

THE BOSTON CAMERATA

Anne Azéma, artistic director

Joel Cohen, music director emeritus

A Mediterranean Christmas: Press excerpts

The Boston Globe: A Christmas delight

Just in time for the holidays, Warner Classics has delivered "A Mediterranean Christmas," the latest installment of a very popular series of holiday recordings by Joel Cohen and the Boston Camerata. Six previous Camerata Christmas records remain steady seasonal sellers on CD. The newest one presents a significant and entertaining cross-cultural collaboration between five regular Camerata performers and five musicians from different musical traditions -- the three members of the Boston-based Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble, and Equidad Bares and Hayet Ayad, superb vocalists based in France who specialize in folk traditions of the Mediterranean region.

The live performances before Christmas last year represented a reunion of artists who had triumphed under difficult circumstances in a national tour of an earlier Camerata program, "Cantigas." The Moroccan musicians who had toured and recorded the program in Europe failed to get visas in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but Cohen discovered the local musicians from Sharq, who saved the day. A revision of the Camerata's 1980 "Mediterranean Christmas" program provided an opportunity to get everyone together again. In high summer, June/July 2005, the group reassembled to make the recording in the Church of the Covenant.

It is a delight, propelled by the pungent, contrasting voices of the folk singers and their interaction with sopranos Anne Azema and Anne Harley, and by the equally pungent sounds of the Arabic instruments played by Sharq. Even the names of the instruments fascinate -- riqq, tar, darabuka, raita.

Some of the music comes from the court of Alfonso el Sabio, king of Spain in a period when Christians, Arabs, and Jews worked in productive coexistence -- with interesting cross-cultural consequences. The program also includes music from France, Italy, and North Africa, and from art and folk traditions, all of it programmed by Cohen for maximum variety and effect.

The album is brisk, ear-cleansing, jubilant, and inspiring. It may help to focus the mind and spirit during the weeks ahead when both will come under assault.

© [Copyright](#) 2005 The New York Times Company

The Chicago Tribune: “Superb...stylish conviction and vitality”

If you are looking for an intriguingly different Christmas album, you've come to the right place. Joel Cohen's superb early music group Boston Camerata takes the listener on an absorbing tour of medieval musical cultures of southern Europe and northern Africa, circa 1200-1900. The 19 selections are sung, and spoken, in several languages and accompanied by a nine-member instrumental ensemble playing such exotic instruments as the sthe shofar, riqq, darbuka and oud.

Don't expect to hear "Ding Dong Merrily on High." Instead, we get such obscure but pleasing fare as "Todo logar mui ben," from Morocco and Arab Andalusia; "Pastres, placatz vostre troupeu," from 17th-Century Avignon; and "Nani na ya srira" from Egypt.

These songs of celebration from (mostly) the Middle Ages are performed with all the stylish conviction and vitality we have come to expect from Cohen's crack ensemble.

John von Rhein

Published December 16, 2005

Time Out (Chicago): “Inspired”

A Mediterranean Christmas
Joel Cohen leads the Boston
Camerata and the Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble
(Warner Classics)

With so many ethnic groups situated so close to each other in the late Middle Ages, it only makes sense that their music would sound similar. So it was an inspired idea for Joel Cohen's Boston Camerata to find works in many languages and put them together to tell the Christmas story in a patchwork of different viewpoints. Such groupings can easily sound forced, but this one revels in the contrasts between Western and Middle Eastern religions. The four singers and the instrumentalists dig into this material like fevered holiday shoppers, with trumpetlike shofar calls a-blazing.

Starting off in the most unlikely of places for a Christmas disc, the album opens with “Taksim Farahfaza—Respondemos,” an instrumental number played on Arabic instruments followed by a Sephardic prayer translated from Hebrew into Spanish. The song asking Abraham to answer their prayers could be a Christmas carol just by changing Abraham to Jesus or Mary. Another surprise is the Occitan “Mei amic e mei fiel,” a minidrama about the angel Gabriel delivering the news of Mary’s pregnancy to her.

Aside from the intellectually interesting songs are those that deserve to become hits, like the raucous “Como somos per consello” and the reserved Andalusian carol “En Belén tocan a fuego.” “Como somos” tells of a corrupt judge who persecutes the poor and is almost thrown down a well by demons. But Mary intercedes before they can complete the deed, and he repents. More spirited tambourine banging can’t be found.—Marc Geelhoed

Time Out Chicago, December 15-29, 2005. Issue 42/43.

