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# Music and Instrument in Chaucer

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# Music and Instrument in Chaucer

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

## Table of Contents:

1) Psalm 150	3
2) Introduction	4
3) The Book of the Duchesse	9
4) The House of Fame	18
5) The Canterbury Tales	37
a) The Voice in the Knight's Tale	39
b) The Miller, the Bagpiper	40
c) The Trumpet and the Voice	42
d) Fingers and Strings and Soundboxes	44
e) Horn and Flute, Whistle and Breath	48
f) Bagpipe Reed and Breath	50
g) Horn and Breath	52
6) Where Why Who and What	53
a) The Squire	54
b) Hende Nicholas	55
c) Absalon	57
d) Impersonal Trumpet	59
e) The Miller and the Bagpipe	60
f) The Cook and the Thief	63
g) The Man of Lawe's Tale	65
h) The Friar's Tale	68
i) The Summoner's Turn	71
j) The Merchant's Tale	73
k) The Squire's Tale	76
l) The Franklin's Tale	78
m) The Prioress' Tale	81
n) The Nun's Priest's Tale	83
o) The Second Nun's Tale	87
7) Summary	90
8) Bibliography	92

## Psalm 150

Laudate Dominum

Hallelujah!

Praise God in his holy temple;

Praise him in the firmament of his power.

Praise him for his mighty acts;

Praise hi for his excellent greatness.

Praise him with the blast of the ram's horn;

Praise him with lyre and harp.

Praise him with timbrel and dance'

Praise him with strings and pipe.

Praise him with resounding cymbals'

Praise him with loud-clanging cymbals.

Let everything that has breath

Praise the Lord.

Hallelujah!

## Introduction

Music and instruments, voice in song, are often referred to by Geoffrey Chaucer. I examine the poet's theory of sound, as expounded in *The House of Fame*, first looking at the music in *The Book of the Duchesse*. In the second half of this paper I investigate his use of musical instrument to contribute to the characterization in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer writes at a time when almost the only music was the organic unalienated live performance. Notation of musical scores, and poetic text, was done by hand. The poet laments his dependency, for this manual reproduction, on the careless Adam, who transcribes his work. Chaucer also worries about the transience, the evanescence of language, as he shapes the merger of French and English. Will he be read (or his work listened to, as he himself performed it at court), or understood?

Ye knowe eke that in forme of speche is chaunge  
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
That hadden pris, now wonder nye and straunge

Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,  
And spede as wel in love as men now do  
(Troilus and Crysede, Bk II, L 22-26)

In the early part of his career Chaucer uses music as part of the conventional narrative environment. He was, however, already challenging and re-molding those conventions' dreams, gods, and ancient authorities. The poet thrusts daily human foolishness to the fore, in the House of Fame, and the Parlement of Fowls. Music and its tools, the harps, the trumpets and drums, Chaucer puts to use, as much his literary tools as are the Biblical allusions. Music makers, folk and artifact, are set dressings of class and vocation, along with costume and weaponry. There is no inter-relationship between the human character, or physical being, and musical instrument, in the first long narrative poems. There is later, with the Squire and his flute, and the Miller and his bagpipe as powerful examples. Because the Canterbury Tales are a compilation of a decade's writings, many of the musical references (i.e. In the Knight's Tale) are of the early conventional type. Instrument is symbolic of social function, without yet acquiring its role as mirror of personality, of the class-formed woman or man

The General Prologue and the Miller's Tale use musical references in a way new to Chaucer's work. In a world and time where everything is hand-made, and machines do not intervene

between people and food, people and music, the common perception of bonds between women and men and activities is not obscured. Folk named themselves after their vocations. The pip-keeper smells of dung, and has pigskins from which to shape his domestic needs. Mr. Smith has flame-hardened hands and reddened eyes, and iron hinges on his doors (a husbandman's are leather). Only a foreign traveler would have to hand anything exotic, like ebony or brass. Life is simple, short, dirty, and quiet (the voices of family and field hand, poultry and milch cow, congregation and choir, are the peasants' available sounds), very hard for most people, and close to home.

Although music is not reproduced widely, by notation, in England in the fourteenth century, there is certainly a musical culture. The mass is sung liturgy of hymns, antiphons, canticles. People sing their wares and wars, their passions, both romantic and military. Folk music and dance form the profane, and favorite, half, of Chaucer's musical environment.

In Chaucer's early poems the musical tools as well as the literary allusions are classical, stylized. The works are formal and impersonal, albeit shouldering the boundaries of dream and romance conventions. The instruments are horns, and harps, in the Duchesse, barely described in shape, sound or function. With each poem, with each year of court and mercantile life and ambassadorial travel, the social and physical details of Chaucer's literary settings increase. Further along the oeuvre, in Chaucer's life, we find people and their

music-makers, flesh, blood and catgut. Dancers, warblers are paced by bagpipes and whistles and gut strings. As pets are reputed to resemble their owners, Chaucer's instruments reflect his characters. He has to get older to get modern, to describe his now, to slice open the membrane of convention and let spill out the drone and discord of his contemporary music.

My focus here is two-fold. By looking at an important piece of daily life in 14<sup>th</sup> century England, the music and musical instruments to which Chaucer listens, we are afforded a particular window. I look at those instruments, in this print examination, whose tones and timbres he hears at court, and in the street, and on the roads through Europe. Geoffrey listens carefully to minstrels and jongleurs, folk whose superior he was by genius and class, though nonetheless his artist-allies. To men who play giternes or rebecs, and sing, perhaps, his now lost early ballads Chaucer owes some debt of inspiration.

My second pursuit here is to examine how Chaucer uses specific instruments to aid in characterization. Instruments have class associations, histories either courtly or martial or pastoral. The poet uses the social lives of each instrument to assist in the creation, the description of his folk, his cast. For both these perspectives it helps us to know somewhat of Chaucer's awareness. We can imagine that his collision with the world of instrument-making is no less penetrating, if as unprofessional, as it is with agriculture, whose practitioners he



accurately portrays. Though certainly rapidly fragmenting, Chaucer's civilization is far less alienated than our own. He could encounter any and all walks and walkers of life as he strode and rode about London and the countryside. He knows court-life well. He knows also Wallbrokk Street, and the quays, Pendelton Forest and Westminster Chapel, quarries and grain fields and armouries. He is a familiar of the musicians who play and sing at court and at rich men's houses, and in the street...and who make their own instruments. Familiar too, Chaucer is, I permit myself to imagine, from his renderings of artisans as well as dukes and vagabonds, with alleys and sheds, the gleam of boxwood and oak under the pressure of knife and lathe and oil. He has seen this life not only in England. In France and Spain and Italy he has ridden the muddy roads, eaten at the inns, taken council in palaces. He listens carefully to the lyrics of Machaut, reads Dante joyfully, hears the undercurrent of string and reed, the overblow of horns, both horn and copper, in much of western Europe.

There is a distinct progression in the occurrence of musical references in Chaucer's poems. In the earliest work we see music and instrument appear in strictly conventional uses. There are trumpets and fanfares, gods and heralds, clarions and processions and hunts. The conventionality of this usage parallels the entire state and stage of this early poetry. Chaucer adheres to the conventions of form, style and content, tetrameter, classical time-frame, the dream-genre, that dominate his time, that inform his contemporaries' works.

Twenty or more years after *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer writes the *Miller's Tale*. Free of the demanded classical allusions of time and authority, he is awake to, and painting what is happening, in his present tense and season, just in the next village, at an inn, under the city gate. And his present-day music and instrumentation, with all their implications of class, function and character aid him in describing Hende Nicholas, quynibling Absalon, and ram-paging Robyn.

### The Book of the Duchesse

*The Book of the Duchess* is certainly not Chaucer's first poem, but is the first long narrative, perhaps, his first major undertaking. This is a dream poem, of 1334 lines, written by a squire in his late 20's. Chaucer had already been at court, on the fringes of power and wealth, for over ten years. On this peripheral track of polite servitude also marched the professional musicians of the day, those who could assert themselves, like roosters strutting and scratching for attention and sustenance. Musicians retained base status in Europe for another 300 years. There were the geniuses who prospered, of course, then and in historical hindsight, Machaut, Dufay, as well as the ordinary and the awful. The English court was not swamped with prodigies, or at least the evanescence of the art, and its sometimes improvisatory nature, have left us no record comparable to Chaucer's own.

Dunstable, the great English composer of lute music, is not born until 1400, the year of Chaucer's death.

By the time he comes to compose the *Duchesse*, Chaucer has been writing poetry for almost a decade. He and his peers later testify that his love-songs were extremely popular in the realm. Queen Alceste, in his *The Legend of Good Women*, accuses him of a prolixity not conducive to Love. We may fantasize a mentoring, by an older more traveled composer-instrumentalist, of Chaucer, the young whip-tongued gentleman-in-training, whose energy and brilliance exceeded his duties as page and squire. We may be sure that if Chaucer had composed his own melodies, some of that work, as the products of a precociously successful courtier, would have survived with his lyrics. Machaut he is not, and unconstrained by the rigorous demands of melodic and polyphonic interest, he is free to play and experiment in the field of words, here in the *Book of the Duchesse*, and in the field of dreams.

[All poem and tale line references are to the Riverside Chaucer edition cited in the bibliography.]

...small foules...  
...had affrayed me out of my slep  
Thorgh noyse and swetnesse of her song

L295BOD

The birds wake the poet into his dream world. They sing a splendid morning service.

...al my chamber gan to ryng  
Thurgh syngyng of her armonye;  
For instrument nor melodye  
Was nowhere herd yet half so swete  
Nor of accord half so mete

L312BOD

Here song is the magic vibration that opens the dream gates. Placing narrative action in the context of a dream depersonalizes the poetry, mythologizes it. The poet joins an historical roster of those who have taken refuge here. He finds safety in the excuse of dream, of spiritual communication. Dream and vision overlap as receptive states, accessible to divine messages. Bird and song as well as dream are traditional poetic figures, drawn from daily life. We wonder about bird species and bird song in southern England of the late medieval period. We may also think of the harmony, this “solempne servise” (L.302, BOD) as human voices sing acapella. There is a swipe perhaps at the instruments Chaucer and his dreamer are accustomed to hearing, which sound neither “half so swete, / Nor of accord half so

mete” (L 315-6, BOD). Human and avian voices are perfectible instruments, facts of God, while flutes and rebecs are artifacts of man. The business of angel and man (or at least monk) is to sing praise, and before the throne of God they sing in perfect harmony. In the English court of 1370, of damp stone buildings, with windows at a minimum, uncontrolled temperature, and humidity fluctuation, pitch, especially of stringed instruments, may have been very difficult to control, even through a single rondeau.

And as I lay thus, wonder lowde  
Me thought I herde an hunte yblowe  
T’assay hys borne and for to knowe  
Whether hyt were clere or hors of soun.

L345BOD

A hunter blows a horn, his signal tool, to try its voice, to know if it is clear or hoarse. This blast, “wonder lowde”, serves to alert dreamer and reader (or listening audience, privileged to hear Chaucer recite at court), like the annunciatory birdsong, of a change of scene, a new step in the dance. There is as in the first example, the hint of technical unreliability. Let us examine this monophonic dream event. There are no voices, no harmony. The dreamer is still in his room, but in a sense is being blown out of it, certainly signaled or marshaled out. The horn is the instrument of hunt and war, an outdoor noisemaker, an

auditory semaphor that announces comings and goings, ranks and maneuvers. It is blown here, not by a musician, or later in the Knight's Tale, but by a herald, at best, or hunt-official, or a porter. Beautiful, perhaps, are these horn signals, when heard across the misty valley, mellowed by trees, echoed by the hills. But not in one's ear, or right outside the window (a car alarm for the 1300s).

Chaucer here begins the comic subversion of convention that he will increasingly pursue. Herald and hunt, serious functionary and function at court, are part of the serious business of rank and precedence, of food supply, honor supply. Who uses the instrument, and where the sound sounds, are elements crucial to the nature of the musical reference. These early and conventional usages are neither domestic nor personal, but outdoor, and anonymous. Chaucer's poem may be thought of as a horn or herald too, a sign of court life. The courtier begins to read, signaling the crowd to pay attention, to the voice, the text, and also to the grandness of a court with such a narrator. The poem and reader focus the room, call upon the huntsmen (all men) to pay attention to their beloveds.

