

Beowulf Performance

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Summary

This is a historically-informed performance of an excerpt from the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. The alliterative poetry is chanted and accompanied by an early triangular harp. (The characteristic Germanic lyre had fallen out of fashion by the 11th century.) The poem is Seamus Heaney's translation; the music is inspired by the Gregorian liturgical recitative. Body language and affect are somewhat constrained by the use of the instrument, but dramatic movement and gestures are not given as characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* or court poet.

Old English Alliterative Poetry

Old English alliterative poetry did not use rhyme to organize its lines; it used similar starting sounds of syllables (like I just did there). It also did not have a regular meter; it had instead a collection of acceptable metrical phrases for each half-line of a work, which could be combined in any way the poet liked. Both these features make setting Old English poetry to music challenging.

Beowulf

The piece I am performing today is Seamus Heaney's translation.⁰ Seamus Heaney's version of *Beowulf* was widely recognized, when it came out, as superior poetry. He maintains the alliterative and irregular nature of the poetry, and even mostly adheres to the Old English metrical patterns.

The dating on the *Beowulf* manuscript is controversial, with anything from the 8th to the 10th century suggested. Many people are eager for an earlier dating, because ancient things have a pull. The British Library currently gives it a date of the last quarter of the 10th century.¹ The poem was analyzed by scholars using oral formulaic theory, and they claim that the current written text was originally orally composed.²

In developing a performance for this piece, I had three main branches of influence: what could be learned directly from period sources, studies of analogous oral epic performance in the modern era, and other historically-informed modern performances. After I go over the various sources that influenced my performance development, I will discuss my artistic process. Readers pressed for time may want to skip the sources and go straight to the development, referring back to the background information as needed.

Period Sources for Performance Development

Literature

Of the Old English literature that survives, three pieces of poetry paint images of the court poet/performer, the scop. *Beowulf* is itself one; King Hrothgar has a scop who performs during the post-Grendel celebrations. The poems *Deor* and *Widsith*, found in the late 10th century Exeter book, are the other principle sources. The all paint similar pictures of a man who sings or chants or recites words with a *hearpe* in hand. It has been argued that it is never explicitly said that they do these things at the same time;³

however, that's a bit like saying that the sentence "Gene Kelley sings and dances in 'Singing in the Rain'" means that Kelley sings, and then dances, and never does the two together. It's possible that is what's meant, but it seems unlikely.

In addition to these, the gnomic wisdom literature provides profiles of the performer. "The Gifts of Men" describes various skills men may have, while no man has all of them. Among hall-building, patience, and martial skills, performance skills are mentioned:⁴

- "One is a poet gifted with songs."
- "One may play the harp with his hands; he has cleverness upon the glee-board."
- "One is very quick, has amusing tricks, a gift for glee-deeds, for the people, light and limb-flexible."

I have already asserted that the poetry paints a picture of a singing, harping poet. Does it follow that the amusing clownish fellow is also one and the same as the *scop*? "The Fortunes of Men" elaborates on the inherent unfairness of life (although it is a part of God's plan), describing how some men will have lives of power, others lives of goodness, some lives of ignominy, and others of misfortune. Two fellows are of interest:

"One shall amuse men in the hall, cheer them at beer, the bench-sitters will be drinkers — there will be great joy. One shall sit at his lord's feet with the harp, he will always receive his fee, and always keenly wrest the strings, let the nail pick the strings to ring sweetly, their voices leap forth with great desire."⁵

This describes two different lives or fortunes, the clown and the *scop*. ("Their voices" refers to the *scop*'s and the harp's voices, not to two men.) Actual jesters or clowns, male and female, are referenced in the Domesday book. While I cannot rule out that there were performers skilled in both physical performance and musical performance, these were recognized as separate skill sets.

Didactic Prose

We have several early treatises on music theory to assist our understanding of how medieval music was structured. Hucbald wrote in northern Germany in the ninth century; Guido d'Arezzo wrote in Italy in the mid-11th. There is not much difference between the two; Guido does write more about organum (the use of parallel fifths above or fourths below as harmony). Hucbald, in explaining the hexachord, mentions in passing that the lyre is tuned to the same sequence of notes (C D E F G A).⁶

Guido recommends that a song stay within the compass of an octave⁷; medieval chant was frequently more constrained than that, ranging within a fifth or a sixth⁸. Stepwise motion is typical, and leaps of larger than a fifth should be avoided. (Basically – the larger the interval, the less Guido thinks you ought to use it.)

