

Part IV

PERSPECTIVES FROM
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMERS



Beowulf, the *Edda*, and the Performance of Medieval Epic:
Notes from the Workshop of a Reconstructed
“Singer of Tales”

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Over the years of performing my reconstructions of *Beowulf* and the Eddic poems, I have often given presentations about my work, either in the form of a pre-concert talk or as a question-and-answer session following the performance. I am always struck by one enormous difference between these two formats; there are usually just some general and hesitant questions before the performance (“Is it like Gregorian chant?”), but afterwards, a genuinely critical dialogue often ensues, provoked by what the listeners have just experienced, and by their curiosity—or in some cases, consternation—about my working process. I am grateful for the ease with which the listeners can comprehend what I have to say about my work *after* having heard the performance itself. A brief demonstration of a spoken or sung text, a modal gesture played on the harp, or a visual examination of the instrument itself, can only make sense in the context of performance, and can hardly be replaced by written words. In this same spirit, the following “notes from the workshop” attempt to provide some background on my work with epic and narrative, much as I would do following a performance (my remarks are generally not intended for an expert, medievalist audience, but rather for listeners who come to medieval epic performance for the first time). In this format, however, the crucial element of sound itself—the audible and visual presence of performer and instrument in live performance—will be lacking.¹ So I aim to find a common ground—a workshop—where listeners (and potential listeners) can meet with the performer, where practical issues confronting a modern-day “singer of tales” can be discussed plainly, so that the listener can examine some of the factors leading to one possible reconstruction of medieval epic poetry in performance.²

¹ A DVD of my performance of *Beowulf* is, however, forthcoming. Moreover, video clips from performances, including a passage from my *Beowulf*, may be viewed on the website *Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase*, eds. Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado, and Marilyn Lawrence, 2005, New York University, 7 January 2005 <<http://euterpe.bobst.nyu.edu/mednar/>>.

² I gratefully borrow the term “Singer of tales” from the title of Albert B. Lord’s important and influential book, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960), which discusses the structures and performance of oral poetry from Homeric verse to the sung epic traditions of

Regardless of the historical period of music which interests us, the concept of “historically informed performance” thrives on the conviction that today’s performers can find knowledge and instruction in the documentation which has survived from past musical practices: musical notation, descriptions of performance situations, treatises, methods, visual representations of music-making, playable instruments, etc. Unfortunately, all of this documentation, which we performers assiduously track down and study, is still missing the one crucial element of musical performance that we would most need and desire to possess: the actual sound, the presence of a living master. Barring the discovery of time-travel, we shall never meet our master (and of course, there is always the terrifying sub-scenario of this time-machine fantasy: what would happen if we had access to the original sound and to the master’s living art, but we simply did not *like* what we heard?). Deprived of this essential face-to-face musical experience, we are forever doomed to confront our own past musical cultures “through a glass darkly.”

This situation is challenging enough in the cases of most European repertoires, but it has obviously not kept generations of contemporary performers and scholars from fashioning a thriving early music scene (especially in Baroque music), complete with living masters and identifiable traditions, so that our vision of the past seems bright and clear. However, the situation becomes much more complex and clouded when we seek to perform the musical arts of early medieval cultures which were largely pre-literate, which knew neither notation nor treatises, and from which we possess only a few descriptions of performance or surviving fragments of instruments. The notationless world of medieval epic song is one such musical culture (a patchwork of cultures, actually) to which I am drawn, a world in which we know that northern peoples—in their huts, their fields, their boats, on horseback, around their cooking fires, their pagan shrines, and even in the first Christian monasteries—were singing and listening to song: narrative, heroic epic, myth, instrumental music, and long sung tales of their own ancestors’ deeds, real and imagined. What kinds of witnesses have survived from the early Middle Ages which we might use to reconstruct a performance art that has been silent for a thousand years and more? Are there other sources of information to which we might turn in making such an attempt? These are some of the questions I have tried to answer in my reconstructions of northern European oral epics such as the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, and more recently, in stories from the Icelandic *Edda*.

