

The Cantigas de Santa Maria

The songs of the Holy Mary

by

Leda Filippopoulou

During the 12th and the 13th centuries, throughout the Christian world, flourished the cult of the Virgin Mary. Men saw her as an intermediary between the common people and God, her Son, and as a symbol of absolute love and immaculate service to a feminine idea. People were inclined to ask the Virgin to plead their cases with God, and large numbers of songs were devoted to her, singing her praise and recounting the miracles that she performed in aid of the pious and the clean of heart. There are many collections of these songs in Italian, French and Latin, but the largest one is the Cantigas de Santa Maria, compiled between 1260 and 1280 by Alfonso X, El Sabio (The Wise) "King of Castilla, Toledo, Leon, Galicia, Sevilla, Cordoba, Murcia, Jaen and the Algarbe" .

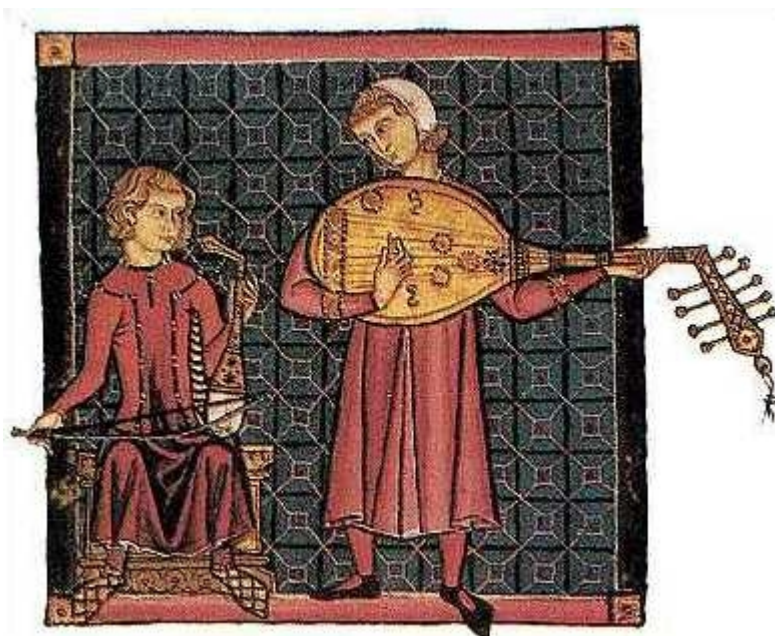


King Alfonso the Wise directing his scribes and musicians

Alfonso was a highly educated man, whose Court consisted of Christian, Arab and Jewish poets, musicians and scientists. During his reign he compiled, edited and published a large number of books, with subjects ranging from art and literature to scientific texts translated into Castillian from the Arabic originals. But the most important of these publications are the Cantigas, which have been described as an

“encyclopedia of narrative art in both verbal and visual form, of poetic meters, of musical notation, of daily life and custom” . This may sound pompous, but it is an undeniable fact that the Cantigas de Santa Maria offer us an amazing insight in 13th century everyday life.

There are some 426 cantigas contained in four manuscripts, of which three are in Spain (two in the monastery of Escorial and one in Madrid) and one in Florence. The two most important are the Escorial manuscripts. One contains 401 cantigas with their music and a series of richly illuminated miniatures of musicians holding instruments, giving us a first-hand clue of the instrumentation used in their performance. The variety of instruments is impressive. All types of stringed instruments, bowed (fidulas and rebab or rebec) or plucked (citterns or guitars, mandolas, lutes, psalteries or zithers and harps), wind instruments (shawms and double shawms, bladder pipes, transverse flutes, pipes or recorders, trumpets, horns or trombas, bagpipes), percussion (drums and tabors, clappers or castanets, cymbals, chime bells) and even portative organ and organistrum or symphonia. Also, the miniatures seem to provide indispensable evidence that the Cantigas were sung by one or more voices variously accompanied by one, two or a group of instruments and sometimes by dancers.



