

Magical Music in Old Norse Literature

No society ever existed without performing music, and most cultures display many variants of music. Music also played and still plays an important part in different religious rites. From the days of yore, music has been intimately connected with the cult, whether it is performed as epic or lyric expressions.

The Old Norse society was no exception to this statement and early finds from as far back as the Bronze Age reveal that different instruments were used in daily life. The most conspicuous specimens from this time are the bronze lures, which probably are depicted on the rock-carvings. They were made in two different ways — a simpler model made in the shape of a big horn and a more elaborate one made as a big S, which seems to appear in pairs: one curved to the left and the other to the right. Their size varied from 50 cm to more than 200 cm. (Jacobsson 1975: 7). Modern musicians have managed to produce five notes on the bigger ones, but it is uncertain whether the lures were used to play melodies. The practice of blowing one note for where two or more horn players replaced each other in a religious ritual has been suggested as a possible use of these huge bronze lures. (Lund 1994: 26–27). The great bronze shields from the same period seem to belong to the ritual ceremonies, of which we know hardly nothing. According to one hypothesis, these were used as drums, but since ceremonial swords and axes also appear among these finds, it is also conjectured that the weapons could have been used in a ritual war dance. There is also evidence of flutes made of bones and various kinds of rhythm instruments, such as drums, rattles and whiners. (Lund 1994: 24–25)

In the Viking Ages the literary sources tell us that music was performed as entertainment, especially at the royal court or in the hall of a famous chieftain. The music was performed by itinerant bards, some of them travelling far away, as Widsid, who was said to have visited India. Their instruments were the harp, which according to the Roman descriptions of the Germanic tribes, but there are also finds of lyres with six strings. In Ibn Fadlān's famous description of a Viking burial, the dead chieftain of the

Rūs was equipped with a lyre among the other things in his grave (Wikander 1978: 67). A stringed instrument was also found in the ship burial of Sutton Hoo, wrapped in an animal skin bag, reconstructed as a round lyre. As a final suggestion about the origin of the harp we quote Roslyn Rensch:

...any people who owned the hunting bow had possession, in embryo, of the frame harp; anyone who inserted a twig between the converging string arm and sound chest of the harp-developed-from the bow (whether he originally achieved that development himself or borrowed it from an Eastern civilisation) had the prototype of the frame harp of western Europe. (Rensch 1969: 31)

The harp is an entertaining instrument in *Beowulf* but it also maddens the monster Grendel;

*Þær wæs heapen sweg
swutol sang scopes*

There was the sound of the harp, the
clear song of the minstrel (*Beowulf*
1978: 89–90)

The origin of the harp has been discussed; some scholars maintain that it derives from the Celtic areas, especially Great Britain; others claim a Germanic provenance. (Rensch 1969: 28–29)

The harp is mentioned in Old Norse literature in *Völuspá*, the poem of the creation of the world and of its destruction. When the mythical ages decline and a different omen forebodes the descent of the gods' power, *ragnarök*, one of these is mentioned in stanza 41:

*Sat þar á haufi
ok sló hörpo
gýgiar hirðir
glæðr Eggþer*

He sat on the mound and played
on the harp, the shepherd of the
giantess, the merry Eggþer
(*Vsp.* 41)

The giantess is mentioned in stanza 40 as “the old woman in the Ironwood” who bred Fenrir’s off-spring. Fenrir the wolf was one of the terrible monsters, sired by Loki, who threatened the gods and the cosmic order. His off-spring included the wolves appearing at the beginning of *ragnarök*, which Eggþer seemed to have herded. He was obviously full of expectation faced with the future battle between the gods and the giants and perhaps he even incited the wolves with his music. This would be a better explanation of the stanza — in my opinion — than the allusion to King David in Old Testament, who also was a great musician on the harp, but in fact had nothing to do with the context.