The dream narrator in the Duchesse races out to join the horn-announced hunt.

The mayster-hunte anoon, fot-hot,  
With a fret horn blew thre mot

L375BOD

The hunting horn, with its big outdoor voice, which can traverse the fields and woods, sounds its sentence. According to Baugh, “Three long notes were the conventional warning that the hart had been sighted.” (FN#7, p10) Horns at this time were workers’ tools, servants to the servants who bore and blew them. Horns are never mentioned by Chaucer in other than the functions of hunting or marching, or as in *The House of Fame*, as a divine enflamer or defamer of reputation. In either class role (may I make divinity a class?) the most important traits of the horn are its penetration of distance, and its specific, almost anti-melodic articulation. The horn is blown as a loud voice, rather than played. It is speech, a musical code.

The hounds lose the scent, early in the poem, early in the dream, early in the morning. The hunt-master “Blew a forloyn...” (L.386, BOD). In the working vocabulary of hunting this is a “signal recalling the hounds...” (Baugh, 11). It is a rhythmic pattern, probably in a single pitch, but with perhaps an overblown octave thrown in. The hunt-master, poor man, is running or riding madly along, through trees and over streams, and is lucky to have breath enough to squeak, much less to play an elaborate figure.

For almost 800 lines there is no mention of instrument, or music. The dreamer’s doubts serve as goad to the mournful knight, an excuse for poet to recite and repeat the lost lady’s virtues. The

bereaved man recalls their courtship, when, to amuse himself, as well as fulfill the role of amorous youth, he resorts to composition.

..for to kepe me fro ydelnesse  
Trewly I dide my besynesse  
To make songes, as I best koude,  
And ofte tyme I song hem loude

L1155BOD

The dreamer cites two possibilities for the origin of song, the birth of music. The Greeks say Pythagoras, but the story of

...Lamekes sone Tubal,  
That found out first the art of songe;  
For as hys brothres hamers ronge  
Upon hys anvelt up and doun,  
Therof he took the firste soun

L1162BOD

from Genesis has verisimilitude in a world where hostler, farrier and horse shared close quarters with page and squire and jongleur. A hammer banging on an anvil is work-percussion. Together they ring like a bell, but a bell summons or celebrates, while the ham-vil ring is a by-product of production.



Chaucer has gotten Jubal and Tubal reversed, or his scripture has. Jubal was father to all who play the harp and flute, while his brother Tubal was the smith of iron and bronze. The co-dependence of metal-worker and instrument maker, songs and timbres, pitches and rhythms of work are clear. Music originates in a vocational as well as ritual context. Chaucer's grief-paralyzed Duke-narrator makes songs to keep from idleness. Are the arts by-products of work, like sausage or gelatin, however opportune and ecstatic? Many hard-working people would consider song-making a type of idleness. The pastoralist of Chaucer's time and our own may sing in the field, sing to a work rhythm, sing to keep moving and fight fatigue, sing even to celebrate or mourn God's harvest bounty or lack. But not to hold sloth at bay. For Chaucer, never apparently an idle man, song and poetry are both work and play.

Song-making, indeed the whole category of music, is the blood-brother of poetry. What Chaucer has to say about music he is saying about the joyful half of his life devoted to composing verse. He would not have believed versifying to be the product of or solution to idleness. His time and locale, his residence in a customs house, and then a city gate, would print in him the melodies and counts of work, which he here acknowledges as the origins of art.

A final note, signaling the end of the hunt, the end of the dream, and the end of the poem, sounds. The huntsmen,

..gan to strake forth; al was doon,  
For that tyme the hert-huntynge.

L1312BOD

Baugh thinks, “..strake” here may be the hunting term meaning to blow certain notes on the hunting horn.” (p25) [The OED’s 4th meaning is “a stretch of ground traveled over, a length of stride or pace.” There is meter to the stride, homeward bound, as well as to Baugh’s speculated horn riff.] The strake is like the forloyn, a pitch and rhythm pattern, perhaps quite beautiful, but with a distinct message. The hunt is over, gentlemen, we’re heading home. And in this case the musical metaphor applies to the entire textual structure, and the poet strakes forth as well. Chaucer signals his readers or listeners, as does his huntsman, with this aural wave, this blast of brass, a splatty-timbred literary flag. As they used to say at the end of Rawhide, a television western of the late 50s, “Round ‘em up, move ‘em out!” The poet, doubling as herald or butler, may have gotten a high sign, the King’s raised eyebrow, gauntlet or flag, mid-recitation, and blown an intermission, the horn of plenty. Time to eat, drink a toast, leave off poetry a while.

Horn and hornist, in *The Book of the Duchess*, written around 1370, are literary figurines. They are silhouettes, lifted whole from Ovid and Bocaccio, from legends and compilations Chaucer has read. As a young man, still perhaps awed by regal pomp, he does not see or

portray heralds' faces, with or without warts, nor the timbre or shine of trumpet. Music, instrument and musician, are furniture within a formal genre.

The older he gets, the more he writes, the more Chaucer draws upon the tavern, the field, and the street of his town and country. He transforms his meter and his music along with his use of literary allusion, of classical erudition, slowly through his career, into characterizing devices. This progress may even be used to aid in sequencing the doubtful chronology of some of the Chaucer work.

### The House of Fame

There are two territories I examine in *The House of Fame*, Chaucer's next long poem. One is the theory of sound he explicates, and the second is the figure of Eolus, the god of wind, and his "clariounes" of good and evil reputation. In this work we encounter the ideal doubling, the heavenly modeling of all sounds. Instruments are a god's tools of blessing or condemnation. Unfinished, *The House of Fame* is almost twice as long as the *Book of the Duchess* and makes more use of sound as both subject and environment.

Again, the poet narrates by dream a supernatural environment in which music is not human. In Book II, clutched in the talons of a giant eagle, Geoffrey receives a lecture on auditory physics. Birds have previously only woken, not spoken to, the poet. This bird,

servant of Jupiter, reproaches Chaucer for his lack of energy and experience in Love, despite his professed allegiance to Cupid. Geoffrey is missing out on literary inspiration by avoiding amorous opportunities. There are, “Mo love-dayes and acordes/ Then on intrumentes be cordes.” (695-6, HOF), says the Eagle. Benson says that “love-dayes” are days of reconciliation, and “cordes” are strings. The stringed instruments most referred to by Chaucer are the rebec (a bowed three-stringed instrument somewhat like a mandolin in shape), the fithelle, and the gyterne (proto-fiddle and guitar). The first has 3 strings, the second 4, and the last 5. How many days of reconciliation or agreement, of concord with one’s lover, is that?

This is the use of musical instrument to highlight the foolishness of the eagle, to undermine his inept recommendation of Love. The Court, Chaucer’s audience, listens and laughs, seeing and hearing in the background, leaning against the tapestry-draped stone walls, the few-stringed minstrels.

[An alternative interpretation involves giving days of reconciliation a doctrinal significance. The day of reconciliation may be the re-entry of a strayed communicant to the Church, to obedience. Since no sincere priest or parishioner (though those are hard to find in Chaucer) would want this to occur more than once in a lifetime, though there is a Church calendar day annually provided, Chaucer may again be mocking the simplicity of the instruments, which have so few strings.]

Still airborne, clutching his precious burden, the eagle leaves the topic of Love to tackle the nature of Nature. He builds a cosmic model in which every creature and action has a natural place and path. Lady Fame lives in her palace, right in the middle of this path between heaven and earth and sea.

That what so ever in al these three  
Is spoken, either privy or apert  
The way therto ys so overt,  
And stant eke in so juste a place  
That every soun mot to hyt pace

L716HOF

The eagle continues this mock-scientific explanation for 135 lines. All speech, love declarations, harp string vibrations, all sound, travel audibly to the House of Fame. There is no indication that the one place, earth, is more real than the other, the sky-borne House of Fame. Sound in its earthly origins is not a reflection, a shadow on the wall of a cave, nor is it diminished or distorted by travel or distance. It is not that there exists the perfect sound, at Fame's house (despite the citation of "daun Platon" (L759, HOF), but simply that sounds travel the path upward to Fame's door.

A force opposite gravity, where heavy things, however high one carries them, will fall down, is described.

...fyr or soun  
Or smoke or other thynges lyghte;  
Alwey they seke upward on highte

L742HOF

Sound is thought of, here, as having lighter than air properties. Part of its nature is to ascend to the divine ear, to report itself. It is a physical, explicable phenomenon. Sound, is of course, the prerequisite to music.

For whan a pipe is blowen sharpe  
The air is twyst with violence  
And rent ..  
Eke whan men harpe-stryngens smyte

L774HOF

Two new instruments enter Chaucer's poetic lexicon. A pipe and a harp, both relatively soft-voiced, indoor instruments, twist the air with violence. Here is more comic undercutting of the eagle's authority, and that of Love. The pipe would most likely be a recorder, an end-blown fipple flute, although it could be a pan-pipe or a transverse flute. The harp is a lyre, small, held in the bard's lap. But they are simply types here. Chaucer expects his audience to laugh again at the contrast between these soft sounding noise makers,

difficult to hear in a hall full of dining retainers, just as he hopes for laughter at the contrast of the three strings and oh so many love-dayes.

...speche or soun, of pure kynde,  
Enclyned ys upward to meve –  
...every soun  
Be hyt eyther foul or fair,  
Hath hys kynde place in ayr  
...every thing that is  
Out of hys kynde place, ywys,  
Moveth thidder for to goo,  
...Ther as Fame lyst to duelle

L824HOF

Not only does sound have a lighter than air physical property, but it has a proper destination or natural territory. Of course, in the context of this poem, Chaucer's traveling sounds are words, speech, rumor, love-whispers. Fame is eavesdropping, on the honesty and dishonesty, gossip and truth, the pride and the fear, petitions, curses, and the invocations of mankind. But all sound, "Thogh hyt were piped of a mous," (L785, HOF) is included. So the timbres of flute, and harp and rebec ascend. Music does not seem to complicate the cacophony of the *House of Fame*. The fates of speech and speakers are various and often without just dessert. But music is above the

fray, and takes its natural place in a space as friendly to harmony as to disputation.

We may wonder here if this discussion of the properties of sound and its travel are undertaken by Chaucer with serious as well as comic intent. He knew some mathematics and astrology, and certainly was interested in natural phenomena. But he places the information in the beak of an avian authority, a pompous messenger whose authority is undercut by his “kynde” as by his foolish and puffy demeanor. Are we meant to appropriate any of the information about sound as other than a devalued and inaccurate Platonic distortion? A question equally speculative, but more relevant to my thesis is: does this sound-theory, however it may reflect or deflect contemporary or classical ideas, affect Chaucer’s use of instruments to characterize, in this and later poems?

What is implied by the assertion that sound is air-breaking? Is all audible expression a type of flatulence? That would be a typical Chaucerian joke of self-deprecation, if we think of him as performer, reading his work aloud in the Hall. Words and ideas ripple out into the cosmos, the social whirl-world (the spinning wicker house of rumor of the last 300 lines of the poem), bearing responsibility for their destructive or creative potential.

Every sercle causynge other,  
Wydder than hymselfe was;



And thus fro roundel to compass,  
Ech aboute other goynge  
Causeth of others sterynge  
And multiplynge ever moo

L796HOF

Noise has temporal and tangible reality and predictable pathways in the Fame. We have a professor, albeit beaked, who comicalizes sound, and is ridiculed by his own theories. Sound and music descend from the platform of purely conventional image and into tools of characterization in Chaucer's second major, though unfinished, work. It is an inevitable trajectory, opposite, ironically, to the path of sound up to Fame's house. From mere backdrop, music and instruments move downstage, mixing with the action, mutually tarnishing and deifying its practitioners.

Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts an eagle who is not reliable. "There (at Shaftesbury) the Eagle spoke, while the wall was being built. If I believed its Sayings to be true, I would not hesitate to hand them down to history with my other material." (p80,GOM)

Has Chaucer read and retained this? He transforms existing traditions linking birds and prophecy, figuring prominently in Homer, into comedy. Monmouth dismisses the bird, which he feels obliged to mention, in one sentence. Chaucer makes him an important and ridiculous narrative voice. Birdsong, mankind's earliest familiar melody, is gutted here by the Eagle's squawk, putting all music, all

noise, the sound of the second Geoffrey's voice reading to the court, on shaky, ironic ground.