Church Music

Large parts of the medieval mass were sung, including prose prayers. These were accommodated by the use of liturgical recitative tones and free composition. The recitative tones (called psalm tones when they were applied to the psalms) rise from a beginning intonation to the tenor, or reciting tone (for the authentic modes, this was a fifth above tonic). One continues to recite words on the tenor until around halfway through the line, when the mediant provides an inflection point. Then one returns to the tenor and holds it until one reaches the end of the line, where the termination will bring one back down to the final.⁹

Free composition is a less structured melodic line that runs through the words from start to finish.

Archaeology

Archeology doesn't have a whole lot to say about 11th century music. The iconic Germanic lyres, like the one found at Sutton Hoo, are dated 6th-7th cen. The Jorvik panpipes are a 10th century find. Although broken, a sequence of five notes remains playable. The notes are the first five tones of a diatonic scale (A B C# D E, in this case), which aligns with Hucbald's description of lyre tuning.¹⁰

Art

The earliest depiction of a triangular harp (one with a forepillar; angle harps are much more ancient) is a Pictish stonecarving c. 800. No harps survive from early period, but we can trace their increasing popularity in manuscript art. The Utrecht psalter (9th cen.) gives the first pictures of what is recognizably the forebearer of our later harps, often played alongside Germanic lyres of various shapes.

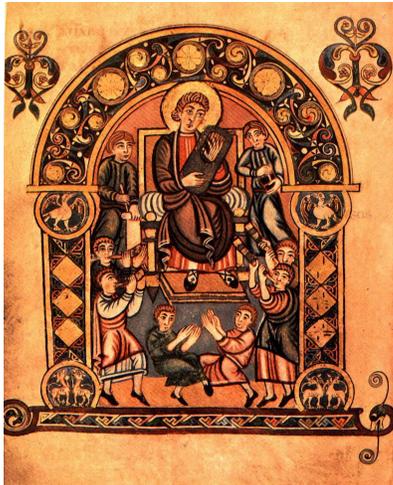


Dupplin Cross Harper, c. 800



Utrecht Psalter, c. 850

In the 8th cen., King David was depicted holding a lyre while he performed the psalms. By the 11th cen., the lyre has been demoted to one of David's retainers. The king now holds a harp.



8th cen. Vespasian Psalter



11th cen. Winchcombe Psalter

Modern Sources for Performance Development

Modern Oral Epics

In the early 1930s, Professor Milman Parry traveled to Yugoslavia to answer questions about Homer. The Classics departments of the time were fighting over theories on how Homer composed his great works: had he been a single poet, writing out a canonical text, or was the text we had the final iteration of an oral tradition? Parry had the idea to study a living oral epic tradition, the guslars of Yugoslavia, and to analyze it for unique features. Then, if the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* had those features, that would be evidence that they, too, were products of an oral culture. Parry's student, Albert Lord, wrote up this research in his seminal

book, *The Singer of Tales*, concluding that yes, Homer's works came out of an “oral-formulaic” tradition. What's more, European epics such as *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland* also showed the classic signs – repeated motifs, both of large narrative elements (e.g., a sea voyage) and small linguistic ones (e.g., “the wine-dark sea”).

The Singer of Tales now includes excerpts of the music sung and played by three guslars, all performing a similar story.¹¹ In every case, the accompaniment on the gusli (a single-stringed bowed instrument) is rapid and elaborate when the guslar is not singing, and more simple when he is. The accompaniments to the voice range from a drone on tonic, to a moving drone, to playing the melody along with the singer. They are simple, to allow the singer to attend to singing, and grow complex only when the recitation is complete. The melodies themselves span about a fifth or a sixth.

Other ethnographic studies provide other possible performance perspectives. The Turkic peoples of Central Asia perform epics in which singing alternates with recitation. The song is sung to a single line of music, repeated with variations for each line of the song, and the melody also typically spans a fifth. Motion is mostly stepwise, in major or minor seconds, and the setting is syllabic (one note per one syllable of text).¹² The Xhosa and Zulu have a eulogistic poetic tradition which tallies in some ways to the role of the scop as a praise-poet for his lord, and a keeper of law and legend; these poems are always solo recitative performances, without music of any kind.¹³ These suggest other possible performance styles.