Together, with the members of my ensemble, Sequentia, my initial work with the Eddic poems (songs of the Norse gods Odin, Thor, Loki, and others) took place in the years 1995–97.³ The ensemble’s most recent production of the Eddic

mid-twentieth-century Yugoslavia: “This book is about Homer. He is our Singer of Tales. Yet, in a larger sense, he represents all singers of tales from time immemorial and unrecorded to the present . . . Our immediate purpose is to comprehend the manner in which they compose, learn, and transmit their epics” (i).

³ Sequentia, *Edda Myths from Medieval Iceland*, CD, Deutsche harmonia mundi/BMG Classics, 1999.

poems⁴ features tales of envy, gold-lust, revenge, and the horrible power they have over that most sacred human institution: the family. The three singers and two instrumentalists (as soloists and in various combinations) tell of the boy-hero Sigurd who kills the dragon Fafnir to obtain the gold, of the ill-fated Burgundian King Gunnar and his beautiful sister Gudrun, and of Attila the Hun and his passionately suicidal sister (the ex- Valkyrie Brynhild). This terrifying family epic is set in poems which are contradictory, weird, and seem to take place in a dreamscape which easily accommodates Mirkwood Forest, the Rhine River, and the glaciers of Iceland. It is a legend in which the names of actual places and people are freely mixed with the old pagan gods, cunning dwarves, dragons, shape-changers, magical swords and horses, supernatural beings, and talking birds. It is an archaic story which enthralled many generations of Europeans as they listened to the bards who formed the fabric of their tribal memories.

The *Edda* (itself an enigmatic Icelandic word whose meaning today is obscure, although it once might have meant something like “ancient knowledge”) is a medieval collection of twenty-nine poems in Old Icelandic including ten which deal with the Norse gods and mythology, and nineteen which recount stories of Germanic heroes⁵ (a few of whose characters, including Attila the Hun, can even be identified with actual historical figures). This astonishing collection, copied in an unassuming parchment manuscript⁶ in thirteenth-century Iceland (by which time Attila had been dead—and stories about him in constant oral circulation—for eight hundred years) is universally recognized as a precious treasure of European culture, and one of the only (and certainly the oldest) detailed witnesses we possess to the practices, beliefs, and myths of pagan Germanic peoples. The Eddic texts, set in the sophisticated, Germanic alliterative verse-forms which the Icelanders practiced and valued long after other poetic forms prevailed on the Continent, were transmitted in the uniquely oral tradition of tribal and itinerant “singers of tales” over hundreds of years. They have not survived in the other Germanic languages in which they were originally sung, but thanks to the profoundly literary-minded medieval Icelanders (who were themselves newcomers to that volcanic North Atlantic island, arriving from the western Norwegian fjords in the ninth century) who re-shaped the texts in their own Norse language, we can still hear today much of the sound of an ancient storyteller’s art.

How could I possibly resist trying to rediscover a voice for these thrilling and mysterious oral poems—saved from oblivion by Icelandic singers and scribes—which were once performed during long winter nights, not only in Iceland but all across the north of Europe? It seemed like an impossible task at first, fraught with the pitfalls of pseudo-historical kitsch and new-age banality. I was determined, however, to draw upon my long experience in performing medieval song, together with a series of carefully-considered reconstructive

⁴ Sequentia, *The Rheingold Curse: A Germanic Saga of Greed and Revenge from the Medieval Icelandic Edda*, CD, Marc Aurel Edition, 2002.

⁵ For complete English translations, see *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶ Reykjavik, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Gml. kgl. sml. 2365 4to (“Codex Regius”).

tools—which I explain here briefly—to take these sung poems off the printed page and back into the world of storytelling, where the human voice becomes an instrument of cultural identity and transformation, the oral medium of an ancient narrative energy.