Musicians with rebec and lute

The other contains 194 cantigas, illustrated in a “comic strip” fashion. Each cantiga is represented in six or twelve (and in one case eight) illuminated panels that describe visually the miracle recounted in the song. These panels present us with an amazing view of day-to-day life. Depending on the story we see travelling merchants and pilgrims, battling soldiers, minstrels, physicians exercising their trade, criminals being punished... Every aspect of life is vividly portrayed. Invariably the Virgin Mary appears in the end to proclaim judgement or offer mercy. The cantigas are written in Galician – Portuguese, the medieval Romance language of the province of Galicia. Galicia was the site of Santiago de Compostella, one of the greatest shrines of the Christian world, therefore it was exposed to pilgrims from all over Europe, which brought with them stories from their respective countries, as well as the elaborate poetry of the

Provençal troubadours. This, mixed with the native vein of folk lyricism, produced a highly developed literary language, used both by Portuguese and Spanish minstrels for love poems (cantigas de amigo, cantigas de amor) or poetic satire (cantigas de escarmio, cantigas de maldizer). It has been suggested that Alfonso used it also for political reasons, as Galicia was one of the provinces he ruled over.

Almost all of the cantigas are in the popular virelai form (refrain/verse/refrain), with some modifications. Below an example.

R
refrain



San - ta Ma - ri - a, stre - la do di - a, mos - tra - nos vi - a pe - ra Deus e nos gui - a.

R
refrain



San - ta Ma - ri - a, stre - la do di - a, mos - tra - nos vi - a pe - ra Deus e nos gui - a.

S
Stollen



ca - ve - er - - fa - ze - los e - rra - dos que per - der - - fo - ran per pe - ca - dos

S
Gegenstollen



en - ten - der - - de que mu - i cul - pa - dos son; mais per - - ti son per - do - a - dos

a = R
Abgesang



da ou - sa - di - a que - lles fa - zi - a fa - zer fo - li - a mais que non de - ve - ri - a.

R
refrain



San - ta Ma - ri - a, stre - la do di - a, mos - tra - nos vi - a pe - ra Deus e nos gui - a.

The melodies of the cantigas come from a variety of sources. Some were adapted from sacred (western chant, mozarabic liturgical music) or popular melodies from both sides of the Pyrenees. There are cantigas whose melodies derive from troubadour songs in Provençal. Others have striking affinities with Arab music, and many have borrowed the metrical structure of the zajal, a popular type of song in Arabic. The tunes were composed or adapted by court musicians or, as it has been claimed, by Alfonso himself. They are in a variety of modes, but the Dorian and Mixolydian predominate. Unfortunately, the square notation used in all the manuscripts still presents serious problems of transcription as regards metre, rhythm and melisma.

The most striking feature of the cantigas, however, is their narrative content, which formed a vital part of their appeal. "A profound and delightfully naïve confidence in the boundless compassion, or rather the infinite tolerance of the Mother of God towards the sins of man, pervades all these songs. Through them we get a glimpse of the medieval soul, with its solid faith, its crude beliefs and simple notions of the supernatural, its charming and unbridled fantasy, its unconscious irreverence and its innocent mixture of the human and the divine." The majority are accounts of the miracles performed by the Blessed Virgin (cantigas de miragres) but every tenth is a hymn in her praise (cantigas de loor). It is these latter ones, many of which feature

first person accounts (for example cantigas 1, 347, and 400), which are believed to be by Alfonso himself. Many cantigas de loor borrow their ideas and their language from the Courtly Love songs of the period. For example, in cantiga 10 Mary is described as the rose of roses and the flower of flowers, the most beautiful of women, a mistress that everybody should love and cherish and in cantiga 340 she is called the Daughter and Bride of God, the Dawn through which the Sun, who is Christ, was revealed, the Dawn which brightens the Heavens.

In the miracle cantigas, the language is extremely matter-of-fact and the narratives often bawdy or humoristic. Their stories, like the melodies, come from a variety of sources (for example, cantiga 42 uses a story that was popular in France before the 13th century), and many were written down in other countries. The variety of the themes is infinite. Most cantigas recount miracles done upon the common folk: there is a nun who is about to flee with the knight which has seduced her, a pregnant abbess being miraculously delivered from her baby, a ship of greedy merchants caught in a storm pleading for help, even a thief spared from the gallows because he prayed to the Virgin Mary. Others deal with kings and princes, and men and women of high status. Some draw their themes from a historical background, such as cantiga 15, in which Mary defends the city of Caesaria from the Emperor Julian the Apostate or cantiga 28, in which Mary defends Constantinople against the Moors. The Holy Mary is credited with healing powers, as in cantiga 37 where she restores an amputated foot and in cantiga 69 where she made a deaf-mute speak, and even with bringing the dead back to life, as in cantigas 21 and 33 where she restores to life a child and a pilgrim. Some cantigas deal with Her powers in a more circumspect way, like cantiga 29 where Mary made her image appear on the stones, but all of them demonstrate in the end the boundless love that people expected from the Virgin Mary.

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