Modern Historically Informed Performances

In an attempt to educate my ear and become more conversant in the sound of early music, I listen to a fair number of modern early music recordings. Only a fraction of these apply to early period England:

- Christmas in Royal Anglo-Saxon Winchester: 10th century chant from the Winchester Troper – The Winchester Troper survives with staffless neumes notation.¹⁴
- Edda: Myths from Medieval Iceland – Sequentia combined influences from medieval chant and Icelandic folk music to create tunes for medieval texts.¹⁵
- The Earliest Songbook in England – A recording of the Later Cambridge Songs, religious songs c. 1200. These survived with music.¹⁶
- Lost Songs of a Rhineland Harper: A recording of the Early Cambridge Songs, secular and religious songs from the mid-11th cen. Only a few survive with staffless neumes. Some survive in later goliardic manuscripts with music, which was used for this recording. The rest had modern music composed in medieval style.¹⁷

'Edda' and 'Lost Songs' contain some period music, as well as music modernly composed in a medieval style, by an ensemble with decades of experience performing that repertoire. Bagby has explained how his group developed a language of “modal gestures” decomposed from medieval and folk music, and then using the rhythms of the poetry as a guide, re-composed them into music.¹⁸ I haven't done anything nearly as comprehensive, but it inspired my approach.

I have also seen Benjamin's Bagby's performance of *Beowulf*. I don't agree with all of his performance decisions, but it is an unarguably effective performance. Like him, I improvise my melodic line, giving it a mostly chant-like character.¹⁹

In addition to these performances, there are handbooks with suggestions for how to perform medieval music.^{20,21} They are, however, mostly focused on 12th century and later repertoire. But their suggestions for accompaniment have informed my performance. This includes the appropriateness of simple melodies for work that is less song and more “heightened poetry,” and the use of simple accompaniments such as

doubling the melody, drone at final or at an octave from final, or open fifths.

Performing *Beowulf*

Selection of excerpt

There is a lot of *Beowulf* to choose from. His epic battles with Grendel, Grendel's mother, or the dragon were all candidates. But I chose the selection I did (lines 229-259, the Danish coast guard challenges the Geats) for these reasons:

- I love the coast guard. This unnamed Danish warrior is brave and wise – he boldly challenges a troop of fifteen men, including the enormous Beowulf, but recognizes their good intentions. I wanted to showcase this minor character.
- This section ends with a famous kenning: “word hoard” for Beowulf's eloquence.

Selection of instrument

The literature of the period consistently links the scop to the *hearpe*, so I wanted to accompany myself with a stringed instrument. As discussed above, the Germanic lyre has lost its position as the pre-eminent musical instrument by the 11th century. I do own such an instrument, and I do perform this piece with it, when I want to evoke an earlier period. But for the persona presented here today, I wanted to use a harp.

My harp is an Ardival Rosemarkie. It is based on that early Pictish stone carving of a harp. The harmonic curve (the top piece) of these earliest harps was flat, as shown in the 'Art' section. It is strung with nylon, which has a sound similar to gut. Gerald of Wales, writing in the twelfth century, found Irish wire-strung harps remarkable, so we assume early English instruments were not so strung.^{citation needed} It is tuned diatonically, like Hucbald recommended for the lyre and like the Jorvik panpipes. I use a Pythagorean temperament, with perfect fifths, rather than a modern equal temperament. I am not good enough to tune it by ear, but my Korg tuner has a Pythagorean temperament setting.

Development of chant

It might be possible to set the irregularly metered lines of *Beowulf* to regular metered music, if one is willing to play a little fast and loose with assigning stresses to the stressed notes of the measures.²⁰ That is not something I have gotten the hang of, so I have opted to follow McGee's suggestion of “heightened poetry” and use simple modal melodies.²¹

Following the liturgical recitative tradition, I make frequent use of a chanting tone. However, I don't hold it as strongly as the psalm tones do, allowing for a little more variation away from the mediant and termination. And since Old English poetry makes frequent use of enjambment – of carrying an idea in one poetic line down into the next – I don't always bring every line down to the final. It doesn't work to put a melodic stop sign in the middle of a sentence.

