

# The "Period" SCA Musician

A study on one of the more peculiar  
inhabitants on the SCA food chain

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## The Medieval Musician:

As far back as the earliest known Egyptian writings and drawings to present day cheap sleazy advertisements, the image of the musician has been an integral part of society. The musician has been the source to bring forth a type of service to mankind that felt a need to surround itself with melodic sounds of contentment, excitement, and merriment. Many iconographs and writings created during the middle ages depict various assortments of musicians and their instruments. It can be interpreted that the frequency of musicians in these historical media implies a strong importance of this art and occupation as part of the treasured assets of monastical, secular, and court life (the music..not necessarily the musician). Sometimes this important fact is overlooked in our modern world. No fault to the listener, for our present day anachronists are constantly surrounded by music. There is not a day that our present day medievalist is not bombarded by music of varying degrees; some pleasant, moving, some outright annoying. The fact of this consistency in melodic overloading gives the listener leave to be discriminate on the choices of music desired. This is accomplished by a mere turn of a knob or flick of a magical remote. This, however was not the case during the time frame that we re-create. Instrumental Music on sophisticated instruments during the medieval and renaissance years was a rarity that was enjoyed only in the churches and on special occasions such as holy feast days or Royal events. Perhaps only 3 to 5 times a year depending upon the location. Singing, however was probably common place. At special gatherings there would be singing by musicians and a smaller percentage of musicians played music if they could afford instruments. Such special occasions usually occurred in specific areas of the country (castles, monasteries) and required common folk to travel many miles to attend. During such occasions, all folk would be delighted by melodic sounds that would awaken ears that had forgotten such beauty. With such rarity, there was no good, bad, in tune or out of tune sounds. There was simply music in its raw form. No cringing of misplaced notes or pitch variants, for it was all so rich and new and unfamiliar that such errors in performance were not noticed. The music was a delight on every level. The music was appreciated, but sometimes the

musicians were not necessarily so. Before 1200, secular musicians were generally regarded as trash. Around 1200, musicians settled down and became town pipers and started being used for official town functions. About that time, they formed organizations to prevent from being classified with vagabonds and other lowlife. They still were not held in very high esteem though. That took a bit longer. Sometimes one mistakes the musician as a type of bard which in the middle ages was highly respected for the ability to bring news from place to place. Usually the bard was also a musician, but a musician was not always a bard.

Most musicians were apprenticed to the art from institutions of higher learning. Mainly the monasteries and the guilds that were established in Western Europe. During the middle ages it was not uncommon for the lord of the lands to hire monks from the nearest monastery to play during a feast at his court. The monastery was well compensated for such services. And indeed, most secular musicians learned the art from schooling at the monasteries which ran singing schools called "scholas". This class of musicians were usually known as troubadours or other variants of the title and they traveled from village to village, court to court, seeking employment for a much prized talent. Musicians were bound to their lords by employment only, which gave them the opportunity to visit many courts. One can conjecture that musicians on the whole were interested in their art alone and not much in political matters, although most of the time they were hired to write and compose music of a very political nature such as songs expounding the virtues of their towns, city-states or lords. Especially Queens or other sovereigns.

## The Modern Medieval Musician:

My own observations of our Current Middle Ages musician (especially those who come from a professional or educational musical background) seem to show similar traits to their period constituents. Oddly enough, many of these personality traits are still prevalent in the modern day professional musician (I am not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing but I will leave it to the psycho-analysts to figure this one out. ) At the cost of being blatantly stereotypical, I will list a few of the common traits:

Musicians usually delve into our "society" with a primary interest in.....music and ..... and ..... don't rush me I'm thinking. Everything else seems to revolve around this interest (ego?...more than likely). Musicians seem to be politically inert unless the situation directly affects them (which is usually never, Thank God!). The subject is just not interesting enough. There is an occasional situation where a musician finds him/herself in a position of authority and is destined to deal with political issues. Other musicians refer to this type as the "backslider". They usually shake their heads and mourn the loss of their brethren to the "dark side", ..... "sniff". Musicians usually have non-musician spouses that do not understand their obsessions but tend to love them anyway and attempt to remind them about the other necessities of life (like sleeping). Musicians are common

sense handicapped. They forget to eat unless their spouses sketch out a little plate, dinner fork, and chicken drumstick at the end of the music page to remind them that they must eat. Sometimes spouses will stand in front of the pit waving for attention, mouthing those immortal words "your food is getting cold, and I am dining at the table alone with two book heralds who are getting into a debate. Come save me before I attempt to impale myself with the bread bowl." Sometimes they will resort by threatening to drink that suicidal mystery mead someone gave them at the last event. Anything to get the musician's attention. Of course the musician continues to stay oblivious to anything else but the notes on the page. Such displays are usually followed by playing and singing a number that incorporates the following lyrics:

