

Torbár Medieval: Daughters of Light

by Mike Telin



When we think of the Medieval period, musical variety is usually not the first thing that comes to mind. But Allison Monroe and her Trobár Medieval colleagues would beg to differ with that sentiment. “There’s a lot of variety in the repertoire,” Monroe said during a recent interview.

“And the human aspect. We just performed a Troubadour program in Chicago which included

Crusade songs, love songs, and pastorals. There’s just so much in the repertoire, and the more you dig into it the more you discover that people back then were just like us. And we’re still singing about the same things today.”

On Friday January 27 at 7:00 pm at Convivium 33 Gallery, the Cleveland based Trobár Medieval will present “Daughters of Light,” which features the music and visions of two abbesses, the ninth-century Byzantine-Greek Kassia, and the twelfth-century German Hildegard von Bingen. In addition to Monroe (voice, vielle, rebec, psaltery), performers will include Elena Mullins (voice, harp, percussion), and Karin Weston (voice, flute, harp), with guest artists Rosemary Heredos and Nadia Tarnawsky.

The program will be repeated on Saturday the 28th at 7:00 pm at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Hts. and on Sunday the 29th at 3:00 pm at St. Anselm Church in Chesterland. Performances are free, but donations are suggested.

I caught up with Allison Monroe by telephone and began our conversation by asking her about Trobár Medieval’s founding.

Allison Monroe: I believe the first concert by the founding trio was in 2017. Before that, Karin Weston and I had already been making music together, but we quickly realized that two people, especially with Medieval music, makes it hard to program an entire concert. So we thought about who we would like to join us.

That same year we asked Elena [Mullins] to join us for a Fringe Concert at the Boston Early Music Festival.

The three of us work well together. Karin and I both like to dig in, take things slow and learn all there is to know before we even begin to make music. Elena is always up for just trying things, so she brings a great balance to the group. If it weren't for her we'd still just be thinking about the music.

Mike Telin: What drew you to Medieval music?

AM: I grew up with an interest in early repertoire — my parents listened to Medieval and Renaissance music. But it was the sound world that caught my imagination — I just love the colors the instruments can create. And the voices. I was used to listening to Met Opera broadcasts, so it was exciting to hear people sing in a different way.

But all three of us founders met at Case Western where we studied Medieval and Renaissance music with Ross Duffin and Debra Nagy. And I think that all of us enjoyed the music's emphasis on the text and its room for improvisation. And I think we all enjoy the process of figuring out how to take the music from the page and making it performable.



MT: *The Medieval period lasted from the late 5th to the late 15th centuries. How did the music change during those years?*

AM: It changed a lot. On this program we're performing repertoire from the 9th-century by the Byzantine-Greek Kassia — a woman. Besides the fact that it is Byzantine, which is a totally different style in its sound world and notation than anything that the group has ever done. The program also includes music by the twelfth-century German, Hildegard von Bingen, which has its own soundworld.

MT: *Tell me more about the program.*

AM: It's centered around the voice, and it's almost entirely chant with some works that were inspired by chant which will involve instruments. What we know about chant during that time is that it would have been performed unaccompanied. But there is some historical evidence that Hildegard played the psaltery or used it along with a harp.

Right now the plan is for the vocal music to be performed *a capella* with instrumental works in between. Our friend Allen Otte will be playing percussion on the program as well and he'll be bringing an array of instruments. He's prepared two pieces — one based on a tune by Hildegard from the Devil from the *Ordo Virtutum*. And near the end of the program he will usher in the sound world of heaven with a piece by Hildegard played on chimes — it's stunning.

There will be a lot of chant, which is something that not everyone is accustomed to hearing, but it will be very calming. There is also more variety in chant than I think people realize.

It's a program that is mainly about women, particularly about nuns and their experience of the world, and how their faith informed everything about their lives. It's sort of a walk through an imagined life cycle of a nun from before she becomes part of the faith to the moment she decides to dedicate her life to the faith.

It's also interesting to ponder that women at that time did not have a lot of options. They could get married, but they still wouldn't have had a lot of choice in what happened in their lives.

We're also doing part of the Consecration of the Virgin ceremony — when a woman became a nun she literally had a wedding ceremony. She would wear a white gown and make vows to her promised one.

So it's a program that you can engage with on many levels. It will also offer an interesting comparison of the sound world of 9th-century Byzantium and the 12th-century world of Hildegard von Bingen.

MT: What aspects of Medieval music are still in use today?

AM: It's funny that when you take a music history class you're told — “these composers figured out how to make the music match the text.” But that applies to many periods, and I think there is a sense that chant does not do that. I disagree. I think that from the beginning of notated music, humans were always matching the music to the text. I think that wanting to create a musical sound that fit their message was always important.

I also think that the prominence of the voice during the Medieval period shows that humans have always been most interested in the voice. From folk, to pop songs, people have always loved the voice. And in the Medieval period everything revolves around the voice. Around the text.

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