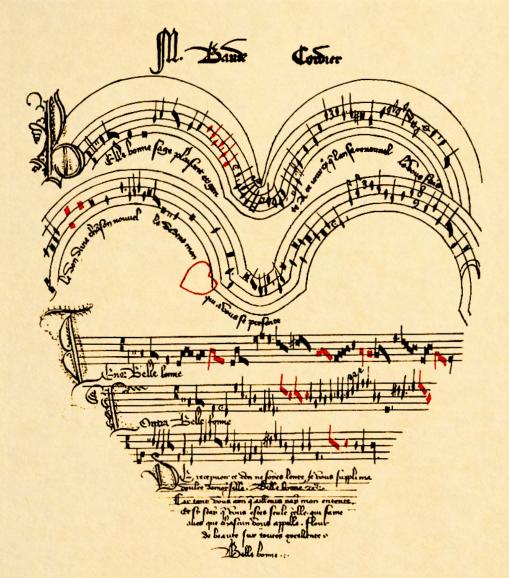
(Sy dolce non sonò)

~Francesco Landini

Blind organist Francesco Landini was the most famous composer of the Trecento. (That's Italian for "1300s," and also the term used to describe Italy's take on *ars nova*.) He worked chiefly in Florence, and he may have been pals with the poet Petrarch. He was equally renowned as a composer, performer, and poet. Dig the motoric rhythms and ornate three-part counterpoint.

# 11. Spring Is Here (Sy dolce non sonò) ~FRANCESCO LANDINI

Landini also wrote many pieces in this simpler two-voice style. The previous piece can be performed only by skilled musicians. But it's easy to imagine a hall of drunken banqueters pounding their mugs while yowling along with this celebration of springtime.



### 12. Good, Beautiful, Wise (Belle bonne sage) ~BAUDE CORDIER

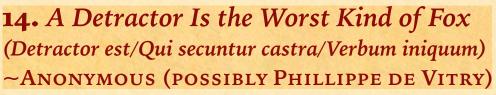
Look up "Codex Chantilly" and you'll probably encounter its most famous page: a love song written in the form of a heart. Chances are Baude Cordier is another fake name, like Grimace and Borlet. (It's probably a pun on *coeur*, the French word for heart.) The red notes in the notation signify rhythmic variations.



13. At the Top of the Tree,
Virginity Sits Pleasantly
(Tuba sacre fidei/In arboris/Virgo sum)
~PHILLIPPE DE VITRY

De Vitry may have written the musical treatise *Ars nova rotandi*, which helped usher in the radical new style. He was also a soldier, secretary, statesman, and eventually a bishop. He served in the courts of three French kings and at Avignon's papal court in exile. The memorable title is from a text celebrating the Virgin Mary. She's chilling on the uppermost branch while human vanities are consigned to lower limbs.





A motet from the *Roman de Fauvel*, an allegorical poem in which a social-climbing horse ascends to the royal court. It's a critique of hedonism and hypocrisy among secular and religious leaders. One surviving manuscript of the poem includes songs. Some, like this one, are probably de Vitry's work. Both "Top of the Tree" and "Detractor" employ isorhythm, a common compositional technique of the 13th and 14th centuries. A phrase is introduced, and then its rhythms are repeated, but with different notes. Here the lowest part is isorhythmic, with a rhythmic pattern the repeats every 10 bars (if you count in 3/4 time). I added a reverse-sounding synth swell every 10 bars so folks can follow the game at home.

#### 15. Organ Estampie ~Anonymous

There are only two English pieces of English origin here, but they're important! This *estampie* (a popular dance form) is a rare example of a medieval piece composed for a specific instrument. It's also the oldest known written keyboard music, period. This is just the opening section of a much longer work. It's old-fashioned for its day, employing techniques from preceding centuries. ("Hey, Anonymous! The year 1200 called. They want their parallel fifths back.") The piece appears in the *Robertsbridge Codex* from Sussex, though some suspect it has Italian roots.





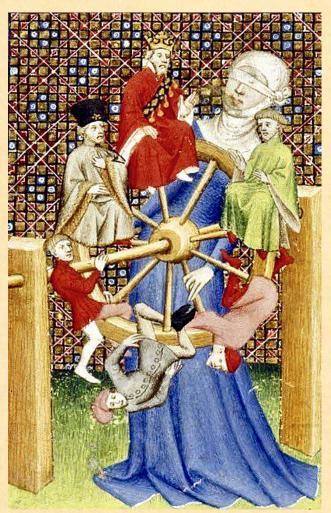
# 16. Harder Than a Diamond (Plus dur qu'un diamant) ~GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT

The previous Machaut pieces are complex four-voice compositions. But he also wrote simpler songs for one, two, and three voices/instruments. This love song has only two melodic lines.

# 17. How Beautiful You Are (Quam pulchra es) ~John Dunstable

This setting of the Bible's sexy "Song of Solomon" is actually from the early 1400s. I include it because it's practically a missing link between centuries. I mentioned how the thirds that comprise tonal chords were considered dissonances at this time. But for some reason, the English were quicker to accept thirds and sixths as stable consonances. (It may have something to do with folk music traditions.) Dunstable's music, admired on the Continent, influenced the leading composers of the new century. It was a giant step toward our familiar triadic harmony. By the 1440s French poet Martin le Franc referred to the Dunstable sound as *la contenance angloise* ("the English countenance" or "the English manner").





# 18. My End Is My Beginning (Ma fin est ma commencement) ~GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT

Ol' Guillaume gets the last word. True to its title, this piece is a musical palindrome that can be played backward or forward. (It's forward here.)

I'm grateful for this opportunity to revisit music I've loved for so long. Thanks for listening and reading. And thanks especially to my dear pals Mikael "Count" Eldridge (for mixing, mastering, and making everything sound better) and Gareth Walters (for his lovely graphic design work). Finally, thanks to Elise Malmberg for her many great ideas, including this project's title.

JOE GORE SAN FRANCISCO, JANUARY 2022