Certainly Chaucer does not dislike music, nor doubt the reality of the material world. Nor does he, good Christian man, actually believe in this pagan zone he describes in *The House of Fame*. He is a scholar and entertainer, a jongleur of meter and rhyme, with one careful eye on the King, one on the Church, pleasing himself most of all.

We now meet a hornist whose blasts are divine sanction. His powerful notes travel, not up to the house of Fame, but from it, out across the earthly plain. Music acquires, with Eolus, the god of wind, moral and immoral power. The dreamer and his dream are traveling upwards, like all sound-bites do, according to the eagle. Chaucer, the dream-speaker, the poem-reciter, is following the natural path of sound to the house of Fame, though he needs the eagle's help to be lighter than air. Like every other whispered gossip, or martial drumbeat, or groan of love or pain, the Chaucer/Noise arrives outside the castle, on the plains of Fame. He is transported here, by the eagle's testimony, "To do [him] som disport and game" (L664, HOF). It's an educational vacation. Jove wants the poet of Love rewarded and re-educated, by proximity to declarers and declarations of Love, to Love's folk and their "sawes". Chaucer is a bird-borne leaf-rattle, but also the ear of man. As a Love-poet he is a reporter, and Jove and Cupid want him to describe the precincts aright.

..all maner of mynstralles  
And gestiours that tellen tales  
Both of wepinge and of game..  
Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe,  
That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,  
Orpheus ful craftily..  
And smale harpers with her glees  
..maden lowed mynstralcies  
In corneuse and shalemyes,  
And many other maner pipe,  
That craftily begunne to pipe,  
Bothe in doucet and in rede..  
And many flowte and liling horn,  
And pipes made of grene corn

L1197HOF

These are conventional references that begin to tinge of home life, with the daily musical realities of Chaucer's time. Orpheus, Orion, and Chiron, legendary bards known to Chaucer from Ovid, play their typical instrument, the harp, or lyre. Orpheus' mother was the muse Calliope, and his father Apollo, the god and patron of music and poetry, guardian of flocks, bearer of the lyre. Though his music gives him power over all living things, and Orpheus charms the gods of the

underworld into releasing Eurydice, his art and skill do not give him patience or obedience. Orpheus, the great musician and poet of his time, loses his wife back to the underworld, and then his own life at the hands of the Bacchae. Chaucer, more than his audience, would have been aware of the fate of this ur-poet. The Orphic Mysteries, founded in legend by Orpheus, showed the way to a happy life after death, not through orgiastic celebration but sacrifice. Happiness for Orpheus, Chaucer imagines, is playing in the band of iconic bards. For Geoffrey it might be reading at a never-ending royal feast, everyone laughing at his forever-new witticisms, applauding his classical references, and profane jokes.

There follows a catalogue, a rhetorical convention, of the other instruments the lesser minstrels use to accompany them. The models of minstrelsy, the Orpheus Trio, play melody and compose lyrics, with the craft of their nature, their “kynde”. And an orchestra of apprentices, wielding an arsenal of instruments contemporary to Chaucer, sit on the lawn and counterfeit ...imitate...the natural music of their models.

Two things are of interest to us here. While Orpheus and his “harpe” do not upset the conventional frame, what does this list of contemporary instruments do? And, what are these instruments? Chaucer wanted the friction and surprise of this dysfunction. He makes this friction his new convention, bringing pre-historical Greece shoulder to shoulder with mediaeval Europe, making Theseus, in the

Knight's Tale, a chivalric knight.

The legendary characters are clothed in myth, appointed with conventional musical instruments, like robes. Faceless ancients, they have only the character of their category, the lyre-laden, versifying bard. Chaucer's use of the classical time-frame is in the convention of anonymity. He describes music and instrument as archtypal, sweet and soft, practically inaudible. In the tradition of European painters who dress the Holy Family according to their own region and day, Chaucer re-dressed his musicians, his apprentice crowd, in the instruments of his own time. He traverses from a conventional mist of classical time to the borders of his own experiences using the vocabulary of his contemporary instrumental catalogue.

The ancient harpers sit in front of, and teach by example, a modern multitude. There is implied here a new cacophony, in contrast to the lost simplicity of enchanting harp and verse. This inharmonious flavor is reinforced if we look at the instruments catalogued.

The cornemuse is the bagpipe (which I discuss in detail with *The Miller's Tale*). Why does Chaucer call it here by its French name, when in the *Canterbury Tales* it is a "baggepipe"? Cornemuse may have been the common name for it, or the French may lend a more upper class patina to the instrument. One factor in his careful choice of name, his continental reference, may be the conventional setting of dream and myth reinforced by the language of Froissart and Chretien. Robyn the Miller, covered with grain-dust and horse-shit, and full of

ale, wouldn't be caught dead with a cornemuse in hand or mouth. When the Miller's Tale is written twenty years later, the English language, championed by Chaucer, has continued moving rapidly toward independence.

“Shalemyes” Baugh translates as “shawms, wind instruments of the oboe class.” (#1218, p46) Like the bagpipe the shawm is a loud, outdoor, processional tool. And the musicians are outdoors, though sitting. Both cornemuse and shawm are buzzy, almost flatulent double reeds which probably did not offer particularly exact pitch intervals, but were strong in volume and excitement.

The list continues with a doucet and rede. The soft interior voice of flute is juxtaposed against the martial bray of the first two instruments, continuing the disharmony Chaucer has vibrating in his conflicting time frames. Both Baugh and Benson translate doucet and rede as particular instruments. I suggest a different interpretation. Beginning at Line 1219, we may read, in my paraphrase, “Many kinds of pipes / Skillfully begin to play / Both dulcet and reed”. Chaucer here is speaking of the category of sound-maker, reed or whistle, and therefore their timbre, rather than a specific instrument called the doucet or the rede. A mistranslation of this passage may lead to the definition of doucet as a “wind instrument resembling a flute” (RSC, fn#1221,p362), rather than dulcet, of sweet tone. Anthony Baines notes, “The fourteenth century had already felt a need for a soft-toned reed instrument and had found it in the doucaine or dulzaina, of which

very little is known.” (p230)

Is it an instrument of the fairy regions, the presque-divine lands that include the plains before the House of Fame? The “pipes of grene corn”, (L1224), are another mystery. Corn would not be maize, out of which cob one could fashion a fragile quiet whistle, but the old world grain, wheat. A corn pipe might be fashioned from the woody stem of wheat or oat, but would then be extremely small. Is the fairy piper so diminutive as to make the scale of oat-stem pipe appropriate to player?

Chaucer returns to ancient times with a list of attending musicians. It is an ominous group, if Baugh’s attributions are correct. Each figure has been in a musical competition. Marsyas has lost his skin and life, by challenging Apollo. Orion and Chiron both suffer brutal deaths. But at this stage of his career Chaucer is willing to leave music in the hands and the lands of the gods. He uses most musical references in the context of classical allusions, where they do not perform a characterizing role. Save the narrator and the eagle, the characters themselves are conventional, without interior life. Their names and harps label them bards, but they have no personality, no dialogue.

..in fight and blood-shedyng  
Ys used gladly clarionyng

L1241HOF

“Gladly” here means commonly, customarily. Is it only the modern reader who feels a jarring implication in this juxtaposition of music and blood? The dance of death, the war dance, is played by the piercingly voiced trumpets, as spears and arrows fly. Trumpets have a literary heritage with which Chaucer was certainly familiar.

And the seven angels which had the seven

Trumpets prepared to sound.

The first ange sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood..

(Revelations ch. 8, vv6,7)

Chaucer missed the great battles of Crecy and Poitiers but he accompanied King Edward III on campaign in France, and was captured and imprisoned. He heard, no doubt, in his lifetime, both the hunting horn and the clarion of war, saw the blood of boar and pheasant, French knight and English peasant, the scream of animal and horn.

The music of blood-shed, from the lips of the bugle corps, comes in sequence after harpists, and pipes of the dance. There were more musicians than stars in heaven, sitting, playing on instruments Chaucer “kan not nevene,” (L1253,HOF). No modern musician gets named, only modern instruments. This keeps music a mysterious endeavor, magicalizes its practice by the face-less, name-less crowd.



Song stays at home in myth. The less than perfect harmonic relationships and the uneasy mix of interior and exterior timbres also serve to devalue Chaucer's present, and inflate and insulate the world of dream and myth.

And, Lord! The hevenyssh melodye  
Of songes, ful or armonye,  
I herde aboute her [Lady Fame's] trone ysonge  
That al the paleys walles ronge!

L1395HOF

This echoes biblical accounts of divinity worshiped by praise and song. King David was a harpist whose music, like Orpheus', gave him power. Fame's palace walls ring in harmony to the melody, rather than by virtue of volume. The human voice, in this pseudo-classical setting, remains the uncharacterized and ideal instrument. The walls vibrate with the magical properties of music.

Lady Fame, the goddess of "renoun", is besieged by crowds of petitioners. They desire her grace, the boon of good name in the world. Chaucer, our fly on the wall, finds the Lady unreliable, unpredictable in her awards, like her sister Dame Fortune. Fame sends for her herald of tidings,

Eolus, the god of wynde -

And bid him bring his clarioun,  
That is ful dyvers of his soun,  
And hyt is cleped Clere Laude,  
With which he wont is to heraude  
Hem that me list ypreised be.  
And also bid him how that he  
Bryng his other clarioun,  
That highte Sklaundre in every toun,  
With which he is wont to diffame  
Hem that me list, and do hem shame.

L1571HOF

We are dealing with second-hand myth, and it is certainly possible that Chaucer had no specific horn in mind to do this heavy work. Eolus does merit a porter, Triton, another trumpeter, a conch-blower by myth, to carry these musical tools of witness before Lady Fame. Eolus is a servant and plays the instrument and the tune which he is told. Bid by his hostess to contradict the good works of a courteous crowd, he

Tok out hys blake trumpe of bras,  
That fouler than the devel was,  
And gan this trumpe for to blowe,  
As al the world shulde overthrowe

That thurghout every regioun  
Went this foule trumpets soun  
And such a smoke gan out wende  
Out of his foule trumpes ende,  
And hyt stank as the pit of helle.

Allas, thus was her shame yronge L1636HOF

The role of music has changed, textually, from its conventional laudatory vocation. And it has taken on a visible reality. It pours forth as multi-colored smoke, spreading everywhere, defaming the innocent, like a Biblical plague. This unstopped brass horn, the herald's or huntsman's daily tool, becomes a plague-blower. The arsenal of instruments, which might in court life contain smaller higher-pitched and lower, larger pieces, and instruments of differing timbres and volumes, is reduced to two. Two voices, two jobs. The moral compass is very limited and conventional, of a piece with the early and conventional language, style and goals of Chaucer's poem. Praise and condemnation are meted out without regard to the merits of the petitioner upon Fame. The powerful music of reputation does its work, finds its place "on every tonge" (L1656,HOF). Eolus seems a little happier to blow good news, when asked.

Ful gladly, lady myn," he seyde;  
And out hys trumpe of golde he brayed  
Anon, and sette hyt to his mouth,

And blew it est, and west and south,..  
Out of his trumpes mouthe smelde  
As men a pot of bawme held  
Among a basket ful of roses. L1677HOF

Lady Fame is approached by one group who beg her to hide their good works, for they “han certein doon hyt for bounte” (L1698). Silence is granted. The absence of music is the absence of repute, good or ill. Is, then, music a neutral medium, colored only by the will of the patroness Fame? Those who have performed good works for the sake of virtue only, ask no praise, even studiously avoid it, avoiding thereby the sin of pride, the pride of melody. The silent overlay of Christianity impugns the pantheon here. Lady Fame and Eolus are defined with the help of music and instrument. They are not characters, but traditional types, the former vicious and fickle, and the latter an obedient bully, a lackey who performs tonal punishments, and trumpets rewards. The music and instrument are on the same level of stock embodiment. The golden horn of clear praise, or the black one of slander, do not exist as artifacts. Sound has virtue and virtue has sound. Music is information, and instrument the vehicle, for long-distance transmission. Perhaps another way for Fame to laud and slander would be to paint the sky, to make astrological broadcasts, rearrange the stars. But that is less immediate, though acknowledged information in Chaucer’s time. The interpretation of the sky requires

a mediator, unlike the direct emotional experience of Eolus' notes, "lowed as any thunder" (L1681).