Bn.com: “A constant delight”

REVIEWS

Barnes & Noble

You could probably listen to all of the [Boston Camerata](#)'s *Mediterranean Christmas* without even realizing it's a Yuletide album. That's not a criticism: This is one holiday CD that you won't want to file away until next year once the season has passed. An early music group that just celebrated its 50th anniversary, the Camerata is joined here by Sharq, an Arabic music ensemble, for an incredibly wide-ranging program of works: from the 12th to the 19th centuries, circling the Mediterranean from Spain through Italy and Egypt all the way around to Morocco, all inspired by some aspect of the Christmas story. And if you're aware of the context for this music, the tone of expectation, joy, and praise is unmistakable in pieces like the lilting 13th-century Italian *lauda* "Gloria 'n cielo." There are carols for the Kings of the Orient, dialogues between shepherds and angels, and even a brief lamentation over Herod's crimes, but the program ends with a charming set of lullabies for Virgin and Child. The variety of instrumental sounds and vocal styles is a constant delight, beginning with the horns of annunciation -- a Jewish *shofar* and a Moroccan *rait* -- on "Madre de Deus," one of several *cantigas* on the program from the 13th-century Spanish king Alfonso el Sabio. Condensing almost a millennium's worth of music into their project, Sharq and the Camerata have managed to produce a unique Christmas album that will charm early music connoisseurs and more casual listeners as well. *Scott Paulin*

Svenska dagbladet (Stockholm): “A fantastic recording”

This sophisticated Christmas disc takes us back to our roots, far from snow-heavy trees and enormous department stores. The music comes from various coastal areas around the Mediterranean and spans more than 700 years, with an emphasis on the 12th and 13th centuries. The Boston Camerata is an American ensemble specializing in really old music, and here it is augmented by the Turkish-Arabic group Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble. Both groups are directed by early music expert Joel Cohen. It buzzes and plucks of instruments such as the vielle, the oud, the raita, and the biblical-sounding shofar. A fantastic recording, both rhythmic and meditative, with texts in French, Spanish, Italian, Occitan, Latin, and Arabic. (December 2005) (translation by and courtesy of Per Walthinsen)

musicweb.uk.net : "Bathed in sunshine... exquisite tenderness...a glorious CD"

Not for the first time, Joel Cohen's alertness and intelligent open-mindedness has allowed him to produce a programme which is wide-ranging in time and space and yet coherent, informed by scholarship but in no way pedantic. *A Mediterranean Christmas* ranges geographically from Provence and Tuscany to Spain, the Balkans and Morocco; in time it spans roughly seven centuries from 1200.

The programme is presented in five sections. The first is called 'The Sign of Judgement' and includes a beautiful Galician song which sets the Sybilline prophecy of the Last Judgement. It is here wonderfully sung by Hayet Adad, to the accompaniment of a vivacious instrumental ensemble which includes the *shofar* – the Jewish ram's horn trumpet, powerfully played by Steven Lundahl.

The second section is 'The Dawn Approaching', which incorporates a reading of verses by Folquet de Marseille and 'Gloria 'n cielo', a beautiful Italian *lauda* of the thirteenth century, convincingly performed by Anne Harley. The third section, 'Star of the Day' presents two of the *cantigas* of Alfonso the Wise.

The longest section – appropriately enough – is devoted to 'The Birth of Jesus'. There are many

delights here, such as a carol from the Andalusian folk tradition, prefaced by a perfectly judged guitar improvisation by Kareen Roustom and movingly performed by Equidad Barès, Anne Harley and Hayet Adad, and another carol from the Italian speaking coast of Dalmatia, 'Nois siamo i magi'. This has a hypnotic modal melody. Most remarkable of all is 'Quando el rey Nimrod' which is best described in the words of Cohen's notes: "From 19th-century Bosnia, here is an extraordinary and beautiful example of cultural syncretism. The story, of course, is that of the Star of Bethlehem, adapted to celebrate the birth of father Abraham by the Spanish-speaking Jews of the Balkans. Here it is Abraham who lies in the cradle, and the bad King Nimrod stands in for Herod of the New Testament. The text, in Judaeo-Spanish, mixes in a number of Hebrew terms, and the musical mode is Arabo-Turk, that of *hejaz-al-kabir*". Richly coloured and fiercely rhythmical, its performance here is a tour-de-force.

The last section, 'Mother and Child', begins with two lullabies, one in Spanish and one in Arabic, both sung unaccompanied by, respectively, Equidad Bares and Hayat Ayad – and each sung with exquisite tenderness and unsentimental sweetness. The programme closes with one of the narratives from the *cantigas* of Alfonso the Wise, in which the Virgin miraculously intercedes to care for a distressed mother and her sick son. It makes a triumphant conclusion to a glorious CD.

