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Trobár returns to its roots with "Songbook for a King"

by Stephanie Manning

In the medieval era, musicians and poets had a different perspective on the process of creation. "They thought of composing as finding and seeking out words and notes that already exist," Allison Monroe said in a recent phone interview. That's why the artistic director named her ensemble Trobár — an Occitan-language word meaning "to find" or "to seek."

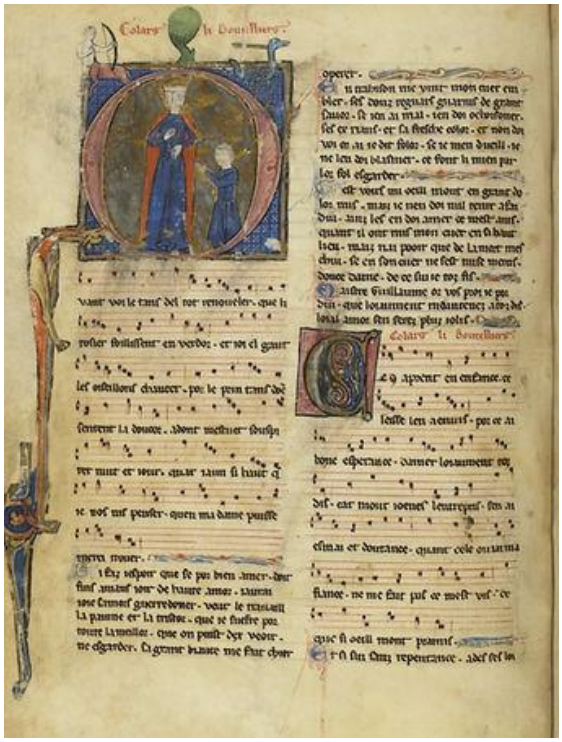
"That's where the word 'troubadour' comes from, as well as 'trouvère,'" she explained. "And that repertoire is really at the root of who we are as an ensemble."

On March 19 at 7:00 pm, the medieval music ensemble will return to those roots by revisiting a program from Trobár's earliest days, "Songbook for a King." This concert draws its pieces from the "Manuscrit du Roi," a famous thirteenth-century anthology of French music. Pay-what-you-can tickets for the performance at West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church in Rocky River are available online.

While most manuscripts focus on a specific type of repertoire, the Manuscrit du Roi includes quite the variety, which piqued Monroe's interest. Instrumental pieces, motets, and troubadour and trouvère songs all lay within the handwritten pages, accompanied by beautiful illuminations. "I've been obsessed with it since grad school," she said. "It also has this fascinating history of what happened to it and how it was compiled over a period of 50 to 75 years."

This program is essentially an expanded version of one of Trobár's first concerts from around 2017. "The broad strokes of the program are pretty much the same as the first time we did it, but I have included some other pieces that are interesting for various reasons," Monroe said.

Returning to perform with Monroe is Trobár founding member and vocalist Karin Weston, who met Monroe at Case Western and is now based in Switzerland. The duo will be joined by frequent guest artists Sian Ricketts on wind instruments and Nathan Dougherty on voice.



"Karin is a wonderful singer and so expressive," Monroe said. "This music is really all about the poetry, so having someone that spends a great deal of time thinking about the text is very important."

Most of the pieces are love songs, written from the perspective of a man pining after his lady. "We rarely hear from the woman," Monroe said. "That's why I think it's really cool and important that two women's songs are in this manuscript." The manuscript includes one verse of each, and the ensemble will perform both.

The concert follows the general chronology of the manuscript and its different stages of additions, complete with a slideshow of images and lyric translations. This kind of repertoire "can be hard for audience members to connect to, because aurally the music is so different from any music that we're used to," Monroe said. "That's why I think this program works really well, because you do have this book and these images that help you create a larger context for the music."

Not only that, but the physical presentation of the manuscript was clearly important to its creators. "It represents thousands of hours of labor from all the people who were involved in putting it together," she said. "It would've been accessible to only the rarefied people who could afford such a manuscript — which is why I call it a 'Songbook for a King.'"

Today, the manuscript and its music are much more accessible. The original lives in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which made the scans available online. And Cleveland audiences can experience both the Trobár concert and its corresponding MuckAbout, which the ensemble is hosting on March 15th at 4:00 pm.

This event in Case Western's Haydn Hall provides an opportunity for singers, instrumentalists (at A=440), and observers to get to know some of the pieces on the concert and explore the notation. RSVPs are encouraged and can be submitted here.

”I would love it if people came and learned a bit about it,” Monroe said. Whether through the MuckAbout or performing, “we really love doing this show — yeah, we’re working, but it’s also pretty fun.”

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