..through the world went the soun  
Also keenly and eke so softe;  
But ate laste by was on lofte.

L1724HOF

The eagle lectures Chaucer on the properties of sound, early on. All noise flies upward to the principality of Lady Fame. Yet Eolus' blasts reverse these aural dynamics and travel down through the world of men, to England, or Italy, and damage or inflate human capacity. The cacophony wafting up from earth, which might record just desserts, must step out of the path to let barrel by the heavy notes of reputation. And even these, finally unburdened of the gravity of image, return on "lofte".

The horn is a transitional instrument, between harp and bagpipe, classic and modern time. Identified with unreliable Homeric gods, and with court and pomp, the horn has a hard-edged timbre. The trumpet, emotionally and physically, amplifies human capacity, lengthens the chest, the lungs. The blast of air is a letter from the heart, the breast. The horn is an inverted funnel out of which pours messages from the gods. All wind instruments extend the capacity of lungs, larynx, and lips to make sound. They are, with drums, the least

alienated musical artifacts, the most integrated with the functions of the human body.

Eolus blows twice more at Fame's behest, once golden sound, once black. Aural blessings for a crowd who desire as much renown as those who actually deserve it, and a curse for the next group in the same moral state. Trumpet, and the long horn blast are here servants of the servant, like hoes, or trays, or proclamations.

Music has evolved, as literary environment, from the Duchess to Fame. It has acquired life and energy, paths and tools. It remains dressed in convention, stylized by Chaucer's sources. Harps and trumpets abound, but so do notes that are neither simply hunt-signals nor fanfares to processions. Music has picked up a comic physics, and a tragic power in Fame. Chaucer will follow a path of integrating the high art of music into the daily life of peasants and artisans in the latter tales. Music will move from conventional mention, to specific tune, and melodies of joy and greed and lust.

### Canterbury Tales

Chaucer's final and incomplete work uses music, musicians and instruments in progressively more mature ways. The Host of the Canterbury pilgrimage elicits tales from tellers in an elaborate and oft-interrupted dance of courtesy and descending class. Several characters provide music and instrumentation for this dance, this

cultural environment, which in the early tales is pervasive and joyful. In the Miller's Tale in particular, Chaucer abandons conventions and gives us the instruments of his daily life in the hands of artisan and student; in the mouths of summoner and leach, in the Prologue and Summoner's Tale.

I shall sketch some of these characters and their musical environment, then re-examine these folk and their music in the context of the poems. The historical development and technical difficulties in manufacturing the instruments cited in the early tales is then discussed. Finally I associate character, personality, and musical instrument, and look at these intentional and accidental symbols and relationships.

The original and primary instrument is the human voice. Chaucer's pilgrims and their tale-characters often sing acapella, or to their own accompaniment. Emelye sings like an angel in the *Knight's Tale*. Does her song cause Arcite and Paloman to fall in love with her? It attracts their attention initially. Arcite sings a roundel greeting the rising sun, the spring a-borning (the season, of course, of the contextual framework). Theseus is waked by the singing of the common people on the morning of the tournament.

The Friar of the General Prologue, is an accomplished musician. "Wel koude he synge and pleyen on a rote;" (L236GP) The Miller's Absalon serenades with rubible and gyterne, and his Nicholas plays a sautrie as he sings. The Wife of Bath could sing and dance to her

small harp. Musical instruments populate the Canterbury Tales not only to accompany song. The Squire sings as well as plays the flute, but of course not simultaneously (polyphonally). The Miller performs a secular processional, horsed, piping the pilgrims out of town. In Venus' temple in the Knight's Tale, her statue holds a citole, and the mural depicts "...instrumentz, caroles, daunces..." as essential "...circumstaunces of love..." (L1931-3KT). Trumpets sound frequently to signal the military parade of tournament participants, the procession of Duke and retinue, and the beginning and end of the joust itself.

Here, in ascending order of complexity, and increasing alienation from the body, I examine music, character, and device.

### The Voice in the Knight's Tale

Emelye, responding to May's importunate call, rises early. She, herself a piece of braided nature, beautiful and "subtil", celebrates and honors the season. She walks in the walled garden, a prison imitating nature. She is confined from public view, accidentally visible to the imprisoned knights, who fall in love with her voice and song. "And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong." (L1055KT) How does an angel sing, and what music, in Chaucer's Christian, historical context? Angels are spiritual powers, creatures of light, forever fortunate in the presence of the Lord. They praise the Creator in perfect and eternal



harmony.

Emelye sings here in praise of natural beauty. Her music is joy and acclamation. Her instrument is her voice, part of the intricate creation that is mankind. Angels exist to praise God; (wo)man's voice and body are frail and temporary temples of praise. Arcite, several Taurus turns later, celebrates the arrival of spring. As if released from the dark wet cell of a British winter...

...loude he song ayeyn the sonne shene:

“May, with all thy floures and thy grene,  
Welcome by thou, faire, fresshe May...”

L1509KT

Music and voice here are annunciation. There is a natural cosmic symbiosis of spring inspiring music, and music ushering in the season. Melody is ritual welcome.

Just after his release from prison, before he returns surreptitiously to Athens, Arcite becomes vulnerable listener, lamenting rather than rhapsodizing. “And if he herde song or instrument,/ Thanne wolde he wepe, he myghte nat be stent.” (1367-8KT) Here courtly love-sickness reverses music's purpose. Where music elsewhere sounds the joy of spring, new life, new love, now song is the young aristocrat's cue to mourn unceasingly. Music reminds him that it forms only half the (season = love) equation. Melody without love appears to cripple Arcite further.

## The Miller and the Bagpipe

In the Knight's Tale characters sing welcome to spring, and lament interrupted love. In the next tale we listen to the Miller, pugnacious as a ram in rut, tell a story of lust, foolishness, and humiliation. Music is the central vehicle of expression for the young men of this fabliau. The Miller is that rare creature of both realms, a Pilgrim and a character in a Pilgrim's tale. One Miller would deny the other, but there are intentional congruencies in all dimensions of the narration. One of these is that the Pilgrim-churl is a piper. "A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne,/ And therewithal he broughte us out of towne." (L565-6GP) Of this "real" Miller the Reeve's creation is an ironic silhouette. "Pipen he koude..." (L3927RT) the Reeve reports simply, a duplicate detail.

The Miller-Pilgrim-Piper tells us a tale of a lascivious and mischievous clerk, withdrawn from school. Hende Nicholas loves books, astrology, sweet smells and pretty girls. When particularly happy with events, he reaches for his prized psaltery.

Whan Nicholas had done this everideel,  
And thakked hire aboute the lendes weel,  
He kiste hire sweete and taketh his sawtrie,  
And pleyeth faste, and maketh melodie.

L3303MT

The other vocalist cum instrumentalist in the Miller's Tale of course, is Absalon, the Parish Clerk and barber. He might raze a face, and let blood, not simultaneously his customers hope;

And pleyen songes on a small rubible;  
There to he song somtyme a loud quynyble;  
And wel he koude pleye on a gyterne.

L3331MT

This multi-instrumentalist uses music consciously to woo, unlike Nicholas, who worships and celebrates. "And Absalon his gyterne hath ytake,/ For paramours he thoghte for to wake." (L3353-4MT) Closer to the earth than Arcite and Emelye, he is less realistic yet more practical, more public yet less carnal than Nicholas. His fancy shoes in the mud, he performs an aubade, a dawn serenade, to a married woman, rather than to an astrological house or spring's new-thawed land. Nicholas reaches out his arms to the same village girl, and crows success with voice and string. As the class of the character descends, his music becomes more personal and immediate, less ethereal and formal.

The Trumpet and the Voice

We are not introduced to a trumpet player. We are told dramatically, the trumpet's dramatic function. But it is anonymous, more a sound-effect than a melody-maker. The commons gather, in the Knight's Tale, to speculate on the prospects of the visiting warriors. Musicians gather, with their instruments, to sever their paging pageant duties. "Pypes, trompes, nakers, clariounes,/ That in the bataille blowen bloody sounes;" (L2511-2KT) And when Theseus changes the rules of the joust to prevent mayhem, "Up goon the trompes and the melodye..." (L2565KT)

The Squire, pilgrim not tale-actor, bedecks himself in celebration of the new botanical year. "Syngynge he was, or floytynge al the day; / He was as fresh as is the month of May." (L91-92GP) We are told he is an ardent lover. We may safely imagine that his music and his adornment have as much to do with romantic quest as with vernal equinox.

Hear the voice, public and solitary. The pardoner and sumonour sing harmony, one high, the other low. The pardoner has a voice "...as small as hath a goot." (L688GP) And "This sumonour bar to hym a stif burdoun." (L673GP) The human physiology of sound production has not evolved over 600 years. Speaking and singing styles, the idea of what is an attractive, or seductive vocal sound, now as then, are culturally determined, and in constant flux. Absalon sings in "a loud quynyble", rendered by Baugh as a high treble. The pardoner's *Come Hider Love to Me*, and Absalon's crooning, are in

counter-tenor, the male falsetto voice. Absalon imitates quaveringly this clear, vibrato-less sound so favored by contemporary composers and audience. Emelye is the only woman who makes music, and she does so in what she imagines is complete privacy. The fashion of the male soprano may be synchronous with the proscription of women from public performance, still in force more than 200 years later at Shakespeare's Globe.

The Clerke of Oxenforde disdains "robes riche, or fithete or gay sautrie." (L296GP) But Nicholas, clerk on long vacation, treasures his psaltery, repairing to instrument and solitude in spiritual and sensual joy. The Friar plays a rote, to accompany his singing. Rote and psaltery are parallel evolutions from a common ancestor, the lyre. The small harp is a plucked string instrument from pre-historic times, existing in many cultures. The character-instrument partnership may be illuminated by looking at the historical development of each instrument type.

### Fingers and Strings and Sound Boxes

The Homeric kitharis and Celtic crot are lyres. The former consists of an open frame, often of natural origin, such as a set of antlers, with strings of gut stretched across it. The crot (crwd) is a lyre whose frame has become a resonator, a soundbox, and whose cousin is the psaltery.

Baugh describes the Friar's rote as, "...resembling a lyre. It had 5 to 8 strings and was plucked." (p242) Neither the Dictionary of Early Music nor Baugh distinguish between psaltery and rote except in number of strings, the latter having no more than 8, thus more portable. According to Christopher Page, "The rote is the triangular zither with strings on both sides of the soundbox." (Page, p123) The rote thus combines a quality of the lyre, accessibility to strings by opposed hands, with the box or shell, to amplify and sustain sound, shared by gyterne, fithle, and the lyre's other child, the psaltery. Their common features are soundbox, and tuneable, unstopped strings.

The psaltery, and later zither, have 8 to 20 tunable strings. The resonating box-frame is a triangular, or trapezoidal (high notes allow shorter strings) wooden body 2 or 3 feet long, by 6 to 12 inches wide. The box is hollowed out and capped with a thin board, sometimes decoratively perforated.

The musician sits with the instrument in his lap, vertically or horizontally, and plucks the strings with fingers or a quill, or strikes them with a mallet. The psaltery is chordal and polyphonic; a skilled player could sound perhaps 6 notes simultaneously, or play two lines in harmony. "Imported to Europe during the Crusades the psaltery was very popular during the Middle Ages as both solo and ensemble instrument." (Galpin, p155)

The technology required to construct such instruments was

available to a cathedral-building culture. There would certainly have been many individual artisans, often the musicians themselves, with the necessary mechanical and musical skills. An instrument maker, working with the handtools of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, might be constructing a dozen pieces at once, all at different stages of completion, as does a custom builder today. Wood must be chosen, cut and stored to dry for a year. Green wood may check or split when fashioned into a board, when it dries too quickly, and may shrink with greater strength than its integrity can sustain.

Materials required for psaltery or other strung boxes are wood for the body, often hardwood; the soundboard, a lighter, resonant cedar or spruce; hardwood pins to secure and tune the strings. Those strings are gut, and hardwood bridges are used at both ends of the instrument to raise them off the soundboard and allow them to vibrate. The accumulation, shaping, and assembly of these components was probably carried out by a single craftsman, from and in the neighborhood environment.

