

2024

"And the people sang in all the ways of the City:" A Speculative Ethnomusicology of Gondor

Kelsey A. Fuller-Shafer

Fairfield University, kfuller-shafer@fairfield.edu

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Recommended Citation

Fuller-Shafer, Kelsey A. (2024) "'And the people sang in all the ways of the City:" A Speculative Ethnomusicology of Gondor," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol19/iss1/12>

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Ethnomusicology is a comparatively young academic discipline, with older roots in ethnology, historical musicology, and the now defunct field of “comparative musicology” (early twentieth-century European and American scholars studying non-European music, with often dated and problematic results: a musically-inclined sibling to “armchair anthropology,” if you will). Indeed, most of us share the unique experience of being ‘the first ethnomusicologist’ a new acquaintance has ever met, a comment I heard so frequently while in graduate school and working in the field that I took to responding with my best Viggo Mortensen impression: “There are few of us left, the Northern kingdom was destroyed long ago” (which, I admit, often did little more than generate further confusion). We ethnomusicologists are perhaps less mysterious than the Dúnedain, but just as surprising it seems when we are encountered unsuspected ‘in the wild.’

The field of ethnomusicology has taken great care to define and redefine itself through the decades. In 1960, Alan Merriam succinctly labeled ethnomusicology as “the study of music *in* culture,” later amending that to “the study of music *as* culture” (Merriam 1960, 1977, my emphasis). Older definitions are more exclusive, limiting the study to non-Western or non-European music, oral-aural (non-notated) traditions, or only genres of folk music (Nettl 1961, Seeger 1961). Today, conceptions of ethnomusicology have expanded to include any and all intersections between human societies and musical behaviors (Turino 2006), or as Jeff Todd Titon describes it: “*Ethnomusicology is the study of music in the context of human life*” or more simply still, “people making music” (Titon 1992). While ethnicity, religion, and geographic location are still common boundaries of ethnomusicological studies, others reference the exact opposite: globalism and international music, or the borderless lands of the internet and virtual communities (Taylor 1997, Caroso 2014). Some demographics are defined by other markers like gender and sexuality (Koskoff 2014, Taylor 2012), and others still are defined by a societal lack of conception of “music”—what we would understand as music, but those that create it do not (Nettl 1983). As the horseshoe bends, contemporary ethnomusicology and historical musicology are becoming more similar, increasingly blended in subject and theory. It is the methods and goals rather than the type of musical subjects that still thinly—arguably—separate the two fields (see Nooshin 2011, summary of arguments from Stobart, Cook, Nettl, Shelemay, and others). The simplest example of ethnomusicology’s goals and purposes is perhaps best summarized in brief by Anthony Seeger’s (1987) title: *Why Suyá Sing*. Ethnomusicology is not satisfied knowing how they sing, or what they sing, but ultimately concerned with *why*? What role does music play in society, and what can we learn about peoples through their music?

But what does all of this have to do with Tolkien? Daniel Barlow (2014) coined the term “literary ethnomusicology” to describe his method applying a modified participant-observation methodology for studying and analyzing musical

activities to unravel musical meaning in literature. In his case study, he was writing about Jean Toomer's novel of the Harlem Renaissance era *Cane*. Indeed, as music was a central component of the story world and narrative—still just a piece of the whole Harlem Renaissance cultural movement, but an evocative and illustrative one—we might apply his tactics and vocabulary within Middle-earth, where music is likewise not the whole of a cultural movement or society's artistic expression, but one that speaks volumes to the values and identities of a people. Following Steve Linden's (2002) speculative historical musicology of Arda, my goal here is to engage in a literary ethnomusicology of the country of Gondor, as it is one of the more elusive music traditions in Middle-earth, not frequently addressed in scholarship because it is so loosely and infrequently described in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Middle-earth's Music-Making

Tolkien expressed in his writings a deep love of music, and included music in many contexts and styles throughout the cultures of Middle-earth. Bratman (2010) likens Tolkien himself to English composer Edward Elgar, as both men exhibited and employed in their works a mildly patriotic Romanticism, defined more by a melancholy pastoralism and anti-industrialism: a love of the land and peoples that resonates stronger than a love of the Nation in particular as a concept. Much has been written about music in Tolkien's stories (see for example Amendt-Raduege 2003, Eden 2003, Klag 2014, Silk 2022, Steimel and Schneidewind 2010), as well as Howard Shore's compositions in Peter Jackson's film trilogies based on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (see for example Meyer 2009, Rone 2022, White 2020), and even the music that Middle-earth has inspired, from Donald Swann's song cycle to Led Zeppelin and beyond (see for example Bratman 2010, Jorgensen 2006; Sulka 2017). Scholars and readers have long been fascinated by Tolkien's evocative lyric poems and descriptions of fantasy music-making. Much of the poetry in Tolkien's texts is explicitly described as being sung by characters, and sometimes instrumental accompaniment is specified. Like our own contemporary and historical cultures and societies, in Middle-earth there is evidence of traditions resembling folk, religious, classical, and even popular music, with influences rooted in, but not limited to, English and other European medieval history.

