INTRODUCTION

English songs – that is, songs with English words – are few and far between in
the early Middle Ages; only a score survive from the three centuries that
followed the Norman Conquest, and they are scattered in a variety of sources.[1]
On their own they form a woefully inadequate basis for any serious study of
words and music in the period up to Chaucer. This small and fragmented
repertoire can easily be extended to about a hundred songs by taking into
account songs with French and Latin texts, some found in the same
manuscripts, others not. That the 'songs of England' might be a more
rewarding basis for study than 'English songs' seems obvious indeed, if only
because French and Latin were more important languages for the educated;
the surprise is only that no one up to the present has undertaken it. In a
subsequent volume I hope to present these 'songs of England' in a modern
transcription, together with an account of the sources in which they are
found and an examination of the relations between music and poetry in
them.

   The present volume has taken a different direction. The 'songs of England'
seemed insufficient, especially on the vernacular side, to provide answers to
the questions which needed asking. This determined me to attempt to
understand the European traditions to which the insular songs were clearly
indebted. Here the opposite problem arose. Instead of insufficiency, a
superabundance of material – songs in Provençal, northern French, German,
Italian and Spanish, to say nothing of a huge and varied Latin repertoire –
thousands of items in all. Here certain limitations would be necessary.

   The decision to limit the study to monophonic song resulted in the first
instance from an accident of exploration, though a natural one. The enquiry
had to start somewhere, and since most of the songs of England survived with
only one line of music, it seemed sensible to take this type of art–song as the
starting–place. However, what began as a decision of convenience soon
became one of scholarly conviction, personal inclination and, in due course,
sheer practical necessity. The conviction arose from a growing sense that an
understanding of medieval song was bound to be based, if it was to be true to

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[1] Dobson and Harrison, *Medieval English Songs* (1979), print twenty of which about half are
monophonic; it is impossible to be precise because the borderline between polyphony and
monophony is blurred (e.g. 'Angelus ad virginem' appears in various forms).

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the facts, on an understanding of melody. (The truth of this has been
splendidly demonstrated for church music by Frank Harrison in his *Music in
Medieval Britain* (1958), which traces the growth of liturgical polyphony from
Gregorian chant.)

The primacy of melody is a thing which Oriental peoples may find easier to
grasp than Westerners. One current European description of melody is as 'the
surface of harmony' – a phrase which shows how far we have moved from the
conceptions of the Middle Ages. Medieval writers have, in fact, no word for
'harmony' in our sense. They have terms, of course, to describe concordant
and discordant intervals, such as *diatessaron* (a fourth) and *diapente* (a fifth),
borrowed from Greek theory. But they have no word to describe the
temporal structure established by a progression of related chords, which is the
primary meaning we give to the term 'harmony'. It is not until the late
fifteenth century that we find the word *harmonia* used to describe chords in the
modern sense (Gafurius, 1496: 'harmonia ... conficitur ex acuto, gravi et
medio sono'), and not until the early eighteenth century that harmony was
formally recognized as a structural element in music.[2] The word 'harmony',
in its Latin and vernacular forms, means to the Middle Ages in general
something quite different. The word is constantly in their mouths, and refers
to the proportional harmoniousness of *melody*.

The distinction between monophonic and polyphonic music is superficially
obvious, but it proves quite difficult to maintain under scrutiny. The
development of polyphony itself is not, in the earlier centuries at least, a
harmonic study but a study of the way one melody is combined with another
or with others. And linear conceptions continued to dominate music until the
end of the Middle Ages. Moreover, scores of monophonic songs occur as
melodies in polyphonic pieces, especially in *conductus* and motet. To take an
example, the principal melody of the *conductus* 'Procurans odium' (2 or 3 voc.)
occurs in another *conductus* of the same type from the repertoire of Notre
Dame in Paris, 'Purgator criminum' (3 voc.) and also as a well-known
trouvère chanson, Blondel de Nesle's 'Amour dont sui espris' (R1545).[3] The
melody appears again as a religious song (R1546) celebrating the miracles of
the Virgin, in the collection by Gautier de Coinci (d. 1236).[4] The inter-relation
of monophonic and polyphonic is complex; and, clearly, the distinction
between monophony and polyphony can never be a hard-and-fast one in this
period.[5] And yet there is a distinction. It would certainly be anachronistic and
misleading to talk of 'harmonizations' of Blondel's melody 'Amour dont sui

