

**CD Report: Ciaramella
Music from the Court of Burgundy**

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Perhaps you were looking critically through your CD collection during the holiday hiatus and suddenly realized that you're a bit thin in your holdings of fifteenth century shawm and sackbut music (is there even a Grammy niche for that?) Or maybe you're just a general fan of Renaissance music looking for something new and different. Ciaramella's excellent CD "Music for the Court of Burgundy" serves both purposes beautifully, entertaining and informing you on whatever level you care to become engaged.

Ciaramella Wind Band, which takes its name from one of the historical names for the shawm, originated at Case Western Reserve University in 2003, though some of its original members were poached from other area universities. The group reunited locally last October 17 for a much admired program in Harkness Chapel called "The Germanic Orpheus and His Student: Henricus Isaac and Ludwig Senfl", but is officially resident on the west coast, where directors Adam and Rotem Gilbert are on the faculty at the University of Southern California.

In the hands of skilled players who have committed their careers to perfecting modern versions of Renaissance instruments, shawms have become quite well behaved, shedding their previous reputation as crude, outdoor instruments. Ciaramella's players, Adam Knight Gilbert, Rotem

Gilbert, Doug Milliken and Debra Nagy (better known as a baroque oboist in the Cleveland area) display a remarkable sense of intonation, ensemble and tonal control. On this recording, they're ably assisted by Greg Ingles and Erik Schmalz on sackbut and Sidney Hopson on percussion. All the shawm players double on chop-saving recorders and most of them on bagpipes, and Susan Judy, N. Lincoln Hanks and Temmo Korisheli join Nagy as singers. Ingles also plays slide trumpet.

Accompanied by informative producer's notes and Adam Gilbert's witty and disarming discussions about the music, "Music for the Court of Burgundy" takes the listener on a well-organized and comprehensive tour of the musical world of the itinerant, warring, art collecting and wine drinking Dukes of Burgundy, who "forged and lost a powerful kingdom (in all but name)" stretching from the Low Countries to parts of modern France. They also supported a rich musical tradition, acting as patrons to such composers featured in this album as Dufay, Ciconia, Binchois, Agricola, Josquin, Isaac & Busnois.

Lest you think that ensembles of shawms and sackbuts, the town bands of Renaissance Europe, are functionally extinct in modern life, producer Bob Attiyeh notes that Ciaramella has brought its pungent sonorities to dignify city ceremonies at Los Angeles City Hall on several recent occasions. Similarly, on this recording Adam Gilbert contributes some of his own 21st century written-down improvisations to repertoire composed half a millennium ago.

The twenty-three tracks on Ciaramella's latest recording skillfully group selections by individual composers (Johannes Ciconia), pieces based on the same tune ('J'ay pris amours' or 'Fortuna desperata'), or pieces written or improvised over stock bass lines ('La Spagna'). The repertoire is characterized by frisky rhythms, startling dissonances and complicated polyphony (which grew from the standard of three voices at the beginning of the century to four at the end), and its ordering on the recording is intelligently chosen to keep the ear fresh by varying the music's instrumentation. Just when a bit of shawm fatigue sets in (probably also for the players), silky Renaissance recorders or the clear voices of singers take over. The drum appears infrequently and only toward the middle of the program, and late

in the playlist, solo bagpipe then three bagpipes playing together provide a new sonic adventure.

In an interesting parallel to the purity of aesthetics of the early music movement, the CD was recorded with an early microphone ("a legendary Austrian AKG C-24 stereo microphone with the original brass surround CK12 tube"), short cables, vacuum tube amplifiers and no mixer, up close in an intimate environment. All of this works well until the final track, when singers, shawms and sackbuts come together in a mixed reprise of Agricola's setting of 'Fortuna desperata' and voices get a bit lost in the texture.

The singing and instrumental playing is magnificent, but what we particularly admire about "Music from the Court of Burgundy" is the way that its scrupulous scholarship is presented in such an accessible and engaging way. People are

people in every age, and as Adam Gilbert notes, "The themes of Burgundian poetry and music live on today: love, death, and desire, simultaneously sacred and erotic". Later, talking about the last track featuring settings of 'Fortuna Desperata' by four composers, Gilbert writes, "Anyone who doubts the persistent mythic power of the goddess Fortune, need only watch Vanna White on television, take a trip to Las Vegas or Monte Carlo, or listen to Frank Sinatra sing "Luck be a Lady Tonight."

Now that's relevance!

"Ciaramella: Music from the Court of Burgundy" is available from Yarlung Records.

To learn more about shawms, read Mike Telin's interview with Adam Gilbert on the blog.