

*Finding the Lost Voice
of our Germanic Ancestors:
An Interview with Benjamin Bagby*

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“Early Music” is usually defined as music originating prior to the end of the Baroque period in 1750. As most compositions written before the eighteenth century were under-prescriptive, one of the central issues for early music performers is the open-ended nature of historical interpretation. For performers of medieval music, or music written earlier than 1300, the problem is even thornier. As Benjamin Bagby has written: “We sometimes may know how this music was performed, but we will never know how it sounded.” This is why the quality and style of early music (and especially medieval music) can vary so dramatically. Performances tend to oscillate between dry academicism (many early music performers are more qualified as professors than musicians), and what Bagby calls “drums and fun” (think: Renaissance Fairs, the Society for Creative Anachronism, and pointy shoes). While Bagby has lamented the fact that medieval music has yet to embrace the kind of rigorous discipline one finds in other genres, his own work has been a remarkable exception. Since forming the medieval music ensemble *Sequentia* with the late Barbara Thornton in 1977, Bagby has continued to develop as a researcher and scholar, a teacher, and performer. He has thoughtfully dissected and carefully reassembled the concept of historically informed performance. And perhaps most importantly, his ability to balance scholarship with passionate personal engagement has earned *Sequentia* its reputation as the most famous medieval music group in the world.

Among the many projects that fill out *Sequentia*’s sprawling discography, the group has performed some of the earliest songs ever written in the English language (*English Songs of the Middle Ages*, 1988), explored early Spanish music (on the *Vox Iberica* trilogy, 1992), and recorded a sampling of monophonic narrative

songs by the Tyrolean poet Oswald von Wolkenstein. Perhaps Sequentia's most well known project, however, has been the ensemble's ambitious attempt to record the complete works of Hildegard von Bingen. Fortuitously or not, this coincided with a more general revival of interest in Hildegard, at least among the (semi-)educated public. Whether New Agers intrigued by the mystical abbess's holistic approach to healing and herbalism, or feminists looking for a medieval female voice, this surge of enthusiasm transformed Sequentia's 1994 album *Canticles of Ecstasy* into a most unlikely pop-culture phenomenon. Among other honors, the album sold over a million copies, and captured a Grammy nomination for best choral recording. Yet another outlet for Bagby's scholarly and artistic pursuits since the mid-1980s has been the "Lost Songs" project. Enlisting the support of philologists and other academics to navigate the obscure and often opaque manuscripts that comprise their sources, Sequentia has explored texts like the Old Saxon *Heliand* and the Old High German *Muspilli*. For 1999's *Edda: Myths from Medieval Iceland*, Bagby spent his research residencies in Iceland poring over archival recordings of traditional Icelandic *rímur* singers, as well as studying the complicated metrics used to compose the *Edda* with the philologist Heimir Pálsson. The purpose of this painstaking research: to construct a "modal language" (a concoction Bagby has likened to a "modal mead") with which to bring the poetry back to life. This attempt to balance creativity and authenticity extends to Bagby's instrumentation as well. For the *Edda* performances Sequentia utilized a harp modeled after an original found in a seventh-century Allemanic gravesite, as well as a small, swan-bone flute. The latest incarnation of the Lost Songs series will see Bagby and crew tackling the songs and canticles of the Carolingian Empire, in a project tantalizingly titled "Frankish Phantoms."

But with the exception of Sequentia's Hildegard recordings (whose popularity Bagby still views with some ambivalence), it is Bagby's monumental *Beowulf* performances that have done the most to cement his wide critical acclaim. The San Francisco Chronicle wrote of a recent performance: "Bagby's imaginative

re-creation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem . . . is a double tour-de-force of scholarly excavation and artistic dynamism.” Inspired by a meeting with the Anglo-Saxonist Thomas Cable (author of *The Meter and Melody of Beowulf*), Bagby began performing selections from *Beowulf* as part of his work with Sequentia in the mid-1980s. With the untimely passing of Barbara Thornton in 1998, Bagby’s focus on the project intensified. Guided by theories of oral epic gleaned from scholars like Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, Bagby has now memorized 1062 lines of the poem, relying primarily on his own musical accompaniment as a mnemonic device. For Bagby, this attempt to recapture the mindset of an Anglo-Saxon *scop* has been a welcome antidote to the conventions of conservatory tradition. A 2007 *Beowulf* DVD release (filmed by the Swedish director Stellan Olsson) attests to his ability to captivate everyone from high school students to the most jaded of New York theater goers.

So why, dear reader, is all of this so important?