[2] Apel, 'Harmony' in *HDM*. See also Dahlhaus, 'Harmony' in *New Grove*: he rightly bases his
     account of medieval theory on the concept of *musica harmonica* but does not mention the other
     medieval concept – of a melodic *harmonia* (balance and proportion).
[3] For the reference R1545 and all similar references in the text, see the List of Abbreviations.
     Terms such as *conductus* and *discantus* are briefly defined in the Glossary.
[4] Full details of the whole complex in Chailley's study of Gautier de Coinci (1959), 52–4.
[5] This is further argued in an interesting article by E. H. Sanders, 'Consonance and Rhythm in
     the Organum of the 12th and 13th centuries', *JAMS* 33 (1980) 264.

espris' (assuming it is Blondel's). Nevertheless, something has happened
when a melody is used polyphonically, given a *discantus* or a counterpoint, and
the listener must take account of it. The dynamic and the tonality of the
melody are no longer entirely, or even primarily, determined by linear
relations but by 'vertical' ones. Since only a limited number of concords are
admissible for use, especially at cadences, the main melody is framed in a set of
'vertical' relationships which are certainly harmonic in a rudimentary way.
Such a frame may give a new power to the melody but deprives it of fluidity
and flexibility.

   The largest and finest monument of melodic art in the European heritage is,
beyond any doubt whatsoever, the traditional song of the Catholic Church –
ecclesiastical chant or plainsong. It was the music *par excellence* of the liturgy;
indeed, for most of the Middle Ages in most churches, the exclusive music.
We should not let our traditional engagement, natural and rewarding though
it may be, with the growth of polyphony and harmony delude us into
believing that the period with which we are concerned, *c.* 1100–1350, was a
period in which polyphony was widespread or was as important as it now
seems to be to us. As Frank Harrison has written,[6]

Plainsong was an integral part of the Christian liturgies from the beginning of their
history. Polyphony, on the other hand, gained a place in the liturgy by its ability to
lend ceremonial distinction to the performance of the established plainsong. Its
function, therefore, was analogous to that of the many other forms of ceremonial by
which the more significant parts of the ritual were distinguished from the less
significant . . .

Plainsong was the basic stuff of liturgical music; polyphony was a ceremonial
ornament. One reason why it could not be widespread is that it demanded the
services of skilled and literate solo singers. Polyphony, it has to be
remembered, was not synonymous with choral singing. The *chorus*, i.e. the
monks or secular clergy 'in choir', sang the chant, not music in parts. The
surviving European manuscripts of liturgical chant are numbered in their
thousands, a perpetual witness to the unquestioned predominance of melody
as the song of the Church.

   The total corpus of early-medieval melodies is huge. Apart from the
inheritance of traditional chant, two adjacent, and overlapping, repertoires are
important: (i) the newly composed ecclesiastical chants of the ninth to the
thirteenth centuries, many of which have verse texts – tropes, sequences
('proses'), rhymed offices, *conductus*; (ii) the melodies of the liturgical drama,
in so far as they were not taken from the official liturgy. Some part of these
repertoires is 'para-liturgical' – associated with the liturgy but not prescribed.
But there are also (iii) non-liturgical Latin songs, variously called *versus*,
conductus, *cantus*, *cantiones*, *planctus* etc., contained in manuscripts associated
especially with St Martial at Limoges and, later, with Notre Dame in Paris. In

[6] Harrison (1958), 104.

addition each major European vernacular produced song-melodies which have survived. The earliest repertoire is that of the troubadours starting in the early twelfth century; it is written in Provençal, the *langue d'oc*, but was not confined to the area of present-day Provence. The largest is that of their equivalents in the north of France, the trouvères, written in the *langue d'oïl*. Neither of these excludes religious songs, but they are primarily courtly. Associated with the trouvère repertoire but distinguishable from it is the phenomenon of the *refrains*, short snatches of courtly verse with tuneful melodies forming the material of dance-song. In France composers of note continued to cultivate the art of melody alongside the new polyphony well into the fourteenth century. Two of especial note are Jehan de Lescurel (d. 1304) and Guillaume de Machaut (d. 1377). The surviving songs of Italy and Spain are almost entirely religious: the popular *laude spirituali* of Italy, connected with the growth of Franciscanism in the thirteenth century; and the somewhat more courtly *cantigas de Santa María* of Spain, also thirteenth-century. The German sources contain the songs of the Minnesinger, from the thirteenth century onwards, and a few *Geisslerlieder* (penitential songs) of the fourteenth century. The melodic art of the Meistersinger, as of the popular composers of the French noël, lies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Faced with such a wealth of melody, two limitations seemed essential – one geographical, the other chronological. A natural geographical limitation suggested itself. I have chosen to deal mainly with northern France, the cultural area to which the greater part of Britain belonged. To a degree we find hard to imagine, the Norman civilization had permeated and overlaid, though it never obliterated, the 'old English' culture. French and Latin were its linguistic instruments. Both had their special domains – Latin in the liturgy of the Church and in the higher learning, French in courtly and aristocratic life; but both were generally useful and used – in business, in administration, in diplomacy, in ceremony, and, not least, in entertainment. Latin as well as French was a living, *spoken* language, and a natural vehicle for verse, wit, story and song.