Although it is generally accepted—based largely on descriptions of performance situations—that medieval epic poetry was the domain of tribal or itinerant bardic entertainers, no written musical sources of the Eddic poems dating from the Middle Ages are known to exist. In fact, we would have no reason to expect such sources to have been written at all. The milieu in which these poems were originally transmitted, sung, and acted out was that of a uniquely oral culture, and professional singers passed on repertoires and techniques from generation to generation without the hindrance and expense of writing. As is almost always the case with medieval song, the use of musical notation is linked to world of the *scriptorium* and the noble or ecclesiastical collector, not to the world of the practicing musician. (A Christian scribe can hardly have looked kindly on songs about the pagan gods, at least not while his abbot was watching.) If we assume that the living traditions of Eddic performance in Iceland itself were already in decline by the time the oldest and most important text manuscript, the Codex Regius, was copied by a sympathetic scribe in the thirteenth century, then how can we possibly reconstruct sung performances of Eddic poems as they would have been known, say, around the time of Iceland’s official conversion to Christianity in the year 1000?⁷

The earliest witness we possess to musical settings of the *Edda* is an account found in Benjamin de la Borde’s *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, published in 1780.⁸ Among other examples (collected for de la Borde by a musician at the Danish Royal Court, whose source was the Icelandic scholar Jón Ólafsson), we find a strophe from the *Edda* set to a simple melody. Unfortunately, we will never know if this rather pedantically-noted melody is indeed the surviving vestige of an oral formula for the vocalization of Eddic poetry, or if it comes from a non-Eddic Icelandic folk tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or if it is merely an example of how a *musique ancienne Islandaise* might have sounded in the fantasy of a homesick Icelander in eighteenth-century Copenhagen.

Manuscript sources of secular medieval song from northern Europe are extremely rare, and the sources of surviving Christian music in Scandinavia tend to come from a late-medieval, Latin-speaking, ecclesiastical milieu which had strong contacts with continental Europe. Although individual religious pieces can indeed demonstrate unusual, regional characteristics (such as the prevalence of parallel thirds in the two-voice “Hymn to Saint Magnus” from the Orkneys), they do not shed much light on the performance of oral poetry in the pagan world hundreds of years earlier.

⁷ For an analysis of the problem, see Joseph Harris, “The performance of Old Norse Eddic Poetry: A Retrospective,” *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music*, ed. Karl Reichl, Intercultural Music Studies 12 (Berlin, VWB Verlag für Wiss. und Bildung, 2000) 225–32.

⁸ Jean-Benjamin de la Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, 4 vols. (Paris, P.-D. Pierres and E. Onfroy, 1780–81) II, 403.



[It was early in the ages when Ymir made his dwelling: there was not yet sand nor sea nor chill waves.] From the beginning of *Völuspá* [*Prophecy of the Seeress*]. Jean-Benjamin de la Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*. Paris, P.-D. Pierres and E. Onfroy, 1780–81, II, 403.

In searching for paths to the vocalization of the Eddic texts, it was obvious that more musical information would be needed than late-medieval church music or a scrap of melodic material from the late eighteenth century. It was at this point that I decided to make use of the techniques of “modal language” which my ensemble, *Sequentia*, has developed over the years in our practical work with European medieval song, a view of musical language which has many parallels in other modal cultures. Briefly stated: a mode is perceived not as a musical scale, but rather as a collection of musical gestures, codes, and signs which can be interiorized, varied, combined, and used as a font to create musical “texts” which can be completely new while possessing the authentic integrity of the original material. (Here, the word authentic—the dreaded A-word of early music—is not used in a historical sense, but in the sense of recognition: in a crowd of strangers and imposters you would always recognize an authentic member of your own family.) However, like the powerfully magic mead-drink which gives the Norse god Odin the gift of poetry, this “modal mead” is a concoction which can be both inspiring and dangerous. An examination of the practice of singing epic poetry as it still exists in various cultures will often show us how such performances can be given both a structure and a soul, and in this way help us to temper the seemingly limitless freedom of modal intoxication.