Bagby himself has provided us with an insight into his own artistic motivations, as well as the historical context for his music in the essay “Searching for the Lost Voice of My Germanic Ancestors (or, Is it still possible for us to enjoy ancient songs about Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, Brynhild the Valkyrie, and Attila the Hun?).” “There is one thing we must never forget,” Bagby writes, “During this entire period, all of these people—in their huts, their fields, their boats, on horseback, around their cooking fires, their pagan shrines, and even in their Christian monasteries—were singing, listening to song, myth, instrumental music, and long sung tales of their ancestors’ deeds, real and imagined.” Thanks to the vision and dedication of Benjamin Bagby and Sequentia, we, too, can savor the depths and texture of this resonant and inspiring musical heritage.



BEOWULF PERFORMANCE IN DECEMBER, 2011 AT THE HOCHSCHULE FÜR MUSIK, BASEL, SWITZERLAND. PHOTO BY SUSANNA DRESCHER.

Tell us about your formative years as a musician. I read somewhere that you were first exposed to medieval music when you were sixteen, and formed an ensemble with other students around the same time. What do you think it was in your own personal and musical background that made you receptive to this kind of music?

I had a perfectly normal musical upbringing for the circumstances of my childhood and my environment, with classical music always considered an important part of education. At home there was also a lot of jazz being listened to, and in fact my older brother was a professional jazz musician. My schools were extremely arts-friendly, the level of music performance was unusually high, and I participated in very fine vocal ensembles, musical stage productions (as well as non-musical stage drama) and instruction in music theory and history. I spent all of my time in the high school music building, practicing, studying and devouring scores with like-minded nerds. My summers were spent studying and listening to music, both classical and contemporary. While visiting a summer music academy when I was sixteen, I heard, quite by chance, a concert of medieval music given by the New York Pro Musica, and it utterly transfixed me. I have no idea why it did so—but there was the raw adolescent nerve and there was the music which struck it. Something clicked. It started a long process of searching and enjoyment which has never ceased. Back at school, I immediately started my first ensemble, rounding up some fellow high-school students and plunging in headlong with absolutely no idea of what we were doing—kind of an early music garage band—learning everything the hard way. I'm basically still doing that today.

Later, as a voice major at Oberlin Conservatory I was called upon to jump through all the usual hoops of classical vocal study, but my interest in early music, especially medieval music, continued to grow. By my third year I was already working for one semester as an assistant for the New York Pro Musica, and during my last year at school, and also in the summer, I was singing with that ensemble on a professional basis. Immediately following

graduation (with both a music degree and a degree in German), I left for Europe on a Charles Watson Foundation Fellowship year, the stated purpose of which was to study the state of medieval song performance in Europe, and to learn about related song types in the Middle East. This blissful *Wanderjahr* led me all over the map, with one important stop at a summer course given in Istria (now Croatia) by the German singer Andrea von Ramm, where I hoped to study troubadour song performance. There, I entered a new world and met a number of people who were to remain friends for a long time. And that's where I also met Barbara Thornton. Although I frequently visit North America for concerts and teaching, I have lived in Europe since that time.

What was the state of medieval music when you and Barbara Thornton formed Sequentia in 1977, and how has it changed since then?

There was actually a lot going on in the 1970s; in fact, sometimes I have the feeling that there is a much less of a dynamic, energized feeling today surrounding medieval music performance than back then, when absolutely everything was new and being discovered seemingly for the first time. The early music scene was certainly exciting (it was, after all, the 1970s), but then I was young and easily impressed, and in fact when I listen now to the recordings from those days which I admired, I realize that the standards of musical perfection were laughable as compared with today's. So probably I'm perceiving the past in a golden haze which actually did not exist at that time—and I do remember feeling impatient, dissatisfied, and wanting to change the world. Well, who hasn't been twenty-three and felt like that? The point I want to make is that the feeling in those times was one of immense freedom and limitless possibility.

Our first real mentors in this field were Thomas Binkley and Andrea von Ramm (*Studio der frühen Musik*), who taught in Basel at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. The Schola had started a medieval music diploma program in the early 1970s, unique in the world, which attracted a large number of foreign students

interested in the work of the Studio, a highly successful ensemble which had relocated to Basel from Munich. Their recordings in the late 1960s and early 1970s caused an enormous stir, and they were far ahead of other ensembles in the dynamic, coherent, and intellectual way they presented medieval music in performance. Once at the Schola Cantorum as professors, they began incorporating their students into their recordings on the EMI/Reflexe and Telefunken “Das alte Werk” labels, and this was a powerful stimulation for motivated young performers. As teachers they were always demanding, fascinating, hypercritical, and often merciless and cynical (think *House*), truly not creatures from academia but from the real world of performance, and this was appealing to young and ambitious students. Although they could also be fun and inspiring, they were often chaotic, and sometimes arrogant, difficult, and contradictory, which made studying with them an education in diplomacy, survival, and patience. Sometimes they taught by negative example, and sometimes they taught by showing us how to teach ourselves. We were lucky to have not only the immense resources of the libraries in Basel at our disposal (in pre-Internet days, this was essential), but to have other expert Schola teachers in medieval notation, history, counterpoint, and instruments, and to find ourselves in a group with other students who were equally motivated and curious.

