

# Eat, Drink, and Play Music

[ GRACE DRAKE ]

The first pandemic episode of plague which devastated Europe in 1348 left the few remaining citizens terrified and confused after a two-year long outbreak. Although many artistic Europeans perished, those who lived through the Black Death continued to create, and their secular works accompanied the shift away from unquestioning faith. One collective worldview morphed into a split view which accounted for different interpretations of the mass death of Europeans. Death became a more integral part of daily life and was widely accepted as inevitable, as death did not discriminate between rich or poor, man or woman, or even layman or clergy. Additionally, as Europeans tried to rationalize the reason for the disease, new philosophical and religious theories emerged. Many of these views were polarizing, and ultimately there was a split between those who sought to sing and dance the pestilence away, and those who sought to maintain religious decorum in order to ensure that they enter Christian heaven.

The Black Death of 1348 changed both the composer and the compositions, and the music of the plague was either somber to reflect the grim reality, or lively music to dance to during parties. Two plague survivors, Giovanni Boccaccio and Guillaume de Machaut, made strides in the world of secular music, which had grown distinctly more popular during and after the outbreak of the Black Death. Boccaccio's *The Decameron* highlights the changing worldview and societal attitudes during the time of the plague, and Guillaume de Machaut's music puts this into context, as the timeline of his compositions align with the societal upheaval that took place during the late 1340s.

Written in 1353 but set just five years prior when plague was running rampant, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* follows ten Florentine pilgrims on their journey out of the plague-infested and desolate city. Each member of the brigata, or group, tells a tale on each day of the ten day journey relating to a different theme, and each tale ends with a song belonging

to the *ballata* genre.<sup>1</sup> The poetic and musical genre was quite new and secular in nature, beginning as a dance genre but evolving into an art song. In addition to ballate in *The Decameron*, Boccaccio also wrote the text to *madrigals*,<sup>2</sup> which were set by different composers of the time.<sup>3</sup> Although *The Decameron* is a work of literature, music played an important role within the fictional brigata during the Black Death, as it served both as a means of escapism and storytelling. In this work, Boccaccio also demonstrates the changing worldview of the time, highlighting the beliefs that plague-era composers likely held which provides context for their music.

In the opening day of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio writes that the deadly plague came “through the operation of the heavenly bodies or of [their] own iniquitous dealings,” which describes the split in ideals between those who thought that the plague was inevitable and due to the alignment of the planets, and those who viewed it as a punishment from the hand of God for sinful actions.<sup>4</sup> One common religious view was that the Black Death was the first of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which are pestilence, war, famine, and death. Contrarily, astrology was growing in popularity, and many believed in the theory of superior conjunctions, which is the idea that the positions of planets in relation to the moon in houses corresponds to major Earthly events, such as flooding or plague. This theory is most likely what Boccaccio was referring to in the line “operation of the heavenly bodies.”<sup>5</sup>

In relation to the church, Saxby Pridmore and Garry Walter claim that due to “the impotence of the Church and the clergy in combating the plague,” many began to question religion and the nature of God, as people sought answers that the church could not provide. There was both social and economic upheaval as the population suddenly shrank, especially as the nobility began to dress and act more extravagantly in order to truly distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Two major examples of societal upheaval were the dissolution of the feudal system and, economically, the drastic trade reduction due to the disease. By the end of 1348, there was no collective idea of how to handle this pandemic, but rather two opposing views both on the origin of the disease as well as whether to choose between quarantine or fleeing the city, or to stay and

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1 Medieval song genre that first emerged in Italy consisting of verses and a refrain and was meant for dancing.

2 Songs written for several voices that explored themes of love and often death.

3 W. Thomas Marrocco, “Music and Dance in Boccaccio’s Time. Part I: Fact and Speculation,” *Dance Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1978), 19.

4 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. John Payne, (Roslyn: Walter J. Black Inc., 2007), 2.

