Sequentia

Words of Power
Charms, Riddles and Elegies of the Medieval Northlands
8th-11th Centuries

Benjamin Bagby, director

Benjamin Bagby, voice and Anglo-Saxon harp; Hanna Marti, voice and harps
Stef Conner, voice; Norbert Rodenkirchen, wooden and bone flutes, harp

$$\boxed{\text{Post–concert Q \& A}}$$

    The musicians of Sequentia present songs of magic, exile, of the uncertainty of fate, of longing and regret, of the healing power of magic herbs, of irony, and just plain fun. The pagan roots of the recently christianized medieval north can still be discerned in some of the oldest manuscript sources known to us today: the Old English *Beowulf* epic (possibly 8th century), the Old Icelandic *Edda*, the poems surviving in ancient songbooks such as The 10th-century *Exeter Book,* and numerous fragments from Germany and Switzerland. Each of these chants, songs and spoken riddles gives us a glimpse into a time so distant from ours and yet near in spirit, a world of singing poets, warriors, valkyries and seeresses, healers and philosophers, whose creations were the first to be written down in English and other Germanic languages (in addition to Old English, we perform songs in Old High German and Old Icelandic, with a hint of Latin). In reconstructing lost musical traditions from this time, Sequentia searches once again to resonate those long-silent, ancient voices, sometimes accompanied by harps and flutes, which would have been welcomed in any gathering of souls, pagan or Christian, those seeking help for their problems, entertaining their friends, or those giving voice to their longing for a lost partner, or a lost tribe.

    Sequentia wishes to thank Swarthmore College (especially Prof. Craig Williamson and the William J. Cooper Foundation), which invited the ensemble to spend ten days in residence at the college in February 2019, preparing this program. The translations from the Old English and Icelandic projected as surtitles for Sequentia's performance are adapted from Craig Williamson's *Complete Old English Poems* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Used by permission.

Instruments
Six-string Anglo-Saxon harps by Rainer Thurau (Wiesbaden, 1986, 1997, 2001)
16-string harp by Claus Henry Hüttel (Düren, 2015)
Wooden flutes by Giovanni Tardino (Basel, 2010), Boaz Berney (Basel 2006), and Beha & Gibbons (Boston);
Sheep-bone flute by Friedrich von Huene (Boston, 1999)
Deer-hide drum, traditional, Kwakiutl (Vancouver Island, BC, 2018)

Please turn off cell phones. Photography and recording are not permitted.

NYC Cultural Affairs

Corpus Christi Church
4 p.m. Sunday, January 19, 2020

I. Incantations for Valkyries and a wounded battle-steed
     (The Old High German "Merseburg Charms")
     Eiris sazun Idisi, sazun hera duoder
     Phol ende Wuodan vuorum zi holza

An Anglo-Saxon Riddle
     Biþ foldan dæl

The Anglo-Saxon elegy called "Deor"
     Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade

Charms to bless a house, to manage a swarm of bees
     Wola, wiht, taz tu weist (The Old High German "Zurich house blessing")
     Fo ic under fot, funde ic hit (Anglo-Saxon charm "for a swarm of bees")
     Kirst, imbi ist hucze ! (The Old High German "Lorscher bee charm")

Beginning with the famous Old High German *Merseburg Charms,* we plunge into a northern world that was still immersed in its pagan past; warrior-women, magic battle-steeds and the god Odin himself attest to the power of these images.

This is followed by the first of several spoken Anglo-Saxon riddles, about which the noted Anglo-Saxonist Craig Williamson writes: "The riddles often describe, or are narrated from the point of view of, some creature or natural phenomenon (swan, moon, iceberg) and may be early environmental poems. They explore the relationship between the riddler and the solver, between the metaphor maker and the world being poetically described. Some riddles contain both a plain and a bawdy solution." In this afternoon's concert, the solution (or one possible solution) to each riddle will be displayed after giving the listeners a moment to reflect and perhaps guess the answer.

The Anglo-Saxon elegy called *Deor* gives us a glimpse of the working world of the medieval tribal singer, recalling a pastiche of images from his mind's songbook before singing about himself. Williamson writes: "The elegies are laments over the loss of a spouse, a child, a homeland, a dying culture. The elegiac speaker often ponders her or his past, wondering just how real the memories of an earlier life, now lost, might be. Together these poems bring to life an ancient language and culture and reaffirm the connection between past and present."

Finally, with a group of charms to bless a house or to manage a swarm of bees, we enter a world of human desires, where both superstition and Saint Mary can cohabit happily. Again Williamson: "The charms use magical words to effect health and healing (of rheumatism, a late pregnancy, a land to be planted and plowed) and often include folk medicines and ritual actions." These are working songs with a purpose, with power over human affairs, certainly not intended for performance in a concert.

II. Instrumental piece
     In modo Magni (Orkney)

Anglo-Saxon Riddles for scholars
     Ic seah wrætlice
     Moððe word fræt

The Anglo-Saxon elegy called "The Wife's Lament"
     Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre

Charms to cure worms, to cure a stabbing pain
     Gang uz, nesso (an Old High German charm against worms)
     Hlude wæren hy, la, hlude (an Anglo-Saxon charm against a sharp pain)

The second group begins with an instrumental piece based on one of the few surviving melodies from the northern islands: the so-called *Saint Magnus hymn* from the Orkneys.