Today, there are several layers of performance orthodoxy in place which did not exist then, and so we felt uninhibited to experiment, which we freely did. The audience for medieval music was younger, less experienced but more passionate, and actually larger than it is today. On the negative side: we performers had great difficulty accessing sources—in spite of the fabulous musical libraries in Basel, the old microfilms were not always easy to read, and it might take weeks to locate and see one manuscript which one can find online in twenty seconds today. When we weren’t rehearsing, we were camped out in the library.

You seem ambivalent about how the conventions of classical chamber music and the conservatory have shaped how medieval music is performed and taught, and how different

this must be from when the music was part of a living tradition. This seems to be a real source of creative tension in your work.

The main modern convention which is contrary to something we might call a “medieval way” is the slavish veneration we have for written sources, for the primacy of “the score.” Medieval musicians generally lived in a series of interlocking oral traditions and had memory skills which we can hardly imagine. The cult of the genius composer was in its infancy in the fourteenth century, and most medieval musical works were created—and later written down—anonously. But this is only one aspect of how we study music today, especially music of the past.

Although the last forty years have witnessed an expansion of the number of music schools which teach early music performance, the spectrum of repertoires and styles in music before, say, Beethoven, is simply too large to offer instruction in all types and genres of historical music. Early music, once thought to be a limited body of uninspiring works (which a music-history professor of mine once referred to collectively as “pre-music”), is in fact an overwhelmingly varied complex of repertoires. And the traditional classical music conservatory is inevitably evolving into the role of “specialist” school (offering instruction in a period of music which encompasses roughly 250 years), whereas an early music program must contend with at least a thousand years of documented musical creation. The trend is clear: along with jazz, world music, and electronic music, most professional music schools today offer a course of study in something called early music, which in most cases means an intensive course in Baroque music performance. But in the environment of early music study, the medieval period—and for that matter, the Renaissance—is still largely neglected.

Orality in musical transmission can be a fertile ground for creative tension, but this is not what music schools are generally interested in pursuing in the training of young musicians. The basic course of study in all early music schools remains focused on the traditional model for performers: the technical mastery

of an instrument or voice, the learning of the canon of pieces most performed, the acquisition of a sense of appropriate style and ornamentation, the chance to work in ensembles with expert coaches, advanced master classes with famous performers, and finally, competitions. We can hardly expect students of Baroque music to be interested in a world where music was transmitted orally, where rhetoric and ancient languages are as important as music, where improvisational skills are valued more than sight-reading. It's messy, time-consuming, and difficult to evaluate with traditional exams and juries.

A dedicated school for medieval music would need to approach this type of study very differently. I have always dreamed of starting a school which pursues these essential aspects of musical study, but it remains a dream and I am the first to admit that there is simply not a critical mass of students—especially paying students—who would be interested, nor is there solid employment waiting for such students when they finish their diplomas. Without a doubt, the big energy field now in early music performance is the Baroque—and for singers, especially, Baroque opera—where there is a solid career to be built and a decent living to be earned. We lack enough passionately interested and gifted candidates for serious, full-time institutional programs in medieval music performance, and this situation guarantees that the general level of performance skill will continue to remain generally low. Expectations remain correspondingly low, and as a result medieval music performance does not enjoy the competitive ascending spiral of excellence which the Baroque music scene has so brilliantly created. Luckily, there are some wonderful exceptions to this state of affairs, but they remain exceptions.

Can you speak a little bit about the idea of “historically informed performance?” Obviously, this seems to be the main problem for anyone dealing with early music to unravel.

The idea of *HIP* was developed about a generation ago when we all realized how mortified and neurotic we felt to be talking about “authenticity.” That self-satisfied word is long-since taboo (and

yet I continue to use it liberally in a completely different sense: the authenticity of musical communication). There is a general consensus that we simply cannot know “how music sounded then” or “what the composer intended” and these ceased to be criteria in our performances as long as we remained “informed.” We know a lot about how music was performed, but until a time machine is invented we’ll never know how it sounded. It’s like any difficult relationship: we agree to cohabit with the past and not give in to despair about those “truths” we cannot know, and in return we enthusiastically pretend to represent that past to our listeners. After a while, as performance conventions settle in and are accepted, the whole awkward mess starts to feel like a cozy world of oral tradition which we can inhabit in good faith and which seems good, sounds good, and therefore must be valid. The younger generations of early-music performers are much more relaxed and cool about these things. But this is a long and complex story—read Richard Taruskin’s essays from the 1990s and you will see how this idea was once densely and passionately argued.