Joel Cohen is, to borrow a phrase of his own which I quoted earlier, a master of "cultural syncretism". This is a life-enhancing CD, an affirmation of values that are by no means exclusively Christian, values such as love and compassion. This is by no means just a CD for the Christmas market; it is a collection of lasting value and one to which I shall, I am sure, listen many times throughout the year.

Glyn Pursglove

Detroit Free Press: "World class...a fascinating multicultural journey"

Posted: Dec. 7, 2005

The Boston Camerata

A Mediterranean Christmas

Warner Classics

For anyone tired of holiday chestnuts and kitsch, the world-class Boston Camerata early music ensemble has issued a series of indispensable thematic albums exploring Christmas music from the American past, the European Renaissance and elsewhere.

The choir's latest is organized around Mediterranean climes and spans 700 years, from 1200 to 1900.

The Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble of Boston plays a key role, lending earthy and evocative folk

singing and traditional instrumental colors to the pristine beauty of conductor Joel Cohen's choir. The album is a fascinating multicultural journey, reinforcing the spirituality of the season.

- Mark Stryker, *Detroit Free Press*

Music and Vision (mvdaily.com): “Colourful spirit...remarkable and fascinating”

This is a celebration of Christmas from Spain, Provence, Italy and the Middle East spanning 700 years from 1200, and is revealing in its colourful spirit and authentic performances both instrumentally and vocally. Its range is remarkable and fascinating.

The recital is divided into five sections. The first is *The Sign of Judgement*, opening with an improvised guitar prelude, a Judaeo-Spanish translation of a Hebrew prayer (*Answer us, o God of Abraham*), and a haunting song in Galician, Sybil's prophesy of the Last Judgement sung by Hayet Ayad, in which the amazing sound of the Jewish *shofar* is heard. The second part, *The Dawn Approaching*, includes songs from 12th and 13th century France and Tuscany; and opening the third section, *Star of the Day*, is one of the many *cantigas* or musical stories, compiled by Alfonso el Sabio, a 13th century Spanish king, telling of the miraculous works of the Mother of God. There is the spoken word too, as in another story telling of a corrupt judge purified by the Virgin.

Patric Standford, Wakefield UK

The London Times: “robust, tart, melismatic and vibrant”

December 2, 2005

Anyone seeking a musical Christmas far from the parish church or King's College, Cambridge, should bask instead in Mediterranean sounds, robust, tart, melismatic and vibrant. Performances follow suit, with plenty of open throats among Joel Cohen's Boston Camerata group, augmented with specialist singers and the Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble. The selection ranges across languages, religious and racial groups over 600 years. An uplifting cross-cultural bonanza.

GEOFF BROWN

Austin Texas Chronicle: “Aplomb and elegance”

BY DAVID LYNCH

December 23, 2005

Joel Cohen & the Boston Camerata

A Mediterranean Christmas (Warner Classics)

The Boston Camerata describes its holiday fare as broader than early music, but that shouldn't stop fans of the genre from picking up this work of holidays past. Bridging the Straits of Gibraltar and the edge of the Levant – including Arabic and Sephardic elements – this ensemble warmly realizes religious and folk works from 1200 to 1900 and does so with aplomb and elegance.

San Diego Union Tribune: “an enticing stew of cross-cultural influences”

The Boston Camerata

"A Mediterranean Christmas"

Subtitled "Songs of Celebration From Spain, Provence, Italy and the Middle East, 1200-1900," the latest offering from Boston's accomplished early music ensemble is an enticing stew of cross-cultural influences, spiced with exoticism.

Though there's too much spoken text, the singing richly reflects folk influences while the instruments range from guitars and recorders to Arabic percussion including the riqq and darabuka. Thanks to the Boston Camerata, it's easy to get a taste of other traditions.

– VALERIE SCHER

Chicago Sun-Times: “Vibrant, sumptuously produced...completely beguiling”

December 4, 2005

BOSTON CAMERATA, "A MEDITERRANEAN CHRISTMAS" (WARNER CLASSICS)

In 1974, Joel Cohen and his intrepid early music ensemble vastly expanded the definition of Christmas music with their wildly popular "Medieval Christmas" LP on Nonesuch. Those of us who had never heard such antique instruments as the shawm and rebec -- or the centuries-old hymn "Ave maris stella," for that matter -- were captivated.

Boston Camerata's newest Christmas album, focusing on music from 12th to 19th century Spain, Provence, Italy and the Middle East, matches the earlier achievement. Vibrant, sumptuously produced, this mostly unfamiliar music is completely beguiling.

