

# Rose & Flame

Love, longing, and devotion were not only central themes of medieval lyric, but also threads that bound together different regions and traditions across Europe. Poet-musicians gave voice to the joys and torments of *fin'amor* (refined love) through song. Their works were at once personal expressions and social performances, intertwining poetry, music, and the ideals of chivalry.

This program follows that shared current of monophonic song from the 12th to the 14th centuries: from the troubadours of southern France, who first shaped the vocabulary of courtly love; to the trouvères of the north, who adapted and expanded it; to the Minnesänger, who carried it into the German-speaking world with their own distinctive voices. At the height of this tradition stands Guillaume de Machaut, whose *lais* both preserved and transformed the medieval lyric into some of its most ambitious and refined forms.

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The **troubadours** were the poet-musicians of southern France (*Occitania*), active from the early 12th century. Composing primarily in Occitan (*langue d'oc*), they created the first large repertory of vernacular lyric poetry in medieval Europe. Their central genre, the *canço*, celebrated *fin'amor* (refined love) in all its paradoxes: joy mingled with suffering, fidelity tested by indifference, and passion expressed through the metaphors of feudal service. Troubadour poetry established the ideals and vocabulary of courtly love that shaped nearly all later European lyric traditions.

**Peire Raimon de Tolosa** (fl. 1180–1220) was one such troubadour, known as a singer and composer of *canços*. His *vida* recounts:

*“Peire Raimon of Toulouse, the Old, was the son of a bourgeois. He became a jongleur and went to the court of King Alfonso of Aragon (1162–1196), who welcomed him with honor. Skilled and subtle, he knew how to sing well and compose finely, writing good verses, good songs, and good compositions. He spent a long time at the courts of King Alfonso, the Count of Toulouse, and Lord Guilhem of Montpellier. Later he married in Pamiers, where he died.”*



Among his works, the *canço* “Atressi com la candela” is the most celebrated, preserved in nineteen manuscripts. Of his twenty surviving poems, it is also the only one whose melody has come down to us.

In this song, Peire Raimon compares himself to a candle that consumes itself to give light to others - a metaphor for the suffering he endures in silent devotion to a noblewoman. Though he recognizes the futility of such love, he insists that constancy, even in pain, is the truest expression of *fin’amor*. He casts himself as her loyal vassal, accepting her indifference as part of the code of service. Yet no other woman, he declares, could rival her worth. The poem ends by directing his words toward the court of King Alfonso of Aragon, while keeping the lady’s identity hidden - distant and untouchable, like a star.

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The **trouvères** emerged slightly later than the troubadours, flourishing in northern France from the mid-12th through the 13th centuries. Composing in Old French (*langue d’oïl*), they inherited the themes of courtly love from their Occitan counterparts but adapted them to their own linguistic, cultural, and political contexts. The *chanson courtoise* was their equivalent to the troubadour *canço*, though the trouvère repertory developed greater stylistic and thematic variety over time. Because northern France became an early center of musical notation, more trouvère melodies survive than troubadour ones, giving us a fuller picture of their sung repertory.

Within this corpus, a distinctive subgroup of songs is often labeled *chansons de femme* (“women’s songs”). These texts are written in a female voice, typically lamenting love’s betrayals, disappointments, or unfulfilled desires. Unlike the majority of *chansons courtoises*, where a male lover addresses an unattainable lady, the *chansons de femme* foreground a woman’s perspective. Their tone is often strikingly direct, emphasizing personal emotion and complaint rather than elaborate courtly conceits. Whether these poems were genuinely authored by women or represent male poets writing in a female voice remains debated, but they nonetheless provide a vital counterbalance to the predominantly male viewpoint of courtly lyric.

Musically, the *chansons de femme* share the monophonic tradition of the wider trouvère repertory: single melodic lines that bring the text into sharp focus, with strophic structures that reinforce refrains. Their haunting simplicity and plaintive tone have given them a special resonance for modern performers, highlighting the emotional immediacy of women’s voices in medieval song.