Having temporarily put aside the examples of Monsieur de la Borde, where did I turn first for the basic ingredients of this modal brew? To Iceland, of course. To give one example: in the Icelandic sung oral poetry known as *rímur*—which in itself is a tradition dating from the late Middle Ages, but whose roots certainly touch much earlier, pre-skaldic poetic practices—I found a vast repertoire of modal material, which clearly could be grouped into several modal families. During research residencies in Reykjavik in 1995 and again in 2001, I was permitted to work in the tape archives of Iceland’s historical text institute, *Stofnun*

Árna Magnússonar,⁹ where I listened to hundreds of historical recordings of *rímur* and related song-types, making notes, analyses, and family trees of the types and uses of modal materials. The result of this process of rumination, which included a weeding-out of obviously later melodic types (including—in one delightful case—an Icelandic contrafactum of “Oh My Darling Clementine”), was a series of modal vocabularies grouped by structural “signals,” which could be transmitted orally to the other singers and applied to (and tempered by) the sophisticated metrics of the Eddic texts as taught to us by the Icelandic philologist Heimir Pálsson. Everything was learned in a process which is inspired by oral tradition: we worked only with our *Edda* texts and our memories; there were rarely any written musical documents, and certainly nothing which could be called a “score.” And in light of this knowledge, the melody found in de la Borde began to make sense; however one chooses to see its transmission, it is clear that the melody demonstrates characteristics which point to the use of a specific modal vocabulary consisting of a few limited elements which are constantly repeated and varied. And so, an attentive listener might hear its “genetic code” echoed in some of our reconstructions, just as an experienced Icelandic *rímur*-singer hearing us sing these poems might find at times that some undefinable element makes him feel he actually knows the unknown piece being sung.

This is the beauty and sophistication of modal song, especially as a vehicle for narrative: the vocalist makes use of a seemingly simple matrix of tones to support an infinitely complex textual structure, so that all elements—tone, text, and performer—merge into one organic process which functions uniquely in the service of the story. For this task, all aspects of the singer’s art are called into use, including the wide and flexible spectrum of vocal utterance: plain speech, heightened speech, sung speech, spoken song, simple syllabic song, melismatic song, as well as the more radical elements of human vocal sound: whispering, moaning, groaning, hoarse speech, barking, shouting, and, yes, even a scream when it’s called for in the story. In addition, the “singer of tales” functions in close physical proximity to his/her listeners; the singer’s entire body, including hands and feet, which are also sources of sound, is part of the *instrumentum* which serves the story. And speaking of instruments: the possible addition of an actual instrumental partner (whether a separate instrumentalist or self-accompanied) allows for expanded elements of dialogue, commentary, support, and interlude, all of which only serve to make the modal brew richer, the narrative denser, more focused. When examining oral epics as they are still sung today in various cultures, one hears a surprisingly similar attitude to the usage of modal structures in vocal style, vocal usage, and instrumental participation.

When performing the Eddic stories or *Beowulf*, I enter with my voice into a world which is informed as much by the actor’s art as by the singer’s, and in that world I only rarely make use of the techniques suited to the needs of what we might call lyric song (say, a troubadour *canso*). These lyric techniques—which call for vocal consistency, the nuanced “delivery” of a large strophic form with its

⁹ Thanks especially to Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, Vésteinn Ólasson, and Grísli Sigurðsson.

intricate structure of rhyme and versification, its almost dreamlike disregard for time—are perfectly suited to the re-creation of a formalized state of soul which, for a few moments, conjures up in the listeners' minds their own similar experiences, their own memories, yearnings, and fantasies. But for the storyteller's art, in which time passes at various speeds, and in which real-time events are recalled, relived, commented upon, and sometimes quite literally *inhabited* by the “singer of tales,” the use of lyric techniques must be reserved for those isolated moments which call out for them, usually moments of reflection and introspection.

