

"Francis and the Minstrels of God:" Performing the Music of the Medieval Italian Laudesi Companies

The phrase in quotations was the title of a program of medieval Italian spiritual songs ("*laude*") performed by Altramar medieval music ensemble in several concerts in 1993. This article focuses on the process by which an ensemble of musician/scholars proceeded from limited manuscript sources to a successfully staged, sung and played concert performance.

St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) urged his followers to be *joculatores Domini* or "minstrels of God". The image of the jongleur resonated strongly with Francis, and poverty, surrender, and gratitude for God's grace were central to his teachings. During his lifetime penitential religious fervor in Italy was at a high pitch; these movements were popular and reformist in nature, and it was discovered that sacred poetry set to popular tunes provided an accessible religious message. These simple tunes became the *laude*: strophic songs with repeated refrains and textual appeals directed to Christ, the Virgin, and the Saints.¹

Altramar is a five-member medieval music ensemble based in Bloomington, Indiana; we share a commitment to presenting integrated, expressive and historically-informed performances.

¹The best and most recent scholarly study of the historical and musical aspects of the medieval *laude* repertoire is Blake Wilson's brilliant *Music and Merchants: The Laudesi Companies of Republican Florence*, published by Oxford in 1992. A beautiful and highly personal treatment of some other pieces than those discussed in the article may be found on the *Laude* CD, performed by musicians from IU's Early Music Institute under the direction of Thomas Binkley [*Focus* recording, 1991; available through the Early Music Institute].

When we began our discussions for a *laude* program, we knew a few musical and historical details, but the format, the connective themes, the specific pieces, and even certain musical building blocks (some tunes, all arrangements, etc.) were unknown. The manuscript notation offered limited information, and few explicit answers to the above questions.²

And so we asked ourselves: "What are the songs: what do they speak of? To what secondary references do they allude? What is their character: are they dances? responsorial folk songs? complex compositions?" Finally, we asked ourselves, "To which of these pieces do we respond expressively; which can we commit to sharing with an audience?"

Our interest coalesced around four songs, each with its own musical, textual or expressive demands: The *Canticle of Brother Sun*, the only piece of the four unquestionably of Francis's

²A central dilemma facing any medieval music ensemble is the relative paucity of musical information. Notation in the period was unstandardized, highly selective and (to a modern musician) ambiguous; in essence, it was intended only as a mnemonic device to facilitate an oral tradition. The notation is quite skeletal: only words and pitches of a given *laude* may be presented, with no indications of accompaniment styles, rhythmic values, or tempo. Therefore any additional material must be in some sense the result of a reconstructive process.

This musical ambiguity has precipitated scholarly debates whose breadth, complexity, and life-span are far beyond the capacity of this article to rehearse. Suffice it to say that scholars from many fields have, through a commendable desire for accuracy and credibility, been drawn into a wide range of conclusions. In the same fashion, those musicians who are attracted to the repertoire by the simple beauty of its poetic and melodic style have responded to the notational ambiguity with a variety of deeply personal and carefully-argued solutions.

The process of catalyzing such solutions is time-consuming, multi-referential and demanding. It invariably involves painstaking motivic analysis of text and music, inference, and intuitive choices; just as invariably, the "final arrangement" is never really final, but always evolves. In fact this is logical: our own individual or group responses to the pieces evolve with time, and our sense of what is "affectively effective" changes with our sense of each audience's individual composition.

authorship, but which has no tune; *Sia laudato San Francesco*, which had the expressive advantage of being addressed to the concert's titular patron; *Laudar vollo per amore*, whose syllabic setting of text to pitches left the rhythmic contour completely unspecified; and *Fami cantar l'amor de la beata*, a lovely hymn of praise for God's creation, but one with complex patterns of metric stress.