Many writings on the musical traditions in Tolkien's mythology focus on *The Silmarillion*, though music features in many of his writings of Middle-earth. In "Ainulindalë," Eru/ Ilúvatar and the pantheon of Valar sing the world into being. Conflict between the Valar and Melkor, the fallen angel who would become the origin of evil in Tolkien's legendarium, is first expressed as a struggle between consonant and dissonant music (Bertoglio 2018; Flieger 2005). Tolkien's cosmic musical construction has been likened to a Classical philosophy of "the music of

the spheres,” codified by Boethius in the sixth century (Eden 2003). Composer Donald Swann noted that Tolkien himself imagined the vocal music of the Elves to sound like Gregorian chant (Bratman 2010), a Catholic musical tradition of the Middle Ages for reciting liturgy in song through carefully constructed melodies designed to reflect and accentuate the holiness of the text. As Elves are the peoples in Middle-earth best acquainted with the Valar, with long lives and longer memory and historical record than their mortal neighbors, they likely inherited elements of their musical aesthetic from the music of the Valar, which is perhaps similar to Gregorian chant, perhaps akin to medieval polyphony with strict conventions about harmonic motion and consonance (rules of composition that Melkor would aspire to break). Klag (2014) further explores the recurrence of music in the pivotal moments of the story of Beren and Lúthien: Lúthien’s song and dance in the woods when first they meet, her song to lull Morgoth to sleep to rescue Beren after his attempt to retrieve a Silmaril, and her song sung before Mandos that convinced him to resurrect Beren so that they might at least share one mortal lifetime together.

In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, we hear of music in cultures beyond the Elves, in the societies of Dwarves, Hobbits, and Men. Amendt-Raduege (2003) suggests that music functions to unite the desperate events of the complex narratives of Middle-earth, while Nadeau (2022) posits that music is how Tolkien articulates memory between and among the races of Middle-earth. Though perhaps a cognitive dissonance, in Middle-earth and in ethnomusicology, music can be understood simultaneously as an impetus of unity between groups and a source of unique cultural identity for individual groups. In *The Hobbit*, Thorin Oakenshield’s company of dwarves bring an entire ensemble of instrumental music to accompany their singing into Bilbo Baggins’s house, and although some readers have complained that some of his musical descriptions are anachronistic to norms of medieval Europe, we are reminded that Middle-earth is indeed fantasy and Tolkien was a scholar primarily of text and language, not of music history (Retakh 2024). The music of the Dwarves is likely less classical than the Elves, organized but still communal, perhaps what we would call a form of popular music-making. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien’s music of the Hobbits intentionally emulates English countryside folk song traditions (Bratman 2010); that is to say, primarily simple vocal music that evokes the Romantic Nationalist pastorate ideals. Characters like Bilbo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee use music for many of the purposes that we associate with folk music genres: for entertainment, for storytelling, for community bonding. In Rohan, Tolkien describes a rich oral tradition which has been likened to Anglo-Saxon poetry and alliterative verse (Fisher 2010; Shippey 1983). Aragorn calls the people of Rohan “wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many

songs,¹” and manages to sing an excerpt of a song about Eorl the Young for Legolas and Gimli when they first arrive in Rohan.² We know that the Rohirrim ride into battle singing as they do at the Pelennor Fields,³ and Éowyn’s assertion to Faramir that she will no longer “take joy only in the songs of slaying,⁴” implies the presence of other genres with which she is familiar but has neglected during wartime.

The cultural contrasts between the neighboring countries of Rohan and Gondor are noted throughout the text by Aragorn and Faramir especially, as Gondor seems to be the society possessed of both a system of formal education (for members of the elite or nobility, at least) and written historical record, unlike Rohan which has developed a strong oral/aural tradition. What is interesting, however, is that despite the many examples of music and verse from Rohan included in *The Lord of the Rings*, we are given little description of Gondorian music-making outside of acknowledging its existence (for example, Faramir is described as a “lover of lore and music”⁵), diversity (“and the people sang in all the ways of the City”⁶ upon receiving the news of Aragorn’s victory in Mordor), and quality or affect (“in the midst of their merriment and tears the clear voice of the minstrel rose like silver and gold, and all men were hushed. And he sang to them [...] until their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords...⁷).

