

The Lay of the Fountain

Vajra Voices

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Le Lay de la fonteinne

Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377)

1. Je ne cesse de prier
2. Et ou porroit
3. C'est celle qui
4. Ces trois
5. Et qui de ceste
6. Mais ceste trinite

7. De la duis
8. Et pour ce di
9. Pour ce te pri
10. Mais de tel confort
11. He! Fonteinne
12. Pour laver

Intermission

Spiritus Sanctus
O Frondens Virga
Quia Ergo Femina

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)

O Quam Mirabilis Est
Karitas Habundat In Omnia
O Virtus Sapientiae

O Pastor Animarum
Kyrie

*Vajra Voices is recorded on Music & Arts
and is an affiliate of the San Francisco Early Music Society*

Our concert features works by two medieval composers whose prolific lives span 200 years: Hildegard von Bingen (1098 - 1179) — a German Abbess called the “Sybil of the Rhein” and Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377) — the French cleric considered the “Last of the Great Trouvères”.

Hildegard and Machaut have an important commonality. These two were the first composers in the history of western music to oversee the collection and preservation of their complete musical works. Hildegard’s are collected in two existing manuscripts (the Dendermonde ms. and the Riesen Codex) and contain a total of 77 chant forms, including antiphons, hymns, responsories, and sequences. Machaut’s 143 works include both sacred and secular pieces which appear in several manuscripts of the Bibliothèque National de Paris.

The texts of Hildegard’s musical compositions are in a style called *Kunstprosa*—free verse intended for oration. An expansive vocal range results from Hildegard’s effusive phraseology, often reaching two octaves within a single piece. Since rhythm (as far as is known) does not seem to be indicated, the declamation of the text is the overall organizing principle. In Hildegard’s songs, the more transcendent and celestial the words, the more elaborate, florid, and wide-ranging is her music. Though Hildegard’s music uses the Gregorian, or church modes, her music is an amalgam of liturgical chant and ecstatic song. The word, tone, and meaning are inextricable.

Hildegard felt the very essence of her faith embodied in music: “...and so the words symbolize the body, and the jubilant music indicates the spirit, and the celestial harmony shows the Divinity, and the words the humanity of the Son of God.” (Scivias, Book III, vision 13) Thus, the human embodiment of song and prayer are a communing with the Divine.

As a poet, Machaut was admired by his 14th century British contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer (1343 -1400). As with many of his fellow writers, the theme of chivalric love runs throughout Machaut’s secular works, which predominately use the so-called *formes fixes* – structured poetic patterns turned into musical forms of *virelai*, *ballade*, *rondeau*. Machaut also composed in the more complex forms required for masses, motets and *lais*. In Machaut’s *Lai de la Fonteinne*, for example, solo verses alternate with three-part *chaces* (i.e., canons or rounds).

Machaut’s compositions are highly rhythmic, written in the innovative mensural notation of 14th century France, the successor to the rhythmic modes of the previous century. In the *chaces* of the *Lai de la Fonteinne*, Machaut’s precise rhythms weave a complex harmonic texture with quickly passing dissonances resolving to the consonances of perfect fifths and octaves. The *chaces* also feature an ancient polyphonic device, known as *hocket* (literally hiccup), which consists of short notes and rests distributed between two or more voices to create one musical line.

The text of the *Lai de la Fonteinne* is a metaphorical argument whereby the Virgin Mary is presented as the source for the fountain that is the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit trio. In verse one, the secular scene is set by the poet who is frustrated by his unbending and inattentive (earthly) lady. Thus, he will turn to another Lady- the Virgin Mary- who will bring true joy and hear his laments. In verse seven, Machaut's sense of humor seeps through as the forlorn lover swears his faith in God, and, would "rather be in Rome or overseas in exile, or thrown in the river Jordan or the Nile... for is anything worth a fig without God?"

For Hildegard in the 12th century and Machaut in the 14th, the spiritual inspiration derives from the same divine sources: the Trinity and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Whereas Hildegard's works affirm the Benedictine Rule (with large emphasis on chastity), her expression of devotion to God is as sensual as it is resolute. And no less reverent is Guillaume de Machaut, whose highly structured masterpiece *Le Lai de la Fonteinne* fuses the sacred with the secular in a thought-provoking entertainment on chivalric love.

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