Words are sounds, and an essential *musical* element of these texts is the sound of the language itself. Since no decisions about modal usage in vocal performance can be made independently of the needs of the Icelandic language, Heimir Pálsson not only taught Sequentia's vocalists the complex metrical structures of our texts, but also tutored us intensively in the sounds of Old Icelandic. Although almost identical to the language spoken by 290,000 Icelanders today, the language of the *Edda* does contain different word-forms as well as a pronunciation which was obviously quite different before the mid twelfth century, when the first documents in Icelandic attest to a phonetic system which places particular emphasis on vowel quality.¹⁰

In cases where two or three singers declaim the same text, different versions of the modal gestures may sometimes be heard simultaneously, resulting in a kind of heterophonic texture (verging on improvised polyphony) typical of traditional musical cultures. In addition, there are vestiges of improvised polyphonic vocal practices, one of which, *tvisöngur*, we can still hear sung in Iceland today. Other aspects of the reconstructive work include a study of Icelandic sources besides *rímur*, as well as a study of the ancient monophonic dance-song melodies of the Faroe Islands; situated on a small group of islands between Scotland, Norway, and Iceland, the 47,000 Faroese still dance and sing ancient ballads telling the story of Sigurd and the Rheingold. Surviving modal musical documents from elsewhere in the world of the far-ranging Vikings (the Baltic region, for example) have also been helpful in understanding the ways in which modal gesture may have been understood in the early-medieval north.

I have mentioned the importance of metrical structures in these texts, and how these inform the performance and the use of the modes. The metrical genius and sophistication of alliterative Germanic poetry is apparent to anyone who has come into contact with works such as the Eddic poems or *Beowulf*, yet, as a performer, the issue which interests me is this: how would such metrical structures have expressed themselves in performance, in a culture which hardly knew reading and writing, and which certainly did not know musical notational systems? Our relationship to the Eddic texts (or *Beowulf*, for that matter) is based on a “literate” course of study: readings, analyses and exercises, using textbooks, editions, translations, and manuscript facsimiles. There is no one alive today who has learned this poetic art as a uniquely oral phenomenon. As literate beings, we are fascinated by various metrical structures and functions which can be indicated

¹⁰ See Heimir Pálsson, “The Eddic Poems,” liner notes, *The Rheingold Curse*, 14–18.

in writing, with markings which can show us the carefully graded varieties of “beats,” “accents,” and “secondary stresses”; we take a positivistic delight in expressing metrics by means of musical notation, with its precise—yet unforgiving—font of symbols. We have heard our teachers recite the poems in clearly defined metrical patterns (perhaps with a bit of tapping on the desk for emphasis), and this has become, for us, the “sound” of Germanic alliterative poetry.