As the above literature review summarizes, scholars writing about music in Tolkien’s fiction have done substantial work documenting what the peoples of Middle-earth sing, and the historical models upon which they are based. But Middle-earth has yet to be visited by ethnomusicologists (to my knowledge), who are primarily concerned with the meanings of musical *activity* beyond the music itself. Some examples or genres of music offer an embedded, functional explanation of *why* music exists in Middle-earth: a walking song for Hobbits, a lament for a fallen king in Moria or Rohan, a ballad recording and commemorating a key moment in Elvish history. But why do Gondorians sing, and what does it mean

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, “The Riders of Rohan.” Evidence of a primarily oral tradition for history and education rather than a written tradition is also observed at Théoden’s funeral / Éomer’s coronation, wherein the line of Kings of the Mark is spoken from rote.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, “The King of the Golden Hall.” The poem in question, (“Where now the horse and the rider...”) bears striking resemblance to an anonymous Old English poem *The Wanderer* in the c. 10th century Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501).

³ War songs are common strategies in many cultures which serve the dual function of synchronizing the singing army’s advance and intimidating the enemy. For a review of war and peace in ethnomusicological study and discussion of its ethical implications, see: Kartomi 2010, O’Connell 2011.

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, “The Steward and the King.”

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Appendix A (iv) Gondor and the Heirs of Anárion. It is interesting in light of this description and the frequent inclusion of song throughout that at no point in *The Lord of the Rings* does Faramir ever sing.

⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, “The Steward and the King.”

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, “The Fields of Cormallen.”

when they do? Admittedly, we have a very few glimpses of music in Gondor, its sonic characteristics, and its cultural contexts. However, from the few references we do have, I would like to posit the following speculative ethnomusicology of Gondor.

Types and Functions of Music in Gondor

Despite the central importance of Gondor and its politics to the ultimate fate of the War of the Ring, the societies of Men, and of *The Lord of the Rings* as a text, we are given comparatively few examples of Gondorian music-making. The lengthiest description of Gondorian musical activity appears during Aragorn's coronation:

And the City was filled again with women and fair children that returned to their homes laden with flowers; and from Dol Amroth came the harpers that harped most skillfully in all the land; and there were players upon viols and upon flutes and upon horns of silver, and clear-voiced singers from the vales of Lebennin.⁸

Harp, viols, flutes, and horns are all fitting of Tolkien's medieval-inspired fantasy, and this phrasing also seems to imply by distinction that there are different manners of music-making associated with the rural areas of Gondor, brought to Minas Tirith for the coronation festivities. Given the geographic expanse of Gondor, it makes sense that musical norms and genres would differ across the urban center of Minas Tirith, in rural areas like Lebennin, and in shoreline communities such as Dol Amroth. We do not know what the singers sang, or what genres the instrumentalists played, but the portrait is one of justifiable celebration for the return of the king and the end of a long and brutal war, wherein music marks the happy occasion. As the eagles bid "Sing now, ye people of the Tower of Anor,"⁹ the return of the king marks also the return of music to Minas Tirith, as the ultimate expression of victory, joy, and rebirth.

This may point to an answer to the question we have not yet asked, but should: Why do Gondorians *not* sing? Throughout much of *The Lord of the Rings*, the portrait of Gondor and its people is one of exhaustion: weary and war-torn, the expression of joy is a luxury that these Men do not have. Even their laughter is ironic, robbed of any genuine humor or merriment.¹⁰ We hear no musical examples

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Steward and the King."

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Steward and the King."

¹⁰ The Gondorian characters exhibit a recurring habit of laughing and joking during serious conversations (perhaps we might say, at inappropriate times). In *The Fellowship of the Ring* "A Journey in the Dark," Boromir and Aragorn exchange improvised rhymes verging on lighthearted as they ponder the dangers on their road: "The wolf that one hears is worse than the orcs one

from Boromir or Faramir, despite the former carrying a prominent horn which he uses only for signaling on the battlefield, and the latter frequently being described as a scholar-afficionado of music. Denethor makes mention of music to Pippin, but no music is heard, and certainly Denethor himself does not sing. Worldly and well-traveled, Aragorn helps Bilbo with his compositions in Rivendell, and sings ballads of the Elves (on Beren and Lúthien) and of Rohan (on Eorl the Young), but he never sings any songs attributed to Gondor, despite his predestined claim to the country's kingship. The only music in Gondor before the coming of Aragorn is akin to the war songs of the Rohirrim: the knights of Dol Amroth sing as they enter the city of Minas Tirith.