I improvise the chant as I go, letting the natural intonations of the words as they would be spoken guide me to some degree. During my rehearsals for Pentathalon, I stopped to review the psalm tones.²² I was very pleased to find that I was essentially using tone 7 (mixolydian) and that I'd even re-created the intonation (the rising introduction). Granted, I was using it as a termination – but I'd still hit upon a genuine medieval “modal gesture” during my improvisation. This encourages me that I am on the right track.

I initially developed two separate themes, one for Beowulf's sea voyage and one for the coast guard. The sea voyage was eventually dropped from the performance. The coast guard's basic tune holds one note very, very strongly, a repeated, driving force as the coast guard demands answers from the interlopers on his shore. Excursions to a third above and a second below (a range of a fourth in all) relieve this tenor somewhat.

Instrumental Accompaniment and Interludes

Between translations of the original treatises, modern handbooks (McGee, Duffin) distilling them down into performance advice, and modern ethnographic studies (Lord, Reichl), I came to a theory of instrumental accompaniment for the performance. Before I begin to chant, or between pieces, I improvise a modal melody based on the mode in which I will perform. These can be as technical as I can make them, with rapid runs of notes and ornaments. However, once I start to chant, I begin a simple accompaniment of open fifths. If I were playing a bowed instrument, I might prefer a simple drone on tonic; however, I find that on plucked strings, that just doesn't sound right. I alternate between the final and the tenor. If the spirit moves me, the drone might move (to an 'away' position a whole step below tonic) when the melody calls for it.

This is similar to the three musical examples in Lord. The guslars perform with virtuosity while they are not singing, but use a much more simple accompaniment while they are (sometimes, nothing more than a fixed drone).

Body language and affect

I do strive to give some color to my singing: changes in emotional affect between the narrator, the coast guard's initial bold challenge, his awe of Beowulf, and then his resolve as he commits to his challenge again. However, I do not try to 'act out' the action in any way; if I were tempted to do so, my harp would argue. I believe the distinction the Fortunes of Men makes between the limber-limbed physical performer and the singer-poet suggests that this may well be appropriate.

Addition of introduction and ending

I added an in-character introduction, speaking as a scop who had performed the beginning of Beowulf for the audience "earlier" or "yesterday." But for any "late-comers," I helpfully summarize the action so far: Hrothgar builds the hall, Grendel savages it, the attacks continue for twelve years; Beowulf hears of it and decides to destroy the monster, setting sail for Shield-Dane country. Without this, it would not at all be obvious who the coast guard is talking to, or what this has to do with *Beowulf*.

The ending, which promises "the rest of the tale at another time," is a device to mark the end of the performance while the main problem (Grendel) remains unresolved.

Costume

I opt not to cross-dress, taking advantage of our SCAdian flexibility on gender roles. (I have no evidence that scopos were ever women.) I am wearing an 11th century Anglo-Saxon woman's garb.



Woman in Bayeux Tapestry, 11th cen.

Result

I'm not exaggerating when I say that this performance has taken me over ten years to develop. That's about how long I have been studying Anglo-Saxon and early medieval performance. It feels almost silly to say – how on earth can it have taken me ten years to put together a basic harp + voice performance?

It didn't. I was reciting poetry with a Germanic lyre in the early oughts. It's taken this long to get all those details – instrument tuning, type of melody, style of accompaniment, improvised performance, performance style, and so on – to a point where I feel like I have my first complete Anglo-Saxon performance.

It's still not quite right. Adding in the harp gave me solid aural markers – the four rising tones of my accompaniment – that I could use to try to implement Pope's suggestion for metered music for Anglo-Saxon poetry. It made me more aware of when my delivery was (or was not) stressing the alliterative syllables the way it ought to. I'd like to take the time to do a detailed analysis of my own performance, to see where the irregularities are and what they might mean. I'm also growing more convinced that, to really understand this type of performance, I need to learn to pronounce Old English and try it using the original language. Translations that 'mostly' adhere to the poetic requirements of Old English verse are very good, but they are not the same as the actual music of the language that the works were composed in.

Resources

⁰*Beowulf*. trans. Seamus Heaney. Norton: New York, 2000.