*Beth I heare thee calleth*

*Yet to home, I canst, this now*

*For I and my brethren will be performing*

*All night*

Which, in my opinion was a song written about a group of pict musicians that painted their faces with every other colour except blue. Scary, but I firmly believe this could never happen in our present day.

It is amazing what musician widows are required to put up with. Musicians also have to be reminded that there are critical bodily functions that necessitate putting down the instrument in order to execute them. Musicians, come from a breed that is generally shy and has chosen to use the instrument as a medium for interacting with people as opposed to actually conversing. Though, I have noticed that from a male perspective, I did not enter into the music field thinking, " Hey!, maybe being a musician will get me babes!" This may work in the rock and roll arena where the lead guitarist plays his Fender Strat in a manner as if it were an extension of himself with slight .....well .... actually blatant sexual overtones. But for the period musician, putting a horn up to his mouth and blowing just does not have the same effect.

Musicians are fanatical when it comes to the care and motherly protection of their instruments. Which comes to an important topic. This last being the most dangerous to non-musicians.

## Musicians and their Instruments:

A pit bull with PMS is easier to reason with than a musician that feels his/her instrument is being threatened. I always recommend to our populace to think of the musician's area (the pit) as being a list field which, as we all know, only the fighters and marshals are permitted to enter. Inside of the roped off area can be fraught with danger for a non-fighter. Our children are ingrained with this concept from an early age in our "society". Yet stepping over, brushing up against, reaching out and picking up, and worst of all, blowing into instruments without the owner's consent is still a practice seen on occasions at events. The ultimate true Ansteorran story is hearing about someone's instrument being peed on by an un-responsible owner's dog who was not paying attention to their charge. Some may ask, "So what's the big deal?" The answer to this question stems from what people are used to in normal everyday surroundings. Everyone seems to know that a soprano plastic recorder can be purchased at "Toys R Us" for about \$6 and in a sense can be easily replaced. This is not so when it comes to the instruments that are normally played on by the Early period musician in the pit. Out of all the individual items at an SCA event (and I could be wrong about this) the most expensive and most delicate piece of hardware on site is usually the musician's instrument. That soprano renaissance wood recorder is not \$6 but in fact is \$350-\$800. The bass recorders average about \$2000. At the last kingdom dance symposium, I did a survey of the pit area, and I found that enclosed within a small space was an average of \$47,000 worth of instruments. Some of these instruments require a 2-3 year wait to replace. This is why musicians get very uneasy when an unattended child comes racing through the pit, or an unwitting adult wanders through on their way to another place. Most of these instruments are EXTREMELY fragile and having someone knock over a music stand on to an instrument will easily damage it beyond repair. At the same time, you must realize that it is hard to understand and respect the value of items that are not readily known, which is one of the purposes of this article. As musicians it is our responsibility to educate those around us about the delicacy of the equipment we use. It has been suggested that pits be equipped with a roped off area similar to the list field just as a friendly reminder to adults as well as un-monitored children that there are delicate items within and that such an area is reserved to participating musicians only. This may not be a bad idea.

## Musicians at events:

There has been a growing trend at events to feed the musicians first (not before the Royals or servers, of course) when they are to be involved with performing during or after feast. As a musician, I have appreciated this immensely because it takes care of three important items: 1.) It allows time for the musicians to get through their meals and get to the pit in order to tune up and be ready to play by the time the populace has completed the feast and are ready to dance. 2.) It allows time for the musicians to eat and start playing during feast as a means to enhance the atmosphere of the hall. and, 3.) It allows time for the horn

player to finish his/her drink and not get that clove accidentally stuck in the mouth piece.....echhhh!

