

Lyric Fest's "Bawdy Bard"

The birds, the bees and the ale

Tom Purdom

September 27, 2011 in *Music & Opera*



Montalbano: Cheerfully risqué.

For its first early music concert, Lyric Fest joined forces with an early music expert, Matthew Glandorf of Choral Arts Philadelphia. The result was an entertaining survey of Medieval and Renaissance songs devoted to sex, nature and the delights of the alehouse.

Glandorf opened the afternoon with a combination of music and showmanship that exploited the comfortable size of Lyric Fest's new Center

City venue, the compact Helen Corning Warden Theater at the Academy of Vocal Arts. Glandorf surrounded the audience with singers and launched into an exuberantly contrapuntal Medieval English version of *Sumer is Icum in In*.

Crisscrossing independent vocal lines are one of the chief characteristics of early music, but it's a technique that requires agile vocalists. Glandorf's troops bounced through their interacting lines with the high spirits of acrobats communicating their *joie de vivre* by turning cartwheels and back flips.

What we don't know about birds

The program also included a stunning new work by Mark Rimple, who served as lutenist for the occasion. Rimple's *Nouveau Chansons des Oiseaux* followed a 16th-Century *Chants des Oiseaux*, and the juxtaposition provided a striking lesson in the development of our attitudes toward the natural world.

Clement Janequin's 16th Century essay on bird songs combines a cheerful pleasure in imitating birdcalls with a text that mingles their cries with good-natured sexual allusions. It reflects the attitudes of people who maintained a day-to-day contact with natural phenomena that most moderns experience only through TV documentaries and art works.

Rimple's movingly beautiful piece takes a very different approach. The four soloists perform in front of a chorus that permeates the work with a mood of reverence and mystery. We may know more about the natural world than our ancestors did, but our knowledge of subjects like molecular biology and the long evolution of life makes it seem far more mysterious and miraculous.

Lady troubadours?

When I picture a troubadour, I usually envision a lovesick gallant singing to an unattainable lady who listens from a balcony or a discrete side window. The lady is usually unattainable because she's married to someone else, in accordance with the practical necessities of a society founded on hereditary wealth.

But what of the lady? What would she have sung?

As it turns out, their ladyships did produce a few troubadours of their own. The texts of some of their songs have survived, but we only have one example of a "trobaritz" song that includes the music.

Soprano Leslie Johnson provided one of the afternoon's most arresting interludes when she sang it from the balcony (where else?) at the back of the Warden theater, accompanied by Gwyn Roberts's flute and Rachel Cama's viola da gamba.

Beatriz de Dia's *A Chantar* is a haunting gem with an all too familiar message. The lady advises us that she loves her gallant "more than anything else in the world," but all the beauty and goodness she can offer him avail her nothing, for he still cheats and betrays.

Expressive voices

Lyric Fest's cooperation with Choral Arts Philadelphia produced an exceptional quartet, drawn from both groups. Leslie Johnson's clear, penetrating soprano contributed several striking solo interludes and embellished all the ensemble passages she participated in.

Mezzo Maren Montalbano added color and personal liveliness; bass Colin Dill contributed a pleasingly unforced masculinity; and tenor Steven Bradshaw spanned a broad range with a knowledgeable feel for the nuances of period music.

They're all notably expressive vocalists.

Seductive boulder

The program's second item was a classic dialogue between a peasant maid and the aristocratic boulder who hopes to talk her out of her virginity. Montalbano and Dill applied their operatic training and turned its lengthy exchanges into a cheerfully risqué scene from a comic opera.

A Lyric Fest regular, actor Jim Bergwall, set the scene with well-chosen recitals from Chaucer, Shakespeare and other appropriate wordsmiths. The selections included Chaucer's praise of summer and St. Valentine; a meditation on the prevalence of adultery from *A Winter's Tale*; and two speeches by Sir John Falstaff that conveyed his agreement with the attitudes celebrated in four of Henry Purcell's ale house songs. Happy is the nation in which Henry Purcell writes the drinking songs.



More in [Music & Opera](#)

ARTICLE OVERVIEW

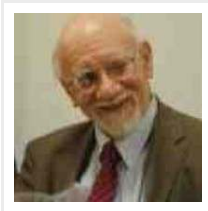
Lyric Fest joined forces with an early music expert to delve into celebrations of sex, nature and carousing from the era of Chaucer, Shakespeare and the medieval troubadours.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Lyric Fest: "The Bawdy Bard." Songs by Dowland, Purcell, Rimple, de Dia *et al.* Leslie Johnson,

soprano; Maren Montalbano, mezzo-soprano; Steven Bradshaw, tenor; Colin Dill, bass; Gwyn Roberts, recorder; Mark Rimple, lute; Rachel Cama, viola da gamba. Choral Arts Philadelphia, chorus; Matthew Glandorf, conductor. September 25, 2011 at Academy of Vocal Arts, 1920 Spruce St. [\(215\) 438-1702](tel:2154381702) or www.lyricfest.org.

ABOUT TOM PURDOM



Tom Purdom (tompurdom@verizon.net) is a science fiction writer and general freelance writer who has been writing about music since 1988.