

PROGRAM NOTES

When we think of medieval monks and their musical lives, the first thing that comes to mind is Gregorian chant, the solemn and ritual song which accompanied the monks' liturgical day, week, season and year. But a closer look at medieval religious manuscripts from the 9th to 12th centuries shows that many monks and clerics were singing other songs as well, with texts which were sometimes anything but Christian. The monastic and cathedral schools of medieval Europe were great centers of learning and focal points of intellectual life. For all monks and clerics, who were native speakers of European vernacular languages (each with their own pagan roots), it was essential to become bilingual—to speak, think, perhaps even to read and write in Latin, the language of their faith, the liturgy, the sciences, philosophy, and literature. And this crucial link to Latin could best be enhanced by studying “ancient” texts which had survived: Roman authors, poets, dramatists, teachers, philosophers, and historians whose works were studied and memorized, and many of these were also *sung*. Taken together with occasional Germanic pagan texts, there were songs of the old gods (Woden, Zeus, Jupiter, Bacchus), of men and heroes (Hercules, Orpheus, Boethius, Caesar), and of powerful female figures and goddesses (Valkyries, Fortuna, Philosophia, Cleopatra, Dido, Venus, the wild Ciconians). The survival of these songs, sometimes very fragmentary, provides us with a rich treasure-house of European vocal art, and witnesses to a vibrant culture where the Christian monk gave voice to his pagan ancestors, passing on stories and ideas which resonate to this day.

I. Woden and Christ: Cohabitation in the Northlands

From the pagan North, many pre-Christian texts have survived, and even in monastic manuscripts we find tantalizing fragments which sometimes mention the old gods. In the form of charms and incantations, they show us an essentially Christian world in which the old beliefs have hung on as folk custom, easily mixing Woden with Christ. As a result, these manuscripts bear witness to a cohabitation typical for recently converted peoples. The texts, written in Old High German and Old English and found in Christian manuscripts, give us a glimpse into the mysterious northern world of Christianized pagans in the 9th and 10th centuries.

Forsahhistu unholdun? is an excerpt from a Saxon baptismal oath, a ritual in which the converted heathen must affirm that she forsakes both the devil and the old gods. *Gang uz, nesso*, an Old High German magic incantation, was meant to be sung together with the Christian prayer *Pater noster* (here also in Old High German), to encourage illness or pain (or worms?) to depart from the body of an afflicted soul or an animal. The two German texts *Eiris sazun Idisi* and *Phol ende Wodan* are known as the Merseburg magic charms, the first one involving female powers (Valkyries?) which can set free imprisoned fighters. In the second charm the band of gods and goddesses tries to repair and heal the injured hoof of a god's horse—possibly Odin's (Woden's) own battle-steed. *Wurm com snican* is excerpted from the Anglo-Saxon “Nine Herbs Charm,” a potent incantation against poison and boils which mentions both Woden and Christ. Finally, *Wenne, wenne, wen-chichenne*, is an Anglo-Saxon charm for shrinking a “wen”—cyst or boil (or tumor?)—until it becomes “so little that it will be nothing at all.”

II. Fortuna and Philosophia

In the gallery of powerful female deities inhabiting the medieval Christian mind, few can rival the fickle force of Fortune, with her ever-changing wheel, or the gravitas of Philosophy, the wise, patient, and consoling teacher in times of need. Medieval Christian singers could effortlessly transition between singing about salvation and divine intervention, to singing of Fortune's unpredictable power over human destiny. A major medieval song collection such as the *Carmina Burana* (ca. 1235) reveals an almost obsessive fascination with Fortuna. From that collection, we hear one of the most famous songs attesting to her power, *O varium Fortune lubricum*, a song probably created among clerical intellectuals in late 12th-century Paris.