Wynne Delacoma

Gramophone: "Rich in infectious Mediterranean rhythms"

Cohen's Christmas

There's a dependable recipe for Christmas releases. Take a dozen much-loved carols, mix with a crack-squad ensemble, simmer in a studio for a few days over the summer, leave to settle in an editing suite throughout the autumn, sprinkle with artificial snow, and serve.

Chances are such offerings will be redolent of 'snowy winters, pine forests and the comfortable, inviting form of Anglo-Saxon or Germanic traditions,' as Joel Cohen puts it in the introduction to his new disc for Warner Classics, 'A Mediterranean Christmas'. For his own take on the Christmas album, Cohen and his Boston Camerata have headed south to the Latinised areas of Southern Europe, places which 'have maintained a certain continuity of being with the cultures of the Near-East' - which is where 'it began, after all'. Rich in infectious Mediterranean rhythms, the result is certainly different to most Christmas discs. 'That's the whole idea!' he laughs.

The focus is on early music but in telling the events of Christmas it also draws on more recent pieces, though ones rooted in folklore and oral traditions. There's a 12th-century Christmas processional from southern France, a 13th-century *lauda* (song of praise) from Italy and a 19th-century 'wassailing' carol from the Dalmatian coast.

To read the rest of the feature, buy the January issue of *The Gramophone*

DN Kultur (Sweden)

På The Boston Cameratas "A Mediterranean Christmas" är hela Medelhavsvärlden fokuserad på Betlehem, i sånger, hymner, danser, processioner och mysteriespel. Den medeltida musiken blandar latin, arabiska, hebreiska, spanska, italienska och provençalska. Alla är på väg, herdar, kungar och himmelens änglar.

Men allra mest den zigenare som i vers efter vers i en andalusisk folksång tumlar söderut genom snön uppe i det nordliga Galicien.

Martin Nyström

On The Boston Cameratas A Mediterranean Christine " is heal Medelhavsvärlden focus on Bethlehem , in song , anthem , dances , processions and mysteriespel. The average music am blending latin , arab hebreiska , Spanish , Italian and provençalska. All is en route , pastoral , kingdom and blue änglar. But very most the zigenare as in verse behind verse in an andalusisk people's romp southwards per snow up in the further north Galicien.

Goldberg magazine, Spain (concert review): “the best and most interesting”

Boston's oldest early music group, The Boston Camerata, celebrated Christmas with a mix of Mediterranean cultures, culling manuscripts and codices from as early as the thirteenth century. The Camerata's programs are events studded with processions, histrionics and improvisation. Music Director Joel Cohen's choice for the evening's entertainment at the newly decorated Romanesque First Church in Cambridge amalgamated Islam, Jewish and Christian stories into a Christmas pageant that celebrated the best and most interesting stories (myths, legends and traditions) of the Mediterranean perimeter.

Much of the Camerata's music centered on the court of Alfonso el Sabio (Alfonso X, King of Castile and Leon 1252-1284). His notable *Cantigas de Santa Maria* have provided centuries of musical praise for the Virgin and her miracles. Alfonso's music gave Cohen's group plenty of free rein for musical expression. The varied colors, timbres and dynamics of the accompanying instruments ran the gamut of medieval Mediterranean aesthetics. First Church's high vaults and its monumental decoration in peaches, mustards, rusts, butterscotch and gold ornamented the musical scene royally. Cohen himself played his own *lauta* (long-neck lute), *citole* (a lute with oval belly and back) and guitar. All three instruments have honorable pedigrees from Alfonso's court - iconographic evidence from manuscripts from the Escorial. To Cohen's right, Kareem Roustom, a member of the assisting SHARQ Arabic Music Ensemble, played the oud, a medieval lute quite rare after the fourteenth century. Anne Azéma, a soprano who has widely recorded medieval literature, sang while she cranked a hurdy-gurdy (and processed, too, which added to the pomp of the occasion). The most startling instrumental contribution, though, came from the opening fanfare. Steven Lundahl blew into a cornett from the back of the church making it sound like a blast from a sacred Hebrew scholar. Such was the excitement of the season, and the Boston Camerata captured it

La Voz Catolica (Archdiocese of Miami): “si sorprendente es la multiplicidad”

Navidad Mediterránea. La Camerata de Boston, bajo la dirección del guitarrista, cantante y conductor Joel Cohen, uno de los más prominentes *ensembles* dedicados a la música antigua, nos trae esta interesante antología de música navideña procedente de España, Francia, Italia y el Oriente Medio, con obras compuestas entre los años 1200 y 1900. La selección consiste en una secuencia musical que conduce al nacimiento de Jesús, en cinco partes, que van desde la Anunciación hasta la Epifanía, donde se entremezclan las más variadas muestras devocionales de sefardíes, toscanos, andaluces, balcánicos, árabe-andaluces, egipcios y franceses, además de fragmentos de las conocidas obras del rey Alfonso X el Sabio. Y si sorprendente es la multiplicidad, la instrumentación no se queda a la zaga, pues los músicos de la Camerata se desempeñan con igual maestría tanto en trompetas y guitarras, como en el *shofar*, la *darbuka*, el *duff* y el *oud*, para rendir un tributo a los compositores conocidos y anónimos perdidos en el tiempo