One widespread motif that survived into the Christian iconography was Gunnar in the snake pit, an episode in the Saga of the Volsungs:

King Gunnar was then placed in a snake pit with many serpents, and his hands were bound fast. Gudrun sent him a harp and he showed his skill by artfully plucking the strings with his toes. He played so exceedingly well that few thought they had heard such strumming even with the hands. And he continued playing skilfully until all the serpents had fallen asleep, except for one large and hideous adder which crawled up to him and burrowed with its head until it struck his heart. And there, with much valour, Gunnar lost his life. (Saga of the Volsungs 1993: 102)

Gunnar enchanting the snakes echoes the old motif in which a musician managed to bewitch nature and goes back to Orfeus, who played the lyre surrounded by listening animals and who subdued even Hades to open his gates to the nether world. Magical music is also reflected in several Celtic myths, where men are said to have died during the performance caused by the ability of the minstrel. This dramatic effect on people's minds is also evident in the late *fornaldarsaga* about Bosi. The hero of this saga, Bosi, tries to free a princess captured by the mythical King Guðmundr of Glæsisvellir. Guðmundr resides in a kingdom in Bjarmaland and personifies an ambiguous person, sometimes benevolent, sometimes ill-intentioned, characteristics reminiscent of Óðinn himself. In this episode he appears to be conspicuously weak, when Bosi enters the wedding between the captured princess and a man called Siggeir disguised as the minstrel Sigurðr. The ceremony begins with a toast to Þórr. After that Bosi begins to play and sing his first song, with the effect that every movable thing in the hall is aroused and some people begin to dance. This playing went on for a while. Then a toast was proposed to all the Æsir, and Bosi played so that the hall echoed with the sounds; first he played only pieces of music, but then he performed Gygjarslag, Drambus and Hjarrandi. As the guests were drinking the toast to Óðinn, he played Faldefyki on his biggest harp, which caused the veils on the women's heads to falter. By now, everyone was dancing. The last toast at the wedding was the one to Freyja, and when Bosi played Ramnaslag, even the king and Guðmundr and the guard were dancing, which gave him the opportunity to hide the princess in the big harp and to carry her away. (Bósa saga ok Herrauðs 1954-76: 310-313)

This reminds us of another mythical tale, about Áslög, the daughter of Sigurðr Fafnisbani and Brynhildr, who was, according to another *fornaldarsaga* about Ragnar Loðbrok, hidden in a harp and brought to Norway. (Ragnars saga loðbrókar 1954-76: 221-222). One might object that these stories cannot exactly be regarded as documents about the perform-

ance of music. Yet *Bosa saga* mentions a number of songs that might have been popular and had their place at the great banquets during the Viking Age.

The power of the harp is described by Saxo on several occasions, but most pivotal is the description about Hotherus in his third book:

His richly endowed mind made him outstrip his unripe years. No one was a more expert harpist or lute-player, as well as which he was dextrous in the whole art of the psaltery, lyre and fiddle. By performing in different modes he could excite in men's breasts whatever emotions he wished, joy, sorrow, pity and hatred, and by delighting or dismaying their ears could capture their minds. (Saxo 1979-80: 69)

Hotherus' capacity to excite people's minds with his music was useful in his perpetual battle with Balderus. This god was nourished by a special drink mixed by three supernatural sisters dwelling in the forest. Hotherus now endeavours to get that drink for himself:

Being handed a lyre, he tuned the strings, set his plectrum to it and played with the most fluent expressiveness to a ravishing cascade of song. They also had three snakes there, whose poison normally provided a potent preparation to be mixed with Balder's food; even now the venom was dripping in large quantities from their open jaws on to his meal. One of the nymphs, unbending towards Høther, would have offered him a share of this banquet, had not the eldest interposed and protested that Balder would suffer deprivation if they enriched his adversary with additional strength. (Saxo 1979-80/1: 75)

The passage ends with a lacuna, but it seems somehow that Hotherus had convinced the three maidens to supply him with the magical drink.

The power of the harp is well-known in later folk-songs and ballads, where it forms a recurrent theme. Music had the power to help people escape from evil forces, as in the ballad about the wedding where *Näcken*, the evil spirit of the water, abducts the bride as she is riding over a bridge; the bridegroom takes his harp and begins to play. The music has magic consequences — the bark is peeled off the trees; the grass disappears from the meadow and finally *Näcken* himself arises from the deep, weeping and returning the bride. (SMB 1983: 22:268). This is not the case in several other ballads, where *Näcken*, disguised as a nobleman, allures a young woman or a man down into the deep. (SMB 1983: 20: 229)