Next we hear songs from the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius (d. ca. 526) in musical settings from the *Cambridge Songs* (Canterbury, early 11th century). A Roman nobleman and scholar, Boethius (ca. 480-526) has been falsely accused of treason against the Empire and despairs in prison, awaiting execution. As he laments his fate, a mysterious woman appears in his cell: it is Philosophy herself. A long dialogue ensues, punctuated by songs (*metra*), as she reminds him of the clarity of mind she can impart, and he is cured of his despair. Boethius wrote this story as *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and it went on to become one of the most important books of

the European Middle Ages. In monasteries and cathedral schools of the 9th-12th centuries, the many songs from this book were set to music and sung, but their melodies remained largely lost to us until the groundbreaking work of the musicologist Sam Barrett (Cambridge University), who has collaborated with Sequentia on this project that the songs of Boethius might be heard again. We have made use of medieval manuscripts copied for monks in Canterbury, most especially the famous collection called *The Cambridge Songs* (early 11th century), whose enigmatic notation has been transcribed for the first time for this project. These songs are heard again for the first time in a thousand years!

In his 9th-century translation of Boethius, King Alfred provides a verse prologue in Old English, *Tha waes ricra sum on Rome-byrig*, which reminds us of the sad story, performed here in a reconstruction by Benjamin Bagby. After this we hear Boethius lamenting in his cell, accompanied by the weeping muses: *Carmina qui quondam*. Philosophy appears to him, banishes the muses, and in carefully guided talk therapy, she calmly reminds him of his training as a philosopher, bringing him slowly back to his true home. Of the many songs and words they exchange in this first chapter, we hear some excerpts. In *Cum Phoebi radiis grave*, she reminds him that there is a proper time for every action in life. Finally, in *Nubibus atris*, Boethius is urged to “cast out joy, fear, hope and grief” in order to perceive the truth and the right path.

III. *Cleopatra and Dido: Suicidal Pagan Queens*

Nunc est bibendum. This ode of the Roman poet Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65-8 B.C.) is performed to a new melody created in the late 11th century. The story of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra is decidedly un-Christian, but the medieval fame of this song attests to a continuing European fascination with her story—the steely determination of her suicide by serpent venom following the defeat of her lover Marc Antony by Octavian (Caesar Augustus) in the sea-battle of Actium.

Vaga is a short instrumental prelude to the lament which follows. It is based on an early medieval sequence.

O decus, o Libie regnum, the masterful and extended lament of Dido, Queen of Carthage, dates from 12th-century France. It is in the form of a *lai*, part of a tradition of *planctus* creation that dates back to the school of Peter Abelard. Its text explores the desperate state of the lovesick queen, abandoned by her lover Aeneas as he follows the gods’ command to sail for Italy. Left with no options for an honorable life in Carthage with only her sister Anna as a friend, she sees no way out but suicide, and stabs herself with the sword which Aeneas had given her as a gift. Surviving as a text in the *Carmina Burana* manuscript, the reconstruction performed here is based on a related source containing a neumatic notation, transcribed for this program by Benjamin Bagby.

Stans a longe is an instrumental version of an early medieval sequence, and like the piece *Vaga* heard earlier, it is transcribed and reconstructed by Norbert Rodenkirchen as part of his ongoing research into the earliest possible written sources of instrumental music: Christian vocal compositions, called sequences, from the time of Notker “the Stammerer” of St. Gall (9th century). In the manuscripts, some of these tunes have strange titles (such as *Puella turbata*, the “troubled girl”), unrelated to the new religious text; they may well refer to a pre-existing melody, possibly indigenous and pre-Christian, adapted in a new Christian context. The titles themselves often refer to musical instruments (*Symphonia*, *Tuba*, *Cithara*), a further indication of their original purpose as instrumental pieces in oral tradition.

IV. *Orpheus: the Power of Song*

The timeless story of Orpheus in the underworld is retold in song in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. At the end of their dialogue, in *Felix qui potuit boni*, Boethius is reminded to keep his gaze fixed on the “daylight above,” and not look back. The melody is from the *Cambridge Songs*, copied in Canterbury in the 11th century, and transcribed for the first time as part of Sequentia’s Boethius project with musicologist Sam Barrett.