It is followed by two riddles which revolve around images from the world of clever scholars working in the monastic scriptorium and library, where parchment manuscripts, ink and pens were rare objects of mystery and wisdom.

The Anglo-Saxon elegy called *The Wife's Lament* describes a love-bond as disturbing and complex as life itself, where hope and anger mingle with images from nature, to create a dark portrait: the tribal woman's world of waiting, longing and regret.

The charms which end this group are centered on the living body and its ailments, bringing hope to those plagued by worms or by alarming pains. The spirits of these invaders are invoked and urged to leave, in a never-ending negotiation with fate itself.

III. Instrumental piece
Lilia (Iceland)

Anglo-Saxon Riddles: the natural world
    Wiht cwom æfter wege
    Frod wæs min from cym

The elegy called "The Song of the Lone Survivor" (from the *Beowulf* epic)
    Þaer wæs swylcra fela in ðam eorðhuse

Anglo-Saxon charms to cure a fever, to cure a boil or cyst
    Her com in gangan in spider-wiht (against a fever)
    Wenne, wenne, wen-chichenne (against a wen, boil or cyst)

Following an instrumental piece based on an ancient Icelandic tune called *Lilja,* with its own special tuning system, **the** third group begins with two riddles from the natural world, elemental images of great power, wonder and sometimes terror.

In an elegy from the *Beowulf* epic, we learn that an entire unnamed northern tribe has been decimated by war, with only one man left alive, the lone survivor. He carries the people's treasure, weapons (and even a harp) into a nearby barrow, returning them to their origins as a final gesture of remembrance, singing to the earth itself before he, too, is carried off by a lonely death.

Returning to the human body for the charms which end this group, we once again encounter a pre-modern world which knew only charms and folk remedies, often combining both for ceremonies of healing.

IV. Instrumental piece
      Stans a longe (Notker the Stammerer)

Anglo-Saxon Riddles: Joy in the kitchen
      Ic on wincle gefrægn
      Ic eom wunderlicu wiht
      Hyse cwom gangan

The Anglo-Saxon elegy called "Wulf and Eadwacer"
      Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife

Charms to stop bleeding and protect against poisons
      Tumbo saz in berke ("The Strassburg Tumbo-Charm against bleeding")
      Christ unde Johan giengon zuo der Jordan ("The Jordan Nosebleed Charm")
      Wyrm com snican (The Anglo-Saxon "Nine Herbs Charm" against poisons)
      Genzan unde Jordan keikan sament sozzen ("The Strassburg Blood Charm")

The Old Icelandic Grottasöngr ("The Mill-Song of Frodi's Slave-Girls")
      Nú erum komnar til konungs húsa

      The instrumental piece *Stans a longe* introduces **the fourth group.** It is a version of an early medieval sequence, 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). Some of these tunes have titles which may well refer to a pre-existing melody, possibly indigenous and pre-Christian, adapted in a new Christian context, as their original purpose as instrumental pieces in oral tradition began to fade.
      The final riddles bring us into the kitchen, or the bedroom, or both. The creators of these texts had enormous fun working around the possible offensive (and sinful) nature of their texts, and so every listener can hear what he/she prefers to hear. Following our performances, and for obvious reasons, only the culinary solutions will be proposed.
      The Anglo-Saxon elegy called *Wulf and Eadwacer* is one of the most mysterious texts known to us, sung by a lonely woman whose anger and longing are overwhelmed and frustrated by memory. Her haunting refrain, "It is different with us," points to a relationship confronted with obstacles and strife, shrouded in secrecy and separation: "Wulf is on an island ; I am on another." Half-spoken situations are left unexplained, and in the end, she laments: "It's easy to tear the thread of an untold tale, the song of us two together." This reconstruction was made by Hanna Marti.
      The German and Anglo-Saxon charms to stop bleeding and protect against poisons freely mix pagan magic beliefs with Christian imagery and herbal remedies: Christ is just as likely to be invoked as a creature known as Tumbo. From the Anglo-Saxon *Nine Herbs Charm,* we hear a potent incantation against poison and boils which mentions both Christ and the Norse god Woden. In moments of crisis and pain, every helping force is welcome.
      Finally, the Old Icelandic *Mill-Song of Frodi's Slave-Girls* is part of a longer story recorded in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* (13th century): King Frodi acquires two powerful young slave-girls, Fenia and Menia, and sets them to turning the magic millstone known as Grotti. At first they willingly grind out wealth and prosperity for Frodi, but when he refuses to let them rest, they remember their powerful ancestry (the mountain giants!) and then grind out an army which destroys their master. In this famous grinding song, we hear of their grisly exploits in human warfare, and sense the doom coming to their abuser. Here, prophecy and magic combine in a song of surreal foreboding.

      Sources/reconstructions: Musical reconstructions of the songs by Benjamin Bagby, except for the "Mersebeurg Charms" and "Wulf and Eadwacer'"(by Hanna Marti). Instrumental music created/arranged by Norbert Rodenkirchen.

      Detailed information about sources and reconstructions for this program will be available on the Sequentia website beginning in summer 2020.