Were you surprised when *Canticles of Ecstasy* achieved the kind of popularity that it did? There seemed to be a huge crossover audience, especially from New Age listeners who might not ordinarily be exposed to such serious material. What do you think was going on there, and were you aware at the time of the burgeoning popular interest in Hildegard of Bingen as a visionary spiritual figure?

Yes, we were surprised, but not entirely delighted. Putting this phenomenon in context, we should recall that at roughly the same time (circa 1993) a rather bland Gregorian chant recording of the Benedictine monks of St. Domingo de Silos, repackaged and aggressively marketed as *CHANT*, was hugely popular. This runaway bestseller CD was sold largely to young people who had neither an interest in nor any knowledge of Gregorian chant or medieval music, but were charmed by the calming effect of this dreamy, “spiritual” mode of performance as they sought to “chill”

after too much techno music and too much ecstasy (the drug). The image of the chanting monk in his hooded habit became in and of itself an image of mystery and coolness, and with clever marketing the record labels brought out more and more of such “product” until the bubble burst. During that period of several years, every record label reissued whatever old or new chant recordings they could get their hands on and gave them a new look (usually monks in hoods) and title (something with the word *CHANT*). We were also victims of this phenomenon: one of our recordings was re-issued with a new look, without our knowledge, under the new title *Chill to the Chant*. In the eyes of the serious music world, we were sometimes considered sell-outs, as if this had been our greedy plan all along.

Our Hildegard recording, which was actually a serious musical effort unrelated to this phenomenon, fell into the turbulent *CHANT* maelstrom by default and was cleverly exploited by our record company at the time, BMG Classics. It was a golden disc in France, and I was recently told it sold more than 1.5 million copies worldwide. Of course some of the interest was genuine and centered around Hildegard as a composer and historical figure, but more often we were criticized by the Hildegard purists and even the press for having participated in the gross commercial feeding frenzy around *CHANT*. There were also pop and world-music versions of Hildegard’s works on the market, and our work was sometimes lumped together with them—all very painful at the time. The positive aspect of all this was that the record label, which made a lot of money and was in an optimistic mood, signed a multi-CD contract with Sequentia which allowed us to embark on the project to record Hildegard’s complete works, a project which will be finished in 2013 (long after that contract had lapsed). The real interest in Hildegard reached its climax in 1998, the 900th anniversary of her birth, but there were so many releases of her music in that year alone that the market was saturated and nothing much has happened since.

The entertainment industry functions most efficiently in the exploitation of such huge bubbles of youth-oriented marketing, whether those bubbles are filled with heart-warming fantasy

worlds, adorable wizards, sexy young vampires, soft-core pornography, or hooded monks chanting in the monastery.

Now I want to talk mainly about the “Lost Songs” project, as this is of particular interest to our readers. The scope of the project is really impressive—it seems to be an outlet not just for you as a performer, but for your work as a scholar as well. You have also involved specialists from a number of other fields to help in piecing these productions together. From a personal standpoint, how do you assess whether you’ve “succeeded” with realizing your vision in a project like this?

I feel I have succeeded every time we give a performance and the listeners can make the connection that these undeniably ancient songs are a deep and visceral part of their own cultural identity and not merely “historical entertainment” or “charming old songs.” These texts—and hopefully their performances—can provide us with small portals through which we perceive the very people our ancestors were and which we are still capable of understanding. The connection is palpable: listeners are often surprised by the immediacy and honesty of medieval texts, set to music in songs which were created without a success agenda. The oldest texts are still with us for a good reason: they mark us and inhabit the deepest zones of the archaic and sometimes dark world which children instinctively know. If my project can help to bring these scattered and fragmentary lost songs and their images back to life for ninety minutes or so, inhabited by the human voice and performed in front of an actual physical audience which is truly and actively listening, then my vision has been realized and it is a thrilling success. But my ambitions are tempered by the knowledge that today’s larger cultural world has different values, a short attention span, and favors performances which are fun, bright, short, accessible, harmless and even a bit ironic. So I have learned to measure and enjoy our successes in very small quantities. I always preferred the little treehouse I built myself to a visit to Disneyland.

With *Beowulf*, you have said that you were trying to put your vocal performance in the service of the storytelling, which goes against your conservatory training and the idea that vocal usage should be standardized. How has that approach developed over the last fifteen years?