The musicians—and the Númenorian bloodlines¹¹—of Dol Amroth are noted throughout the text with special regard. From their first appearance, the army of Dol Amroth arrives at Minas Tirith proud and heavily armed, “singing as they came¹²” prepared for the impending battle at the Pelennor Fields. The first meeting and interaction between Legolas and the Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth in “The Last Debate” furthermore illuminates a more vital and recent Elvish influence living in the people and culture of Dol Amroth. As the hierarchy of Númenorian racial superiority (Stuart 2022) might suggest, this heritage plays no small part in the rank and esteem that the nobility of Dol Amroth hold in Gondor. Tolkien draws frequent attention to Imrahil's kinship to the line of Stewards. This connection resonates geographically as well, as both the Elves and Númenorians were seafaring peoples, and Dol Amroth is a shoreline city in the country of Gondor much closer to the ocean than Minas Tirith. If music traditions survived or descended from the Elves and Númenorians in Gondor—histories and laments, maritime ballads and shanties—then Dol Amroth, representing an exceptional place and demographic within the whole of Gondor, would logically be where that seed would be planted and nourished, the exception that proved the rule. And yet, in the text they sing only as they march toward battle, further illustrating Faramir's assessment in “The Window on the West” that any semblance of Númenorian superiority no longer remains, that Gondor is culturally becoming more similar to Rohan, and should no longer to be held in higher esteem than other societies of Men. If music is an

fears” [...] “But where the warg howls, there also the orc prowls.” Later, in *The Two Towers*, “The Window on the West,” Faramir laughs unexpectedly when he learns of the Ring and pieces together its connection to Boromir's fate in his discussion with Frodo and Sam. As the captains prepare their last hopeless assault on the Black Gates in *The Return of the King*, “The Last Debate,” Imrahil laughs at the absurdity of their frontal assault on Mordor, to which Aragorn responds, “if this be jest, then it is too bitter for laughter.”

¹¹ Númenorian heritage in Gondor is explicitly referenced and additionally coded throughout the text as Men who are tall, have dark hair and grey eyes, and furthermore are especially insightful and perceptive (i.e. Faramir more so than Boromir on grounds of the last qualification).

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, “Minas Tirith.”

expression of joy, there is little of either in Gondor before the coming of Aragorn, but plenty to be heard after his ascension.

The Role of Musicians in Gondor

In addition to carrying its own cultural significance, music also assigns social implications to the people who make it. Tolkien's reverence for music manifests almost religiously throughout Middle-earth, and in Gondor as elsewhere, musicians appear to be held in high regard. The aforementioned minstrel who sings for the gathered heroes and soldiers at Cormallen following the fall of Sauron holds an esteemed position. His efforts are not sidelined but attentively observed and deeply felt by the listeners. By contrast the preference towards oral tradition and battle songs of Rohan suggests that there is less social and occupational distinction drawn between soldiers and musicians in Rohan. That is to say, in Rohan music-making is structured as participatory, but in Gondor, music-making is structured as performance. In the real world, this would be the difference between a popular or folk setting for music wherein audience participation (i.e., sing-along) is not discouraged, and a classical setting such as opera wherein audience participation would generally be considered inappropriate and disruptive. There are class connotations associated with this distinction as well, especially historically, throughout Western music tradition wherein classical music was considered the domain of the elite and nobility, and folk and popular traditions of the masses were not "elevated" (utilized as a basis for classical composition) until the nineteenth century, when romanticizing local folk traditions became a Nationalist project in many European countries (Burkholder et.al 2018).

The distinction between performer and audience, listener and participant, has some effect on how the musician is regarded in a given society. In Gondor, this manifests in the way in which Faramir is viewed by his father and others around him. Unlike the Rohirrim and the knights of Dol Amroth who ride to battle singing, Faramir is held to the standards of Minas Tirith, and his proclivity towards music is placed semantically in opposition to his martial responsibilities. This may explain why Faramir does not sing at any point in the text, despite Tolkien's describing him repeatedly as a musician. Beregond, the guard who befriends Pippin during his time in Minas Tirith, describes the situation as if Faramir is respected as a captain during wartime in spite of, not because of, his more learned endeavors and creative interests:

He is bold, more bold than many deem; for in these days men
are slow to believe that a captain can be wise and learned in
the scrolls of lore and song, as he is, and yet a man of

hardihood and swift judgement in the field. But such is Faramir.¹³

Denethor's lower opinion of Faramir compared to his brother Boromir also supports this theory: what Minas Tirith needs during wartime is soldiers, not singers, and these are not typically considered one and the same. In Gondor it seems the role of music and those who make it are treated with more specificity than elsewhere in Middle-earth: there is an appropriate time for music, and wartime is not it, just as there are people who have the luxury of being musicians, and those who do not.

