

Music in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages the term *jongleur*, from the Latin *joculare* (to entertain), described both musicians and other entertainers (mimes, acrobats, clowns).

At the time these functions were inseparable. The **jongleur** had no fixed employment; he moved from place to place, offering his services in private residences. He was music. He alone created it, carried it with him and organised its circulation within society. At the same time, the jongleur himself remained outside society; with his itinerant lifestyle, the Church condemned him, accusing him of paganism and magical practices.

Consumers of music belonged to every social class. A jongleur might play at a country wedding one night, and the next evening in a castle, where he would eat and sleep with the servants. The same musical message reached every ear and the repertory was identical for rich and poor. Popular tunes were performed at court, while melodies composed in the palaces found their way to villages, where they were transformed into folk songs.

In a world in which music was an essential way to circulate information, jongleurs could be used for spreading political propaganda. Richard I hired jongleurs to compose songs to his glory and to sing them in public squares on market days. On the other hand, independent jongleurs composed factual or satirical songs about current events. Certain subjects were forbidden, however; if they disobeyed, they were sent to prison.

The other important musician of the period, who appeared slightly later, was the **troubadour**, a more aristocratic figure whose art flourished from the 12th to the 14th centuries and was confined to France, northern Spain and northern Italy. *Troubadour* originally meant 'finder' or 'inventor' and the art of these poet-composers represents one of the greatest refinements of poetry that the world has ever seen. Nine hundred different metres and forms of stanza can be found in the remaining body of their poetry. Their principal subject, the praise of women, gave rise to the idea of courtly love. But they also celebrated heroism and the greatness of princes and took side in political disputes. Though more sophisticated in their poetry, musically troubadours borrowed from the same store of popular melodies as the jongleurs, and so throughout the Middle Ages music remained more or less the same in the village, the marketplace and the courts of the lords.

In the 14th century, however, everything changed. The increasing complexity of musical composition, in particular the spread of polyphonic music - written for many instruments - distanced court music from popular taste. Nobles would buy trained musicians and order them to play solemn songs to celebrate their victories, light songs for entertainment, orchestrated dances, and so on.

Musicians became professionals bound to a single master, producers of spectacles for a privileged minority, and by the 16th century the courts had banished the jongleurs, the voice of the people, and listened only to written music performed by professional players. This change is confirmed by a shift in vocabulary: in place of the term *jongleur* we have *ménestrel* (minstrel) from the Latin *ministerialis* (functionary). Attached to a court or resident of a town, musicians no longer travelled around. **Minstrels** organised themselves into guilds similar to those of craftsmen or merchants and won a monopoly over public and private ceremonies such as marriages, marginalising the nonprofessional jongleurs who became more like beggars. Employed by rich patrons, minstrels acquired a new social role for musicians, but music itself was no longer free. Nonetheless, the street musician has survived as a subversive figure outside the music market. Modern day '**buskers**', as they are called, play in streets and underground stations making music once again circulate in public spaces.

TIME IN MOTION

- Your turn!** Think about the forms of control which govern the circulation of music today. In what way might a musician's relationship with a record company resemble that of a minstrel with a lord? Apart from through street musicians, are there any other unofficial channels by which music circulates?