Perhaps I'm not the one to judge my own development, but I feel as if I have gained a huge amount of freedom in the way I use my voice in that language (Old English), and I also feel I am able to do more with less. Maybe this is just the illusion which comes with advancing age: that is, older singers finally feel they "know" how to sing but can no longer "do" it. My approach was formed when I was in my thirties and I have been working on it ever since—it's an ongoing story. I will increasingly have to develop strategies for remaining vocally viable as I get older and try to delay the ultimate victory of gravity over everything. And hopefully I will know when the time has come to stop.

In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong wrote about the shift from oral culture to literate culture, and the changes this would have effected in people's consciousness. Is this something you have thought about in terms of your own experiences working with oral epic, and particularly in the incredible undertaking of memorizing *Beowulf*? This is something most of us moderns have completely lost the capacity for. Is a deliberate attempt to regain such skills of memory something inherently worthwhile?

The memorization of *Beowulf* was indeed a huge effort and I'm sure an Anglo-Saxon *scop*, were he to observe me, would laugh himself silly at how hard I had to work for something so gloriously simple and easy. But the act of memorizing *Beowulf* was already a big mistake on my part: instead I should have learned to speak/sing Old English so perfectly, and mastered the art of extemporaneous alliterative poetry so completely, that I could "re-tell" the *Beowulf* story in my own words at every performance, sticking mostly to the known formulae but also adding

my own ideas and elaborations, changing things to fit the mood of the audience or my own mood, perhaps even changing the story. *THAT* would be a totally honest performance in the style of the *scops*. What I'm doing is still not much better than a very carefully studied formal re-enactment. Perhaps the next generation of modern *scops* will take the art of this kind of performance to the next level. The tiny oral tradition which is me will probably die with me—I have no apprentices, nor would I expect any talented young person in today's world to be so foolish as to attempt such a thing.

Listening to your *Beowulf* performance in a modern concert hall is clearly a very different setting than the one in which a traditional storyteller might have originally performed the piece, both for you and for the audience. Do you think this is a disadvantage? In a perfect world, how would you want an audience to experience the text?

One of the hard realities of early music is that we can approximate the historical performance but we cannot begin to approximate its audience. In a perfect world, I would perform *Beowulf* for a small gathering of people who are also able to move around quietly, get a drink, or dream a bit. But they would also know the text, intimately, in advance of the performance, in the same way a child knows the bedtime story you are about to read for the fiftieth time. The story itself is known, but the telling of it—again and again—is essential to the listeners and connects them to their first experiences of hearing it. We tend to forget that night was utterly dark in pre-industrial Europe, and extremely long in the winter, especially in the North. People did not live with the amount of bright light, noise, and distraction that we consider normal (a medieval intellectual, visiting any of us today and observing our daily lives and the machines which surround us, would have no doubt that we are all living in hell).

A story lasting four to five hours (such as *Beowulf*) would be a comforting entertainment for the listener, and would not be measured in units of time. In such a storytelling environment,

life slows down, the mind wanders, and the story's images become almost real (alcoholic beverages can help here); the *scop's* gift was to make use of this intimate surrounding to weave a magic spell with the others in the same space. Storytelling was essential for identity and survival. A tribe without a *scop* and his stories was a tribe without memory, without heritage, without history, and therefore without respect. Each retelling of an old story reinforced what Doris Lessing famously called *SOWF* (= Sense of We Feeling). No matter where I perform today I can't hope to play that original role, but in performing I hope to conjure it for a few moments. It's a brief glimpse of what we have lost in becoming who we are today.

I used to fantasize that some enlightened concert presenter would build a small Anglo-Saxon mead hall where epics and other intimate repertoires could be performed, but then I realized that by the time such a hall would be in compliance with today's fire rules, access codes, signage and proper lighting for emergencies, smoke alarms, etc., the whole place would have been turned into something else, basically a modern hall wearing a fake medieval costume. Frankly, I would now prefer a neutral space where people could listen in comfort, without distraction, and don't feel self-conscious. I don't wear a costume, so why should I put one on my performance space?

However, I feel strongly that cinema could create the most genuine experience of epic poetry in performance. I have long thought about that, and was deeply inspired by the example of Im Kwon-taek's film *Chunhyang* (2000), which brilliantly combines Korean Pansori epic performance with cinematic storytelling techniques. But there is probably no producer in the world who would accept to go there, especially not after the dismal series of *Beowulf* films we've been subjected to in the past years. It's probably a good thing that my *Beowulf* performance remains relatively far beneath the general cultural radar.