However, I have not confined myself strictly to the Norman area or to the wider realm of the *langue d'oïl*. For instance, in the chapter on narrative as a musical genre it seemed desirable not to exclude German poems; this was partly because the linguistic kinship between German and English was bound to be illuminating (Latin and French have no important traditions of alliterative verse, for instance), partly because the chapter aims to bring together for the first time in English, or I believe in any language, a comprehensive range of the material necessary for understanding the problems of musical narrative. Similarly, in discussing the chansons of the trouvères I have made more than occasional use of troubadour song, for it was with the troubadours that vernacular courtly song in all its sophistication began. Furthermore, I have relied deeply on Dante, if only because in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and in passages elsewhere he speaks more penetratingly

about the whole enterprise of vernacular song, Provençal, Northern French and Italian, than any other medieval writer. I have strayed towards the south on other occasions, too, as for instance by describing a Padua Annunciation ceremony at the beginning of the chapters on drama. But I hope never to have done so without making the reader aware of it – and never when it might mislead.

The chronological bounds of the study are defined roughly as *c.* 1050 to *c.* 1350, by which time art-song became more and more cultivated as a polyphonic form. But I have not regarded the bounds as sacrosanct. There was seldom any temptation to go beyond the fourteenth century; but in several parts of the book I have gone backwards in time, to before the Conquest, because the nature of the argument or of the materials demanded it. For instance, it would be hardly practicable to discuss such theoretical concepts as the difference between *ritmus* and *metrum* without grounding them in earlier writers. Moreover, the appeal to the past was a favourite medieval procedure. Reverence for past masters, the *auctores* who wielded *auctoritas* (the very terms are revealing), meant that everything each one said could, and indeed should, be reconciled with everything else. So, in treating Boethius and Bede as in an important sense contemporary masters, we are entering into an essential element of the thought we wish to understand. My reasons, however, for allowing pre-Conquest material into discussions of sequence and *planctus* and of the liturgical drama are more purely practical; it seemed helpful, and for the most part unavoidable, if the object was not to be falsified.

The decisions to limit the scope of this book to monophonic music, to the period *c.* 1050–*c.* 1350, and to the French-speaking area of northern Europe were all, for the reasons given, easier to take than to carry out to the letter. A further limitation proved even harder to observe than these. I was clear from the start that I wished to centre the investigation in what might in a very loose sense be called 'secular' song; but the inadequacy of the term was only too evident. 'Vernacular' would be even more misleading. The single word that comes nearest to defining the corpus of melody is 'non-liturgical', but even that is not very satisfactory. I have, in fact, interpreted 'song' widely enough to include, for instance, the liturgical drama, much of which is not merely associated with the liturgy but deeply embedded in it. The Latin *conductus*, too, with its strong festive affiliations, is often part of a liturgy, or at least a 'para-liturgy' – on New Year's Day (*in festo circumcisionis*) for example.[7] Finally, I have devoted one complete chapter, though with a strong sense of my own temerity in doing so, to considering some aspects of Gregorian chant itself, since the relationship of words and music in the chant must be of fundamental interest and has often been misrepresented.

Such, roughly, is the material scope of the book; and, despite the self-imposed limitations, its breadth is bound to have led to some superficialities. This risk seemed to me, however, worth taking. Indeed, it had to be taken in

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[7] The term 'para-liturgical' is discussed in chapter 3 p. 80.

order to achieve the wider aims. The principal of these was to examine the
relations between words and music. There has never been, to my knowledge,
anything approaching a general study of words and music in this period,
though German scholars such as Hans Spanke and Ewald Jammers have made
many signal contributions towards one.[8] Yet the need for such a study seems
evident, since anyone who is interested in medieval songs and lyrics, whether
as scholar or performer, makes assumptions about the way melodies and
poems are related to each other. These assumptions are not of trivial import-
ance, especially in this early period, and often determine the very questions
which can be asked as well as the answers that can be given. For instance, if
you believe that composers in all ages must inevitably respond to the sounds
of individual words, you are not likely to question the view that the chansons
of the trouvères are fit for declamation. And, if you hold that view, other
consequences follow. What I have tried to do above all is to examine the
ready-made and often unconscious assumptions that we all have and to
discover what questions need to be asked. In the event I have, I am aware,
raised more problems than I have been able to solve, and have uncovered some
areas of general and not merely personal ignorance.