## The Performing Band:

Historically the dance band was comprised of about 4 to 5 musicians playing for approximately 20 people. That is 20 people total in the hall. During the middle ages, this was considered a huge revel and feast. The softness of period instruments was not hampered by such numbers and the ability to hear the musicians was generally not an issue. Modern day revels do not have that luxury. A band of about the same size is now required to play for as much as 200 people within the hall. Period instruments are just not constructed to be heard beyond a 20 foot distance. This creates a well-known problem in our current middle ages. In a large setting you end up having a couple of musicians playing to themselves for they are the only ones that can hear the music. The people playing the "air lute" have the same effect (see Samuel Piper's home page for reference: <http://www.onr.com/user/steveh>). However, it was common in the larger populated areas to have what is called a loud band play for events. These bands used shawms and sacbuts to produce music and were very loud. Unfortunately, there are so few players in the SCA that can afford to own such expensive instruments and generally one can not play it for very long without having your lip blow out on you. Soft instruments are more common in the SCA and it becomes very difficult to play them loud. Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions. In the time that we play, it was a commonly well documented fact that all court members were required to have the ability to dance, play an instrument, or sing. If you did not fall into any of these categories, you were considered un-learned and not properly reared... in other words, not fit for court company. Sometimes you were expected to do all three performing arts (especially by the renaissance period). There are several manuscripts that document this trend in court society. Therefore, during courtly events where musicians were performing, the members of the revel were either playing, dancing, or singing. Fortunately, this stiff courtly requirement is not practiced in our current middle ages, but it does bring forth a condition that makes the ability to hear soft instruments much more difficult than during the time they were invented. Those who are not involved with the courtly arts of dance and music are engaged in the delightful pastime of conversation. Unfortunately, the two activities do not mix well where 5 instruments are competing against 180 voices. Yet, neither of these activities should be stifled. Their conflicts are merely the product of modern day event requirements hosting larger masses of revelers. There is really not an easy solution. Most of the time the Dance Mistress/master is forced to make an announcement to the assembly requesting the level of conversation to be decreased since the musicians do not have the ability to increase their sound production. Realistically, this is not at all fair to the those not participating and it pains me every time I do it. Yet, at present it is the only solution available. Another solution is to have events where the dancers and musicians retire to another hall to revel in these courtly arts. Of course not all sites can accommodate another large room, and so many times there is a loss

of participants when dancing is not in the same hall as the feast (other feasters do not get to see how much fun they are missing). The ultimate solution (and alas, the most expensive) is to incorporate modern means to project soft instruments to a large audience as it is done in modern events. I mean of course, using a sound system, or hiring a sound company to come and support sound requirements for the pit. This can sometimes be expensive and is usually not within the budget of the event, though I highly recommend it for dance oriented events (kingdom dance workshops) or very special events. This can be a touchy area, because if you don't use the proper configuration (a hi-tech mixing board with special orchestra mikes and someone who knows what they are doing), you can actually do more harm than good. Most events are not set up for "the bigga bucksa" and the burden falls upon the pit to compensate for the conditions. Besides, it can be heavily argued the presence of such equipment takes away from the period atmosphere. It's a hard call all around. Unfortunately, none of the instruments have a volume knob, at least not that I have found yet. The result is you have musicians blowing the %&\*\$\*& out of their horns, and string players breaking a lot of expensive strings as they play harder on the instruments than they were originally designed for. I have no clear cut solution on this unresolved topic, so I will press on.

## Why bother:

Our "society" strives very hard to recreate the finer aspects of the middle ages by teaching the use of period methods to create weaving, cooking, costuming, leather work, armory, combat tactics....the list goes on. But when it comes to music there is never a lack of the boom box to fill the space. As musicians, our goal in this society is to encourage the use of live musicians to fill the space of the boom box. Mind you, the boom box has its necessity when musicians are not available, but it is discouraging to musicians when a preference is shown to a machine than the real thing. True, the boom box is more controllable and is always in pitch and does not come with an attitude, but I must remind everyone that our goal is to recreate the atmosphere of the middle ages and I would urge all to encourage your local musicians to do their duty in filling this responsibility and provide an authentic rich atmosphere and not the plastic/silicon variety. And that includes everything that goes with it (out of tune period instruments and all). Just like it was in the middle ages. Music is just as important in our society as it was then, and with your help, will be again. The bottom line: You have a bunch of socially inept people who enjoy and want to play music for you.....use them.

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THA E GU MATH, THA MI COMHLA RIS A COMHLAN - CIUIL

(Kingdom Musician's War Cry...use Gaelic dictionary for translation)