

MUSIC REVIEW

Camerata conjures the medieval technicolor of Machaut

By [Jeremy Eichler](#) | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 01, 2013

CAMBRIDGE — Two years ago, when the French city of Reims was toasting the 800th anniversary of its legendary cathedral, the Boston Camerata received a high honor for any out-of-town ensemble: an invitation to participate in the festivities. And not only to participate, but to present the music of the magnificent 14th-century poet and composer Guillaume de Machaut, who was employed as a canon at the great Cathedral of Reims.

For the occasion, Camerata artistic director Anne Azema bravely took aim at Machaut's single most celebrated work today: his "Messe de Notre Dame," a work that owes its renown not only to its remarkable sonorities but also to its status as the very first polyphonic setting of the Mass Ordinary to be written by a single composer.

In some ways, the music of Machaut's Mass — written around 1360 and possibly conceived as a memorial to the composer himself and his brother Jean — needs no special pleading or context in order to project its own radicalism and innovation. For modern listeners, the pleasures of first discovering Machaut's music — especially his secular music on themes of courtly love — is the sense of shock visited on the ears by the exquisite strangeness of his harmonic palette.



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Boston Camerata, led by artistic director Anne Azema, in the Cathedral of Reims in France in 2011, preparing to perform Guillaume de Machaut's "Messe de Notre Dame."

But to allow for today's concertgoers to grasp the deeper novelty and ornate beauty of Machaut's polyphonic writing, Azema chose to present the Mass not in a deracinated modern concert setting but in the fuller liturgical context in which it was originally heard, essentially as part of a period church service. She therefore surrounded Machaut's famed Mass sections with Gregorian chants taken from the Marian Mass "Salve sancta Parens." Saturday night's performance at St. John's Memorial Chapel, the first local airing of the Reims project, clearly justified Azema's creative experimentation. The men of Boston's Convivium Musicum (Michael Barrett, director) sang with persuasive elegance the monodic chant used to showcase Machaut's polyphonic settings, allowing the latter to arrive like sonic starbursts, a kind of sensual medieval technicolor against the backdrop of dignified grays.

Medieval musical manuscripts leave many decisions open to the modern performer, and the Camerata took an earthy and grounded approach to the Machaut, choosing a relatively low pitch level, with six male singers (tenors, baritone, and bass) joined by two sackbut players (Brian Kay and Steven Lundahl). The sound on Saturday night was intimate yet rich and full, with the Camerata singers under Azema's direction delivering Machaut's wonderfully piquant harmonies with clarity and zest, and his more outwardly virtuosic moments — such as the extraordinarily ornate Amen of the Gloria — with palpable excitement. Special credit goes to bass-baritone Donald Wilkinson, who replaced an indisposed Paul Guttry at short notice. This was the final concert of the Camerata's local season, but hopefully next year will bring more fruits from this ensemble's extensive European travels, in Reims and beyond.

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