Our procedures for addressing these questions are complex, involving deduction, historical inference, iconographic and manuscript evidence, expert scholarly commentary, and information from related folk-music traditions. Various members dedicate time to specific pieces: perhaps one singer and one instrumentalist will work together in analyzing a single text's formal, metaphorical, and motivic organization. It is essential that the rhetoric of text and music be complementary, so the singer and the player will work together at creating a musical structure which accurately reflects the rhetorical organization. This may be dependant upon more large-scale textual elements (a strophic rhythmicization to fit a strophic text, for example) or more micro-analytic ones (carefully exploiting musical motives associated with specific text images).³

And so, from skeletal musical outlines in the manuscripts, the pieces began to put on flesh. They reached out to us as we reached in, suggesting poetic implications, cultural references, structural organization, internal rhythms, and emotional and spiritual connotations. What we presented is not the "definitive historical reconstruction", but rather a realization of our own musical and expressive insights.

³The conviction which drives this intensely-detailed and comprehensive work is both ideological and practical: first, we believe that the individual pieces deserve such close attention; second, we operate from a presumption that a sophisticated musical structure, just like a technical poetic one, may have a profound impact on the listener, even if it is not consciously appreciable. A reader need not analyze the structural details of a sonnet in order for those details to have a cumulative effect; in the same fashion, one of our listeners need not know the specifics of musical construction in order for the musical result to have a powerful impact.

Laudar vollio became our opening and entrance piece. It retained the character of a chant; vielle-player Jann Cosart wrote a short introduction with the rhythmic and motivic outline of a slow processional. Angela Mariani sang the verses, and our arrangement for Gothic harp, vielle, and gittern teased out the motivic images of the poetry, echoing the modest songs of birds and the marching feet of Saracen armies.

Sia laudato San Francesco became a soloistic vehicle for tenor David Stattelman, a gentle, meditative, non-metric song of gratitude, in an arrangement constructed collaboratively by David, harpist Allison Zelles, and Jann Cosart.

Jann created a duet for vielle and gittern based on the melismatic lauda *Radiante lumera forte*, in tribute to the skilled instrumentalists who were employed by the laudesi companies.

The *Canticle of Brother Sun*, authored by Francis, was the expressive centerpiece of the program, despite the initial absence of a melody. Angela Mariani found a textual connection between the canticle, for which there was no tune, and the lauda *Altissima luce*, for which there was, and, as Francis was said to have done, "recomposed" the tune to fit the canticle; our program notes acknowledged this creative license. With the help of luthier Tim Johnson, a former member of the Cambridge Court Dancers, we created simple staged movement based on old iconography: over the course of the piece, the singers moved in a slow pattern of interlocking circles. This visual analog evoked both the choreography of the Mass and the majestic slow-motion dance of the planets themselves.

Fami cantar l'amor, the joyous "song to love", closed the program. In the early experimental stages we had developed a set of dance-like melodic figures and phrases based on the tune. Vocalist Allison Zelles worked through each line of text, matching the textual word stress with the sung melodic emphases to yield an ebullient dance feel.

Our collaborative realization addressed several goals: it presented key pieces of the repertoire with a spectrum of rhythmic, melodic, and expressive characters; it conveyed some sense of the communal and communicative intentions which underlay

the pieces' construction, and it recreated for the audience our own sense of the repertoire's expressive and spiritual impact.

We introduced the program in the dramatically-vaulted space of the IU Art Museum. At that concert, birds flew over the sunlit glass ceiling above us, a small flood of rainwater invaded the gallery holding the collection of medieval icons, and one audience member said simply "I felt as if my soul had been washed clean".

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Emblem of the Arciconfraternita della Santa Croce e della Pietà dei Carcerati, Milan. From Marina Olivieri Baldissarri, *I "Poveri prigionieri" ...*, cover.



*Effigie del Servo di Dio GAETANO PRATESI
Maniscalco Fiorentino, e Fratello della Ven. Compagnia
delle Sacre Stimate di S. Francesco di Firenze.*

Inc. Gio. Batt. del

Carlo Innoc. Scud.

Engraving of Gaetano Pratesi, member of the Compagnia delle Sacre Stimate di S. Francesco, Florence. From *San Lorenzo. I documenti e i tesori nascosti*, p. 228 (entry 5.18b)