The body is hollowed out by chisel, the top planed thin. Parts are glued or pinned or tied together. Tuning pegs may be found objects, or turned by the village (or civic) lathe-master. Holes must be augered for the pegs. Chisels and auger bits might be forged by the local smith to specification, or borrowed or rented by a one-time instrument-maker. A simple lyre may be toyed up by a shepherd, but the rote-psaltery is the product of a year's planning and gathering of

material. There follows two weeks or a month of skilled and delicate handwork. If the instrument is to be inlaid with ornamental woods, shell or ivory, painted or filigreed, this might double the labor time for the project.

Absalon, a village barber, supplementing his income, and his targeted females, by assisting at mass, plays songs on “ a small rubible.” Baugh defines this as, “a rebeck, an early type of violin.” (p294). Anthony Seay, in *Music in the Medieval World* describes the rebec as, “...an instrument of Arabian origin...the ancestor of our violin, although its original shape suggests a relation to the lute’. In the 13<sup>th</sup> c. it had but two strings, tuned to C and G.” (p73)

Also known as the rybybe, the early fiddle Absalon bows with horsehair stretched across a flexible shaft (the crescent bow) has 2 or 3 strings and a resonating box that traditionally is oval. This instrument presents the same technical problems in construction as the psaltery.

One must first build the shell. The shape implies an organic origin. Perhaps a gourd was first used (in South America the small guitar made from an armadillo shell is one example of natural exploitation). Neck and body are made from one piece of wood. Seasoned wood, chisels, gut, the use of a lathe – all follow the same pattern as with making the more directly lyre-derived rote. Having only three strings the rebec neck and body bear less tension than the psaltery, and require less strength, thus less expertise and time in fabrication.



Assuming dry wood was available, a musician might be playing his rybybe a month after deciding to proceed, if he were able to devote much time to the project.

Any custom made instrument or handcrafted tool, and a musical instrument is a tool used to produce sound, requires both fine-tuning and maintenance. A musician-owner of such relatively high-tech artifacts would need to be able to file down bridges, re-gut, fabricate and replace tuning pegs, rehair the bow, make new mallets, or plectra. In an economy far less alienated from sustenance, and famine, than ours, less protected from weather, or war, holders of such luxuries as musical instruments are cultural caretakers. Musician-builders bore the history of sound-production, device-construction, tale-telling.

### Horn and Flute, Whistle and Breath

Wind instruments are less alienated artifacts than strings. To breathe is to sound. Simultaneous recitation of text is impossible. The Squire of the Prologue plays the flute and sings. He may be using the transverse flute, the ancestor of today's silver flute, or the flute a bec. Both existed for centuries before Chaucer's lifetime. I originally assumed he was playing the flute a bec because there are many extant contemporary scores calling for what we now know as the recorder. However, the transverse flute is easier to construct. The ancient flute

is essentially a hollow tube, plugged at one end, with holes drilled along the length for varying pitch.

The indigenous peoples of the Andes achieve a beautiful breathy whistle tone with an end-blown pipe. Traditionally, Europeans have stopped one end and cross-blown over a large hole near that plug. The early flutes in many cultures were made with natural, minimally transformed objects: hollow reeds, bamboo, branches serendipitously bored by insects or fire, animal horn.

The end-blown whistle flute, or recorder, is the same hollow tube, capped by a carved windway. The whistle tone is pitched with fingerholes which, when unstopped, shorten the tube. The whistle windway is a manufactured embouchure, a second, or substitute pair of lips. It requires a very skilled carver, the exact duplication of lathe and auger bits, and a jealous guarding of the instrument from abuse and weather. Flutes are made from fine hardwoods, locally available in Chaucer's time, slowly dried, without flaws. One might work a piece of wood for a week only to find a crack or knot at a critical location.

The great advantage to the whistle flute is that anyone can play it. It is more accessible to a less devoted musician. To build this noisemaker, a 14th century craftsman would have used a foot-treadle lathe, sharp chisels, accurate augers. Once the materials and tools are in place an instrument might be constructed in a week of full time skill and experience, with several months of trial and error. I

hear the Squire playing a recorder, for while fluting all the day, he is neither devoted musician nor soldier nor craftsman, but professionally a bachelor.

Any one of these instruments is worth at a minimum what it would cost to feed and house the family of its builder for the labor time needed to build the contrivance. Of course many village families kept gardens, and animals, in addition to practicing the cottage crafts of smithing, weaving, or lathework. Sacred, passionate work, making the instruments to make the music, for harvest dance or harvest prayer need not always pay. Instrument building would rarely have been the sole craft of an artisan.

### Bagpipe, Reed and Breath

The bagpipe is an instrument introduced into Europe early in the Christian era. Certainly in the Middle Ages the cornemuse, or musette, was a successfully refined device, and it has continued to evolve. There are clear depictions of bagpipes in Psalters and on tapestries (Canticles of St. Mary, Escorial, 13<sup>th</sup> c. Goldron). The instrument is a complication of several crafts, yet it arrived in Europe prior to the proto fiddles.

The bagpipe is a double-reed pipe or set of pipes. The player blows into an air reservoir, originally an actual animal bladder, through a mouthpipe. The bag is thus constantly being reinflated, and

deflated by the arm-pressure of the musician, to pass a constant stream of air through the reeds and pipes. The chanter, or melody pipe containing the reeds, modifies the pitch of the tone by the stopping of fingerholes. A common feature of such pieces is a second or pair of reeded pipes that sound a drone at a pitch varied tuneable by the length of the drone pipes.

To build a set of bagpipes a medieval musician-craftsman would need at least two pipes, and possibly four. Contemporary depictions (iconographic evidence is often more specific, if still speculative, than that afforded in the text) convince me animal horn was used. These horns must be shaved and smoothed inside and out, and the pitch holes located and drilled. Reeds must be sawn and shaved thin for each pipe except the mouthpipe. A bladder, airtight at seams and around pipes must be sewn and glued, with a non-return valve (a leather flap) capping the mouthpipe entrance.

Making the bag tight around the pipes is a challenging aspect of the handcraft. What is now accomplished with metal clamps (and even all modern brass and wind instruments leak somewhat at joints) would have been undertaken with gut thread, bone needles, and animal glue. Examining the components, we see that everything is animal-derived. A shepherd might build the instrument from a ram, and feed the family in the interim.

The Reeve says his Miller can pipe and “turne coppes” (L3928RT). This may tell us that this Miller is a lathe worker, turning

wooden cups while the grain is ground, or when there is no grinding to be done (perhaps water or wind turns lathe as well as millstones.) This would be appropriate for a necessarily multi-skilled worker. It would confirm his ability to build his own bagpipes. However, Baugh cites a Sussex drinking chant that ends “the cup is turned over” (Baugh, p304). The Miller is a drinker, rapidly emptying his cup and turning it over, to indicate he is ready for more. Rather than recounting the skill of this Miller then, the Reeve may be insulting his fellow pilgrim.

The work of bagpipe construction is a least four times more time consuming than making a flute...4 pipes. And add a week in the life of a busy shepherd-craftsman-musician for the bag. We look at a construction period of a season, perhaps from fall slaughtering until Christmas. We must keep in mind that work is done in natural light.

### Horn and Breath

The trumpet originates as an end-blown animal horn. It is mechanically simpler, and less alienated from the human body than strings or bagpipe. The musicians’ cheeks function in a limited way as the bag, the pressurized air supply and lips perform as reeds, the vibrating limiters to air passage. Air squeezed into a tunnel, either through reeds, a whistle way, between lips, sounds a pitched tone. The narrower the opening, the higher the pitch, the longer the tunnel,

the lower the tone.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century there were several parallel species of trumpet. The cornett family is an ensemble of end-blown trumpets, of animal horn or wood, with pitch holes. The hunting horn had no fingered stops. Tone was varied by pressure of breath, and size of the aperture for air passage formed by the lips over the mouthpiece. The “trompes” mentioned by Chaucer exist in the neverland of chivalrous pre-Classical Greece. Our poet would have had in mind the trumpets he heard and saw at court and tournament in France, Italy, and London. The old was not abandoned abruptly for the new, and he would certainly have encountered ivory and horn as well as the more recent copper horns.

### Where Why Who and What

The social setting in which music occurs, the function of that music, and the instrument(s) on which sounds are produced are an historical trinity. This happy harmony, this uneasy discord, it is possible to view as a progressive relationship, moving through time: changing participants, technology, concepts of propriety and harmony, purpose and accessibility.

Bagpipes and trumpets are loud, appropriate to outdoor signaling, as well as melody, band as well as solo playing. The flute is a soft voice, defeated by the wind. The psaltery is quiet and large,

demanding a static musician and a close audience. The bowed string rebec can project across a room but not a field. The human voice cuts through party hubbub, but not march or battle. Vocal music has the huge appeal of universality – all can join; text is combined with melody. Singers feel the unalienated joy of organic participation in music as a collective or solo endeavor.

In Chaucer's Prologue and Tales we encounter music, character, and instrument in town, tavern and tournament. Outdoors marching, indoors wooing, each moment is an interplay of class, spirituality, and action. Music and romance are partnered. The Squire, Knight's son and lusty bachelor, flutes all the day. Emelye is singing in the gardens when spied by Arcite. And Hende Nicholas, after swiftly reaching a sensual understanding with Alisoun, abruptly picks up his psaltery and plays fast and joyful (replicating his treatment of the lady.) Absalon serenades the same Alisoun while sawing on a rubible, and plucking on a gyterne.

### The Squire

The Squire is an aristocrat and world traveler – perhaps a plunderer, with his father, of fellow Christians. He might have come upon his flute as booty. An economy of currency as well as barter existed in the upper class, and the Squire might have purchased his flute from a local craftsman, or received it as a gift for his services as a soldier. He may have bought or stolen (in a military context) a

piece of ivory, horn or ebony which he brought home to be wrought custom.

As a landowner's son he has the leisure, when not campaigning, to master the instrument. He does not play in a group, but for his own joy, and wooing of ladies. Music is a personal pleasure and a tactic of seduction, without spiritual or martial overtones. The instrument, the tone and the timbre, and the musician, are all light and casual, peripatetic.

“Syngynge he was, or floytynge all the day;” (L91GP) Here is a character without urgency or depth. He is happy to play, unpresed by economic necessity, allegiance to church or state, by Holy Orders or official status, or even a particular lady. The instrument and the pilgrim define each other – breathy, adventurous, indulgent, vain and monophonic.

Hende Nicholas:

Nicholas, the Miller's Clerk, occupies the internal frame of the Tale conceit, created by a creation. His psaltery occupies the place of honor in his neat but humble lodging. He has been a theology student, but now devotes himself to astrology. Nicholas forecasts the weather and, “...what sholde bifalle / Of everything;” (L3196-7MT) Mayhap he predicted a happy future for someone of means, and was given this,



...gay sautrie,  
On which he made a-nyghtes melodie  
So sweetly that all the chamber rong;  
And Angelus ad Virginem he song'  
And after that the Kinges Noote.  
Full often blessed was his myrie throte.

L3213MT

To get to Oxford Nicholas must have completed a primary education. He is neither a peasant nor bourgeois, but comes from a poor family of intellectual and class pretension. He is rather a “povre scoler”, living in a village carpenter’s house, and not very ambitious. What does he choose to do with his talent and cleverness? He can read, write, perform astrological calculations, any of which are beyond most of his neighbors.

Nicholas could have finished his studies at Oxford, and become a priest, key to a career in many fields. Hence Father Nicholas, he might have become, the parish parson, the academic, the Chantry priest, the government bureaucrat. Given to complex planning, he wants to know and influence the future. But his actions are very local. He doesn’t even leave the house to find lover or victim.

Chaucer calls the psaltery gay, which meant finely dressed, rich or handsome, and also joyful. The psaltery is a sophisticated evolution of the lyre, laid horizontally, with a soundbox that amplifies and

improves the tone. Nicholas is a student, not a craftsman, and he has not built his prized possession. Neither has he bought it, this poor and lazy man, as it represents a month in the life of a better paid soul than he. It may have been in his family, a family downwardly tracking through generations (crossing paths with the Chaucers, headed up in class), and whose fortunes and future are unlikely to be helped by Nicholas.

The instrument is polyphonic, and leaves the player free to sing melody. It is a piece of indoor leisure for this indoor man, and perhaps of devotion. Nicholas sings hymns, and calculates cuckoldry. Unlike the Squire our student must support himself, and he does so with his wits, casting horoscopes, casting nets to catch friends' charity. He and his instrument are equally complex and fine. His music comes from his celebratory soul, solo, interior, joyful, certainly lustful and avaricious too.