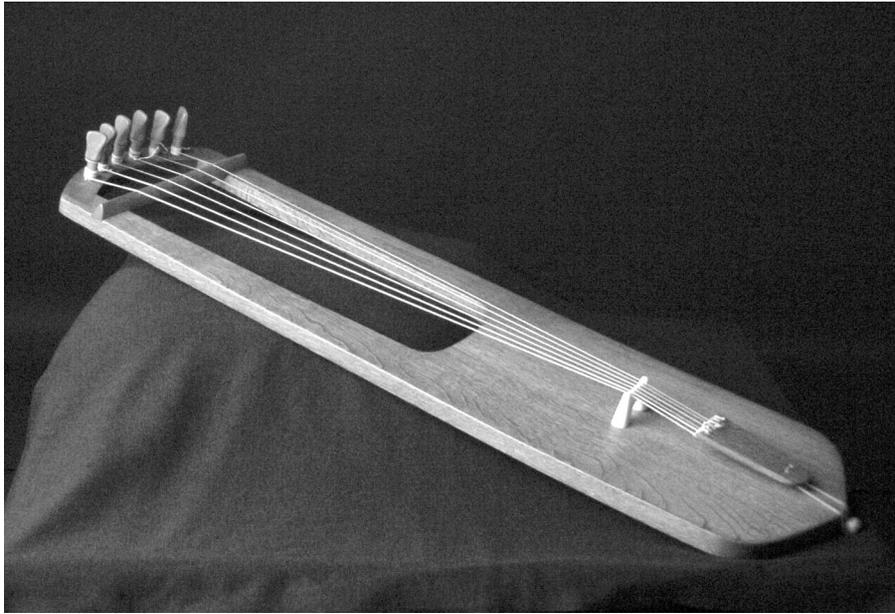
Like most music students, I was programmed at an early age with a great reverence for notation, metrics, and the unassailable authority of “the score,” but a subsequent lifelong involvement with medieval European song has provided me with some more pliable, more differentiated tools for the shaping of texts and melodies, for the telling of stories. When I approached the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* for the first time, with the intention of reconstructing a performance, I listened to all of the available recordings of experts reading the original text. I was struck by what I perceived as an exaggerated emphasis on the pure mechanics of metrics; the metrical patterns of various lines, which for an oral “singer of tales” would normally function on a deeper structural level, had broken the surface of the text (and the story), becoming obvious and heavy in the mouth of the reciter, and intrusive in the ear of the listener. The musician (and storyteller) in me imagined a subtler role for these delightfully vivid and supple metrical patterns, and I resolved to work on the text of *Beowulf* (and later, the *Edda*) in such a way that the metrical structures are servants of the performance and not its master. Through long hours of practical work, I searched for ways to give the metrics a powerful yet less superficial function in support of the text, so that the story would be free to emerge as an aural experience, held together from within by an almost imperceptible array of interlocking sounds and impulses.

As a performer of metrically structured texts, I do not have the role of teaching metrical theory to my listeners, but of telling a story. This does not mean, however, that the metrical structures are being neglected. On a very deep level I do experience the metrics as I sing and speak the story; they are influencing and shaping my use of voice, instrumental accompaniment, timing, speed, and rhetorical gesture, in short, all of the variables of performance. Assuming a small medieval audience of *cognoscenti* who had heard a given story already dozens (if not hundreds) of times, there would be among the listeners a subtle appreciation of the text’s inner structures, even a certain delight in the singer’s masking of the obvious and in the performance’s interplay of sounds, patterns, and meaning. I work to create metrically aware performances of the Eddic poems and *Beowulf*, based on a written source, but I aim to re-create the spirit of an oral poem performed in a notationless culture. My goal is to allow the metrical structures their important place in the text, so that they function, but subtly, creatively, almost subconsciously. All elements of measured time must be free to help shape the story: from the smallest unit of the individual syllable to the single, long pulse of an entire performance.

Equally important in these musical reconstructions are the instruments, especially the harp, flute, and fiddle, which are mentioned in early northern sources describing or depicting music-making. The harp used for the *Edda* is a copy based on the remains of an instrument found in a seventh-century Allemanic burial site

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in Oberflacht (Germany), as reconstructed by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, Germany). This earliest type of harp would have been known throughout the northern world,¹¹ and much interesting work in the field is still being done by musical archeologists.



Reconstruction of Germanic harp by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, Germany).

This Germanic *harpa* is often referred to as a lyre, in order to differentiate it from the triangular *cithara* (with its distinctive front pillar, which we still recognize as the most common harp form), and in the *Edda* text itself it is also known as a harp. Such instruments commonly have very few strings (the Oberflacht instrument probably had six), and the possible tuning systems—based on medieval theories of consonance, scraps of information from medieval sources, the limitations of medieval string technology, and harp-tuning traditions from other cultures—yield a series of basic intervals which in turn can inform the text being accompanied.

