

The New York Times

Thursday, February 12, 2009

MUSIC REVIEW

Love Songs, From Godly to Earthy

By Allan Kozinn

The Orlando Consort has made an art of thematic programming, particularly in its recordings, which often come with lavishly illustrated books (not mere booklets) that add literary and artistic elements to the music at hand. That made this early-music vocal quartet an ideal choice to contribute a concert related to the Metropolitan Museum's current exhibition "Art and Love in Renaissance Italy."

In some ways the group exceeded its brief in its program "Amore: Love and Marriage in the Italian Renaissance" on Tuesday evening at the museum's Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium. Some of the music was actually from the heart of medieval times, and several works were by French and Flemish composers, with French texts.

Explaining that took lots of definition parsing: most (though not all) of the Franco-Flemish composers found work in

Italy, where courtiers were fluent in French. The medieval pieces provided context, or at least helped demonstrate the evolution from accompanied melody to balanced polyphonic textures.

But really, who could complain when the result was getting Machaut's rich "Rose, Liz Printemps, Verdure" onto the program, to say nothing of a handful of bawdy French songs by Isaac, Compère and Mouton.

The program's point was that love songs cover an enormous range of intentions, let alone expression. The Machaut was an example of idealized, courtly love. But love had a religious side as well. In Dufay's "Vergine bella" the imagery is loving but reverential, and works by Brumel and Gombert use the romantic imagery of "Song of Songs" — as well as slow-moving, deeply involved counterpoint — to evoke religious ecstasy. And the Gloria from a Josquin

Mass built a sublime polyphonic structure around a racy popular song, "L'ami Baudichon." One of the group's tenors sang the original text while the rest of the quartet sang the Gloria.

A Busnois song, "Ja que li ne s'i attende," showed how composers played word games to document the names of their paramours. (The title of this one means "now let him not rely on it," but its first four words name the lady.) And carnality was explored in groups with texts that anyone conversant with 15th-century sexual slang would have found explicit. (The ensemble helpfully provided explanatory footnotes.)

The Orlando singers were models of focused intonation and textural transparency: Every line was clearly heard, yet the blend was solid and rich. And most crucially, the singers captured the character and specific flavor of each song — a tall order in this varied program.

The New York Times

Sunday, January 18, 2009

CLASSICAL RECORDINGS

Under the Influence, or Providing It

By Allan Kozinn

**TARIK O'REGAN:
'SCATTERED RHYMES'**

Orlando Consort; Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, conducted by Paul Hillier. Harmonia Mundi USA HMU 807469; CD.

The technique that pop musicians call sampling — taking bits of one recording and using them as elements in another — is very old news in classical music. In the 16th century, composers created parody Masses built around quotations from popular (and usually secular) songs instead of using plainchant, as earlier composers had done.

The British composer Tarik O'Regan stands that practice on its head in "Scattered Rhymes." Instead of writing a Mass using modern musical themes, Mr. O'Regan takes thematic fragments from a famous Mass as the basis of an elaborate setting of Petrarch sonnets and an anonymous 14th-century love song.

Mr. O'Regan borrows his themes from the oldest existing polyphonic Mass by a single composer: Machaut's *Messe de Nostre Dame*, composed in the 1360s. Mr. O'Regan's often dense rhythms and

counterpoint make it hard to spot the source material within the work's invitingly variegated textures. But he means you to hear it; he suggests performing "Scattered Rhymes" alongside the Machaut, as the Orlando Consort and (in the O'Regan only) the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir do here.

The Orlando singers make the juxtaposition less odd by singing the Machaut with a velvety modern tone, a very different sound from what you can hear on the Ensemble Organum's conjectural 1995 recording on Harmonia Mundi, which presents the work in more rough-hewn timbres. As a performance of the Mass, it sounds pleasant but newfangled; as a companion piece for the O'Regan, it works beautifully.

Two similar pairings are also included. "Douce Dame Jolie" is first performed in Machaut's version, as a single unaccompanied line, and then in Mr. O'Regan's playful reconfiguration, with the melody sped up, slowed down, harmonized and otherwise toyed with. And a beautiful account of Dufay's "Ave Regina Celorum" precedes Gavin Bryars's serene, textually quirky "Super Flumina."

The Boston Globe

Saturday, June 16, 2007

Early-music pilgrims show their devotion at festival

By Jeremy Eichler

Early-music nation has taken to the streets.

Like Wagnerians at the shrine of Bayreuth or diehard Sox fans at Fenway, the early-music pilgrims flooding the city for the Boston Early Music Festival are a passionately devoted group. They queued outside of Emmanuel Church on Thursday afternoon to hear the Orlando Consort, a distinguished British vocal quartet, as part of a marathon week of concerts. Some concertgoers were happily branded with festival shirts and bags. Many clutched the thick program book and wore backpacks suggesting a long day of urban concert-hopping.

Within the broader classical music world, early-music fans remain a distinct subculture, even as the historically informed performance styles the movement has championed have become increasingly part of the mainstream. And as with any subculture, special rules seem to apply. At most classical concerts, for instance, obscure choices in repertoire are often

punished at the box office. But in the early-music world, when the performers are well-known, listeners seem to thrill to the prospect of terra incognita.

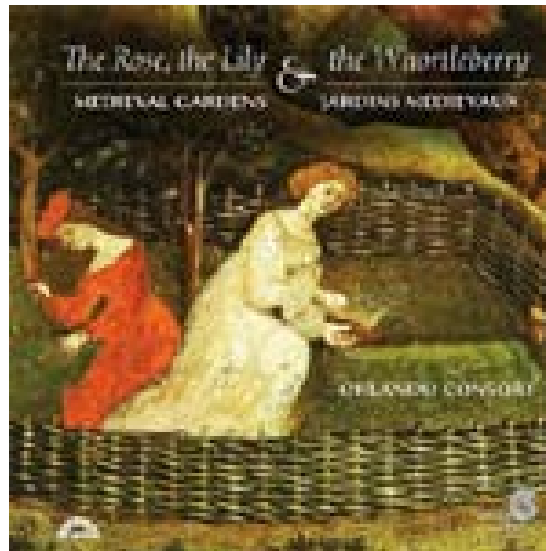
I wondered for instance how many of the fans that packed into Emmanuel Church had heard more than one or two works on the Orlando Consort's program. But it appeared not to matter, especially with the group's clever unifying theme of garden music — that is, representations of gardens in medieval and Renaissance works drawn from France, Italy, England, Burgundy, Spain, and the Low Countries over a period of three centuries, from Guillaume de Machaut to Clemens non Papa. Many selections used horticulture as metaphor — for politics, or more commonly, of course, for love. The quartet's performances were intelligent, graceful, and fluid, with each grouping of songs introduced from the stage with that unmistakably British combination of eloquence and dry wit.

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The New York Times

Sunday, April 2, 2006



‘The Rose, the Lily and the Whortleberry’

Orlando Consort. Harmonia Mundi U.S.A. HMU 907398; CD.

OR maybe this should be a book review. Harmonia Mundi has always taken pride in its artful packaging, but this tops all. (Except, perhaps, an earlier Orlando Consort release, “Food, Wine and Song: Music and Feasting in Renaissance Europe,” complete with recipes.)

The disc comes in a lavish 116-page hardcover booklet replete with background discussions, colorful artwork and text translations in English, French, German and Spanish. Various subtitled (most grandly, “Medieval and Renaissance Musical Representations of Gardens and Horticulture”), the album consists of chansons, motets and madrigals

from France, England, Burgundy, Spain, Italy and the Low Countries.

The booklet notes, like the project as a whole, are a quaint mix of earnestness and whimsy, as encapsulated in a post-script by Angus Smith, one of the Orlando Consort’s two tenors. The anthology’s name, he writes, “was chosen early in the research process as a ‘working title.’ Subsequently we found many songs and motets with references to roses and lilies, but none, alas, in praise of the whortleberry (which is also known as bilberry and blaeberry). Our search will continue, however, and we are so determined eventually to find the elusive piece that we have decided to remain faithful to our original title.”

And oh, yes, the music: two dozen works by composers both known

(Machaut, Brumel, Clemens Non Papa, Gombert) and obscure. In addition to the floral images, themes of spring and especially May abound. Among the gems are two anonymous works: the English “Flos regalis” from around 1290, reminiscent of the sacred style of the Notre Dame school in Paris a century before, and the delightful Spanish miniature “Dindiridin” from about 1480.

The expert Orlando Consort, which performed this program at Merkin Concert Hall in February, renders it here in a refined yet flexible and varied musical style. What comes next from the group is anyone’s guess, but count on it to be luxurious.

JAMES R. OESTREICH

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San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday, April 16, 2006

Orlando Consort The Rose, the Lily, and the Whortleberry Harmonia Mundi

By Joshua Kosman
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

The Orlando Consort, the excellent British vocal ensemble, continues to blaze new trails in over-the-top record packaging. Following up on “Food, Wine and Song,” the group’s 2001 CD-cum-cookbook, this new project is a lavish tribute to the medieval and Renaissance practices of horticulture. So along with the actual disc, you get a glossy hardbound 116-page booklet with essays on the history of gardening, beautiful photographs and reproductions of manuscript illuminations, and even a scrupulous catalog of the various species of grasses, roses and perennials invoked. Oh, and there’s music, too — two dozen chansons, motets and madrigals spanning the 13th to the 16th centuries. They’re beautifully sung, with crisp diction and shapely, transparent textures that bring out the counterpoint; and even if the floral theme is slightly beside the point unless your medieval French is up to snuff, the sequence of the pieces is charming.

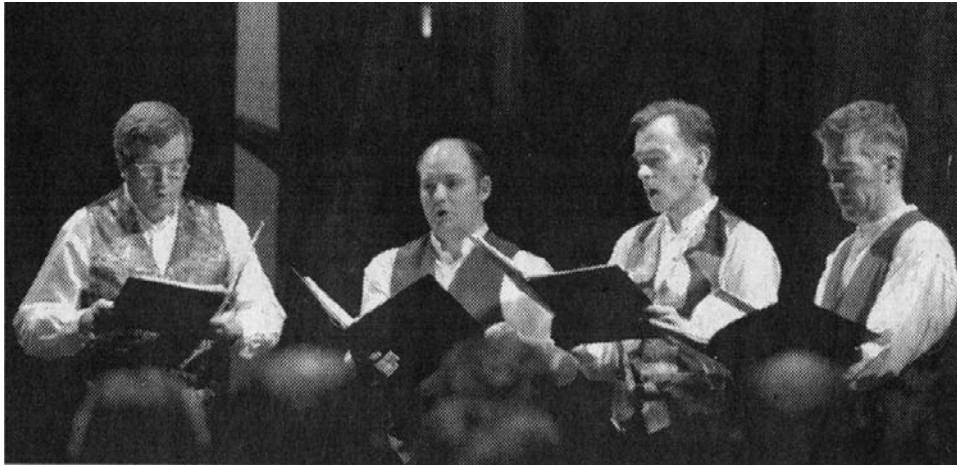
They’re arranged in little posies according to both chronology and geography, and the selections progress from the early French style of Machaut through the sweet consonances of the 15th century English school, then by way of Spain, France and Italy to the great 16th century Netherlanders like Gombert and Clemens non Papa. The whole thing should be listened to on an iPod while strolling through the Conservatory of Flowers.

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The New York Times

Tuesday, February 15, 2005



Nan Melville for The New York Times

The Orlando Consort, from left, Robert Harre-Jones, Mark Dobell, Angus Smith and Donald Greig, put works in their historical frames.

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

Henry VIII Looved and Loosted

By Allan Kozinn

The Orlando Consort, a superb English vocal quartet that specializes in medieval and Renaissance music, wraps its programs in themes. Sometimes these are commonplace or frivolous — programs about love or food, for example — but for its performance at Low Library at Columbia University on Saturday evening, the group put its survey of Renaissance works in more substantial, historical frames.

The concert, “The Ambassadors,” used diplomatic correspondence to evoke six settings, from Duke Charles the Bold’s encampment at the Siege of Neuss, near Cologne, in 1475, to the court of Henry VIII in 1533. At each stop the group sang works that might have been heard by the participants.

This inventive solution to what might otherwise have been a programmatic hodge-podge let the ensemble touch on sacred works by Busnois, Dufay and Brumel, set in sublime polyphony, as well as an ample sampling of secular works, from popular 15th-century French pieces like “De Tous Biens Plaine” and “L’Homme Armé” and Henry VIII’s engaging “Pastime With Good Company.”

There were some true finds. As an intense, artfully made prayer for rescue from the plague, Walter Lambe’s “Stella Celi Extirpavit,” from a sequence devoted to Eton College in 1479, is a fascinating slice of life. And “Versa Est in Luctum,” a funeral motet by the Spanish composer Francisco de Peñalosa has a dark serenity that, in the Orlando

Consort’s rendering, was both moving and luminous.

On more familiar ground, the singers also gave exquisitely polished, beautifully balanced accounts of works by Josquin Desprez, Guillaume Dufay and William Cornysh. In the section devoted to Henry VIII (in which the Cornysh was performed), the singers used antique pronunciations, rendering love and lust as loov and loost, and company as coompaneye.

But most striking was the degree to which these selections showed England’s musical sensibilities lagging behind those of other countries. The works of Cornysh and his king, though contemporary with the rest of the program, had a medieval cast, both harmonically and structurally.

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FANFARE

July/August 2004

THE TOLEDO SUMMIT • Orlando Consort • HARMONIA MUNDI HMU 907328 (74:48)
 Music of MONDÉJAR, LA RUE, ANCHIETA, PENALOSA, DI LA TORRE, AGRICOLA. LAGARTO, DIVITIS,
 BRUMEL, LUCHAS, JOSQUIN DES PREZ, DÍAZ DE AUX

To all the events that have been commemorated on records — the feast of the pheasant in 1454, the field of cloth of gold in 1520, and numerous royal weddings and funerals — we can now add the series of events that took place in Toledo in the space of five months in 1502. Philip the Fair, the Hapsburg duke of Burgundy, had arrived with his wife, Joan the Mad, the daughter of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Philip came to be sworn in as heir to the combined thrones. Toledo was the capital of Castile, so Ferdinand escorted the couple into the city to greet Isabella. The young couple was expected to be the first king and queen of Spain. Philip brought the Burgundian chapel choir and some knights of the Golden Fleece with him, but the court of Toledo was not to be outdone in splendor. A detailed account of the entire visit survives from a member of Philip's retinue, and this disc offers some highlights of the music that might have been performed in varied locales. ("Might have been" are key words in most liturgical reconstructions on disc.) Pierre de la Rue directed the visiting Burgundian chapel, which included Alexander Agricola and Antoine Divitis among its singers. The Castilian chapel included Juan de Anchieta and Alonso de Mondéjar. Francisco de Peñalosa, Francisco de la Torre, and Pedro Díaz de Aux were members of the Aragonese chapel, and Pedro de Lagarto directed the Toledo cathedral choir. These names account for all but three of the composers represented on the disc.

One of the first events commemorated during the visit was the death of England's young Prince Arthur. He was married to Joan's sister Catherine, who later married Arthur's brother Henry. This was the basis for Henry's later denunciation of his marriage (he argued that he could not marry his brother's widow, though the pope had given a dispensation from the impediment of affinity), but another pope's refusal to annul the marriage led to Henry VIII making himself the head of the Church of England. The period of mourning is noted here with Anchieta's *Libera me, Domine* and Peñalosa's *Versa est in luctum*. In the notes, Tess Knighton suggests that Peñalosa may have also composed his *Missa L'homme armé* for this occasion. It receives its first recording here, though it is limited to the Credo.

The program is an excellent excuse to put together a bundle of unrecorded pieces, indeed of unrecorded composers, five of whom have no vital dates. There is unity in the time frame, and there is diversity in the junction of Burgundian and Spanish composers. There is further diversity in marking the varied celebrations that occurred, not only for the liturgy but also for banquets, dances, and entertainments. There is no claim, however, that all of these pieces were sung at the time. What we do hear is exquisitely presented, for the Orlando Consort ranks with the finest vocal ensembles of the day. I can only quibble that these four voices hardly represent the splendor of the combined chapel choirs, as Knighton emphasizes. Of the few pieces previously recorded, Peñalosa's *Versa est in luctum* may be heard in Bruno Turner's collection of his motets and La Rue's *Gaude virgo* has been recorded at least twice, while Josquin's *In te Domine speravi* and Brumel's *Mater patris et filia* are the most familiar pieces on this program. Six contemporary paintings are also reproduced to add a visual element to the commemoration. This event in effect marked the beginning of the Golden Age, *El Siglo de Oro*.

The future, which appeared so promising in 1502, was not to be fully realized. Though Isabella died two years later, Philip and Joan never actually ruled Spain. Handsome Philip's infidelity drove his wife mad, and then he fell ill and died two years later. Their son became Charles I on the death of Ferdinand, who ruled all of Spain from the death of his son-in-law until 1516. Joan retained the title of queen until her death in 1555, just before her son abdicated. Charles's son, Philip II, would move the capital from Toledo to Madrid in 1564. —J.F. Weber

chamber music

April 2004

Not less exciting is The Toledo Summit (Harmonia Mundi HUM 907328), a brilliantly conceived collection by the Orlando Consort, a crackerjack quartet of male singers. Here we are transported to the beginning of the sixteenth century—to the summer of 1502, to be precise, when, to quote Tess Knighton’s admirable booklet essay, “Philip the Fair, Duke of Burgundy, accompanied by his wife, Juana, known as Joan the Mad, was escorted by his father-in-law King Ferdinand of Aragon into Toledo where they were all greeted by Ferdinand’s wife, Queen Isabella of Castile. Philip was to be sworn in as heir to the Castilian and Aragonese thrones in accordance with royal tradition and had traveled through France and Northern Spain with an impressive retinue that included not only the highest Burgundian nobility...but also his chapel choir.” (Well, don’t we all?) Pierre de la Rue and Alexander Agricola were among the musical luminaries in that entourage. Josquin des Prèz was invited along but couldn’t make it; at least he was represented by his music, as was Antoine

Brumel. (If you didn’t play hooky from your music history class that week, you will recall that this lineup of composers represents the mid-Renaissance crème de la crème.) The Spaniards summoned their best musical forces to meet the Burgundians head-on; and if the names Francisco de Peñalosa, Juan de Anchieta, and Alonso de Mondéjar don’t seem as familiar, you can be assured that they were nonetheless masters of their craft at a time when craft meant a lot. Twenty-one pieces in seventy-five minutes, and—wonder of wonders!—through all that polyphony the ear simply does not tire of listening to this immaculately blended quartet of singers. So well have they mastered vocal color as individuals and as an ensemble that you may fall prey to the illusion that the ensemble is differently constituted from one piece to the next, which it simply is not. If you buy one CD of Renaissance music this year, I would suggest it be this one. It’s a treasure trove of great, mostly unfamiliar repertoire and of great chamber-music-singing.

—James Keller



American Record Guide

March/April 2004

The Toledo Summit (1502)

Early 16th Century Spanish & Flemish Songs & Motets — Orlando Consort
Harmonia Mundi 907328 — 74:48

A rich and very generous exploration of music in Spain at the beginning of its “Golden Age”.

This recording is a venture slightly after the fashion of Paul McCreech’s recreations of events in the past. In this case it evokes the “summit” meeting in late spring of 1502 where Philip the Fair (son of Maximilian I of Austria and Maria of Burgundy), newly married to Juanna, daughter of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, was brought by his father-in-law to the court of his mother-in-law to be formally invested as their heir in Toledo. This was, as the annotator observes, “a meeting between two cultures”, since Philip of Burgundy brought with him the famous court chapel, and the royal chapels of Castile and Aragon were marshaled to vie with the illustrious visitors.

The program of 21 selections — 10 by Netherlandish composer, 11 by Spaniards — is roughly laid out so as to reflect the progress of celebrations, both liturgical and festive, that marked the meeting. More generally, the program offers a nicely varied mix of 11 sacred Latin pieces (6 by northerners, 5 by Spaniards) and 10 vernacular ones (3 in French, 1 in Italian, 6 in Spanish).

Composers represented include a number who actually participated in the event. Thus we have Pierre de La Rue, Alexander Agricola, and Antoine Divitis on the Burgundian side; with music by Brumel and Josquin symbolizing their contribution to that side’s working repertoire; and the French *chansons* reflecting the northerners’ elegant court entertainment. Among the Spaniards were Francisco de Peñalosa, Juan de Anchieta, Alonso de Mondéjar, Francisco de La Torre, and Pedro de Lagarto. Spanish songs by some of them, as well as by Luchas and the ubiquitous Anonymous also represented the dancing and hunting dimension of the festivities. Only a few of the selections might plausibly be claimed as specific compositions for the occasion, but the rest of the music certainly stands for the categories represented. And at least two selections do symbolize a true “meeting” of cultural traditions: a movement from a Mass by Delarue using a Spanish song as *cantus firmus* and a movement of a Mass by Peñalosa on the famous French song, ‘L’homme Armé’.

The four male singers of the Orlando Consort offer suave and stylish performances. They are particularly fine in the secular pieces. But in the liturgical works, their limited numbers, which might have been suitable for a small court chapel of the day, surely lack the weight and sonority of the grander forces involved in 1502. As the booklet notes point out, the Burgundian chapel contributed 14 singers, while the combined Hispanic forces may have included 60 to 80 singers.

We should note that the 1502 festivities ended in a solemn tone (commemorated in the selections here) marking news of the death of Philip’s brother-in-law, Prince Arthur of England.

The Washington Post

Saturday, November 22, 2003

Orlando Consort

Not only love, sorrow and the beauties of nature have inspired the makers of songs through the ages. The more mundane pleasures, eating, drinking and tomfoolery, have given rise to a wonderful repertoire of pieces, and the Orlando Consort brought three centuries' worth to the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center on Thursday.

The musical journey began at the 13th-century Cathedral of Notre Dame with a plaintive song extolling the culinary promises of a field full of fig trees, lambs and grain, and it almost ended, after singing of many glasses of wine, in a drunken train wreck of a part-song by the 16th-century German composer Ludwig Senfl. In between were groups of pieces from 14th-century England (rather politer than the rest) and 15th-century Italy, Burgundy and the Iberian peninsula.

If the texts were sometimes silly and sometimes downright obscene, the music

was sublime, and the four singers of the consort negotiated with an understated simplicity the job of dotting on each melodic line while making the subtle and delicate ensemble sound almost accidental. They have honed these pieces to well-fitting agreement. Rhythmic shifts happened almost imperceptibly, and texts spun out as if each singer had been born in 13th-century Paris or 14th-century Yorkshire. All of this was most apparent in the English carol "Nowell, Nowell: The Boares Head," where a lovely long unison verse gave way to an intricately textured "burden," or chorus.

Countertenor Robert Harre-Jones, tenors Mark Dobell and Angus Smith, and baritone Donald Greig took turns talking about each song group, and those comments, also, were smoothly honed.

—Joan Reinthaler

San Diego Chronicle

Friday, January 31, 2003

The Orlando Consort, under the auspices of the San Diego Early Music Society, brought their delightful anthology of medieval and Renaissance “food music” to town. The program, almost exactly reproducing that of their admirable 2001 CD, *Food, Wine and Song* (on Harmonia Mundi, with an elegant booklet), was based on these interestingly varied structural principles. First, there was the connection with food and drink in the texts of these compositions. Then, there was the roughly chronological arrangement, starting with a 13th century monophonic conductus from the school of Notre Dame de Paris, ending with a late 16th century German drinking song, and covering along the way a variety of types of secular vocal music in that 350-year period. Overlying the chronology, the group also offered seriatim a survey of the major centers of musical culture in the period: high-medieval France; late-medieval England; the early and high renaissance in Florence, Burgundy, and the Iberian peninsular; and late Renaissance Germany. Thus, without any academicism, the group provided a more-or-less systematic (though necessarily selective) introduction to the whole field.

In any case, the chief pleasure of the program was not any instruction it might offer, but the loveliness and the vivacity of the singing — the same qualities fans of early music have encountered over the years in the Orlandos recordings of Leo-

nin and Perotin, Machaut, Philippe de Vitry, Ockeghem, Loyset Compère, and others. The suavity of their sound (notably of the stellar Robert Harre-Jones, the best English countertenor since Alfred Deller) is incomparable. Their singing has a mesmerizing lyrical flow, with exquisite modulations of timbre and volume. They tailor their vocal production and their interpretative manner to the demands of each particular style, ranging from the ethereal purity of the chapel or abbey to the raucous lewdness of street songs. In strophic compositions and in repeated refrains they vary dynamics and tempos according to the meanings of the texts and the musical shape of the whole work. They are meticulous in following correct historical pronunciation in more than half a dozen languages.

The four male singers have vivid individual personalities and voices of very different colors, which when appropriate they choose to emphasize; but at other times they can blend into a unified expressive utterance so seamless that it seems to be coming from a single consciousness. They are also — in between numbers, and sometimes even during the numbers — funny and charming. No one ever goes away from one of their concerts without a smile of happiness at the artistic and human experience. And this program, whose earthy concerns naturally evoked high spirits in both audience and performers, was especially full of fun.

The Georgia Straight

Vancouver, British Columbia

November 27, 2003

The Orlando Consort

Sex, alcohol, and pigging out — these are not themes normally found at a classical music performance, let alone one held in a church. Nevertheless, the spirit of Bacchus was well and truly present when the all-male early-music Orlando Consort took the stage at the University Chapel to redden the cheeks of its unsuspecting audience.

In a program titled Food, Wine & Song, countertenor Robert Harre-Jones, tenors Angus Smith and Mark Dobell, and baritone Donald Greig showcased some of the bawdier works to come out of medieval Europe. With witty and informative tongues firmly planted in their cheeks, they enthralled us with joy, humour, and a bit of naughtiness.

Things began innocently enough, with four works from 13th- and 14th-century France. With impeccable harmonies and fluid counterpoint, the English quartet sang songs of harvest, wine, and love. This included a beautifully lilting song by Guillaume de Machaut whose tenor part, we were told, had been amusingly described by the composer as being “as

sweet as unsalted gruel.” Things got more risqué with 14th- and 15th-century Italy. A piece about cardoons was filled with double-entendres, according to the extensive program notes that also featured translations of all the lyrics. The cardoon, a relation to the artichoke, also represented the “male organ”, hence the lyrics: “The cardoon should be in size/a span or a little more, for nature/cannot digest anything so big and hard,/even though we always like big mouthfuls.”

But it was with songs from 16th-century Germany that the roars of laughter truly began. One piece about the effects of imbibing too much alcohol had verses to churn even the strongest stomachs: “I spew into my beard/without a thought.” Demonstrating a great knack for slapstick, the quartet sang this piece increasingly out of tune, ending with Dobell keeling over.

The Orlando Consort did more than host a musical feast; it added some welcome levity to the often sober world of classical music.

—Jessica Webb

Houston Chronicle

Thursday, January 30, 2003

Orlando Consort gives 'Phoenix' new life

By CHARLES WARD

The Call of the Phoenix, an evening of very early English church music sung by the Orlando Consort, was a story of music that almost literally rose from the dead — or at least out of fish wrappers.

The Consort's focus Tuesday at Trinity Episcopal Church was the glorious Roman Catholic choral repertoire that flourished in England before King Henry VIII.

As part of his fight to establish the Church of England in the 1520s, Henry confiscated the property of the great Roman Catholic monasteries and churches. Libraries were ransacked, and the manuscripts containing 500 years of music were destroyed.

Actually, one of the Orlando singers said, the parchment on which the music was written was so valuable that it was saved and used for anything from filling in holes in shoes to wrapping food to binding other books.

Once scholars recognized such recycling, they were able to piece together at least a little of the music that had earned great respect in continental Europe. The

reconstructed works, plus compositions Europeans had copied for their own use, give an idea of the extraordinary achievements before the 16th century.

In *Phoenix*, the Consort, a male vocal quartet, took the Houston Early Music audience into a far different world of music-making.

Counterpoint reigned through a complex set of practices (including intricate changes of meter and rhythms that sometimes came across simply as a shift in tempo).

Though composers had to follow rules about consonances, harmony as we now know it didn't exist. Cadences often resulted simply from voices slithering into moments of rest.

The foundation of pieces was a slowly moving line, usually called the tenor and often was based on plainchant. Two or three other voices moved more rapidly against it.

Some of the most stunning moments Tuesday occurred when the extra voices careened along in rapid, parallel flourishes. *Ave mundi rosa* (*Hail rose of the*

world) was the most striking example. (It comes from a collection, circa 1350, known as the First Fountains Abbey Manuscript after a monastery in Yorkshire. The composer is unknown.)

Often the additional voices had separate texts. In the evening's opening work, the magisterial anthem *Veni Sancte Spiritus/Veni Creator Spiritus*, John Dunstable (circa 1390-1453), often identified as John Dunstable, set three texts about the Holy Spirit against each other.

A few moments of distinct individuality appeared. In *Gaude Virgo* (*Rejoice, Virgin Mother*), from the Ritson Manuscript, circa 1450, plainchant alternated with florid, rousing chordal music. (Many of the pieces heard Tuesday had so-called Marian texts praising the Virgin Mary.)

The Call of the Phoenix was a fascinating history lesson. The Consort members sang with exquisite refinement, and their commitment made music, which could have sounded far too similar, consistently vivid and alive.

TIMES COLONIST Victoria, British Columbia

Monday, January 27, 2003

Love of food inspires fine concert

By Deryk Barker

“If music be the love of food,” as Shakespeare so nearly wrote, “eat up, there’s plenty more.” (This is, of course, from an early draft — *Twelfth Night Out*, or *Eat What You Will* — whose existence was, until recently, suspected only by a handful of scholars.)

The love of food — or, sometimes, the absence of food — has inspired composers throughout history and provided a wide range of repertoire for the Orlando Consort’s superb EMSI concert on Saturday evening.

From Charles Daniels’ gripping opening solo *In paupertatis predio* to the closing exuberance of *Trinkt und singt* the four members of the consort, in varying combinations, took us from 13th-century France to 16th-century Germany (and much of the rest of Europe in between) in a performance which combined scholarship with spirit, accuracy with wit.

The music covered an almost bewildering diversity of styles — reminding us that 3½ centuries is a very long time — all of which were conveyed with what seemed like an entirely natural spontaneity, although it was, no doubt, the product

of years of study and performing experience.

To reinforce my point, however, there is nothing dry or academic about the Orlando’s singing; they were equally convincing in music like the beautiful *Nes que on porroit* by Guillaume de Machaut — which the composer described in a letter as “sweet as unsalted gruel” — as in the more overtly humorous, even racy material such as the group of Spanish and Portuguese songs, all of which appeared to hinge on sexual innuendo and double entendre, delivered sometimes deadpan, sometimes with a more than knowing lilt in the voice.

Early songs were frequently performed by different combinations of singers and we heard an anonymous French piece sung three times: first by tenor and baritone voices, then with the addition of Robert Harre-Jones’s counter-tenor, and finally by the full quartet.

What was particularly impressive about these performances was the way in which the singers emphasized their individual parts so that each performance seemed almost a different piece. And all of this in under two minutes.

Although most of the evening sang of the joys of food and drink, the dangers of overindulgence, especially of wine, were “celebrated” in Ludwig Senfl’s *Von edler Art* which is nothing less than a paean to the delights (!) of — how can I put this delicately? — the emetic consequences of excessive consumption. The Consort’s performance — a fine beginning, gradually deteriorating as the effects of the wine became apparent — elicited outright laughter from the audience, as well it might. Music does not have to be dour.

Perhaps the prospect of spending an entire evening listening to nothing but four unaccompanied male voices seemed a little unattractive to some, perhaps the inclement weather also prevented an event which should, if there were any justice, have been sold out, with frustrated music-lovers wandering off into the rainy streets cursing their ill-luck, from playing to a completely packed house.

But the sizable crowd which did turn up was rewarded with an evening of stunning, mesmerising singing.

Make no mistake, performers in the Orlando Consort are The Real Thing.



November 2003

The Orlando Consort: THE TOLEDO SUMMIT
Harmonia Mundi 907328

Early 16th-c. Spanish & Flemish songs & motets
Various works by La Rue, Peñalosa, Agricola, Brumel, Desprez, anonymous, others

Artistic Quality: 10 — Sound Quality: 10

These days a major event usually is accompanied by swarms of television cameras, blathering announcers, and the very latest “hot” pop star prancing, leaping, and (badly) lip-synching to some canned, ultimately forgettable electronically processed McMusic. How far we’ve come in the 500 years since the occasion commemorated on this CD—the ceremonial visit of Philip the Fair of Burgundy to Spain, hosted by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella! In addition to the banquets, outdoor recreations (including a battle re-enactment), and church services, the five-month-long stay involved numerous musical performances, utilizing the considerable talents of the most prestigious Aragonese and Castilian choirs in addition to the hand-picked band of Burgundian singers and composers Philip brought with him. Although we don’t know exactly what was sung at these events, including liturgical ceremonies at Toledo Cathedral, we do know who the composers on the scene were, and combined with other information found in contemporary songbooks and other documents, we can speculate with some reliability.

As explained in the detailed notes, The Orlando Consort—countertenor Robert Harre-Jones, tenors Charles Daniels and Angus Smith, and baritone Donald Greig—has chosen a program designed to “highlight” the summit’s main events through the music of the composers who

were either present or whose works were part of the repertoire of the cathedrals and courts in question. It’s a welcome mix of sacred and secular, and includes the poignant *Versa est in luctum* (“My harp is turned to mourning”) by Peñalosa, which may have been sung at a memorial for Ferdinand and Isabella’s son-in-law who died during Philip’s visit. Agricola’s *Je n’ay dueil* (“I have no grief that does not come from you”) is a secular piece similarly compelling with its dolorous melody and affecting beauty, highlighted by countertenor Harre-Jones’ ideal, pure, plaintive vocal quality.

Throughout, the four singers seem completely focused on creating an ensemble whose sound takes a significant measure of its form from the music’s style and text—in other words, unlike many early music groups, this one doesn’t just deliver each piece with the same perfectly blended, elegantly shaped, yet homogeneous vocal character. The sad, contemplative, and more serious pieces immediately put us in that mood because the singers express the texts that way—not simply by modifying the tempo, but more by varying vocal color, reserving accents for only special moments, and allowing a particular voice prominence where the melody demands. This may or may not be completely conscious on the part of the singers—it may just be a result of their grasp of and

immersion in the music—but it’s very effective nevertheless.

On the other hand, the livelier pieces—including an anonymous, 42-second-long song with ricocheting voices (“Now you dance; After you, after you,” etc.), La Rue’s *Autant en emporte le vent* (“So many does the wind carry off”), and Pedro de Lagarto’s *Andad, pasiones, andad* (“Go on, passion, go on”)—properly emphasize rhythmic (usually syncopated) features and take delight in shading certain words for their importance and special effect. The sophistication and sheer beauty of the two Peñalosa selections—including the closing piece, the *Credo* from his *Missa L’homme armé*—makes you wonder why more attention hasn’t been paid to this composer by early music groups.

Somewhere in the middle of this nearly 75-minute program some listeners may wish for an occasional break from the very distinctive four-voice a cappella sound—an instrumental piece or two?—but that’s purely a matter of choice. You don’t have to listen to the whole thing at once. And for most of us, hearing so much of this glorious, ancient music, expertly sung and ideally recorded, provides a happy respite in a world that in certain critical areas (except for those lip-synching, hyper-processed, tonally challenged pop stars) hasn’t really changed much in 500 years.

—David Vernier

GRAMOPHONE

December 2002

ORLANDO CONSORT “The Call of the Phoenix”

Here, the Orlando Consort explore the hinterland of their Gramophone award-winning Dunstable recording of 1995. Technically it is, if anything, even more accomplished than its predecessor. Years ago I observed that the Orlando appeared to improve with each recording; and it seems to me that observation is still valid today. They have honed their distinctive, rich plummy sound to near-perfection, and their interpretative intelligence shows no sign of letting up. Be it one of the period's best known pieces (like Frye's Ave regina celorum) or an otherwise unheard work (like the striking, anonymous Stella celi that opens the disc), their ability to communicate something of a sense of discovery in each piece is remarkable.

And what glorious music it is! With the help of Gareth Curtis, one of the foremost specialists of this period, the Orlando have assembled a remarkably varied programme. Anthologies of 15th-century English sacred music often focus on one or other of two surviving sources,

the Old Hall manuscript from the beginning of the century (represented here by Forest and John Pyamour), and the Eton Choirbook near the end (here, Walter Lambe's intricate Stella celi).

Between these poles there lie the fragments, shards of a wonderful history. The great strength of this disc is its account of this contingent repertory. Every piece is involving in some vital way, so often one wonders, 'How come I've not heard that before?' Acknowledged 'masterpieces' like Frye's Ave regina or Dunstable's isorhythmic motet Salve scema rub shoulders with works by near-complete unknowns such as Richard Mowere and John Trouluffe.

But whatever the name (or indeed the absence of one) invention is sustained at a high level. I'll wager that even connoisseurs of this 'rare' repertory have surprises in store for them here; and I cannot see how the general listener can fail to be seduced. This is simply one of the best recordings I have heard all year.

—Fabrice Fitch

The Boston Globe

Monday, November 4, 2002

ORLANDO SOUNDS GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT

By Ellen Pfeifer, Globe Correspondent

CAMBRIDGE — Food and drink, not to mention some of the other sensuous pleasures, were the organizing principle behind the Orlando Consort's program Friday night for the Boston Early Music Festival Concerts.

France, of course, became known as the monarch of cuisine, but other major European realms obviously had their share of gourmands, to judge by this sampler of medieval and Renaissance foodie music. There was even England, from which the quartet hails. "We know how to roast animals," tenor Angus Smith said in introducing the "Boar's Head" Carol.

Like all serious food enthusiasts, the consort was concerned with the origins of good food, from the planting of seeds to the production of, say, a fine cheese.

And if in planning the program the singers allowed themselves to be distracted momentarily by a pretty face or a naughty double entendre, who were we to object? So, for example, in an anonymous Florentine song about milking the cow and kneading the curds, the Italian word for cheese and a coarse term for the male organ were gleefully conflated. And, dazed by love, the 14th-century French composer Guillaume de Machaut eschewed thoughts of all other earthly pleasures in his delectable love song "Nes qu'on porroit."

More characteristic, though, was a poignant song of leave-taking from 15th-century Burgundy. Composer Guillaume Dufay's protagonist enumerates all the things he will miss at home. Not surprisingly, the "good wines of the Laonnois" are first on the list. Similarly, some Spanish *bons vivants* evoked by Juan del Encina kick up a merry ruckus in a pre-Lenten feast: "Today let us eat and drink and sing and be merry, for tomorrow we shall fast."

Unlike other, more deadly serious vocal ensembles, the Orlando Consort clearly enjoys putting across the words and spirit of the music they sing. Their performance was marked by impeccable diction — no lost consonants here — and by nicely particularized moods. If a song was lusty or playful or sweetly romantic, that's how the consort performed it. Also fascinating: The singers have nicely differentiated timbres that blend but also remain distinct so that polyphonic lines are easier to track. The voices don't simply melt into a sonic blur.

Having whetted the appetite, the consort didn't leave its audience to savor hypothetical pleasures; it invited everyone to a post-concert reception. On the menu? "Authentic (well, historically informed) mulled cider and bread pudding." There was even a souvenir sampler of recipes in the program book. I can't wait to try "Orange Omelette for Pimps and Harlots."

B E S E N  A R T S

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