Absalon:

Mutual victims in the same tale, Nicholas and Absalon inhabit the same village, but on different planes. The former is reclusive and sophisticated, the latter public and inept. Absalon is a step up the ladder, I imagine, in material wealth. We do not visit him at home, but we know he owns at least two instruments, and has several jobs. He dresses his hair and body carefully and, if not in good taste, dearly. Absalon leaps out into village life, dashing about the muddy street,

acting in liturgical dramas, singing in taverns, and under bedroom windows. He adopts fantasy identities, courtly and common. Nicholas never leaves his room, never moves the zither save from the wardrobe to his lap. Absalon's strings are his vehicle, his ticket in the door. As barber, leech, and thurible-bearer he acts in public intimacy, overstepping boundaries, confronting and touching many folk in his environment.

The rubible and gyterne are appropriately portable, and as plucked and bowed strings have fair outdoor audibility. Absalon is handy (not "hende", polite or gentle) and resourceful. The manufacture of a three-stringed rebec is not beyond his capacity of energy or skill. He also has a good relationship with the smith, a craftsman whose aid to instrument-maker is vital. The same energy that curls his hair, and trades haircuts for ornate shoes, the narcissism inherent in performer and performance, builds the instrument of desire. In taverns he carouses with minstrels, picks their brains, carefully examines their instruments. Perhaps his leechcraft fails to kill a gypsy, ill on the road, and he is given a gyterne.

Absalon's music is a quaint parody of courtly love serenade. He has a quavery falsetto, and staying in tune may be as much or more than he can manage. Half drowned amid tavern revelry and ale, his accompaniment to carousal may be welcome, but underneath an aging and prosperous carpenter's window he annoyance not entertainment. "He syngeth, brokkyng as a nyghtengale;" (3377MT)

Chaucer is laughing at this broad vibrato, rapid and rustic as birdsong. Absalon sings and plays for the public, chasing his audience practically into their homes, carrying strings, bow and plectrum.

The complexity and value of these instruments represent this active and ambitious village crooner. One hand strikes the tones, the other pitches the notes. However well Absalon accomplishes this, it is a more assertive musical activity, less gentle and harmonious, more variable in locus and response, than melody home alone at night. The fragile ego that yodels Herod in the town square, when humiliated, does not respond with a musical lament. He returns across the street from friend Smithy with a hot iron he fully expects to smack in the rear or the face, he cares not which, of his so recently beloved.

The Impersonal Trumpet:

For Chaucer the trumpet is a sound-effect, a hunting language. It may also signal the approach of the ruler, of chivalric engagement, and victory. It sets an aristocratic stage of private forests, stone castle walls, military arenas, and Classical temples. Trumpets are heard in the Knights' Tale, loudly announcing the approach of the royal household. Fanfares salute the procession of Theseus to the tourney; prod the start of the action; and announce the end, Arcite's victory. "The early horns were intended not for musical but for signaling purposes. If sometimes made of metal, they seem more often to have been made of horn or wood." (Reese, p329) Anonymous trumpet

players in the Duke's service precede the Herald to call for attentive silence. The instrument blasts out impersonal, hard-edged, metallic sounds. "Often early horns were capable of producing only one tone. Sometimes the octave and 12<sup>th</sup> of the fundamental were obtainable also." (Reese, p 329) Trumpets, in the mixed time frame Chaucer gives us, the fantastic Greek Chivalric, are archaic martial message carriers. Natural horns are extremely difficult to play, and it is fitting that court musicians are professionals. If they are of ivory or copper or brass (Henry VIII's musical instrument inventory cites two horns of copper) they are very valuable. Their manufacture requires intimate cooperation between craftsman and musician. In the Knight's Tale we lack the musician about whom to draw more than speculative conclusions, about class or skill.

The Miller and the Bagpipe:

In the most interesting combination of character with instrument, the Miller plays the bagpipes. Such a pairing is onomatopoeic. The Miller is a rich peasant. He holds a franchise from the seigneur to grind locally produced grain. The Lord gets a large cut, the Church might get a share, and the Miller takes his and more. Being Miller is like having a rural mail route. It is a working-class sinecure, with the advantage that the product is edible and marketable.

The Miller has privilege in his village, whose grain is far less

valuable unground. He has license to steal, perhaps to harass the young women, certainly to be drunk, brutal, and outrageous in public. He's mean, he's ugly. He's loud and vulgar. And he is big and carries a sword.

Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre,  
Or breke it at a rennyng with hs heed.

L550GP

Robyn the Miller (shep)herds the Pilgrims down the road, more the ram than the sheepdog. He butts doors, he butts heads, perhaps not only verbally. He wins the ram at wrestling, because he is the ram. His bagpipe is his body, all horn and bladder, pneumatic energy and carapace. He is a leader, by intrusion. He does not hesitate to insert himself into the running order of tale telling, all drunk and outclassed. He may have almost the same economic status as Harry Bailey the innkeeper – status based on license, skill, and small property, rather than the heredity of nobility or serf. The Miller has big shoulders, bigger mouth, and even thicker skin. What position doesn't grant him, his bulk and heedless daring carry off. Not that he asks much – just good Southwark ale, in quantity; a horse, his pipes, center stage and a captive audience.

A hagepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne,  
And therewithal he broghte us oute of towne,

A good miller is an agricultural technician. He must know millstones, the wood for wheels and cogs and sluice works, the ripeness and moisture content of grain. A pre-industrial miller builds and maintains his own machinery from the local terrain. He might reluctantly engage his rival the Carpenter for some of the finer work. The family economy of this stout carl includes some stock, fields and a garden. Slaughtering goat or ram in the fall, he can reserve skin, bladder, and horn for his bagpipe, this ancient folk instrument. In a year's Sundays and brief tallow-lit evenings he may fabricate an airtight bag, with one-way air valve, a chanter (the pitching pipe with finger holes), a drone pipe and mouth pipe and reeds. He would be drawing on centuries of tradition, local examples of the bagpipe, and the cultural content of the music.

Leeve brother Robyn pipes the pilgrimage out of town. Like a drum major he sets the pace, physically, rhythmically. Theirs is a processional, sacred and profane. All are horsed, and the pipes skirl the start, easily heard by the laggards in the Tabard stableyard as the vanguard heads east.

How alike are Miller and noisemaker! The pipes are a loud out of doors instrument (though certainly in the 14<sup>th</sup> century smaller, quieter, leakier than modern pipes), suitable for exciting military progress. Pipes, once inflated, do not hush neatly. They scream and

wheeze and drone; like the tale their bearer tells, they are capable of raucous intricacy and raw beauty.

### The Cook and the Thief

In the short fragment of the Cook's Tale we find the instruments used by Absalon, musical tools contemporary to Chaucer. The decline of the protagonist's class continues precipitously, from knight to village carpenter to country miller, to this apprentice victualler. From the aristocratic teller of a courtly love tale, where music is a love song or a herald's fanfare, to a vulgar drunk reciting a fabliau in which stringed instruments are used with remarkable ineffectiveness as seductive accompaniment. From the Miller's pair of clerk/musicians who play variations of lustful expressionism, we descend to Perkyn.

For sikerly a prentys revelour  
That haunteth dys, riot, or paramour,  
His maister shal it in his shoppe abye,  
Al have he no part of the mynstralcy.  
For thefte and riot, they been convertible,  
Al konne he pleye on gyterne or ribible.  
Revel and trouthe, as in a lowe degree,  
They been ful wrothe al day, as men may see. L43 CT



There are parallel paths of descent here, in the class and vocation of the Tale tellers, the Tale protagonists, and the participation. The nobility are served game they have killed. They are served by music, announced and escorted. Emelye sings of May's delights, and Palomon and Arcite intone complaints to Love and Fortune, and prayers to god for success in battle. All do so privately. Nicholas, the clerk, second son perhaps to a burgess who could afford to educate him but no more, plays the psaltery in his room. Alison listens at the door, or enters to help him play. The music is less private, more specific, less elevated. And Absalon, a more naïve clerk, more in the world of work, plays several instruments, and sings, badly. He does not hesitate to sing in the taverns and under the window of his married beloved. Absalon looks, with his musical tools and skill, to acquire sophistication and admiration.

The Cook is along for the ride, on this pilgrimage to Canterbury, to prepare the chickens, and evaluate the ale. As the Knight arms the pilgrim band, as well as inhabits it, so the Cook feeds it and is a pilgrim too. He is not the scoundrel he narrates, for his skills are catalogued, but he is no gourmet. He is fonder of drinking than of working, and perhaps not entirely clean or healthy. Perkyn, the victualler's apprentice, is the subject of the Cook, who must work in close partnership with the victualler. The Knight stayed, with his creation, at his own level of class and experience. The Miller, certainly more prosperous than his clerks, used music in Nicholas'

abrupt seduction, and to mock Absalon and courtly love. And for the Cook's protagonist, Perkyn, music is part and parcel of his riot. Theft and wanton revelry are interchangeable. The reveling, the minstrelsy, are equated here with riot, with gaming, whoring, dishonesty, theft. Even if the master victualler knew how to play the guitar or fiddle he would not have joy of his music, because here music is part of the fabric of dissolution, a drain and waste of the fruits of honest labour. Perkyn's joys are riotous, his music is the hysterical laughter of running through the streets, drunk on his master's stolen coins. He is not simply an energetic, teenage bad boy destined to go straight, but already a confirmed thief. And minstrelsy suffers, as part of the riotous environment, the background music to sin. Perkyn has no future, and so, neither does the Tale. Perkyn is headed for one of Sathanas' orifices, like all friars, where tavern-shouting, and money-clinking, and no longer innocent string-tones turn to eternal screams.

#### The Man of Law

The Sergeant of Lawes is an educated man. He is so educated that he successfully speculates on land and property, so clever that he can seem busier than he is. He can remember laws from King William's time; his words seem wise. The Man of Lawes, like all of Chaucer's pilgrim-narrators, is human...fallible, greedy, lazy. More schooled than the Knight and Franklin, who both prosper more, he stands apart, literate, bourgeois, with only the poet/pilgrim as equal. Like Chaucer

in other venues, he tells a story of an oppressed woman.

Custance, daughter of the Emperor of Rome, is to be married. Packed off on a packet, shipped out like cattle, she is unaccompanied baggage to the Sultan of Syria.

..Romyans..

Nas herd swich tendre wepyng for pitee

As in the chamber was for hire departynge;

But forth she moot, where so she weep or synge

L291ML

I hear two musical themes here, the processional and the magical. She must go forth, to the quay, the boat, the ocean, the foreign land, the exile of adulthood and marriage. It is a procession, to be accompanied by song, both a funeral and wedding march. She is a great lady, if an innocent child, the ruler's daughter, yet it seems she alone must provide the tune for her departure, and she can choose its emotional weight. Processions, like the framework pilgrimage, are piped by raucous lower-class men, while Custance has no help nor herald. The horns of the Emperor should have escorted and protected her.

The second theme is the power of music in song, not the martial power of father's soldier-servant-musicians, but the magic. The magic that Custance is separate from but which is acknowledged by, "Where so she weep or synge." (L294) Caught between two royal

men Custance cannot sing or pray away her fate this time. But song and prayer, addressed in time, might find harmony with constellations, and deliver safety or a beloved.

What sholde I tellen of the roialtee  
At marriage, or which course goth biforn;  
Who bloweth in a trumpe, or in an horn?  
The fruyt of every tale is for to seye:  
They ete and drink, and dance, and synge, and pleye.

L703ML

Here music and instrument are in traditional, anonymous celebratory roles. Trumpe and horn, dancing and singing, follow the conventional phrase, "What sholde I tellen...". Why should I recite this catalogue, of beauties or talents or possessions or activities. Or, do I have the talent to recreate, in narration or on the page, these festivities, these horrors, foolhardinesses. Horn and trumpet are part of the catalogue, foresworn yet indulged in. This wedding feast is an event of joy and good food, beautiful dresses and sexual anticipation, whirling dancers and loud music.

