



About the Author: Professor Karl Kügle
ERC Research Professor and Senior Research Fellow,
Wadham College



Music and Late Medieval European Court Cultures:

REWRITING THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF LATE MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Late medieval cultural history in Europe has traditionally been studied from a mono-disciplinary and national(ist) perspective. For musicologists researching the period 1250–1450, this meant a strong focus on sources and on notation, leading to well-established distinctions between ‘English’, ‘French’ or ‘Italian’ music and styles. Musicology’s sister disciplines developed along similar lines: we speak of an ‘English’ or ‘French’ Gothic, a ‘northern’ and a ‘southern’ Renaissance, Middle French, Middle Dutch or Middle High German ‘literature’. Historians of different nationalities sometimes even place starkly contrasting value on a single historical figure: the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, for example, to modern Germans is merely a transitional figure, whereas to modern Czechs he is a national hero. And scholars generally take little interest in ‘peripheries’ - which actually often include formerly powerful polities whose territories nowadays are divided up among several nation states.

How can we rectify the distortions generated by such traditional historiographies? How did words, sounds, visual,

gestural, material, and spatial components interact and form culture, and specifically ‘court culture’? Can we rewrite the cultural history of late medieval Europe along lines that adequately reflect the perceptions of contemporaries and give due attention to courtly centres or networks that have become submerged? Specifically to music, what exactly were the social and architectural contexts in which a polyphonic song by, say, Du Fay, or a motet by Machaut would have been performed, and how would an audience have savoured these pieces aesthetically? These are some of the questions that the ERC-funded MALMECC project will seek to tackle in the upcoming years.

MALMECC, an acronym for Music And Late Medieval European Court Cultures, is supported by an Advanced Grant provided by the European Research Council (ERC) and will run through the end of 2020. The project not only seeks answers across disciplinary fault lines but also strives to innovate methodologically. As Principal Investigator, I am the only musicologist on the team; all other MALMECC researchers

were deliberately recruited from sister disciplines in order to generate the transdisciplinary critical mass that the project requires to achieve its objectives. Three post-doctoral researchers, Drs Christophe Masson (History), David Murray (Literary History) and Laura Slater (Art History) are my scholarly collaborators on the project. Martha Buckley lends invaluable support as Programme Administrator.

Each MALMECC scholar will pursue their own research project. The various sub-projects within MALMECC were selected to converge along interlinked research themes, generating synergies that can only be achieved through our work together. For my own research, for example, I focus on the court culture of late medieval Savoy during the reign of Duke Amadeus VIII (1383–1451), later (anti-) Pope Felix V (1439–49), his son and successor Louis of Savoy (1413–69), and Duchess Anne of Savoy (1418–62), better known under her maiden name Anne of Lusignan. She was the daughter of King Janus of Cyprus and French royal princess Charlotte of Bourbon and, among other things, was



Oxford Musician Issue 7 2017

‘Chantilly, Musée Condé: Frères Limbourg, Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry, mois de mai’ (image in the public domain)

responsible for the acquisition of the Shroud of Turin. Laura Slater, our art historian, in turn researches cultural and dynastic networks linking late medieval England, the Low Countries and France. The court of English Queen Philippa of Hainaut (1311–69) is her primary point of entry. Philippa was the daughter of another French princess, Joan of Valois, and her husband William, Count of Hainaut, Holland and Zeeland – a group of territories nowadays divided among France, Belgium and The Netherlands. Our two projects share an interest in the role of females as cultural patronesses and nodes of power at court, but also deal with territories that have been relegated to the periphery of the modern nation states that they now belong to (in the case of Savoy, France, Italy and Switzerland).

Literary historian David Murray and historian Christophe Masson pursue a complementary focus: the dynamics of ecclesiastic courts. David examines the musico-poetic production of the *Monk of Salzburg* against the background of the considerable political ambitions of prince-archbishop Pilgrim II von Puchheim (c1330–96) at Salzburg. For an ecclesiastic ruler such as Pilgrim, available power networks would have extended deeply into the Austro-German aristocracy through his familial lineage, alongside the transnational coterie of churchmen that extended all the way to the cardinals and, with a bit of luck, the one cardinal who served as Pope at any given time. Princes of the Church during the later Middle Ages were typically brothers, nephews and uncles of secular rulers and their wives. They played important roles as advisers, educators, intellectuals, administrators and rulers in their own right, and formed a network of their own that will be examined by Christophe Masson.

Needless to say, visual and musical performances were essential for the cultural

display at all these courtly communities. Courtiers secular and ecclesiastic often grew up together and were connected through dynastic and educational ties. This makes it easy to understand how a transnational courtly habitus came about that the MALMECC team aims to reconstruct.

Music, sounds and listening played a vital role in courtly life, from the daily prayers and mass to making, exchanging, discussing, hearing and performing courtly song and poetry, to dancing and acoustic signals performed at courtly ceremonies. Much remains to be recovered about music’s *Sitz im Leben* from romances, chronicles, educational texts and archival records as well as architectural, visual and material artefacts. Triangulating this evidence against that of the notated sources and archives already explored, and assembling our findings into a coherent picture, is an exciting challenge and the main objective of the MALMECC team in the upcoming years.

For further information please go to the project website malmecc.eu, which features regular updates and blogs by team members.

“HOW DID WORDS, SOUNDS, VISUAL, GESTURAL, MATERIAL, AND SPATIAL COMPONENTS INTERACT AND FORM CULTURE, AND SPECIFICALLY ‘COURT CULTURE’?”