Classics Today (France): “Un beau et dépaysant CD”

Ceux qui s'attendent à entendre "Il est né le divin enfant" risquent une mauvaise surprise... Joel Cohen poursuit ses explorations sonores érudites des répertoires anciens. C'est donc comme une bibliothèque sonore que l'on ouvre ici, même, dans la plage 2, aux sons du shofar, instrument rituel de la religion juive.

Le parcours musical de terre et de chaleur, autour des traditions, notamment arabo-andalouses, du Bassin méditerranéen est aux antipodes des traditions hivernales anglo-saxonnes. Il est subdivisé en cinq parties dans lesquelles on ne perçoit pas grand chose de ce qui est habituellement associé dans notre culture à Noël.

Tout cela laisse évidemment une marge immense à l'interprète "réinventeur de traditions", l'effort de Joel Cohen étant, dit-il, de "rendre justice à au moins quelques uns des aspects profonds du matériau sous-jacent". Noël est ici, pour les interprètes, synonyme au sens large de "vision de paix et de réconciliation", de "musique d'espoir et de renouveau". De ce point de vue, c'est réussi, avec une partie mariale conclue par un très enlevé et exalté "Como somos per consello" (Alphonse le Sage, page 8).

C'est la partie "naissance de Jésus", qui mélange le plus les siècles et les régions, avec, notamment, un vigoureux chant traditionnel italien du 19e siècle chanté avec les couleurs rauques idoines. On trouve d'autres plages fortes, tant à la fin de la section naissance (Noël avignonnais et sublime Noël andalous), qu'à la section "La mère et l'enfant", avec une fastueuse conclusion sur "Tant'aos peccadores" d'Alphonse Le Sage.

Un beau et dépayçant CD d'exploration, avec, s'agissant du propos, une inattendue tonalité orientale.

--**Christophe Huss**

Rapport (Netherlands): “Fascinating”

PAUL BOEKKOOI

Joel Cohen, artistieke direkteur van die Boston Camerata, vertel die volgende in 'n onderhoud oor hul nuutste uitreiking getiteld *A Mediterranean Christmas*: "Here we bring together musicians from diverse traditions (Middle Eastern, European, American) and diverse religious backgrounds (Christian, Muslim, Jewish) around a common celebration of the Christmas theme."

Hierdie bykans ekumeniese viering van die Kersboodskap het sy wortels in musiek van Spanje, Provence (Frankryk), Italië en die Midde-Ooste wat tussen 1200 en 1900 ontstaan het. Die Bostonse groep word aangevul deur die Sharq- Arabiese musiekensemble wat antieke instrumente bespeel wat die ouer inkantasie-liedere aanvul. In die tekste word folklore op die Kersverhaal toegepas, of andersom.

'n Fassinerende blik op geestelike kruisbestuiwing word gebied, terwyl ons weer daarvan bewus gemaak word dat Westerse musiek se bevrugting in die Midde-Ooste plaasgevind het. Ons simfonie-orkes is ewe seer van Oosterse oorsprong as ons Christelike kerk en Kersmusiek. Toegewyde sang en instrumentale ritmes herinner jou daaraan dat Boney M in die dertiende eeu en daarna moontlik só sou geklink het! (Warner Classics 2564 62560-2.)

El Nuevo Herald (Miami): “una amplia y sorprendente variedad”

ECOS NAVIDEÑOS DEL MEDITERRANEO

Posted on Sun, Dec. 25, 2005

Jesús Vega

Los países de la cuenca del Mediterráneo, habitados por pueblos apasionadamente religiosos, deseosos de trascender y unirse a la divinidad, fueron testigos del surgimiento de al menos tres religiones de repercusión mundial. La Camerata Boston explora la herencia musical de estas tierras, específicamente en lo tocante a los ritos navideños, y nos regala una selección de canciones de España, Francia, Italia y el Oriente Medio, en un recorrido desde el siglo XIII al XX, dando vida a los ecos sefardíes, toscanos, marselleses, catalanes, árabe-andaluces, egipcios y gregorianos, entre otros, interpretadas en una amplia y sorprendente variedad de instrumentos.