Another ode of Horace, *O fons bandusie*, is here performed instrumentally. The poem praises the clear waters of the Bandusian spring, to be colored on the next day with the blood of an animal sacrifice. The original melody is presented here in an instrumental paraphrase, played on a medieval swan-bone flute with only four finger holes. It is an exact copy of a 10th-century instrument found near Speyer in Germany.

Collis erat collemque (The death and transformation of Orpheus) with a text by Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC - 18 AD). Here Ovid, the great poet of antiquity, tells the story of Orpheus in the *Metamorphoses*, a collection of

many mythological stories, which were well-known in educated circles in the Middle Ages. They were certainly declaimed, and probably also sung. The story begins with the marriage of Orpheus to Eurydice, who is bitten by a snake and dies. After the attempted (and failed) rescue of his wife in the underworld, Orpheus sits down in the mountains to sing his stories (where this performance begins), attracting a large crowd, including animals and even trees. But the wild, ferocious Ciconian women also discover the gathering and kill him in their rage. The singer arrives in the underworld and is reunited with his Eurydice.

This reconstruction is part of a solo project of Hanna Marti, who writes: “No medieval melodies for the *Metamorphoses* are left to us. The whole reconstruction process was focused on the improvisation with carefully researched melodic material from other 12th-century songs which are set to verses of Antiquity. There was never a score, each performance presents a unique version, combining textual pacing with internalized melodic gestures, and assisted by the patterns of the harp. Approaching singing and music-making in this way allows for a deeper understanding of a musical mind-space in the Middle Ages.”

V. *Hercules: Heroic Inspiration*

We tend to think of Hercules as an action superhero, with bulging muscles and too much testosterone. In fact, his legend speaks to the human condition and elemental questions of discipline and perseverance, even redemption, an inspiration to every seeker of the true path in life. In *Prima Cleonei tolerata*, the twelve labors of Hercules are recited in an ancient hexameter form designed to aid memory. This text was copied in the early 13th-century *Carmina Burana* manuscript, at a time when the story was still widely circulated.

The labors of Hercules are also brought to mind by Philosophy as she sings the song, *Bella bis quinis*, to Boethius in his prison cell, using the mythical hero's accomplished tasks to inspire her pupil to “follow his steep path, learn from this example,” and face his own dilemmas head-on, urging him to “never falter in laziness or fear, but overcome the earth’s trials to ascend to the stars.” Once again, we hear a musical setting from Canterbury (11th century).

Although Pierre de Blois (d. 1212) was a court poet for the English king Henry and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, his Latin works were widely appreciated by the clerical intelligentsia in Paris as well (he had studied there as a youth). The extended song *Olim sudor Herculis*, with its ironically moralistic refrain (“Love deflowers the merit of fame...”), would have been appreciated most fully by an audience of ambitious young theology students who knew the story of Hercules intimately. Who could resist—then or now—the playful subtext about “great” men making fools of themselves under the influence of the powerful goddess, Venus? Hercules becomes a heroic “fool for love” in his murderous obsession with the princess Iole. And who would not identify with the singer’s plan, delivered with an ironic wink, to flee from love’s enticements in the interest of his career and prestige? We all know he won’t succeed.

—Benjamin Bagby

This program was developed as part of a research project on the Boethian *metra*, together with musicologist Sam Barrett (Cambridge University). Thanks to Sam Barrett for his generous invitation to Sequentia to participate in a working week at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in April 2016, during which the final rehearsals for this program were held, and thanks for his generous assistance with the transcription of the Boethian *metra* and other songs.
<https://performinglostsongs.wordpress.com>

Instruments:

6-string Germanic harp by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, 1997)

15-string harp by Geoff Ralph (London, 1983)

16-string harp by Claus Henry Hüttel (Düren, 2015)

Wooden flutes by Neidhart Bousset (Berlin, 1998) and Beha & Gibbons (Boston, 1995)

Swan-bone flute by Friedrich von Huene (Boston, 1999)

Sheep-bone flute by Friedrich von Huene (Boston, 1999)

Sources/reconstructions:

Information about manuscript sources and reconstructions for this program can be found on the Sequentia website:
<http://sequentia.org/programs/program10.html>