

Review

Boston's Broken Consort at St. John's Cathedral (March 8)

by Daniel Hathaway



Music from nunneries is the source for two fascinating concerts of early music by distinguished ensembles this month. On March 20, the Newberry Consort will celebrate the new gallery organ at the Church of the Covenant with late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century music from Spanish and Mexican convents.

Last Friday evening, the Boston-based Broken Consort visited the Helen D. Schubert concert series at St. John's Cathedral in Cleveland to present a program of medieval Spanish music called "Burgos, 1275" featuring music from the royal Las Huelgas Convent, selections from the monophonic collection of Marian songs, the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, and improvisations on Sephardic and Arabo-Andalucian tunes that brought all three of the prevailing Iberian cultural streams into the mix. It was an era in which three religious traditions flourished side by side and seem to have gotten along well. Their respective music certainly meshed perfectly during this concert, providing the five excellent singers and instrumentalists with a wealth of built-in variety and contrast.

The evening began simply though dramatically with a single soprano intoning *Quis dabit* from the center aisle midway back in the nave. *Ex illustri* and *Ave Maris Stella* followed in three-part polyphony, the first in *organum* style, the second in a springy *conductus* rhythm. Vocalists Emily Lau, Clare McNamara and Camila Parias sang with full, straight tone, tuning their intervals so perfectly that open chords rang splendidly through the space.

A spoken prologue (Don Alfonso de Castela) preceded two *cantigas*, one the story of a dishonest judge redeemed by the Virgin, the other a praise song to Mary, the basis of an impressive and lengthy bagpipe solo by Peter Walker and a trio for two sopranos, bass (Walker again) and drum. A Sephardic song, *Quando el rey Nimrod*, was introduced by Brian Kay's brilliant oud playing; its dance-like refrain was ornamented with Walker's fine recorder lines.

Two motets, *Alleluya vocavit* (for two voices) and *Ave, Caro splendida* (for four) contrasted the hundred-years-earlier simplicity of the music in the Calixtinus Codex with the

sophistication of the Las Huelgas collection. An far-ranging oud solo and an exciting improvisation for pipes and tambourine ended the first half of the program.

More Las Huelgas motets — *Resurgentis* and *In Sapientia* — came after intermission, the latter a long and striking soprano solo by Broken Consort founder Emily Lau. The *Cantiga, Como Podens* was a duet colored by recorder and percussion.

Another oud solo — meant to be played on the *komuz*, a long-necked, fretless lute which didn't make the journey from Boston due to a snowstorm — led to a surprisingly sweet and consonant-sounding *Dum sigillum summi Patris* by Perotin and the anonymous *O Monialis* for voice and oud, both from the Las Huelgas collection.

The Broken Consort ended with the humorous *cantiga, Non sofre Santa Maria*, a spirited, strophic tale about a group of pilgrims at an inn who discover there's a piece of meat missing from their dinner when they return from prayer. The Virgin helps them recover it, and in a startling denouement, the pilgrims suspend the meat on a silken cord in front of her altar at Rocamadour. It may still be there.

The large audience responded enthusiastically throughout the evening. Their standing ovation after the story of the meat miracle was rewarded with another ear-tickling Sephardic tune by the full ensemble.

The Broken Consort creates a compelling historical scenario without costumes or props, solely through the eloquence of the music they choose, arrange so cannily and perform so well. The trajectory of their program on Friday evening would have been even more compelling without the interruption of a twenty-minute intermission.

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