Näcken was an evil spirit of the rivers and waterfalls, probably derived from the verb, *nigu*, "wash, bathe". A comment made by a medieval theologian, Gottfried of Ghemens tells that he was a fallen angel, who played the dulcimer, an instrument which he brought with him when he was expelled from heaven. His origin is, however, traced back to pre-Christian

times, where he appears as a Proteus-shaped demon, sometimes as a horse (Landnamabók 1925: 57), sometimes as a man, related to sea-spirits as Ægir and Rán, a demonic creature who demands a tribute of human life. In order to allure people down to him, he plays the harp, later the fiddle. (Strömbäck 1981: 432–438)

The harp (or the lyre) is one of the most significant instruments in Old Norse literature. Used as entertainment at a royal banquet, it seemed peaceful enough, but it could — in the right or wrong hands — suddenly change into a powerful tool with which it was possible to gain ascendancy over individuals. Its magico-religious capacity is evident from an early, pre-Christian period until the Middle Ages, when certain types of music became the tools of the fallen angels which seduced mankind and ruined their hopes of salvation.

The War Song

Compared with the evidence of the wide-spread belief in the mystical power of the harp, the war song may seem more concrete and distinct. Its purpose is clear — to incite men's fighting spirits before a battle. For this purpose *Chanson de Roland* was sung by the Normans before the battle of Hastings. (Much 1959: 49). In *Fostbrædrasaga's* account of the battle of Stiklastad we are told that Þormoðr Kolbrúnarskald recited *Bjarkamál* with the beginning "*Dagr's er uppkominn*" in order to hearten the king's army. (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943: 262–263). Heimskringla merely reports that the army of the yeomen cried and beat their shields. The war cry was able to cause a battle-panic — according to many sagas — which made people run away into the forest and eventually turn into an animal's shape. (Gundersen 1981: 282–283)

Strangely enough, other examples of battle hymns in the Old Norse literature are few, something that would be expected from such a belligerent people as the Vikings. There is, however, one possible example interpolated with the framework in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where a man called Dörruðr sees twelve armed men riding into the women's house. (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 454–458) Looking in through the window, he beholds a terrible scene: Women are weaving with weights of human heads, their weft and warp consisting of human intestines; their reeds are swords and their weaving-comb arrows. They are singing a song about the battle while weaving the warrior banner for the army, prophesying victory for the young King and defeat for the Irish.

We weave, we weave the web of the spear
 as on goes the standard to the brave
 we shall not let him lose his life
 The Valkyries have power to choose the slain (6).

All sinister now to see
 a cloud of blood moves over the sky
 the air is red with the blood of men
 as the battle-women chant their song (9).

(Translation from *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, by N. Kershaw, Cambridge, 1922)

As the outcome of the battle of Clontarf was in fact the opposite, we may draw the conclusion that *Darraðarljóð* belongs to another context than *Brennu-Njáls saga* but has for some reason been inserted into it by its author. Already the uncommon name *Dörruðr* is probably a construction made from the title of the song, *Darraðarljóð*. Furthermore, to look through a window sometimes entailed taking part in a supernatural vision, like the slave-girl in Ibn Fadlān's story or the housewife in *Völsa þáttr*.

There are, in fact, certain stanzas in the poem alluding to the battle at Clontarf, such as the death of Sigurðr jarl; others, like the recurrent homage of the young King, are more hard to interpret, as King Brian perished at the beginning of the battle. The last stanza ends with the inciting appeal: "let us ride away quickly on unsaddled horse and swords in hand!". This suggests a battle hymn, with the function of instilling courage in the warriors before combat and a signal to attack.

The women in the hymn are easily recognised as Valkyries, the female deities whose names mean "those who are going to select the slain". In this situation they are singing a returning stanza *Vindum, vindum vefr darraðr*, "We weave, we weave the web of the spear". The web of the spear has sometimes been interpreted as "web of the Spear-God", Óðinn. Anne Holt-smark has, however, suggested that *vefr darraðr* should mean a banner or a standard, alluding to what was called a *merki* in the descriptions of the battles. In this episode of the saga this *merki* had a particular role. It belonged to Sigurr jarl, the leader of the heathen army, thus representing the bad guy, and it portrayed a raven, a bird carrying strong symbolic value of battle and death on the battle-field. The standard was woven by the earl's mother, skilled in magic, and it had the characteristic that it gave victory to the one for whom it was carried — i.e. the commander — but brought death to anyone who carried it, the *merkismaðr* or the standard-bearer". During the battle of Clontarf two standard-bearers fell and the jarl therefore asked the third to take up the banner, who answered: "You might

carry your devil yourself!" The jarl then took the banner himself but fell immediately. (Holtsmark 1956:192–193)

