IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Jerome of Moravia, On the Construction, Range, and Tuning of the Vielle, *Tractatus de Musica* (*Treatise on Music*; c1280)

Jerome of Moravia was a Dominican friar (noncloistered monk) living in Paris at the end of the thirteenth century. (He was likely from the area of Moray, Scotland, rather than from the region of Moravia in the Czech Republic.) As a music theorist Jerome was both a conservative and a progressive. In his one known work, *Treatise on Music*, Jerome includes lengthy direct quotes from several earlier music theorists, such as Boethius (c500) and John of St. Gall (c1100), as well as more recent writings of the anonymous author of *The Common Position on Discant* and Franco of Cologne (extracts from both appear at this website as In Their Own Words for Chapters 8 and 10, respectively). Moreover, Jerome was much influenced by the new, analytically critical (as opposed to theologically respectful) approach to sacred texts that was sweeping through Parisian university circles at this time.

For the history of music theory, however, Jerome is notable as being the first Western medieval theorist to provide information about the construction and tuning of instruments, specifically the two-string rebec and the five-string vielle (see Fig. 11-4 in Chapter 11). In the passage below, Jerome suggests three different ways to tune the vielle, and from his discussion we learn something about its construction. As you read through this material, ask yourself the following questions: Which tuning can actually play all the notes of the Guidonian scale (except the high e")? For what kind of music would tunings one and three be especially good, and for what kind of music would tunings one and three not be as useful? Related to this, why would a medieval instrumentalist want to tune two strings to the same pitch? Do the musicians of the time ever seem to have shifted into higher string positions? What might this say about the length of the fingerboard on the medieval vielle? In sum, can you venture an opinion as to what kind of music this instrument might have played and how it might have sounded?

Of greater importance than the rebec is the vielle. It can play higher and lower, and it can be tuned [temperatur] in several different ways according to the player. It has, or should have, five strings.

And here is the first way in which it is tuned: first string to d, second string to G, third string on g, and the fourth and fifth strings on d'. Observe how it is able to play the scale from G up to a'. We mentioned that the second string is tuned to G. But using the fingers [on this string] one can play A, B, and c. The first string sounds only a d and serves as a drone string to the others. This is because it is placed outside the fingerboard of the vielle, to the side, and therefore cannot be stopped by the fingers. For this reason, in this tuning two pitches are missing, namely, e and f. These will be supplied by the fourth and fifth strings at the octave. The third string by itself produces G. By using the fingers one can produce a, b natural and c'. The fourth and fifth strings provide d'; by use of the fingers e', f', and g'; and by the application of the little finger a'. And a vielle tuned in this fashion can play all the [church] modes [actually, it can’t because pitches e and f are missing]. This is the first method for tuning the vielle.

Another tuning is necessary for secular performers and all other kinds of songs, especially “irregular” ones [presumably ones that don't stay within the prescribed limits of range for each of the eight church modes] that frequently run up the entire [Guidonian] hand. In this tuning it is necessary to put all five strings over the fingerboard, none being off to the side, so that the fingers may stop all five. However, they should be tuned so that each generates its own pitch; and in this second method of tuning it...
is the first string that sounds e’ and f’ by using the fingers. And the second, third, and fourth strings are the same as in the first tuning [G, g, d’], but the fifth string is not in unison with the fourth string, but a fourth above it, that is on the g’ of the superacute tetrachord [g above our middle c’], and so the fifth string sounds a’, b’ flat, b’ natural and c’”, and d” with the use of the little finger. [This second tuning has the strings d, G, g, d’, and g’ and can sound the full Guidonian scale from gamma ut to d”], specifically, G, A, B, c, d, e, f, g, a, b flat, b natural, c’, d’, e’, f’, g’, a’, b’ flat, b’ natural, c’” and d”].

The third method of tuning differs from the first in that the first two strings both sound G, the third d’, and the fourth and fifth c’. In this method the notes in between likewise can be found by stopping the strings. [To which a marginal commentator in the original manuscript states rightly, “I do not see how b’ is sounded.”]

Having seen these tunings and memorized them [again, the importance of memory in the Middle Ages!] you are ready to take this art and apply it in practice.