

## **This is gonna be EPIC! Performing medieval narrative**

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[http://moeticae.typepad.com/mi\\_contra\\_fa/class-notes.html](http://moeticae.typepad.com/mi_contra_fa/class-notes.html)

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Epic: Long narrative poems telling stories of heroes. Generally focused on great deeds and martial virtues.

Examples: Chanson de Roland, El Cantar del mio Cid, Beowulf, Illiad, Aenid.

All performance decisions are part of a balancing act. Try to understand your own priorities – what is important to you? What are you trying to communicate with this performance? Keep that in mind as you go forward. Every thing you keep in your performance generally means there was something else you had to leave out.

### **I. Study your culture**

1. Learn what you can about the performers and performance culture of the people who wrote the epic(s) you are interested in, or the culture you are interested in.
2. Some of these epics did travel – a Norwegian king had a copy of “Roland.” How would a Norwegian skald perform a Norman epic?

### **II. Pick your text**

1. Surviving text?
  1. Translate or not?
    1. If translate, which translation? What qualities are most important to you to preserve?
    2. If not, how will you communicate to the audience what's going on?
  2. Excerpt, abridge, condense/rewrite?
2. Write your own?
  1. Study surviving poetry from the culture. Learn rhyme/assonance/alliteration rules, meters used, themes, tropes, etc.
  2. Write your poem using aspects of what you learned
3. PROSE?!
  1. Epic performance is narrative. It's a short jump from a narrative poem to narrative prose.
  2. Some really good translations are in prose.
  3. Modern storytellers' performance style – filling in a memorized story skeleton with words as they go – is actually the same thing modern performers of oral epics do. Most Westerners can't do that in poetry, but we can with prose.
  4. But you'll lose the poetry aspect

### **III. Pick your vocalization**

1. Did your research in Part I tell you anything about whether epics were spoken/recited, declaimed, chanted or sung?
2. Reciting is speaking in a fairly natural voice.
3. Declaiming is a heightened kind of speaking, with deeper resonance, more dramatic pauses, and a sense of thoughtful deliberation. It has more emotional color.
4. Chanting is between declaiming and singing. The melody is often very flat and the rhythm can be very free. Chanting may be a good option for alliterative poems that don't have a

regular meter, like Old English and Old Norse material.

5. Singing is setting words to music with interesting melodic contours and a regular meter. It can work very well with verse that has a regular meter.
6. All of these were possibly/probably done by someone at some point. See if your culture has any specific references to performance that can help you narrow down.

#### **IV. If applicable, pick your music**

1. If you went with chanting or singing, you will need music.
2. We have exactly one surviving line of melody from one chanson de geste.
3. You could base your music on other medieval music (church or secular).
4. You can study medieval music theory to understand how songs were written and structured (although this theory isn't actually for epics)
5. You can look at modern examples of oral epic culture, *with some care*.
  1. I prefer to use this to fill in holes that I can't fill in with other period knowledge
  2. I prefer to find commonalities across cultures, e.g.:
    1. A simple tune that may/may not be varied and ornamented as the epic goes on
    2. A narrow range of a 5<sup>th</sup> or a 6<sup>th</sup> (probably corresponding to the singer's tessitura, the easy natural range you can sing in forever. Because with a true epic, you're going to be singing forever).
    3. A lot of stepwise motion – intervals of a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> are very common, with 4ths and 5ths being less so. Albert L
    4. Modal music (usually Dorian mode)

#### **V. If applicable, pick your accompaniment**

1. You can have an accompanying instrument whether or not you are singing/chanting. Music can sound very good with spoken words.
2. Almost certainly going to be a stringed instrument (plucked, strummed, or bowed, depending on your culture)
3. For early medieval music, most performers look to organum (early parts singing) for inspiration on how to select an accompaniment.
  1. Generally speaking, it's hard to go wrong with a drone on tonic, a moving drone between tonic and a step below, or an open interval between tonic and dominant (either a 5<sup>th</sup> above or a 4<sup>th</sup> below).
4. Going to the modern oral epic performers, we see:
  1. Not uncommon to have a drone or simple moving drone while performer is singing/speaking
  2. More elaborate melody work comes between lines or sections, when performer is not singing/speaking.
5. At least one famous modern performer (Benjamin Bagby, doing “Beowulf”) just sort of “noodles around” on a lyre strung pentatonically. I can't support his decision academically, but it sounds darn good and his performance is top-notch.

#### **VI. Shape your performance for your performing opportunity**

1. Bardic circle: 2-5 min, 10 max. Can try dividing longer work into shorter sections you perform each time it's your turn
2. Feast: 2-5 minutes, shorter side preferred. Folks want to eat.
3. Special performance at event: Ask the autocrat or A&S coordinator if you can snag a corner of the hall/set up a day shade and do your performance at the event. You may even be able to get it into the schedule for the day if you arrange it early enough.
4. Pennsic Stage: Up to an hour.

#### **VII. Resources**

1. Albert Lord, Singer of Tales, 1960 (book)

2. Benjamin Bagby, Beowulf, 2015 (DVD, clips on YouTube)
3. Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, <http://www.oraltradition.org/>
4. Anything by John Miles Foley
5. Recordings of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century oral epic performance
6. Books on medieval music, music theory
7. Books on the culture and even the performers of the culture of interest.