

Peter Dronke (1934-2020)

We recently learned of the passing of renowned medievalist and Latin scholar Peter Dronke. An appreciation can be read in The Guardian:

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/14/peter-dronke-obituary?fbclid=IwAR2q98UhlzkuRA93pvhVrBTMGWN0eSwjqJSmycl0zUG3rz5CTk9_Pid2Qm8

Sequentia mourns a great friend and long-time collaborator. No singer involved with medieval music in the past 40 years could have been unaware of Peter Dronke's immense understanding of the role of performance in medieval poetry, or of his sensitivity to the ways in which the voice, the music and the text merge in the magical moment of transformation which takes place during live performance before an audience. His was a uniquely humanistic voice: his scholarship profound and masterful, his sensitivity to music unparalleled, his lucid prose an inspiration; his intensely-felt translations are treasures which cry out for the human voice to perform them.

Barbara Thornton and I had admired Peter's work since our school days. We first contacted him in 1981, requesting his collaboration in the preparation of texts and translations, and to provide liner notes for Sequentia's first LP, 'Spielmann und Kleriker' (Minstrels and Clerics). We wanted our first recording to make a statement about the importance of text, and its emotional power. Who could better provide this statement than Peter Dronke? The LP contained mostly Latin *lais*, a genre which Peter knew well, and which was to remain a mainstay of the ensemble's repertoire over the following decades. He was an amiable and committed correspondent (always by neatly-typed, posted letters), and many of our exchanges ranged over a variety of topics and projects that we dreamed of realizing in his company. We were always struck by his firm insistence on making sure that his verse forms, often unusual and very complex, were scrupulously respected by the editors of the LP booklets, not always an easy task at a time when song texts and translations were anything but a priority for record labels.

We finally met Peter face to face in 1982, when we invited him, together with musicologist Leo Treitler, to collaborate on our first project involving the music of Hildegard von Bingen. This was a fully staged production of Hildegard's music-drama 'Ordo Virtutum', prepared by Sequentia in Cologne and recorded by the West German Radio. In addition to rehearsals and workshops, there was a scholarly symposium at which Peter spoke eloquently about Hildegard's work. He went on to prepare the texts and translations for the recording, thus beginning a series of collaborations on the seven CDs of her music which we issued over the years (see the Sequentia discography). In addition to these, Peter's editions and translations were essential for other Sequentia productions, including 'Philippe le Chancelier' (1990), 'Lux Refulget' (1996), 'Visions from the Book' (1996), 'Aquitania' (1997), 'Chant Wars' (2005), and 'Endzeitfragmente' (2008).

Over the years, on several visits to Cambridge for performances, we had the pleasure to visit Peter and Ursula at home, where our wide-ranging discussions sometimes lasted long into the night. Ursula's Icelandic publications were already calling to me then, and in the 1990's she collaborated on our CD 'EDDA: Myths from Medieval Iceland', providing her wonderful editions and English translations, together with many pithy comments about the qualities of some of the poems.

In 2015-17 Sequentia was again in Cambridge several times, working on the Boethius project ('Songs of Consolation') together with musicologist Sam Barrett. At the premiere of this new programme in the chapel of Pembroke College, Peter was among the guests of honour, and although we might have been unnerved by his presence, it was obvious that he relished the event, and delighted in hearing these texts he knew so intimately, performed again for the first time since the 11th century. Ever the critical and insightful listener, he engaged with all of us musicians following the performance, sharing in our wonder at this music we had all waited so long to hear.