The anonymous *chanson de femme* “L’on dit qu’amors est dolce chose” exemplifies the genre. The speaker contrasts the ideal of love as “sweet” with her own lived reality of betrayal and disillusionment. She recalls how a kiss once bound her to her beloved in loyalty, only to discover that kisses can deceive and mask faithlessness. In the final stanza, the imagery becomes more poignant: her brief revival at his words is likened to the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, whose tragic love flickered only for a moment

before death. The refrain underscores the cathartic power of lament, suggesting that voicing grief is the only solace left when love has failed.

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The **Minnesänger** (literally “love singers”) were the German counterparts of the troubadours and trouvères, active from the mid-12th to the 14th centuries. Like their Occitan and Old French predecessors, they cultivated the art of courtly love lyric (*Minnegesang*), singing in Middle High German of devotion, service, and longing for a noble lady. Their songs often drew on feudal vocabulary: the lover cast himself as a vassal to his lady, pledging loyalty and humility in hopes of her favor. The repertory was largely monophonic, though later polyphonic settings survive, and it was closely tied to aristocratic courts across the German-speaking lands.

Early Minnesang was strongly influenced by troubadour ideals, but over time it developed its own idioms. Later poets introduced more accessible and playful elements, moving away from the strict abstraction of earlier courtly lyric.



Among the most distinctive figures is **Neidhart von Reuenthal** (c. 1180–1240?), active in Bavaria in the early 13th century. Neidhart transformed *Minnegesang* by weaving humor, satire, and social commentary into the courtly love song. Rather than situating love exclusively within the refined setting of the court, he often relocated his scenes to the village green (*Dorfweise*), where rustic peasants—sometimes named and caricatured—attempted to imitate courtly manners and courtship. His songs mock these figures, especially peasant men competing for women’s attention, and contrast their awkward pretensions with the ideals of refined love. This blending of noble lyric with parody created a unique genre of satirical Minnesang, one that was immensely popular and widely transmitted in manuscripts.

Historically, Neidhart is significant for broadening the scope of *Minnesang* beyond the aristocratic court. His works show how courtly forms could be adapted for entertainment that combined serious devotion with biting wit and popular humor. Over 1,500 stanzas are attributed to him in manuscripts, and his reputation endured well into the late Middle Ages.

His long *Minnesang* “Svmmmer vnde winder” epitomizes this dual style. At first, the singer uses familiar seasonal imagery to lament the constancy of his longing despite nature’s renewal. He praises an unnamed lady with the expected virtues and beauty of the courtly beloved, yet admits that decades of devotion have gone unrewarded. As the poem unfolds, however, earnest complaint gives way to satire: rustic rivals

such as “Geppelmann” and “Bärenwolf” appear, making absurd attempts to win the lady’s favor. Their vanity and pretension are mocked in detail, and their eventual humiliation is gleefully narrated. This mixture of Minnesang convention and parody is characteristic of Neidhart’s art: he preserves the outward form of the courtly love song while at the same time exposing its absurdities and grounding it in a more humorous, even burlesque, social world.

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**Peire d’Alvernhe** (fl. 1149–1170) was a troubadour from the Auvergne region and belonged to the first generation of troubadours. His *vida* tells us:

*“Peire d’Alvernhe was from the Auvergne. He was the son of a poor knight, and he was a clerk before he became a troubadour. He was a handsome man and very learned in letters, and he composed both good and bad songs. He was a man of good company, and he was skilled in composing satire. He made the sirventes against the bad troubadours, in which he attacked them all. stayed a long time in the court of the Count Poitiers and of other great lords. Later he became a monk of Dalon, and there he ended his days.”*



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Unlike many of his contemporaries who idealized the joys and sufferings of *fin’amor*, Peire often infused his poetry with satire and moral critique. Alongside *cansos* that explore the contradictions of love, he composed biting attacks on fellow troubadours, mocking their vices and exposing the pretensions of courtly culture.

His *canso* “Deiosta. Is breus iorns e. Is loncs sers” reflects both sides of his artistry. The poem describes the paradoxes of love: the renewal of spring evenings with blossoming leaves and birdsong means little without the presence of his lady. Love can enrich or impoverish, bringing laughter or sorrow. He confesses his deep devotion - his lady’s presence makes him tremble, and though fear holds him back from speaking, even the smallest glimpse of her transforms his sadness into joy. The song ends by affirming that her favor is worth more than the entire kingdom of France, sealing his loyalty and the exalted value he places on her love.