The horn and trumpet are loud instruments. The distinction between them may exist only in the need for a rhyme to "biforn"; or, horn may mean the earlier, organic, eponymous, man-modified

osseous appendage of a steer or buffalo, while trumpet is a copper artifact. The Sultan would have many guests, and his wedding march and dances would need to triumph over a large crowd. The Man of Lawes, a man of circumstance and procedure, would appreciate the function of music at the state wedding. And notice the lack of it at Custance's exit from her homeland. Yet the horns and trumpets of the Sultan's palace do not protect her for long, despite their loud tones. Custance is unaccompanied, by music, by father, by all trumps save the Lord's, and is banished again to the waves.

#### The Friar's Tale

In the 400 lines the Friar occupies in his Prologue and Tale, there are four musical references. Song and instrument are gathered into figures of speech, and used pejoratively. To sing is to uselessly lament, And twice a poor elder-woman is compared to a fiddle. A zealous archdeacon pursues sinners, or at least victims, and pursues also the pleasures of intimidation and income.

..lechours dide he grettest wo;

They sholde synge if that they were hen.

L1310FT

Baugh translates this expression into our contemporary "sing a sorrowful tune." (p403) We may expand this; whistle in the dark, sing

the blues, cry a rainstorm, it make no mattermind. The summoned lechers do not sing songs, of course. They are invited ironically to call for help that will not come, to chant helplessly. They cannot sing for their supper, in lieu of paying their fines and tithes. Even perfect pitch will avail them naught.

For smale tithes and for smal offrynge  
He made the people piteously to synge.

L1315FT

Again singing is a product of getting squeezed financially, humiliated socially Here it becomes an apologetic tune. The people sing pitifully; we'll pay, we'll pay! They sing from pain-in-the-pocketbook. They sing as a natural consequence of getting caught by a corrupt and greedy church bureaucrat. They moan.

This somnour, evere waityng on his pray  
Rood for to somne an old wydwe, a ribibe,  
Feyning a cause, for he wold bribe.

L1376FT

By now we have a clear picture of this twisted churchman whose career is spent harassing and extorting, rather than preaching Christ's love. Though this sentence is in the third person, we hear the

contemptuous musical metaphor in the voice of the summoner. We smell the Friar's vocational competitor, reeking of onions and wine, scarred by ignorance and indulgence, merciless in his pain.

How might this slur, of woman and instrument, be understood? Would it compare the shape of crone and ribibe, a mere armful, with long stringed (stringy) neck? The Summoner laughs at his intended victim, round-shouldered and bent. Or is it the ragged piercing sound, thin yet powerful? Woman and craft, man and church, all are devalued by the Summoner's figure of speech, and by his intentions.

Down the road, and now in company with a bailiff of greater power, greedy not for money but for the currency of damned souls,

This somonour to his brother gan to rowne  
"Brother ," quod he, "here woneth an old rebekke,  
That had almost as life to lese hire nekke  
As for to yeve a penny of hir good."

L1572FT

Same woman, same defamer, same family of stringed instruments recruited colloquially to do the job. The change in contemptuous object is for variety and rhyme, rather than for the description of a different instrument in Chaucer's contemporary landscape. The old woman is being characterized by association, as small and whiny, tough and miserly. The verbal assassination is

performed by the unreliable, evil and doomed Summoner, who embodies a damaged and damaging petty church bureaucracy. Since the unpleasant linkage of woman and instrument is made by a symbol of malefaction, shall we imagine that Mother Mabely, the stingy widow, is a virtuous and pious elder, and fiddles Chaucer's favorite instruments?

### The Summoner's Turn

The Summoner tells a tale about a friar, whose greed overwhelms common sense. Chaucer depicts a friar who thinks on his feet, improvises his fund-raising pitch, incorporating new information seamlessly. He drops in on a farm-couple who have already been victimized by fraternal frauds, including even by himself, to ask for more. And when the wife tells him of the death of their child just after his last visit (tingeing the friar with a Typhoid Mary glaze), the prosperous mendicant segues into a fantasy of supernatural awareness. He tells the grieving mother that he and two others in his dormitory saw by relation the boy's death and scansion to heaven. He spins this tale within a tale of holding a spontaneous service for the dead child.

And up I roos, and al oure covente eke,  
With many a teere trillyng on my cheke,  
Withouten noyse or claterynge of belles;  
Te Deum was oure song, and nothing elles      L1863ST



This is one of Chaucer's few specific citations of song-setting. The Kinges Noote is unknown, and Angelus ad Virginem we do have. Both are mentioned in the Miller's Tale. Both Summoner's and Miller's Tales are vicious and hysterical fabliaux, close in composition sequence, I speculate, on the strength of this use of musical detail. The Te Deum has been given many settings throughout the centuries. Most "songes" in Chaucer are the spontaneous lyrics of young lovers, including Troilus, and the grieving knight of the Duchesse. They lack any history of melody. They are a mere mention, or verse-text, original in English, of loose translations from Boccaccio. In his last decade, Chaucer is using the specific sounds and melodies, the braying bagpipe and wheedling Friar, warbling barber and farting farmer, to enliven his re-presentation or translation of folktale and tradition. This is the latter end of the career of music in the poetry that began with bards and lyres, dreams and gods. Music is in the hands of men, who are each and almost every one, sinners and fools, greedy and proud.

The specificity of this reference to the Te Deum is less powerful than the demeaning context given to this prayer in music. The Friar exploits the innocent wife and her innocent gift of true information, the loss of her child. He utilizes the sad history to create a fraudulent spiritual debt. The Te Deum, the ancient Latin hymn of praise to God, the Friar tosses into his improvisation, his jazz lie, conning the mother for a meal, and the father, he hopes, for gold. The

Te Deum, along with the Friar's vocation, are costumes of honesty this cheat has put on, to exploit the poor, the sick, the victims. From the fanfares for Theseus, down to the quynibling of Absalon, to a perverted hymn, music is progressively devalued as the pilgrims progress.

The Friar receives punishment for his greed, on the auditory and olfactory planes. Chaucer harks back to his *House of Fame*, in explaining the nature of a fart, so loud and so light. "The rumblynge of a fart, and every soun, / Nis but of eir reverberation" (2233-4ST) Sound drops below the belt, from the throat of a fraud tarnishing prayer, to the "buttok" of an honest man.

### The Merchant's Tale

In The Merchant's Tale Chaucer's first musical usage is the name of Januarie's brother. Placebo is the accommodating one, the unctuous slippery relative who yesses the old man incessantly. The naming of characters here parallels the absence of names in the *Pardoner's Tale*, in skirting allegory. Chaucer, like his Pardoner, who preaches against avarice avariciously, both generalizes, and ridicules the genre.

Placebo. "I shall be pleasing." The brother is named for his personality, his lack of integrity. Placebo Domino is the first antiphon of the Vespers of the Dead. The antiphon is sung, a choral response. Here Placebo as character, a subservient fool, declares he shall please, at all costs, his rich brother. Chaucer's audience, as he writes, as he

performs his Tales, attends Mass and Vespers, both sung in Latin. They know that Placebo Domino is the goal and simple necessity of all Christians. I shall be pleasing to God. There is no other way to avoid Satan's company. The echoing stone walls of church and chapel, the choirs of monks, tenor and bass, are the musical context that make Placebo, in name and character, instantly ironic and contradictory.

Al ful of joye and bliss is the paleys,  
And ful of instrumentz and of vitaille,  
The most deyntevous of al Ytaille.  
Biforn hem stood instrumentz of switch soun  
That Orpheus ne of Thebes Amphioun,  
Ne madden nevere swich a melodye.  
At every course than cam loud mynstralcye,  
That never tromped Joab for to here

L1712MT

We are back to the use of music and instrument for wedding feast, for pomp and ceremonial. This is the old, the young Chaucer, the translator and stylizer. Unnamed instruments, classical and Biblical musicians are the sudden furniture of the indoor palace landscape. But there is a difference. The entire structure of the wedding ceremony, its bride and groom, the hyperbolic expression of the superiority to Orpheus of the minstrels, is skewed and sarcastic.

This is not the beneficent, or vengeful, trumpeting of Eolus, nor the processions for Theseus and Emelye and Paloman. Nor is it the specific class vehicle of Robyn. It is self parody, Chaucer taking his earlier naive use of pastoral and courtly music and twisting the entire category to participate in a catalogue of mockery.

Song in the Merchant's Tale is the melody of sarcasm, the mutilated plaything of fools. Januarie, Damayan and the fairies make music, making fun of their own slim capacities, their shallow moral perspective.

..Januarie,  
..in the garden with his faire May  
Syngeth ful murier than the papejay

L2320MT

The blind elder, confident of his walls of wealth and garden, sings of his love for, his power over, his young wife. His song, like his wedding-night, neck-shaking, post-coital aubade, gives comedy equal time with pathos and morality. The raised voice, here in this tale, is human pride and greed. The song is the shouted sin of the vision-impaired, who cannot see enough to hide, either his treasures or his trespasses.

He sings merrier than a popinjay, but how merry is that? A popinjay is a parrot, and such birds do not sing really, but squawk. Or

they parrot, they imitate speech and other surrounding sounds. This animal reference contributes to the nasty symbolism of the music. A parrot has no soul or song. The second and third definitions from the SOED are : an heraldic representation of a parrot; and "The figure of a parrot fixed on a pole as a mark to shoot at." Alive or dead, there is no music in this parrot, or this Januarie and his song. There is only discord, delusion, pride, and "coveitisse."

### The Squire's Tale

There are in the short and unfinished Squire's Tale only two mentions of the musical world. A Tartar khan, perhaps Ghengis or his grandson, is holding a festival to celebrate his twenty years of rule, as well as his birthday.

[Cambyuskan} sit thus in his nobleye,  
Herknynghe his mynstralles hir thynges pleye  
Biforn hym at the bord

L77SqT

Chaucer was never dispatched to the Caucasus (though he did travel to Italy three times on behalf of the King). He narrates a culture to which he has no exposure. But he does know the social hierarchy of his home court. Chaucer substitutes the familiar for the exotic. Musicians played, almost for background, as Edward III or Richard II

or Henry IV dined. Music-workers were valued, but not regarded, consistently anonymous, heard but not carefully listened to. We are in the age of warrior-kings still. Henry VIII's musical activity comes not for almost 100 years. Minstrels, in this fiction within a fiction, and perhaps at the Westminster of the latter 1300s, are still nameless and faceless, audible wallpaper.

..Cambyuskan,  
Roos fro his bord, ther as he sat ful hye.  
Toforn hym gooth the loude mynstralcye,  
Til he can to his chamber of paramentz,  
Ther as they sownen divers instruments,  
That it is lyk an hevne for to heere

L266SqT

The khan rises from his meal, and is preceded by the band as he proceeds to the hall. The musicians and their tools are still without description or name. They play several kinds of instruments, which sound like heaven, like the music of praise that angels sing to the Lord. But their real function is to escort their temporal lord, to sound his approach, his motion to a new site. These are references completely within the conventional realm that marks the early sort, here used in contradiction to other more specific environmental detail.

The Tale character is sketched by the pomp of band, at and

from the board. The Tale teller reveals his love of both regalia and serenade, "an hevne for to heere". The Squire would happily lord over a table and a "meene", and be announced by marching fanfares. A heavenly sound is a joy in itself, as well as a fan to pride. Music here is service and praise, and the ruler is defined by the degree and quality of service rendered.

### The Franklin's Tale

The Franklin in his prologue says he will retell a story

These olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes  
Of diverse aventures madden layes,  
Whiche lays with hire instrumentz they songe

L709FrT

The notable piece of this quotation is the "gentil". Here are music and instrument not in the hands of nameless servants, but exercised by nobles, people of the highest class. They are writing and singing songs about their own adventures, rather than singing folk material, legends, or courtly romances. We have heard the dream-knight of the Book of the Duchesse sing love-pleints, and so does Troilus. But most gentlemen don't touch instruments. The Squire does play the flute, though the real business of his life should be war. And his use of the instrument impugns, almost un-mans him. Heralds and clarions are

the music of blood and maneuver. But the Breton gentles do not hesitate to sing their offshore, ahistorical history, unimpeached, though the callouses of lyre differ from those of the sword.

In the body of the tale, Aurelius parades before Dorigen.

He syngeth, daunceth, passynge any man  
... Save in his songs somewhat wold he wreye  
His wo, as in a general compleynyng.

L929FrT

He sings his own songs of the pain of love. We find music here performed by the gentles (like the grieving knight in the *Book of the Duchesse*) and not as part of ritual or procession. This song is personal, an expression of pain without public function.

