

**Preview****The Broken Consort at St. John's Cathedral:  
ten minutes with founder Emily Lau**

by Daniel Hathaway



The Boston-based “Broken Consort” visits the Helen D. Schubert Concert Series at St. John's Cathedral in Cleveland on Friday evening, March 8 at 7:30 for a concert of Iberian music of the thirteenth century as preserved in manuscripts in the northern Spanish city of Burgos.

First off, you may be wondering why this consort is “broken.” Nothing needs fixing — the term refers to an ensemble made up of different families of instruments rather than consorts of similar instruments like viols (a tradition that survives in the classical string quartet). But founder Emily Lau was inspired to form the group because she thought something definitely needed fixing in the way early music was performed.

“I think people were bored to tears by early music concerts,” Lau told us in a phone conversation from Boston. “A lot of presentations ended up being two hours and forty-five minutes long, with translations as thick as a book. That becomes more about educating the audience than delighting them!”

Although Lau, who was born in Hong Kong and educated in England, Florida and Boston, has a thorough grounding in musicology, she's eager to keep that in the background. “I'm the kind of person who would be drawn to over-analyzing if I didn't curb myself. The most important thing when I listen to music is to be touched, to feel something.”

When Lau began putting her consort together, she took her time. “Shopping for colleagues was a slow process. I asked myself who was magical? Perhaps someone didn't have the most beautiful voice in the world, but is someone who can move people. It was really fun!”

The traveling complement of The Broken Consort is small. On Friday, it includes three female singers including Lau, ex-Clevelanders Brian Kay on lute, oud and percussion, and Peter Walker, who sings bass-baritone and plays bagpipe, flute and percussion. “Burgos is the title that ties everything together. We'll explore 13<sup>th</sup> century music in a region where

three different religions coexisted. Music got passed down because they had a king that really cared about it.”



Much of the music originates from the Las Huelgas Codex, the legacy of a community of Cistercian nuns who sang a wealth of polyphonic music before the practice was banned around 1550.

“The monastery represented a big concentration of power and wealth. You might have come to live there if you were too smart to get married and risk dying in childbirth, but chose to live a long, happy life doing music and art and not be bossed around by men. Women there didn't see themselves as suppressed, but blessed.” The 70-

minute program also includes improvisations and music from the Cantigas de Santa Maria, a Gallician-Portuguese repertory of monophonic songs to the Virgin Mary. “We don't do long programs where the audience starts counting the pages,” Lau says. “We want you to come out saying Wow! That was interesting and I want to learn more.”

Lau's special approach to forming her consort extends to the way they rehearse and perform. “A lot of ensembles get together on Monday to rehearse and perform on Friday. That can work if the players are good, but the real magic comes through when you spend a long time with the same colleagues and program according to each musician's strengths. And this is an ensemble you can grow with. A few years ago, Brian Kay suddenly told me he wanted to learn to play the oud. I told him that was wonderful because I was cooking up this program.. I suggested he buy an instrument, then we hooked him up with a Turkish master and two years later after studying at Peabody, he won the Lute Society's emerging artist competition.”

The Broken Consort is also unusual for its “broken” range of repertory. “We only do super early music and modern music,” says Lau, a subject that takes us into a completely unexpected area. Lau tells me that she and her husband celebrated their honeymoon by taking a cruise on the ill-fated Costa Concordia. “We almost died. We hung on a rope for over three hours before being rescued.” The experience was so traumatic that the couple went through months of therapy, then decided “to make meaning out of this” by writing a book and recording a CD of Emily Lau's original compositions. We'll explore that collection in a forthcoming review. Both the book and recording will be available at The Broken Consort's concert on Friday evening.

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