I believe we can fairly say that a six-string harp such as Oberflacht was tuned according to some kind of system of tones yielding a certain number of consonant intervals (the principal intervals being the octave, perfect fifth and perfect fourth); this would be consistent both with the laws of physics and with the theoretical European concepts of consonance inherited from antiquity. Even for a Germanic bard who had never heard of Pythagoras or Boethius, we could expect certain consonant intervals to sound between the various strings of his harp. There are

¹¹ Christopher Page, “Instruments and Instrumental Music Before 1300,” *The Early Middle Ages to 1300*, vol. 2 of *The New Oxford History of Music* (Oxford, Oxford University Press) 455–84.

several plausible tunings which would yield these intervals in various combinations. One such tuning, which I have chosen for my work with *Beowulf*, is what I call an “open” tuning, since it encompasses an octave between the highest and lowest strings, and the central tone (or *finalis*) of the resulting mode is situated on the lowest tone. The resulting row of six tones, encompassing an octave, includes a series of gaps which give the tuning its characteristic pentatonic color. Besides the octave, the resulting consonant intervals include a series of three perfect fifths and their corresponding perfect fourths, making this “open” tuning extremely stable and modally flexible. It is ideal for the spontaneous outbursts needed in a six-hour performance of the complete *Beowulf*, and it is the most resonant of all the tunings I have tried.¹²



A similar tuning, which I have used in several Eddic poems, retains the principle of an octave span between highest and lowest strings, but places the modal *finalis* on the second-to-lowest string, with the lowest string one whole tone below it. This also results in a series of perfects fifths and fourths, and I call this the “centered” tuning because the weight of the mode is now placed on the central perfect fifth/fourth, and emphasized by the powerful *sub-finalis* of the tone below it. It is a less open tuning, demanding more discipline of the principal playing hand; it therefore requires more attention to precision when shaping stories.



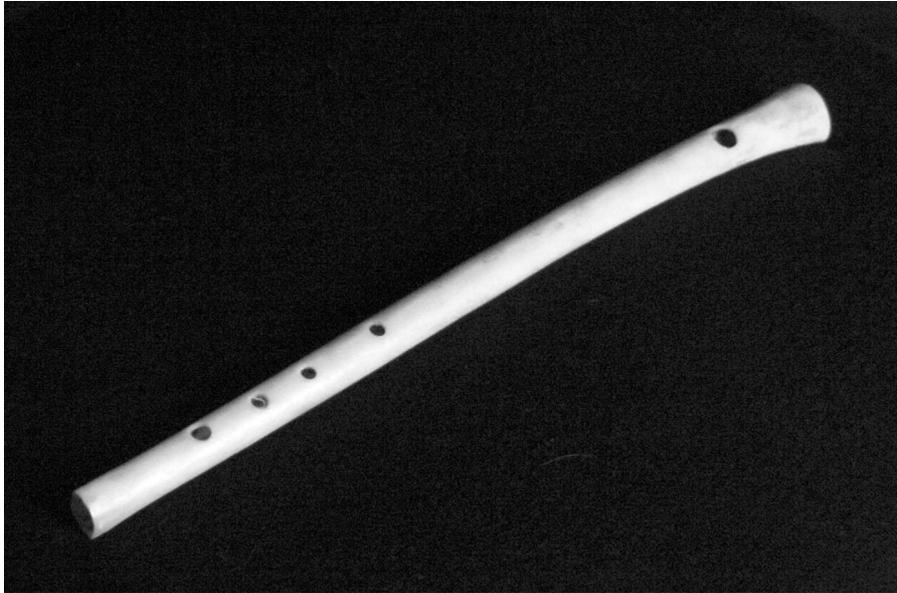
If the idea of an octave span (from highest to lowest string) is replaced by the idea of a six-note consecutive scale of tones, we hear a very different sound altogether, much more concise and much less resonant. As Christopher Page has demonstrated,¹³ there is an eleventh-century source containing a *cithara* tuning attributed to Hucbald of St. Amand (c.880) which tends to support the idea of a diatonic harp tuning, at least within Christian communities which were trying to tame a pagan instrument used to accompany the telling of heroic epics.