There is, of course, not one relationship between words and music requir-
ing definition but several. Indeed, to demonstrate multiplicity seemed in itself
worthwhile. For this reason the book proceeds by a series of separate studies,
each devoted to a different part or aspect of early monody – the courtly
chanson; Latin song; sequence and *lai*; dance-song in French and Latin; and so
on. In several of the individual chapters I found myself considerably hampered
by the absence of any succinct published account of the *material* I wished to
study – not simply in English but in any language. This was particularly the
case with narrative, as already mentioned, and with dance-song, but it applies
also to the Latin *lai*, to the *planctus* and, one could say, to the whole area of
Latin monophonic song.

Surprising as it might seem, there is no substantial account in English of the
'secular' melodic tradition; and even the compendious and lucid chapter by Sir
Jack Westrup in the *New Oxford History of Music* is now many years out of
date.[9] It is true that the non-liturgical monophonic music of the period is
briefly discussed in the various standard histories which have appeared since
then, but it is usually tucked away in a corner and rarely treated with the fresh

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[8] See Bibliography, especially Spanke (1936) and Jammers (1963).
[9] To the works cited in the text (Stäblein (1975), van der Werf (1972), Westrup in *NOHM* II)
should be added, from general histories of medieval music, Reese (1940) and Hoppin (1978)
for their comparatively generously allotted space. Gérold's *La Musique au moyen âge* (1932),
moreover, deserves special mention for its lucid and comprehensive coverage of the
monophonic repertory (in some 250 pp) and its fine selection of examples. A. Machabey's
'Introduction à la lyrique musicale romane' (1959) is also useful. Amongst the more literary
introductions to medieval European lyric Dronke's *Medieval Lyric* (1968, rev. 1978) with
extensive bibliographies and several musical illustrations is outstanding for its balance
between the particular and the general.

interest which it deserves. In a word, the phenomenon of melody outside the central chant traditions is felt, if not stated, to be peripheral. We still live with the unfortunate legacy of generations of historians for whom the 'evolution of polyphony' was the all-important event to which the whole musical creation moved, even though evolutionary conceptions of art are now discredited and interest in exotic musics is much more lively and appreciative.

So the second aim of the book became to provide a conspectus of the art of melody in northern Europe, *c.* 1050–1350. It is only a conspectus at best and not the systematic account which is needed; the descriptions are subsidiary to the main argument. Nevertheless it seemed necessary to do something in a descriptive way to help not only literary readers but also musicians to find their bearings in one of the least frequented bits of artistic countryside in the European scene. I have been greatly helped in compiling my 'guide' by the timely publication of *The New Grove.* This magnificent all-round lantern has illuminated many dark corners for me; but it does not, of course, in itself provide the needed 'guide', and its coverage of the monophonic material is distinctly uneven. Readers of German with a good musical knowledge are now catered for by the magisterial work of Bruno Stäblein, *Schriftbild der einstimmigen Musik* (1975), to which I am myself deeply indebted; it covers the whole field, liturgical and non-liturgical.

The study of the trouvère tradition, it should be added, has been made much easier of late by the publication (in the series Monumenta Monodica Medii Aevi, inaugurated by Stäblein), of the first two volumes devoted to non-liturgical monody; they contain virtually all the versions of all the melodies of eleven trouvères, edited by Hendrik van der Werf. The editor's earlier general study, *The Chansons of the Troubadours and Trouvères* (1972), is also by far the best recent description in English of the courtly repertoire; I have found myself obliged to differ from van der Werf on a number of crucial issues, but this has not diminished my gratitude for the stimulus his book provides.

It is natural and right that someone who has spent a good number of years working on what might seem a specialized topic should ask himself and explain to others why in his view it is not a 'mere specialism'. There are several reasons why the diverse and changing relations of music and poetry never cease to fascinate and have seemed to justify expenditure of time and labour. But the principal reason is that they compel one to ask central questions about what might, for want of a better term, be called the 'aesthetic' of the age. To consider the relationship – or what in some cases seems like a non-relationship – between a poem and its melody is to find oneself meditating on the 'meaning', for contemporaries, of the sounds they heard, including the sound of poetry when read. In this instance I have found the meditation fruitful – or like to think I have – first for the new insights it has given me into the particular examples of song or chant or poem analysed in each chapter – the *carole*, for example, the recitation of the *Passion*, saints' lives, the plays of St Nicholas, *planctus* and *lai*. In some cases the word 'insight' may be too positive; what I

have achieved may look like a deeper, more complex sense of enigma. Secondly, setting the particular gains and enriching riddles on one side, I found myself increasingly interested in the bearing of certain general concepts – those of 'number', *musica*, *ritmus*, *harmonia*, *modulatio*, for instance – on the problem of interpretation, especially rhythmic interpretation.