¹Cotton MS Vitellius A VX (The manuscript containing Beowulf) Online at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv

²Albert Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2003, p. 198.

³Jeff Opland. *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*. Yale University: New Haven, 1980.

⁴“The Gifts of Men.” trans. Michael Drout. *Anglo-Saxon Aloud* blog. <http://acadblogs.wheatoncollege.edu/mdrout/2007/09/24/the-gifts-of-men-all/>

⁵“The Fortunes of Men.” trans. Michael Drout. *Anglo-Saxon Aloud* blog. <http://acadblogs.wheatoncollege.edu/mdrout/2007/10/01/the-fortunes-of-men-all/>

- ⁶Ann Hagan. *Anglo Saxon Food and Drink: Processing and Consumption*. Anglo-Saxon Books: Frithgarth, England, 2000, p. 108.
- ⁷Hucbald. De harmonica institutione. Waren Babb, trans. In Hucbald, Guido and John on Music: Three medieval treatises. Yale University: New Haven, 1978, pp.13-44.
- ⁸Guido d'Arezzo. Micrologus. Waren Babb, trans. In Hucbald, Guido and John on Music: Three medieval treatises. Yale University: New Haven, 1978, pp.57-86.
- ⁹Richard Hoppin. *Medieval Music*. Norton: New York, 1978, pp. 73-83.
- ¹⁰Ibid
- ¹¹Patrick Woolery. Recreating the Jorvik Panpipes. Online at <http://www.panflutejedi.com/viking-pan-flute-tutorial.html> Woolery bases his reconstruction on Richard Hall's book *The Viking Dig*.
- ¹²Lord, p 39-41.
- ¹³Karl Reichl. *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry*. Cornell University Press: Ithica, NY, 2000, p. 105-106, 169.
- ¹⁴Opland, p. 21.
- ¹⁵Schola Gregoriana of Cambridge . *Christmas in Royal Anglo-Saxon Winchester: 10th century chant from the Winchester Troper*. Mary Berry, dir. Herald HAVPCD 151, 2007. CD.
- ¹⁶Sequentia. *Edda: Myths from medieval Iceland*. DHM Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 77381 , 1999. CD.
- ¹⁷Gothic Voices. *The Earliest Songbook in England*. Christopher Page (conductor). Hyperion CDH55297, 2012. CD.
- ¹⁸Sequentia and Benjamin Bagby. *Lost Songs of a Rhineland Harper*. DHM Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 58939, 2004. CD.
- ¹⁹Benjamin Bagby. "Beowulf, the Edda, and the Performance of Epic." In *Performing Medieval Narrative*, Evelyn Birge Vitz et al, eds. D.S Brewer: Cambridge, UK, 2005, pp.181-192.
- ¹⁹Benjamin Bagby. *Beowulf*. Koch Vision, 2007. DVD.
- ²⁰Timothy McGee. *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1988.
- ²¹Ross Duffin, ed. *A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music*. Indiana University Press: Indianapolis, 2000.
- ²²John Pope. *The Rhythm of Beowulf*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1966.
- ²³McGee, p. 86-90.
- ²⁴Hoppin, p. 82.

Appendix: Beowulf lines 229 – 259 with amendments

This is from Seamus Heaney's translation. ~~Words struck out~~ are his words that I have omitted or altered; words underlined are my own additions. The changes occurred organically during performance development and practice.

When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings' lookout
Whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs, 230
Saw shields glittering on the gangplank
And battle-equipment being unloaded
He knew he had to find out who and what
The arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
This horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
In formal terms, flourishing his spear:

“What kind of men are you who arrive
Rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
Sailing here over the sea lanes
In your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed 240
As lookout on this coast for a long time.
My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
~~And~~ Any danger to the Danish shore.
Never before has a force under arms
Disembarked so openly---not bothering to ask
If the sentries allowed them safe passage
Or if the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
A mightier man-at-arms on this earth
Than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
He is truly noble. This is no mere 250
Hanger-on in a hero's armour.
So now, before you fare inland
As interlopers, I have to be informed
About who you are and where you hail from.
Outsiders from across the water,
I say it again: the sooner you tell
Where you came from and why, the better.”

The leader of the troop unlocked his word-board;
The distinguished one delivered this ~~answer~~ response: