

**Lisa Colton**

## Fourteenth-century music

When Machaut wrote that there is no instrument – whether woodwind, keyed, or stringed – whose existence does not depend on Music, he was surely referencing musical sounds with which he was intimately familiar. It is easy to associate medieval music with only two contrasting sound worlds: the unaccompanied liturgical song of churches and monasteries, and the earthy instrumental music associated predominately with recreational settings. The recordings discussed here show more nuanced approaches to both religious and secular music, with some of the most effective combining voices and instruments with subtlety and imagination.

Three of the discs present music by Guillaume de Machaut exclusively. Machaut's presence looms large in histories of fourteenth-century music on account of the quantity and quality of his output. Certainly, there is no comparable poet for whom musical expression was so fundamental, and the delicacy of his verbal and musical language gives performers the opportunity to articulate intricate combinations of words and music. The Orlando Consort's performances in both recordings – of selections from *Le Voir Dit* (**Guillaume Machaut: Songs from Le Voir Dit** (Hyperion CDA67727, *rec* 2012, 64')) and of monophonic and polyphonic courtly love songs on **Guillaume Machaut: Dart of Love** (Hyperion CDA68008, *rec* 2013, 65') – are typically fine, stemming from the group's long experience of performing this repertory. Those who own their earlier recording of Machaut's 'Ne que on pourroit' on **Food, wine & song: Music and feasting in renaissance Europe** (Harmonia Mundi HMU907314, *rec* 2001, 73') will recognise their approach to texture across several tracks on these discs, in which the appropriate vocalist sings the poetry against an untexted vocal accompaniment. This affords maximum opportunity for the text to penetrate from the polyphonic texture, from Matthew Venner's countertenor in 'Ne que on pourroit' and 'Plouré dames', to 'Dame, se vous n'avez aperceü' in which the text is presented by a tenor. On *The Dart of Love*, the Orlandos demonstrate their command of a wide range of styles and genres, including intricate motets and rondeaux, and expressive ballades and virelais. A chace tentatively attributed to Denis le Grant (d. 1352) provides some highly entertaining and virtuosic depictions of animals and hunting calls in a song in which the protagonist laments his tendency to sing far less than before on account of his outdoor chivalric pursuits, an ironic poetic gesture that is heard also in Machaut's lengthy ballade *Pour ce que tous*. Both Orlando Consort discs are based on scores prepared by Yolanda Plumley and others as part of *The Complete Works of Guillaume de Machaut*, a project that will doubtless stimulate further high-quality performances such as these.

Nevertheless, the Machaut disc that I found most striking in this selection was **Guillaume Machaut: Mon chant vous envoy: Virelais, ballades et rondeaux** (Eloquentia EL 1342, *rec* 2012, 61'), a recording that features voices and instruments, carefully matched in various combinations. Although the CD as a whole is remarkable in its beauty and control, there are standout tracks, notably 'Dou mal qui m'a longuement' in which Marc Mauillon's gentle vocal line is accompanied by delicately plucked strings, and the well-known rondeau 'Dix et sept' in which the playfulness of the text – which encodes the lady's name in number

– is effectively captured. Comparison can be made, for example, with The Orlando Consort performance of ‘Dix et sept’ on **Le Voir Dit**, which is substantially slower, perhaps emphasising the numerical element of the text over the poetic game. **Codex Chantilly II** (Et’cetera KTC 1905, *issued* 2011, 77’) positively glistens in its exploration of music by Machaut, Solage, Grimace and others. If at times the balance feels rather top-heavy, the intricacies of individual lines are performed with control and sensitivity to rhythmic and melodic details. The opening song, ‘Toute clarté’ describes the world turned upside-down, and is a suitable opener for a collection that features some of the most contrapuntally complex music of the period, written in a style known as the *ars subtilior*.

Travel and pilgrimage would have afforded opportunities for the interaction of very different cultural and musical traditions. La Camera delle Lacrime present a highly dramatic performance of **Le livre vermeil de Montserrat** (Paraty 414125, *rec* 2013, 61’) (a source also known as the *Llibre Vermell*) benefitting from imaginative ‘staging and scenography’ by Khai-dong Luong; the recording was made in a concert setting, and benefits from the sense of presence that occurs in live performance, even though some of the edges are somewhat uneven. Particularly enjoyable is the involvement of the Dordogne Youth Choir, whose voices ring with the enthusiasm of young musicians discovering the power of medieval song. Their performance in the main sequence of songs captures both the reverence (‘Polorum regina’) and joy (‘Stella splendens’) of medieval pilgrimage, and is an effective contrast to the solo voices and instruments. Bruno Bonhoure’s dramatic vocal manner sometimes pushes details of pulse and ensemble, though the instrumentalists and choir maintain control in what was clearly an entertaining live show.