Musically, the song stands out for its sophistication, setting it apart from much of the surviving troubadour repertory of the mid-12th century. While many contemporaries favored straightforward, syllabic melodies with modest ranges to highlight the text, Peire’s melody is strikingly elaborate. Its unusually wide contour and large leaps demand considerable vocal agility, revealing his ambition not only as a poet but also as a composer.



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The **trobairitz** were the female counterparts of the troubadours. About two dozen names are preserved in the chansonniers, with roughly forty songs attributed to them. Their works show that women participated fully in the culture of *fin'amor*, but their perspective often reshaped its conventions: instead of the distant male lover serving an unattainable lady, the trobairitz frequently give voice to the frustrations, vulnerabilities, and demands of women negotiating both the ideals and the realities of love.



The most famous of the trobairitz is the **Comtessa de Dia** (sometimes identified as *Beatriz de Dia*), active in the late 12th century. Like most women's biographies in the chansonniers, her *vida* is brief and functions mainly to link her to Raimbaut d'Aurenga, another celebrated troubadour:

*"The Countess of Dia was a noble lady from the county of Die. She was beautiful and good, and married to a great lord, but she was in love with Raimbaut d'Aurenga, and she composed many fine songs about him."*

Her *canço* "A chantar m'er de so qu'eu no volria" holds a unique place in the tradition: it is the only extant troubadour song by a named woman for which the melody survives. While anonymous works in the chansonniers may well have been authored by women, *A chantar* is the sole example where both text and melody together preserve the voice of a known female poet.

In the song, the Comtessa laments the cruelty and indifference of her beloved despite her beauty, merit, and loyalty. She insists on her innocence, declaring she has never wronged him and has loved him more faithfully than legendary lovers of old. Yet he remains distant and haughty toward her, even as he shows courtesy to others. The poem alternates between reproach and reaffirmation: she recalls the joy of their early love, praises his valor and noble worth, and asserts that no woman could fail to be drawn to him. Still, she wonders why her devotion and nobility are not enough to win his favor. The song closes with a direct appeal, sending the poem itself as a messenger to demand an explanation for his harshness while warning against the dangers of pride.

"A chantar" is thus significant not only as a rare survival of women's authorship in medieval lyric but also as a vivid testimony to how women could engage with, reshape, and challenge the ideals of *fin'amor*.

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**Guillaume de Machaut** (c. 1300–1377), the most influential French poet-composer of the 14th century, stands as the culmination of the medieval tradition of the poet-musician. His *lais*, though composed more than a century after the height of troubadour and trouvère song, both preserve and transform that earlier lyric



inheritance. The form itself had long been cultivated in northern France, but Machaut expanded it into one of his most ambitious poetic and musical vehicles.

Like the troubadours, Machaut explores the paradoxes of *fin'amor*: devotion that ennobles and destroys, desire that brings both exaltation and despair. Yet where troubadour *cansos* are often concise, his *lais* unfold as extended meditations, sustaining a single emotional idea - lament, complaint, or praise - through refined variation of imagery, stanza form, and

melody. Musically, they carry forward the legacy of monophonic song while becoming highly elaborate: long cycles of twelve stanzas framed symmetrically, with wide-ranging verse lengths and rhythmic nuance made possible by Ars Nova notation. In this way, Machaut reimagined the lyric tradition of love poetry on a large scale, creating structures of unprecedented scope and intensity.

“Pour ce qu'on puist miex retraire” is one of his most striking examples. The poet laments the wounds inflicted by Love, describing himself as destroyed by desire, bereft of joy, and shown no mercy by his lady. Her beauty first bound him, but she withholds all comfort, leaving him to burn with longing, humiliation, and despair. Death is invoked as the only release, yet it refuses to come, prolonging his torment. The poem closes in resignation: he will die of love unrewarded, while hoping others may find comfort where he could not.