Regarding this interpretation of *vefr darraðr*, it is, in my opinion, quite reasonable to assume that *Darraðarljóð* was originally a war song, recited before a battle in order to provoke a fighting spirit among the combatants. Tacitus already mentions a kind of battle song, although wordless, performed by the Germanic tribes before a battle:

They have also those cries by the utterance of which — "barritus" is the name they use — they inspire courage; and they divine the fortunes of the coming battle from the circumstances of the cry. Intimidation or timidity depends on the concerts of the warriors, it seems to them to mean not so much unison of voices, as union of hearts; the object they specially seek is a certain volume of hoarseness, a crashing roar, their shield being brought up to their lips, that the voice may swell to a fuller and deeper note by means of the echo. (Tacitus 1954: Ch. 3)

Tacitus' account has a counterpart in *Hávamál* 156, where the battle god par excellence, Óðinn, says:

bat kan ek it ellipta
ef ek skal til orrosto
leiða langveini
undir randir ek gel
en þeir með rík, fara
heilir hildar til
heilir hildar frá
komo þeir heilir hvaðan

I know that in the eleventh place
 if I go with good friends to the battle
 I sing towards my shield and
 enchant the war to appear
 enchant the war to disappear
 that they will return safely
 (Hvm 157)

Singing toward the shield once again reminds us of ritual shields of the Bronze Age, although the space in time prevents us from speculations of a direct continuity.

This kind of song indicates the outcome of the battle rather than the agitation of an army against the enemy. This leads us to the special term *vígspá*, a kind of sorcery which turned success in the field to personal favour. It is mentioned in *Völuspá* in relation to "the first battle in the world" between the Æsir and the Vanir. It is the Vanir that use this technique, and their women were also skilled in the kind of sorcery that was called *sejðr*. In an earlier strophe one or two of these female Vanir had infiltrated even Óðinn's hall and used their sorcery against the Æsir. This was possibly an appearance of Freyja, who according to *Heimskringla* was the one that taught Óðinn the art of *sejðr*.

Galdr — the Magic Song

A characteristic feature of *sejðr* was the singing of a special song, *galdr*. (Strömbäck 1935: 119) *Galdr* derives from a similar stem to *gala* “to crow”, which means that the song was performed loudly in a shrill voice. The music historians sometimes relate the special art of singing that was performed by *saeter* girls, cattle-tenders in the forest pastures calling home the cows in the far distance, the *kulning*. A *kulning* was performed at a special vocal pitch, shrill and piercing, and could be heard over a vast area. This is, however, a pure guess, since we know nothing about the performance of a *galdr*. (Lund 1994: 38)

The master of *galdr* was Óðinn himself, also called *galds faðir*. The stanza of *Hávamál* mentioned tells that *unðir randir ek gel* “I sing (a *galdr*) towards the shield”, and later on in the same poem he relates the following:

*Þat kann ek et
fjórða / ef mér fyrðar
bera / bönd at
bóglímom / svá ek
gel / at ek ganga
má / sprettr mér af
fótom fiöturr / en af
höndom hapt*

I know that for the
fourth, if people
bind my limbs
with fetters, then I
chant that I can
walk, loosening
the fetter from my
feet and the chain
from my hands. (Hvm.149)

This war fetter appears to be a special form of magic paralysis that belongs to the realm of *sejðr* and it is found in *The First Merseburger Galder*, an incantation belonging to the ninth century:

*Eiris sâzun idisi sâzun
hera duoder / suma
hapt heptidun suma
heri lezidun / suma
clûbôdum umbi
cuoniouuidi / insprinc
haptbandun, invar
vîgandum!*

Once mighty women sat here
and over there,
some tied fetters,
some stopped the
armies, some loosened the
fetters. Dash out of the
fetters! Run
from the enemies!