He seyde he loved, and was biloved no thing.  
Of switch matter made he many lays,  
Songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes.

L946FRT

Aurelius has fetched a magician from Brittany, a shape-shifter, to reshape his mournful future, his rocky coast; to help him seduce, or coerce, a married woman. They return to an England locked in winter, to a sun dim as brass where,



Janus sit by the fyr, with double berd,  
And drynketh of his bugle horn the wyn.

L1252FrT

Janus is here a symbolic personage, an image of the turning of the year. Drinking wine by the fire is a way to keep warm during the long dark evenings of the small ice age. Note the organic reference, the bugle horn. The horn of a wild ox is used as a drinking vessel. Such horns are also used to store food or powder, or as hunting horns. It is not unlikely that some laboriously scraped out horns did all jobs. The dry-mouthed hunt-master, exhausted after running through the woods all day, blowing forloyns, stops in an ale-house on the way home. He claps his horn down, narrow open end tightly against his palm, and holds it up the innkeeper for a draft. And witness the etymologic sequence: from bugle, a wild ox, to bugle, a military horn. The animal, the bugle-ox, is dragged forward in time into a musical vocabulary. Perhaps when Janus rises next morning he can uncork the small end of his wine-cup, and call hounds and hunters to follow the trail of winter hare.

The musical mentions in the Franklin's Tale are largely conventional. The Songes are love-pleints, the singers amorous youths. The only new item is rhetorical, the use of musical talent in hyperbole.

## The Prioress

The music of Prioress, both as pilgrim and narrator, is the music of the human, and post-human voice.

...Madame Eglantyne.

Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,  
Entuned in hir nose ful seemly

L121GP

She sings in church, chapel, or convent, probably as well as she speaks French. Eglantyne works hard on her mask, but seeping through is her provincial English accent, her labored table manners, and, we hear, her nasal-timbered singing voice. Like her garish broach, the Prioress' vocal affectations are naïve and inappropriate, ambitious and off-key.

Her off-kilter miracle tale uses musical worship to start a tragedy of murder and reprisal. It parallels the Prioress' deluded and inappropriate sense of self and vocation. In her Prologue she prays the Virgin to "Gydeh my song that I shal of you seye." (487PT). Her story is, for this nun, a song of worship, however disturbing, however askew.

Her little "clergeon" insists on learning a hymn to the Virgin, Alma Redemptoris. He doesn't understand the language, and barely comprehends the intent. He is not of the age of reason, in the eyes of

the Church, and will have made his first Communion, but not his confirmation. His religious instruction, including this self-undertaken piece, consists largely of recitation, of rote response. Is he a saint, and is this a saint's tale? Is music enlisted here by Chaucer as a vehicle of praise, an occasion of martyrdom? Or is the poet undermining the value of the event, the education, and the social structure that has made the tragic outcome inevitable?

The swetnesse his hert perced so  
Of Cristes mooder that, to hire to preye,  
He kan not stynte of syngyng by the weye.

L555PT

As in so many places, Chaucer is doing several things at once. He writes his Tale so that those who care to take it at face value, the simple majority, smug and righteous, can justify a pogrom. But for those who have ears of dissent, Chaucer's Lollard friends perhaps, who disdain a sentimental spiritualism, and a sentimental literature, there may be an underlying message. Don't tempt the devil. Don't sing the song if you don't know the words. Go to school, obey your parents and the master, and don't stray from the path, little red riding hood!

To counter my rampant speculation, we may take the above quoted verse as support for an ecstatic religiosity. The words are not

important, nor is continued temporal existence. The joy of worship and the act of singing are identical. He cannot stop. This innocent is born to sing the praise of the Virgin. That is his vital function. Whatever interrupts him is either martyrdom, or his own sinful distraction. And the miracle is musical. He goes on singing after he is dead, because what he is doing, hymning, supercedes material life.

My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,  
...for the worship of (Christ's) Mooder deer  
Yet may I synge O Alma loude and cleere.

L649PT

#### The Nun's Priest's Tale

In the Nun's Priest's Tale there are many musical references, as we hear about a singing rooster.

...Chauntecleer.  
In al the land, of crowing nas his peer.  
His voys was muriier than the murie orgon  
On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon. L2849NPT

Orgon is a plural noun, like a pair of pants, and this plural verb form “-gon”, Benson says, distinguishes this organ from the portative. The portative organ is often pictured in illustrated manuscripts, the

musician half obscured by what appears to be a tray of vertical pipes. The instrument consists of a small keyboard, bellows and pipes, and is only relatively portable. It has a thin tone and a minor volume. The church organ, of course, the king of instruments, is a building in itself, music as furniture, as wall, with timbres mimicking and volume mocking all other efforts at sound. Chaucer says Chauntecleer's voice is murier, more pleasant, than the organ. London, a town in his time smaller than other European capitals, was full of backyards, full of chickens. Cock crow was not a literary expression but a time of day, an endurance of cacophony for everyone in Chaucer's audience, from King to page. In this relatively late tale, the poet uses a specific instrument to contribute to the ironic structure of the work. The use of animals, and especially birds, as heroic substitutes, under-miners of messages, is a Chaucerian tactic dating back to the House of Fame. This reference is of kind with Januarie's popinjay. A rooster sings no better than a parrot. Chaucer makes sure to assert that Chauntecleer not only sings well, better than the reedy breathing of a portative, but better than the grand tones of the positive, the artifact built to quarter in the house of God. This is hyperbole twisted into comedy, with the musical technology of the day doing the job.

...Chauntecleer in al his pryde  
...Cast up his eyen to the brighte sonne,

And knew by kynde, and by noon oother lore,  
That it was pryme, and crew with blissful stevene.

L4381NPT

Here singing (and vocal song is really a territory of its own in Chaucer), is primitive, organic, instinctual. Chaucer is no stranger to natural energies, such as lust, and anger, and often portrays them. But they are not celebrated so much as smiled on, accepted, human, sinful, inevitable, comic. Chauntecleer's singing in the morning is the thoughtless outburst of the proud man. It brings no credit to music, nor the musician, the voice. It has no design, no meter. It is part of the real world, and Chaucer does not condemn it, but he warns us. Don't close your eyes!

Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee  
Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille  
Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,  
As thilke day was maad upon the fox.  
Of bras they broghten bemes, and of box,  
Of horn, of boon, in whiche they blewe and powped,  
And therwithal they skriked and they howped.  
It semed as that hevene sholde falle.

L4584NPT

Chauntecleer, aurally seduced, has shut his eyes, and been taken by the fox. And his fellow domestics raise a ruckus, to alert the whole yard, to request help from a greater power. Pride of voice, and disregard of dream, have put Chauntecleer in peril. And now the yelling and blaring of instrument and voice attempt to rescue him. But it is a cacophony like that preceding or following death, the ducks on the killing floor, the fiends in hell, and ineffective as well. It is more, and more unpleasant, noise than Jack Straw made, looting London, hunting Flemings, and again, the peasants did not triumph. Only a quiet and desperate cunning on the part of Chauntecleer transforms disaster and tragedy into humiliation and narrow survival. Wat Tyler is hewed down at the peace parley. Song is pride is blindness is sin, and a second chance is not had by all. Chauntecleer beshrews himself and the fox.

Thou shalt namoor through thy flaterye

Do me to synge and wynke with my ye

L4619NPT

Trumpets of brass, of box(wood), of bone, and of horn, we read, the panicked ducks and geese blow and shriek. Or is it the rioting peasants who hooped and pooped as they ran through the streets, pitchforking weavers, and burning Gaunt's palace? We hear a broken consort, of screaming fowl and howling men, the music of hell

looming around the corner, outside the walls of farmyard, of city gate. Avian and human at the point of sword and tooth yell for help. And trumpets “skrieked” so that it seemed heaven should fall. The horns of peasant and herald and huntsman are all pumping away together, despite their incongruities of class, of timbre, social function, and pitch.

Trumpets were made of these different materials in the England of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The brass horn would have been the possession of the royal or noble household, a precious artifact. A rank of heralds might stand and blow for attention, as Richard II rode into, or spoke from the stands Chaucer built for, the tournament at Smithfield.

The horn of horn would be the tool of the huntsman, harvested from his trade. He would use the best antler or ox horn he had found in his career of careering through the woods, woods claimed exclusively by his employer, the local aristocrat. The bone trumpet may be Chaucer’s metrically demanded insertion into the line. There were ivory and bone whistles, and he may be adding to the diversity of his aural squawl by including the shrill whistling of shepherd or squire.

### The Second Nun’s Tale

..whil the organs maden melodie,  
To God alone in herte thus sang she:



“O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye  
Unwemmed, lest that it confounded be.

L134SNT

This melody we hear is conventional wedding music, a celebratory processional found in several tales. In both this, the Second Nun’s Tale, and the Clerk’s Tale, these nuptial marches are ominous, threatening the future of the bride with the pretence of joyful noise.

This roial markys, richely arrayed,  
Lordes and ladyes in his compaignye,  
..With many a soun of sundry melodye  
..In this array the righte wey han holde.

L267CIT

Januarie, the Merchant’s groom, throws a wedding party, hires a band, feeds the crowd of dancers. Music is the usher to all these arranged marriages, these traditional contracts which ratify male power in the social economy, the master bedroom. Custance is marched to the shore, solemnly, with every circumstance, which must include here heralds of royal presence, as well as marital send-off, whether she weeps or sings. The musical shield that precedes noble passage, brushes aside interference, and brings her safe to the water’s

edge, to the border of homeland and adulthood. Griselde, Custance. Cecilie, all are piped off to the slaughterhouse gates, the marital sacrament. These ritual processions are overtures to purgatory.

Grisilde doesn't know Walter is on the way. Custance and Januarie's May have been shopped for, youth and beauty and wide-hipped fertility, not forgetting dowry, the primary considerations. The wedding march is portentous, a battle tune, even a dirge. The music does not alleviate the dangers of entering a social structure so oppressive, so often fatal, to women that the convent is a frequent alternative. The distraction of sundry melodies deafens all to the probable outcome of marriage, to the inevitable outcome of the material world.

Cecilie came of a noble Roman family says the Second Nun, who can afford musicians, melody, and march. "Organs" made the melody of ceremony as Cecilie married Valerian. Like the church organ to which Chaucer's voice is compared, "organs" may be the plural noun, the institutional musical furniture. Or we may be hearing several portatives, which have made the trip from bride's home to church, wheezing in the dusty or muddy street, and now wait to accompany the procession on to Valerian's parents. They celebrate the secretly celibate future of Cecilie and Valerian.

There are other small musics in Canterbury Tales. The Canon's Yeoman seems to me another type of bagpiper, blowing on the fire,

red-faced with effort and poison. There is marital meter and music in Sir Thopas. Musicians open the Pardoner's Tale, whose young folk haunt taverns and,

..with harpes, lutes, and gyternes, L466PaT,CT

They daunce and pleyen at dees bothe day and nyght .

### Summary

Chaucer uses music, instruments and players as rhetorical tools throughout his career. He starts tamely, conventionally, with neither character nor instrument fully defined. There are horns. There are gods. There are men. As his career and his confidence and his art progress, he gains rhetorical tools and cultural experience. In the Book of the Duchesse there is an anonymous Hunt-Master and his horn. His work, his language is performed, loud and primitive, a collective exhortation to action. The House of Fame gains sophistication, of character and instrument definition. Eolus has an Olympian back-story, minions. The poet and the god each have complicated tasks here, of listening and speaking, with words and penetrating tones. We are introduced to the harp and the pipe, to deception and dishonesty, to dissonance between timbre and character. Each character is further defined or belied by his or her accompaniment.

The Canterbury Tales, written over the period of a decade, displays an evolving, progressive, daring. The Prologue, which is we speculate, written late in the process, has all the riffs and tools of Chaucer's greatest achievement, The Miller's Tale. Arcite and Palomon, Emelye; the Squire with his flute; the Friar with his rote; all lead us to Absalon, Hende Nicholas, and the Miller and his bagpipe. Each is clothed by class, instrument and song. Naïve and unworldly; sophisticated, lazy, lustful; bombastic, bullying, inebriated. No heroes here, Chaucer finds. He loves them all, painting them with words and music, men sharing desires, for women, power, the story-telling podium.

With each person, each instrument carries a history of class and function. Reading this body of work with some attention to the specifics of noise and its makers may enhance our understanding, and our joy.

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