As a result my third and final aim in this volume became to try to throw new light if I could on this vexed problem. To anyone with a serious interest in the songs of the Middle Ages one question is centrally absorbing – what was the rhythmic relationship of words and melody in monophony? It is absorbing because of its practical import for editors and performers; absorbing intellectually, because its consideration demands a close acquaintance with the techniques of the two arts – a substantial demand in itself; and absorbing imaginatively because at root it is, as I have hinted, not purely a technical but an *aesthetic* question. Its solution is dependent on the way people felt about music and about poetry in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. If it could be solved, we should have taken a great step forward in understanding; and even if it cannot, the endeavour to reach a solution – or, at least, formulate a hypothesis – in an open-minded spirit must be educative and illuminating.

The hypothesis I shall put forward in the last chapters of the book is that of an approximate equality of syllables, and consequently of notes or note-groups, for that major part of the repertoire which is in my view unmeasured. The isosyllabic hypothesis is not a new one in itself; a number of scholars have advocated it, even adopted it for their transcriptions in the course of this century – notably the Italians Ugo Sesini, Giuseppe Vecchi and Raffaello Monterosso. The positive case for it has, however, never been fully argued; nor, I believe, has the right emphasis yet been put upon the unique way it can represent the relationship between the words and the melody. The case rests on historical and aesthetic grounds as well as on technical ones and requires the careful interpretation of a wide variety of evidence, musical and theoretical, on the issue of rhythm and metre. This is why I have chosen to place my discussion of it at the end. The musical transcriptions in the text of the chapters which precede it are mostly 'neutral' and unmeasured. The analyses also are, as far as may be, independent of any particular rhythmic interpretation and have, I think, a validity of their own.

Finally, there are two particular omissions from the present study which call for comment. I do not discuss, except incidentally, the new French monophonic art of the fourteenth century – the songs of Jehan de l'Escurel and, much more important, Guillaume de Machaut. One reason for the omission will, I think, become evident to the reader. The intricate rhythmic patterns of Machaut's monophonic *lais* and lesser forms (exemplified in the *Remede de Fortune*) represent a new departure. The novelty of their 'measure' is specified in elaborate but unambiguous mensural notation. Although there are many features which link Machaut to the centuries-old art of melody, he is, to my mind at least, even here the proponent of an *ars nova* the fascination of

which may have motivated the rhythmic revisers of whom I speak in chapter
13 (see especially section 11).[10]

There is a second considered omission: I have not discussed 'the
instrumental assumption', as it might be called. Performances of monophonic
song on the concert platform and in the recording studio have generally been
and still are accompanied by instruments. In the early days the attempts were
cautious and dull. More recently a 'thousand twangling instruments' have
hummed about our ears. The results – especially the rococo-like virtuosity of
recent ensembles – have often been impressive and incline one to forget that
there is questionable historical warrant for the practice. In crudest form the
unspoken argument has been as follows: 'Medieval literature and art contain
thousands of references to, and depictions of, instruments and players. The
musical sources of the period contain hundreds of songs without any perform-
ance instructions whatever. Therefore the songs were accompanied by the
instruments.' But were they? The question needs thorough scholarly
investigation.[11] Such an investigation will have to take into account the
likelihood that different genres obeyed different rules. The performance of
lais, for example, is often described as taking place with instrumental support.
Concerning the performance of chansons there is, on the other hand, a
weighty silence; neither manuscript illuminations in the chansonniers, nor the
texts of the songs, nor the regulations of the puys seem to have anything to say
about this. This unanswered question is of real musical importance; there
could be as great a difference between the performances, varied as they are, to
which we are accustomed and those of the Middle Ages (which may also have
varied) as between Gregorian chant as it was romantically performed in the
nineteenth century and the style which Guido of Arezzo was trying to teach in
the eleventh.

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[10] Another reason for omitting Machaut is that he has been the subject of intensive study over
the years, has been admirably edited and often performed in versions unquestionably more
authentic than those we hear of earlier medieval songs.

[11] The first issue of the *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* (1977) was entirely devoted to
problems of the performance of monophonic song, with special attention to the relevance of
non-European traditions. The volume is full of interest, but it seems to me symptomatic of
the present situation that Thomas Binkley's 55-page article is based entirely on the unques-
tioned 'instrumental assumption'.

PART I

NUMBER IN MUSIC AND VERSE