This charm could have been recited before battle, with a view to invoking these powers to decide the outcome of the struggle, another example of *vîg-spá*. The mighty women are probably the Valkyries, and typically enough, one of these deities carries the name *Herfjötur* (Grm. 36), “the war fetter”,

alluding to the magic paralysis which could, by certain charms, fetter a warrior, making him an easy target for his enemies.

The Second Merseburger Galder displays another effect of the *galdr*:

<i>Phol ende Uuodan vuorun zi holza</i>	Phol and Wodan went to the forest
<i>du uart demo balderes volon sin vuoze birenkiet</i>	Then Baldr's horse sprained its foot,
<i>thu biguolen Sinhtgunt Sunna era suister</i>	then Sinhtgunt, the sister of Sunna charmed it,
<i>thu biguolen Friia Volla era suis- ter</i>	then Frija, the sister of Volla charmed it.
<i>thu biguolen Uuodan so he vuola conda</i>	then Wodan charmed it, as he was well able to do. Be it
<i>sose benrenki sose bluotrenki</i>	sprain of the bone, be it sprain of
<i>sose lididrenki</i>	blood, be it sprain of the limb:
<i>ben zi bena bluot zi bluoda</i>	bone to bone, blood to blood
<i>lid zi geliden sose gelimida sin.</i>	limb to limb, thus be they fitted together.

This spell does, as F. Ohrt has shown, display close similarities with a song in *Atarvaveda* which also instructs how to handle a sprain. (Ohrt 1925: passim) Galdr was used in medicine in many ways, as one example in *Oddrúnarkviða*, where Óddrún delivers Borgný:

<i>rikt gól Oddrún</i>	Oddrún chanted mighty
<i>rammt gól Oddrún</i>	Oddrún chanted strongly
<i>bitra galdra</i>	keen <i>galdrar</i> at Borgný('s bed).
<i>at Borgnýja</i>	(Odd. 7)

Galdr could be used as a curse and the best example is found in *Skírnismál*: the fertility god Freyr has fallen in love, at first sight, with Gerðr, daughter of the giant Gymir. He sends his servant Skírnir ("the shining one"), who is none less than a hypostasis of the god himself, to propose to the girl. Skírnir finds Gerðr exceedingly hostile to his errand and begins by offering her golden apples and the ring Draupnir, which produces eight golden rings every ninth night. Gerðr refuses icily. He threatens her with his sword, but she takes no notice. Skírnir now utters a curse, charged with maledictions, intensified when the poem changes its metre from *ljóðaháttir* into *galdragalag*, the metre of spells:

Listen giants, listen frost-giants, sons of Suttungr, all kin of Æsir
how I deny, how I forbid the girl from man's joy, the girl from
man's use!

Hrímgrímnir is the giant, who shall have you down at the gates of Hel; where 'Vilmegir' will serve you goats' piss live on the wooden roots. You will never get a nobler drink, of my will, of your will.

I carve a þurs-rune for you and three staves: defilement, lechery and concupiscence! I will carve them off like I (once) carved them, if that is needed (Skm. 34–36).

This curse breaks Gerðr's resistance and she makes Skírnir a promise: Barri is the name of a grove where we both may meet in peace; in nine nights Gerðr will joyfully love Njörðr's son (Skm.41).

A particular role of this kind of song is described in *Eiríks saga raua*, called the *locus classicus* of the *sejðr* by Dag Strömbäck. (Strömbäck 1935: 50) The appearance of a *völva* "a sibyl" takes place in a farmstead on Greenland, where she prepares the rites for the divination. She asks the women of the house if anyone of them could sing a song called *Varðlokkur*, which she needed to entice the supernatural beings who brought her the prophecy. She then entered *sejðhjall*, the special seat where she received knowledge from the supernatural world, and one young women sang the song. After that the *völva* was able to answer questions from the present about the coming year. (Strömbäck 1935: 52–54)

All these examples emphasise the character of music in Old Norse literature as connected with the magic aspect of religion, and particularly with divination. This does not mean that all music in the Viking Age was performed with a magic purpose, but what has survived in the sources is the conspicuous role of music as something that affected the human mind to the extent that it was experienced as a magic feeling, even able to reveal the future.

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