

## Björn Schmelzer and his “Poissance d’amours”

*“Making these old, broken stones sing is a wonderful experience”*

### **Following *Caput and Joye* you are now turning to another area of the medieval musical world. What has inspired you to consider 13th-century Brabant?**

After trying to show two important 15th-century composers in a different musical light, I thought it would be interesting to do a programme which is more geographical yet at the same time more “virtual”: one based only on musical remnants, traces and ruins. In this way we might try and create the sound world of an entire region: rather than producing portraits one would be able to paint full landscapes of scenes hitherto lost and in need of being invented anew.

After talking to two very enthusiastic specialists of the Brabantine literary tradition in Frank Willaert and Remco Sleiderink, I became resolved to focus on Brabant, and in particular its oldest musical repertoire. Strangely, nobody before has concentrated on this repertoire: there are no recordings of the very attractive songs of the Duke of Brabant, Henri III, almost none of his colleagues, no focus on the local plainchant from the very important Cistercian abbey of Villers and almost nothing on the mystical songs of Hadewijch. As there is no musicological research on the subject we had to start from the beginning and do it almost all ourselves – something which is always quite an adventure and provides a lot of fun – and we became most inspired by the studies of architects and archaeologists, art historians and linguists. For example, there is a little island in the centre of Leuven (the capital of Brabant at that time) which was reorganized in the 13th century as a kind of Brabantine Île de la Cité, and the church which was built there in the new Gothic style was a work of great inspiration. No longer can I walk in Leuven without thinking of this island, even though it has now almost totally disappeared! You can say that it functions rather like a metaphor for our whole programme: creating a musical island, with its own logic, whilst not being separated totally from the mainland. Yet as an island it is barely visible because of the many bridges and the smallness of the rivers surrounding it. For that reason you will find on the CD repertoire which is local but set within an international context, drawn from manuscripts which are very significant for 13th-century music in general. Another important source of inspiration for me were my own childhood visits to the ruins of the Abbey of Villers. These impressed me a lot (and not only me, you will find a lot of 19th-century graffiti on the walls, including the signature of Victor Hugo, who frequently visited the ruins looking for inspiration...). Making these old, broken stones sing is a wonderful experience.

### **As with Flanders, medieval Brabant was known for its beguines and beghards. Who were these people? What sort of writings did they produce? How much was music associated with their activities?**

Beguines and beghards can be considered to be a kind of underground movement, highly critical of the official authorities and of clerical power, about whom we know precious little except that which came from their enemies (such as inquisitorial reports). They lived together, but kept mostly a form of celibate life, and were known for the accuracy of their handicrafts, something of significance for the prosperity of the developing nearby cities. Some were involved with mystical thinking and practice. This is usually seen as springing from the Cistercian order, but is probably older in its original inspiration. One famous case is that of the mystic Hadewijch: she was probably the leader of a group of young women. She wrote some of the most wonderful poems which exist in the Dutch (Flemish) language (paradoxically she was rediscovered at the end of the 19th century by the French-writing Fleming and Nobel Prize-winner Maurice Maeterlinck). This really is world-class literature which has since been translated into many other languages. Unknown until recently is the

fact that Hadewijch's poems functioned not so much as reading material for individual readers, but in a kind of performance context. It is quite clear now that performance and singing were very important not only for her poems, but also for her visions and letters, as has been established by the Hungarian scholar Anikó Daróczy. Therefore we are performing some of her poems on *Poissance d'amours* sung to the melodies for which they were created. I'm very proud that my singers Silvie (Moors) and Patrizia (Hardt) succeeded so well (in their own individual manners) in "inflaming" this very passionate repertoire.



**You also present “local” music from trouvères and from church music from the region. Do these exhibit special characteristics?**

There exists no real research on this subject in terms of comparing individual repertoires and debating whether there regional styles or variants existed. It would be fascinating to do so! However, one can see for example that Duke Henri III was himself a trouvère and had strong affinities and contact with other trouvères from Arras, the important city in Northern France. What we do know is that in the middle of the 13th century the court of Brabant was a real paradise for literature and music, much more so than the French court (Louis IX was a real enemy of all such profane practices and forbade them during his reign). An interesting hypothesis says that the climate in Paris changed with the coronation of Marie de Brabant in 1274 and that musical traffic was not so much oneway (from Paris to the “province”), but more the other way round.

With the abbey repertoire we are focusing on Villers, an important Brabantine Cistercian abbey and spiritual centre. One reflection of this is that the monks at the end of the 12th century for example corresponded with the visionary nun Hildegard von Bingen and she sent one of the two existing manuscripts with her music to them. I had two reasons to concentrate on Villers. Firstly, because two local offices composed by the cantor of Villers Goswin de Bossut are still extant: we are moving into uncharted territory with this repertoire and it gives very good insight into the evolution of Cistercian plainchant in the 13th century. Secondly, because I wanted to try out the discoveries made recently by researchers into 13th-century Cistercian plainchant performance practice. Two-part singing for example was very common. Some abbeys even tolerated three- and four-voice improvisation practice in the manner found at churches in cities.

**You recorded the programme in the Dominican Church in Leuven. How did you react to performing in such a space which has such strong connections with the music of this programme?**

From almost the start of this project, it was very clear for me that the only real location would be the Dominican church in Leuven, officially known as the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Predikherenkerk. Not only was it built by Duke Henri III of Brabant himself, copied after the Parisian Sainte Chapelle, it was also the first Gothic church in Leuven with its very typical high lancet windows. The sculpted capstone of the duke's sepulchre is still there, now to be found at the back of the church. So naturally during the recording, which we did in the direction of the choir, we felt the duke's presence behind us... I am very happy that we did the recording there, although it was very difficult (not only in terms of being allowed to record in the church at all, but also because during the recording sessions we were always hoping that no cars would pass), but it has a splendid acoustic: the vaults in the choir are original from the middle of the 13th century.

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