Can you talk a little bit about the technique of “modal language” you’ve utilized in setting epic sources like the Eddas and *Beowulf* to music?

This is something which I cannot describe effectively in writing and it would require a long, hands-on workshop to explain. Basically stated, my work involves absorbing a large amount of musical material and distilling its modal essence into recognizable modal units, and then using these units, like components of a tiny language, to tell stories, forming the larger shapes on pre-existing medieval metrical forms and structures. The process is, by definition, highly intuitive and personal. Another musician might try the same process with the same material and come up with very different results from mine.

For the *Edda* project, you worked extensively in Iceland studying *rímur* in the Árni Magnússon Institute. How were you able to adapt certain structural elements of that tradition to your own reconstructions? Have you had any contact with, or exposure to, the modern exponents of the *rímur* tradition such as Steindor Andersen and the Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn (the Iðunn Society of traditional *rímur* singers)?

The structural and modal elements of some (by no means all) *rímur* melodies informed my work with the Eddic texts. As in the previous question, I cannot accurately explain how I went about doing this, but it involved interiorizing a large amount of modal/gestural material from that repertoire, and sometimes actual melodies (the obviously archaic ones), and using this material in turn to re-imagine the roots of its modality and generate new models fitted to the subtle metrical structures of the medieval texts. I enjoy listening to today's *rímur* singers, but in no way do I try to copy their art—I am looking for a way of vocalizing a text which may have pre-dated *rímur* by many hundreds of years.

Sequentia worked with Ping Chong to stage *The Rheingold Curse* as a full dramatic performance. What do you think of the idea of scholars like Bertha Phillpotts (and more recently, Terry Gunnell) that the Eddic material is actually connected to ancient Scandinavian drama?



STILL FROM PING CHONG'S PRODUCTION OF "EDDA: VIKING TALES OF LUST, REVENGE AND FAMILY."

I completely agree with Terry Gunnell that many of these texts were "re-enacted" in some way, but that doesn't necessarily locate the performers on the stage of a theater (a place where we would expect to experience "drama"). These may have been ritualistic, or even informal re-enactments, possibly for a very few onlookers (notice I also avoid the word "audience"). Since source material is so scarce and fragmentary, we may never be able to answer this question. The Ping Chong staging was modern and sought mostly to capture a particular archaic feeling which the texts awakened in Ping. We performed it frequently in 2001–2002 but it was very expensive to produce and to transport the set. Since 2002 we perform the same program with only a very simple series of positions and scene shifts, so that all of the focus is on the text and on the performer who is speaking/singing. I feel this brings us closer to the kind of *scop*-like performance situation which Terry was describing.

With *Fragments for the End of Time* you have (at least in

the live-performance version) juxtaposed both Christian texts and those with a secular or pre-Christian perspective. This is evident in *Beowulf* as well, and scholars have endlessly debated whether the poem is more Christian or pagan in character. Another Sequentia program is *The Monk Sings the Pagan*, which will feature classical authors set to the music of the tenth to twelfth centuries. Historians used to characterize the early Middle Ages as a period of “dual faith,” when Europe was no longer heathen, yet not entirely Christian, either. Are these grey areas of friction and/or syncretism something that interests you?

Yes, the confrontation (or accommodation) of differing belief systems fascinates me. Even today, in some Christian churches I sometimes have the feeling that the Old Gods are only thinly disguised. In the program concept for *The Monk Sings the Pagan*, I am mostly interested in pursuing the ways in which pagan themes penetrated the Christian monastic milieu and cathedral schools as a result of the monks’ desire to study Latin grammar. The venerable old (pagan) texts were sometimes doctrinally awkward (or downright naughty) but they were uncontested as a means for learning to speak and write in Latin beautifully and clearly. Despite all of the propaganda surrounding the Renaissance as a time of reconnection with classical antiquity, the fact is that classical authors were valued and studied throughout the so-called “Dark Ages.” Clerics managed to ignore the pagan origins of the texts and accept them for their brilliance and their craft. And the fact that so many texts from antiquity survive in medieval manuscripts with musical notation attests to their elevated status in the clerical world. Texts by Homer, Virgil, Horace, Terence, and others were sung by Christian clerics and monks, well into the twelfth century.

As a second question with regard to *Fragments for the End of Time*: What compelled you to collect these varied texts on a single performance and recording? Do these apocalyptic texts speak to a modern audience in some way that other

doctrinal Christian texts might not?