5 John J. O’Connor, “Astrological Background of the Miller’s Tale,” *Speculum* 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1956), 121.

party in the streets as the city is destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

Music is central throughout *The Decameron*, and the only lute player of the brigata, Dioneo, represents those who abided by the saying “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die” in order to cope with the plague.<sup>7</sup> This portrayal was accurate because many, including King Henry VIII, held this philosophy. When Henry VIII was in quarantine, the only members of his court whom he did not dismiss were three of his best gentlemen, his physician, and organist Dionisio Memo. In this time of turmoil, Henry VIII equally prioritized his health and merrymaking in the form of musical entertainment.<sup>8</sup> Throughout *The Decameron*, Dioneo consistently tries to sing lewd songs, and tells the group before they begin the journey that he would return to the infested city if they were not interested in having fun. Additionally, both Dioneo and vielle player Fiammetta choose to amuse themselves through song while others in the brigata amuse themselves with games or conversation. This brings to light the notion of music as both a pastime and a coping mechanism rather than only for the purpose of communication or prayer. Dioneo and Fiammetta are also attractive and sensuous characters, portraying the Troubadour-esque archetype of the musician as one who focuses on love rather than one who is godly.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of the Black Death, composer Guillaume de Machaut was composing mostly sacred motets<sup>10</sup> and dabbling a bit in secular music. Roger Bowers notes that “the Machaut of the 1340s and 1350s was composing... *lais* and *virelais*, *ballades* and *rondeaux*” which are all secular genres, and these years mark a distinct break in his catalogue of sacred music.<sup>11</sup> The *virelais* is the French equivalent of the *ballata*, which is the genre of song that Boccaccio’s brigata sings throughout *The Decameron*. Although he began to explore secular music shortly before the outbreak, his new styles did not gain popularity until the Black Death struck. Unlike many composers, Machaut also wrote his own

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6 Saxby Pridmore and Garry Walter, “Suicidal Ideation and Completed Suicide in *The Decameron*,” *Turkish Journal of Psychiatry* 25, iss. 1 (Spring 2014), 3.

7 The phrase “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die” was popularized in Dante’s *Inferno*, written in 1321, but was originally a mashup of Bible verse snippets. The phrase is often used out of context but was a common saying during the time of the Black Death, used to justify the engagement in raucous behavior.

8 Leonard W. Courie, “Social and Economic Effects of the Plague,” *Decameron Web*, last modified March 12, 2010, [https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/plague/effects/social.php](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/plague/effects/social.php).

9 Christopher Macklin, “Plague, Performance and the Elusive History of the *Stella Celi Extirpavit*,” *Early Music History* 29, (Oct. 2010), 3.

10 Unaccompanied choral music often meant for church choir.

11 Roger Bowers, “Guillaume de Machaut and his Canonry of Reims, 1338-1377,” *Early Music History* 23, (2004), 1.

poetry which he set to music, making him favorable among other poets and writers. He is widely regarded as one of the most notable composers of the fourteenth century, and by exploring his works one can understand the changes in music as a whole during this time.<sup>12</sup>

The ballata genre and virelais genre, which are nearly synonymous, are crucial to the development of secular music, and by the mid 1300s functioned as an art song rather than a dance. W. Thomas Marrocco states that the features that distinguished this new definition of the genre as opposed to the older dance tradition were:

1. A florid and prominent upper voice against a lower part or parts consisting of longer note values.
2. Contrapuntal and chordal treatment within a composition.
3. Rhythmic independence of each part.
4. Occasional presence of changing time signatures within a composition.
5. Absence of symmetrical periods and dance-like rhythmic regularity.<sup>13</sup>

Machaut had a direct confrontation with the plague in November of 1349, when it struck the city of Navarre in which he was living at the time. The introduction of his poem, "Le Jugement du Roi de Navarre," written in 1349, describes the hardships of this time and laments on the crumbling society. His account of the Black Death is consistent with historians', as the city of Navarre was one of the last to become infected. Machaut comments in this introduction,

But what grieves me more  
To endure, and troubles me more too,  
Is that God is accorded little reverence  
And that there is no order to anything.<sup>14</sup>

This passage accurately describes the disorder throughout Europe, as well as Machaut's sadness that God was no longer at the forefront of society. The virelais genre as an art song removed the orderly dance beat, and introduced a sense of disorder and change into music. Many features of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> W. Thomas Marrocco, "The Ballata: A Metamorphic Form," *Acta Musicologica* 31, (1959), 36

<sup>14</sup> Guillaume de Machaut, ed. R. Barton Palmer, ed. Yolanda Plumley, "Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre," in *Guillaume de Machaut, The Complete Poetry and Music*, vol. 1 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2016), 143.

Machaut's "Messe de Nostre Dame," which was composed within sixteen years post Black Death, retain elements from these secular genres, such as isorhythm.<sup>15</sup> Overall, these elements that were present in his later music were considered imperfect by medieval standards, but were utilized in a deliberate way to glorify God during a time when Machaut felt that he was forgotten. The contrapuntal quality of this mass can be interpreted as a tribute to the divine order of God perhaps being restored after the Black Death had ended.