There are other plausible tunings for harps, such as a tetrachordal tuning system in which a series of four tones in a fixed relationship (for example: tone / semitone / tone) is repeated, or even overlapped. For this, however, we lack direct

¹² There were no medieval standards of absolute pitch in the tuning of instruments; all tunings shown here simply depict the relation of tones and semitones, and are normalized for clarity of comparison.

¹³ Page, *Instruments* 458 (includes facsimile).



Reconstruction of swanbone flute by Friedrich van Huene (Boston).

evidence. We can only make an informed guess at the exact tuning of the harp which provoked the legendary Caedmon's abashed retreat to the cowshed, but it cannot have been far from one of the tunings given here.

The tuning system of any such instrument will be closely related to the mode which the tradition of the song demands, so that the instrument must sometimes be re-tuned to accompany in a new mode. Regarding playing technique, it hardly needs stating that an instrument of six strings is not suited to playing the elaborate melodies with accompanying chords which we tend to associate with later harps. Instead, we have here a harp type (such as is still known and played in non-European musical cultures, especially in Africa) which has as its means of expression the use of pattern, inversion, and variation, and the "playing out" of modal vocabularies. Since one hand must hold the instrument upright on the player's knee, there can only be one principal playing hand, although several players have found that the holding hand can easily spare a thumb to thicken up the patterns by emphasizing the top strings. Some iconographic evidence (especially depictions of King David playing the *cithara*) might even point to such a practice. Just as the singers rely on a small repertoire of potent modal gestures for the vocalization of their texts (the "matrix" I mentioned earlier), the harp makes a virtue of its seeming limitations and, like an interlaced Viking design, brings a richness of articulation to the expression of the mode, and hence to the telling of the story.

The fiddle used by Sequentia in some Eddic reconstructions is based on one of the earliest depictions of a bowed instrument in northern Europe, dating from the early eleventh century, and was created by Richard Earle (Basel, Switzerland) especially for this production. Techniques of early northern fiddle playing can possibly still be found today, hidden within the thriving *hardingfele* tradition of

Norway. Elizabeth Gaver's own practical research into the possible medieval antecedents to this tradition have yielded a convincing style of stringing, tuning, and articulation.¹⁴ Likewise, the use of the flute in Sequentia's work with the *Edda* is based on concepts of tuning and consonance from the early Middle Ages. One instrument in particular has an almost shamanistic quality: a tiny flute made from a swan's bone, reconstructed by Friedrich von Huene (Boston) based on the remains of a tenth-century instrument found near the city of Speyer on the Rhine River.¹⁵

In collaboration with flautist Norbert Rodenkirchen, much was learned about the placement of finger holes, and therefore the tuning system, of such an instrument. In developing instrumental pieces and accompaniments, the players have made use of the same modal vocabularies and language as the vocalists, but then they have factored in the particular playing and tuning characteristics of their own instruments. There is no "improvisation" as such, but then there are also no written scores aside from a few sketches; we think of ourselves as working within a rather strict oral tradition.

We can never know if our performances precisely duplicate the art of a particular medieval bard, in Iceland or elsewhere; nor can we ever rediscover the "original melody" to which any epics were sung in the early Middle Ages, since *the* original melody certainly never existed for any one narrative or story. In each local tradition, in each language and dialect there were varieties of originals being passed along in their own oral traditions. However, I am convinced that by making careful use of specific information and techniques, as described here, coupled with an intuitive spirit based on a working knowledge of both medieval song and the essence of sung oral poetry, it is possible to reconstruct highly plausible performance models which allow our venerable ancestral stories to live again.

¹⁴ Examples of solo fiddle-playing can be found on Sequentia, "Edda Myths." The eleventh-century fiddle reconstruction by R. Earle can be heard on "The Rheingold Curse."

¹⁵ The swan-bone flute can be heard on the first track of *The Rheingold Curse*.