The genesis of this program was a discussion between myself and my colleague Norbert Rodenkirchen, in the old Sequentia hangout Cafe Central in Cologne. We were examining the fragmentary Old High German text called *Muspilli*, which is Christian but mentions an absolutely pagan/Germanic word (*muspilli*) in connection with the end of time, conflagration, annihilation of the world, and Last Judgment. It's linked to the Old Norse Ragnarök and the pagan gods in their final battle with the race of giants. Suddenly, the relationships began to branch out, showing how the early Christian world in northern Europe was interconnected with the older beliefs. I don't know if these texts speak to modern audiences at all, but they speak to me, even though they are filled with stern and moralistic ideas of sin and judgment, punishment and salvation. They speak to the timeless fear of all humans: that life on this planet will simply cease to exist (which is a certainty, although hopefully a distant one)—we want the feeling that someone powerful and wise, somewhere, is in charge of things and that our demise will not be random, anonymous, and devoid of significance. Modern audiences are always struck by the harsh and unsentimental tone of these medieval texts, in which nowhere is to be found a sweet and forgiving Jesus or a mild Virgin Mary, but only images of destruction and accountability: prophets, Antichrist, a dragon, terrifying angels blowing horns, dead bodies rising from the earth, widespread sickness, violent warfare, random death, firestorms, the moon and stars falling down, the mountains leveled, the seas and rivers dried out, utter darkness as the sun is extinguished, and then—a court date with the most terrifying judge. In the mind of each individual listener, pagan or Christian, we would expect to find the world's most sophisticated special-effects department, hard at work creating a horrible vision which, somehow, is shared by all.

One of your latest projects is *Frankish Phantoms*—I am especially excited about your rendering of the *Hildebrandslied*! As these are also “lost songs” whose melodies have been

forgotten, I am curious how you and the Cambridge musicologist Sam Barrett have been approaching the manuscripts? For example, can you talk about the degree to which the literal plot line or drama of the words themselves informs how you interpret them musically and vocally?

I have worked with Sam Barrett mostly on those Latin-texted songs for which we have some neumed sources, several of which are performed in our program. However, other pieces (such as the *Hildebrandslied*) are found in sources without neumes, so that I must create the musical version based on similar criteria to other epics I have performed, such as *Beowulf*. As in *Beowulf*, I never make use of musical notation in my work but only deal with the text, the instrument, my voice and my memory. In such cases, it is the tuning of the harp which provides a “matrix” of tones from which I can work. I am never thinking of “melodies” or trying to create them, but I am working with the different registers which this particular tuning yields: most potently a series of sounding perfect fourths, one below and one above. In the course of learning this story, I naturally fell into the rhythms and registers of the dialogue between father and son, the whole crux of the story and tragedy. (The story: father and son, separated for thirty years, meet in single combat as warrior-champions in front of their respective armies. During their initial exchange of formal words, the father, Hildebrand, realizes that he is facing his long-lost son, Hadubrand, in combat and must either kill him or be killed by him. His attempt to explain the situation and hand over a peace offering is rebuffed by the hotheaded and suspicious younger man—who basically calls Hildebrand a “tricky old Hun”—and so the old warrior laments cruel fate, rousing himself to the deadly encounter. The fragment breaks off as the shields begin to splinter under their blows.) But there is also the role of the storyteller, who advances the description and sets the scene. Therefore, I needed the instrument to provide me with three distinct registers and modes for the three functions I must fulfill as a performer. A fairly small and stable amount of modal material—provided by the six strings of the harp—is used by the

singer to tell a wide-ranging story, sometimes spoken, sometimes sung, sometimes a little of each.

For *Frankish Phantoms* you will be using songs in Latin as well as Germanic and Romance dialects; your *Beowulf* performance is rendered in the original Old English. You have expended a huge amount of effort in mastering the cadences and pronunciation of these languages as they might have actually been spoken. Why is it so important to work with these texts in their original dialects? Would your reconstructions even be conceivable if the material was translated?

I believe very strongly that text is music. Each language has its own “music”—its own inflections, cadences, modes. If we translate a given text into another language, the music of that text would also change. My reconstructions would be utterly ridiculous if the language were not the original one. I would have no problem with hearing someone performing all of these pieces in modern English translations (or German, or Spanish, or Mandarin), but then I would expect to hear radically different musical versions, to hear different instruments employed, to hear a different approach to time and rhythm, color and pitch-level. The performance would necessarily become a “composition,” setting a contemporary text inspired by an ancient source. This type of music making has a venerable tradition in European Classical music, but this is not where I am interested in going with my own work. My work is and isn’t “composition;” in fact, it isn’t really early music either (I find myself in that category by tradition and by default) and so my work belongs absolutely nowhere in today’s accepted modes of creative endeavor. I think of myself as sitting between the chairs.