In **Il Codice di S. Maria Maggiore, sec. XIV** (Tactus TC 400005, *rec* 2013, 63’) the Abruzzo region of Italy is revealed as a cultural meeting point. Located on the east side of central modern Italy, it was ideally placed for its musicians to collect new ideas from those passing through, and clearly developed its own repertoire. The ensemble, directed by Marco Giacintucci, present the collection’s religious music both vocally and as the stimulus for instrumental dances, such as the saltarelli based on 2- and 3-part settings of the Sanctus. Although some of the accompanying notes are not quite clear on this point, it seems that the recording has been made from live performance in an appropriately resonant architectural setting, in a small number of takes. This may well account for the coherence of phrasing, and the way in which the recording manages to capture something of the multisensory nature of performance that would be experienced in concert, in which one would also be able to see the band’s performance on replicas of instruments found in medieval iconography.

The musical practices of nuns are explored in **Exit Rosa: Canti per le monache dal manoscritto Q.11 di Bologna** (Tactus TC 280002, *issued* 2011, 54’), a mixture of plainchant and polyphony, some with instrumental accompaniment, and including spoken prayer taken from annotations in the manuscript source. The codex, a miscellany that once belonged to Sister Guiduça, was copied in Italy and dates to the decades around 1300. Its diverse contents represent some of the interests that the nuns shared with the liturgical repertory circulating in Europe at that time. Ensemble Korymbos sing this music with great lyricism, though at times the pitch feels a touch high for comfort. Director Alessandra Fiori also includes items in the Las Huelgas Codex, a comparable anthology used by nuns at the wealthy Cistercian convent of Santa Maria la Real de Las Huelgas in Burgos, Northern Spain. For example, the group

sing *Clastrum pudicitie / Virgo viget / Flos filius eius*, a song from that source also found as *Castrum pudicitie* in the Bamberg Codex and – with French-texted upper parts – in the Montpellier Codex. Such a well-travelled motet, full of intertextual references to French secular song, reminds us of the cultural literacy of religious women, and **Exit Rosa** deserves to sit alongside other excellent releases dedicated to nuns' song collections, such as Ensemble Organum's recording of the **Gradual of Eleanor of Brittany** (Harmonia Mundi HMU901403, recorded 1991, 61'), with which the present recording also shares some repertoire.

**Hör, Kristenhait! – Sacred Songs by the Last of the Minnesingers** (Christophorus CHR 77395, rec 2015, 79') presents the music of Oswald von Wolkenstein (c. 1376–1445) and the musician known only as the Monk of Salzburg. The texture is enriched by bagpipes and other instruments, and the performances benefit from the performer's command of improvisation, such as in a version of the Christmas hymn *A solis ortus cardine*, set to German words *Von anegeng der sunne kchlar* by the Monk of Salzburg. The title track, presented here for lute and voice, stresses the importance of living a chaste life, something that proved a personal challenge for Oswald; the poet-composer's travels and involvement with politics are well-documented, and his romantic liaisons arguably at odds with his final burial place at Neustift monastery. This disc is a welcome adjustment to our understanding of Oswald's music in particular, since it presents sacred song rather than the courtly texts with which we might more readily associate him.

The performance captured on **Rosa e Orticha: Music of the Trecento** (Carpe Diem CD-16287, issued 2011, 60') reflects a sensitive understanding of the way in which a programme of short pieces might be presented in sequence, here tracing a day from dawn to dusk. Opening with evocative woodwind sounds, expressive improvisation also underpins Ensemble Syntagma's approach in ways that convey the heart of each piece. The musicians use their instruments to paint pictures of a world in which they imagine that 'material reality and the invisible freely flew together'. The results are exploratory, tasteful and evocative, and beautifully highlight the sophisticated songs of Bartolino da Padova within music by his contemporaries. The ensemble playing is tightly focused, blending Mami Irisawa, Catherine Jousset and Akira Tachikawa's voices with the natural contours of the instrumental melodies.

## Websites

*Carpe Diem* [www.carpediem-records.de](http://www.carpediem-records.de)

*Christophorus* [www.christophorus-records.de](http://www.christophorus-records.de)

*Eloquentia* [www.eloquentia.fr](http://www.eloquentia.fr)

*Et'cetera* [www.etcetera-records.com](http://www.etcetera-records.com)

*Hyperion* [www.hyperion-records.co.uk](http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk)

*Paraty* [new.paraty.fr](http://new.paraty.fr)

*Tactus* [www.tactus.it](http://www.tactus.it)