While God was not widely viewed as a remedy for the plague, Remi Chiu notes that often "doctors prescribed song as a prophylaxis to the disease."<sup>16</sup> One Italian physician, Niccolo Massa, stated that it is vital to listen to beautiful music and look at beautiful art in order to fight the Black Death, introducing the idea of music therapy in order to lift one's spirits during a tumultuous time. When the outbreak began to take many lives in 1348, the city of Pistoia issued an ordinance which stated that the use of town criers or drummers to summon citizens to a burial was illegal.<sup>17</sup> At least for common people, music was no longer allowed to be associated with death after the passing of this ordinance. Neither prayer nor medicine at the time were able to effectively ward off the plague, so doctors and city officials advocated for the use of music to make the best of the situation.

Physicians prescribed all behaviors that would bring joy, and Remi Chiu writes that these include "socialisation, games, storytelling, beautiful objects and joyous music."<sup>18</sup> The brigata of *The Decameron* embody these remedies as they spend their days assigning each other the role of Queen or King for a day and filling their journey with stories and songs. Machaut's secular music explores a variety of emotions within the overarching theme of love. His virelais composed after the year 1349 especially encompass the theme of courtly love, which was considered noble and elegant. Although he was troubled by the thought of the crumbling of a godly society, he still utilized music to showcase earthly beauty, just as medieval plague doctors prescribed it as a rudimentary form of therapy. Highlighting the joy and beauty of love, as well as the beauty of love lost, was perhaps a coping mechanism for Machaut, just as it was for the fictional but historically based Dioneo.

These themes of courtly love are present in Machaut's post 1349 virelai, "Ay mi! Dame de Valour." The first verse of the poem reads,

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15 An isorhythm is a repeated rhythmic pattern that is juxtaposed with other rhythms, creating a full musical texture.

16 Remi Chiu, "Music, Pestilence and Two Settings of O Beate Sebastiane," *Early Music History* 31, (2012), 154.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 159.

## 18 inter-text

Most gentle creature.  
How can your tender sweetness  
Be so hard towards me.  
When my heart, my body and my love  
I have given you without reward  
And without regret?  
Now you keep me in langour  
Of which I fear I will die.<sup>19</sup>

The associations with love and death in his post Black Death secular music are characteristic of other courtly love poems and songs, and although he sings of earthly love, he does so in an honorable way. Judith Kraft's recording of this virelais illustrates the somber tone through the choice to record the song with a single male voice with no accompaniment.<sup>20</sup> It may have been sung this way, or it would have been sung with vocal accompaniment singing either a drone or slower notes underneath the melody. Although there are moments where a pulse can be heard, the beat is unsteady and free flowing, which does not make for an effective dance tune, unlike earlier virelais. The emotion and lamentation in this piece reflect Machaut's view of the plague, and grief is an overwhelming theme throughout the rest of the lyrical content of this virelais. This song was not a reflection of plague time merriment, but rather an illustration of the overall feeling of hopelessness that possessed Europeans following 1348.

The Black Death irreparably changed the worldview of Europeans, as many were split between two conflicting philosophies. While some thought that the plague was punishment for a straying society, others thought that it had been predestined in the stars and that it had nothing to do with one's actions. Institutions such as the nobility and the church failed, and the old feudal system was looked down upon after 1348. Social and economic uprisings further split the classes, as the lower class often resented the nobility who could afford to flee the infested cities and escape the plague, so those who were forced to stay made the best of the situation with song and storytelling.

The music that emerged from the time of the plague was uniquely secular during an era when sacred music flourished, and the compositions and writings of Giovanni Boccaccio and Guillaume de Machaut provide context for the philosophical views that gave rise to secular music. Secular does not mean anti-God, as Machaut produced a large catalogue of secular music before continuing on to write one of the most influential

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19 Guillaume de Machaut, trans. Jennifer Garnham, "Ay mi! Dame Valour," *Medieval Music Database*, 2003, <http://arrow.latrobe.edu.au/store/3/4/5/4/2/public/MMDB/Composer/H0033033.HTM>.

20 Judith Kraft, "Ay mi! Dame de Valour," Track 23 on *Devotion*. 1997.

masses of the Middle Ages, “Messe de Nostre Dame,” during the recovery period after the plague. Although there are differences between the lustful music performed by Boccaccio’s fictional luenist Dioneo and the courtly love virelais of Machaut, both ultimately serve as a coping mechanism and a means for distraction in the form of pleasure. Whether this pleasure seeking was of noble intention or not, it was all one could do when faced with the first Horseman of the Apocalypse in the form of pestilence.