When you started *Sequentia* in the seventies, there was a burgeoning interest in medieval culture, both in academia and as a pop-culture phenomenon, with the counter-culture and so forth. Nowadays it seems that much of this interest



SEQUENTIA MEMBERS BENJAMIN BAGBY, NORBERT RODENKIRCHEN, AND WOLODYMYR SMISHKEWYCH. PHOTO BY JAN GATES.

has waned from an overtly counter-cultural perspective, although in some ways the Middle Ages are more popular than ever (albeit through a Tolkien/fantasy lens). What do you see as the future for medieval music, both as an area of scholarly interest, and as something non-specialist listeners can relate to? And by the same token, how concerned are you with the reception of your own work by scholars and popular audiences?

In the scholarly field, I believe we are already seeing historical medieval musicology move out of its specialized corner and beginning to interact more dynamically with other disciplines, with less narrow focus on manuscript sources and more on the interaction of the sources with performance, orality, social context, and liturgy. In any case, the number of surviving manuscripts, although huge, is actually finite, and almost all of the important musical sources from the period of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries have been studied in detail. Non-specialist listeners would generally not find the scholarly literature enjoyable or interesting to read, and of course the field becomes

increasingly more specialized as the zones of study become more clearly and narrowly defined. On the other hand, generalized studies about medieval music—which have always been with us since Gustave Reese’s post-World War II *Music in the Middle Ages*—are no longer an attractive prospect for publishers. Students today are still using textbooks from the 1970s and the critical mass of students interested in studying medieval music is not sufficient for a flourishing textbook market to exist. At best, the Middle Ages merit a few chapters in a general history of music. Historical musicology is no longer the dominant force it was fifty years ago, and in academia it is being slowly eclipsed by areas of study which respond to an expressed need for a more “relevant” course of study: ethnomusicology, analysis, composition, technology, gender studies, queer studies, semiology, etc. Medieval manuscripts lacking pictures are generally not considered “sexy.”

There is a reflection of this tendency in the arena of performance as well, as sources of medieval music increasingly serve as platforms for new genres of entertainment only loosely related to the Middle Ages. The buzzword has long been “crossover” and the motivation is to prove that medieval music is not austere, difficult, or boring, but rather “rich and varied” (a PR phrase which should be retired). In fulfillment of this need, we increasingly find concerts which seek to sell the audience an image of the Middle Ages as a time filled with people who are comfortably “just like us” only they wear silly costumes—and of course we see this reflected in Hollywood films, Medieval Fayres, and the entire spectrum of fantasy entertainment and the SCA re-enactment and role-playing scene. The innate strangeness of our own culture’s deep past has been tempered by what we would like to believe (well, who doesn’t experience history in this way?), and by the need we have to enter fantasy realms which explain everything very clearly, which offer us a simpler version of ourselves which we find more attractive, more human, even more heroic.

“Rich and varied” has become an imperative. Performers of medieval music are increasingly including in their concerts other types of music as well, especially new music written for medieval

ensembles and also traditional music which makes use of similar vocal or instrumental sounds. The boundaries of identity are less and less clear as we become more focused on interesting sounds and not so much on historical repertoires, texts, languages, styles, and functions (for example: liturgical music no longer has functional meaning for most people today). As this type of concert experience becomes the status quo and role model for young performers, we will probably see the emergence of new genres of programming which we could call “medieval-inspired.” In our increasingly entertainment-oriented society, in the world of short attention spans and a musical “shuffle mode” in which anything can be combined with anything else, the honest confrontation with musical genres from our own deeper past is probably going to become a rarity. But these are cycles:

*What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)*

I’m not overly concerned about the reception of our work by scholars, but I’m always pleased when a scholar likes (in the non-Facebook sense of the word) what we do. We try to bear in mind that scholars are, by their training, highly critical observers and will always object to something or other. And some scholars may even enjoy our music per se without necessarily agreeing with the way it’s produced. In the best cases, it provokes a dialogue and one can always learn something from that. As for the popular audience: we rarely come into contact with this segment of the concert-going public, since we normally appear in rather special venues which are either marked out as an early music zone or are closely associated with a dedicated festival, or (in North America) a university or (in Europe) a historical place—church, chapel, castle hall, or other medieval performing space. The larger, popular audience will always gravitate towards a genre of medieval music which is known in my circles as “drums and fun” (see above), and there is plenty of that to go around. In the end it’s a relatively big tent, in which there is room for everyone, and we treasure our little corner of it while it still exists.

I try to keep foremost in our work the honesty of the texts themselves, the deep integrity of the human voice as a vehicle of communication, the power of language, rhetoric and mode, allowing the direct presentation of this music to the listeners, without distractions. It's a fulfilling life's work.

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