Formally, the lai exemplifies Machaut's ambition. Its twelve stanzas, with the first and last paired in rhyme and music, form not a narrative but a sustained exercise in persuasion. Its great length and relentless variation of theme and imagery mirror the inexhaustible anguish of the text, while shifts in verse length - from three to ten syllables - combined with rhythmic innovations of Ars Nova notation, allow the music to heighten and intensify the extremes of lament and desire.

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We close the program with one of the most celebrated works of the troubadour tradition: the estampida “Kalenda maia”.

**Raimbaut de Vaqueiras** (c. 1150–1207), a Provençal troubadour, is notable as a figure who bridged the worlds of lyric poetry and knightly service. He played a key role in

the dissemination of troubadour song in Italy, where he entered the service of Marquis Boniface of Montferrat, whom he accompanied with on the Fourth Crusade. According to his *vida*:

*“Raimbaut de Vaqueiras was from Provence, from the town of Vacqueyras, and he was of poor and humble family. He became a jongleur and went to the court of the Marquis Boniface of Montferrat, who honored him greatly. He composed poems about the marquis, and about the marquise as well, and about many others. He was a fine knight, for the marquis made him one, and he was valiant in arms and in*



*song. He knew well how to compose cansos, sirventes, tensos, and descorts. And he went overseas with the marquis on the Crusade, where he performed many feats of arms and finally was killed.”*

His “Kalenda maia” is remarkable both for its graceful and distinctive melody and for its rare, documented link to instrumental dance music. The *razo* that accompanies the piece is especially valuable, as it is the only source to explicitly mention the *vielle* being played in a troubadour court—making the song unique both in its medieval setting and in modern performance.

The *razo* to “Kalenda maia” recounts the following:

*“You have certainly heard who Raimbaut was and where he came from and how*

*he was knighted by the Marquis of Montferrat and how he paid court to Lady Beatrice and on account of his love lived joyously.*

*And hear how he experienced during a short time great sadness. This was caused by the false jealous ones who found love and courting displeasing. They spoke to Lady Beatrice in the presence of the other ladies saying: “Who is this Raimbaut de Vaqueiras even though the Marquis made him a knight? And how dare he court so high born a lady as you are? Be it known that it is not an honor either for you or for the Marquis.” They said so many evil things (as bad people do) that Lady Beatrice became angry at Raimbaut de Vaqueiras. So when Raimbaut tried to woo her and ask her pity, she did not listen to his prayers, but to the contrary told him that he should woo another lady who would be more appropriate for him and that she would no longer listen to him. And that is the sadness Raimbaut had during a short time just as I told you at the beginning of this razo.*

*So he stopped singing and laughing and withdrew from all activities that might please him. That was too bad. All this was caused by the tongues of gossips, just as he tells it in one stanza of the estampie you will hear.*

*At that time two jongleurs came from France to the court of the marquis who were skilled at playing the vielle. And one day they played an estampie that much pleased the marquis, the knights and the ladies. But Raimbaut did not enjoy it. The marquis noticed this and said to him: "Sir Raimbaut, why do you not sing and rejoice since you are listening to a fine sound of the vielle, you see here so beautiful a lady as my sister who has retained you as her servant, and she is the noblest lady in the world?" And Raimbaut replied that he would do nothing. Now the marquis knew why, and he said to his sister: "Lady Beatrice, for the love of me and of all these people, I want you to agree to beg Raimbaut, in the name of your love and your grace, that he be happy, that he sing, and that he enjoy himself, like he used to." And Lady Beatrice was so courtly and of such good grace that she begged Raimbaut, encouraging him, for her sake, to be happy again and to again make a song.*

*So Raimbaut, for the reason you've just heard, made the estampida that runs like this:*

*[First stanza of Kalenda maia]*

*This estampida was made to the notes of the estampida that the jongleurs played on their vielles."*

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**Vida:** a short prose biography of a troubadour or trobairitz, usually found in the chansonniers. Often anecdotal, they give background on the poet's life, patrons, and character.

**Razo:** a brief prose explanation or anecdote that introduces or explains the context of a specific poem: why it was written, for whom, or under what circumstances.