The Search for Musical Meaning

From the small glimpses into Gondorian music-making that Tolkien provides us, we can start to deduce some ethnomusicological conclusions. Based on the near total absence of music prior to the return of the king, and the prevalence following Aragorn's coronation, it seems that in Gondor the artistic scene is affected by the War of the Ring in ways that have been observed in real-world conflict zones. War robs soldiers—historically speaking, primarily young men—of the ability to attain music education, the time to practice, and the venues to perform; But on the other side, music becomes an essential part of public life after the war is over—particularly to women and children—to help process and heal from the memory and trauma of violence (Kartomi 2010). Tolkien would have been all too familiar with these parallel constructs from his time of service during and surrounding World War I, and he articulates them almost as clearly as the ethnomusicologists who have studied this: Faramir is a musician who has been called to war with no opportunity to prioritize music-making, and Minas Tirith is made home again to civilians who return following the end of the war and bring music back to the city with them, in celebration but also as a coping mechanism to aid their recovery.

That genres besides military music, which we still hear from Dol Amroth, would be reserved for peacetime rather than wartime is a related musical-philosophical phenomenon. Our human predilection to associate music with goodness and purity, or to assume that music's value is inherently good, is also observed in the real world and has inspired debate among musicologists broadly (see for example Edwards 2011, Higgins 2018, Walhout 1995). Despite examples to the contrary where music has been used for (subjectively) nefarious or harmful purposes, Tolkien reserves music in this kingdom of Men to signal the transformation and rebirth or restoration of Gondor, the triumph of good over evil in Middle-earth, and the emanating of order from chaos and ruin, not unlike the consonant and harmonious music of the Valar in *The Silmarillion* prior to Melkor's

¹³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "Minas Tirith."

dissonant disruption. In Middle-earth as in our world, history and cultural expressions are often patterned and cyclical.

Furthermore, ethnomusicologists studying classical musics (as we might describe the comparatively formalized musical example from the coronation in Minas Tirith) have revealed that classical music ensembles like symphony orchestras often strive to be active agents of civility by embodying the metaphoric ideal of ‘orchestra as society,’ which places a high value community and communality despite the internal orchestral structure of hierarchy and rank that exists within the ensemble itself (Ramnarine 2011).

As a ‘microcosm of society’, the symphony orchestra not only lends itself to the metaphoric conceptualisation of power, politics and economy, but also fits in a third sphere which demands a more active engagement with social life (ibid).

The public performance of collective, collaborative music does more than just assert the general goodness of music. It signals a return to the civility of Gondor’s society. It is not enough that musicians play music together, but to support the political revolution marked by the returning of the king, they must formally represent the state as agents and representatives of positive change. Up until his victory at the Black Gates, there was the lurking possibility that the legitimacy of Aragorn’s claim to the kingship would be questioned. Boromir questions it at their first meeting at the Council of Elrond, and Denethor refutes Aragorn’s authority several times, though Faramir and Imrahil accept him immediately and without interrogation. It fell to Faramir as the last surviving member of the family of Stewards to prepare the coronation, and while a simpler transition of power would have sufficed given the unusual circumstances (which he takes the liberty to explain to us), the objective of hosting such an elaborate, performative ceremony is to publicly legitimize both the process and the result. Without saying it in so many words, the return of formalized, state-sponsored music marks an end to the chaotic, fading government of Denethor and a start of a new age of civil progress.

Just as the political landscape of Gondor is in a moment of transition at the end of the Third Age and beginning of the Fourth Age, so too is the soundscape. The relative silence gives way to a vibrant musical celebration, and mirrors the many other indicators of Aragorn’s divine kingship (Scarf 2013), including his reemergence from the Paths of the Dead, his unlikely victory over Sauron, his healing ability, and his retrieval and planting of the surviving seedling of the White Tree. An ethnomusicological approach to analyzing what little Tolkien does tell us about Gondorian musical behavior demonstrates that music in and of Gondor functions as the audible manifestation of joy, goodness, and redemption, and

reinforces the totality of Aragorn's new role in the chronicles of Middle-earth history as "*Elessar*, the Elfstone, and *Envinyatar*, the Renewer."¹⁴

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¹⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Houses of Healing."

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