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MUSIC REVIEW

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## A raucous night for knights

By Matthew Guerrieri, Globe Correspondent | March 19, 2007

CHESTNUT HILL -- Thirteenth-century France had better tailgate parties than we do today, judging from the testimony of Jacques Bréte! , whose poem "Le Tournoi de Chauvency" describes a 1285 tournament of knights and the surrounding festivities. The French soprano Anne Azéma has fashioned "The Night's Tale" around Bréte! 's poem, using his descriptions as cues for songs from the medieval French troubadour and folk repertoires. The result, for an ensemble of eight singers and two instrumentalists, is less a narrative than an evocation of these get-togethers, a glimpse into the origins of courtly love and chivalry.

"Night's Tale" was fully staged earlier this year in Europe ; a semi-staged American premiere was jointly presented by the Boston Camerata and Azéma's own Ensemble Aziman at St. Ignatius Parish, Boston College, last weekend. Camerata music director Joel Cohen read excerpts from Bréte! 's text to provide narrative thread . Baritone David Allen Newman set the stage with a supple rendition of a song by Thibault of Champagne : "Neither for bad weather nor for frost. . . . Will I turn my thoughts from the love I have."

In the first half, the men searched for a noblewoman to whom they could dedicate themselves. The women spurred them on: "You shall have the delight," they sang, "which my husband never has at all." In Gauthier d'Espinal's "Se par force de merci," Newman, Marc Mauillon , Stéphane Olry , and Jean Paul Rigaud engaged in full-throated, gleeful posturing. This climaxed with Huon d'Oisy's wonderfully comic "En l'an que chevalier sont," in which the men described the time the ladies stage d their own tournament. As the action heated up, the women piled on their own impulsive lines, creating a rowdy cacophony.

In the second half, the women -- Azéma, Annie Dufresne , Jennifer Ellis Kampani , and Els Janssens -- contrasted a learned disquisition on the nature of love with a more raucous consideration of the pros and cons of a rich lover. To close, the entire ensemble, led by Shira Kammen's fiddle and Tom Zajac's bagpipe, danced out to a medley of Adam de la Halle's "Bonne amourette" and the anonymous "C'est la fins," leaving Newman and Cohen to poignantly reprise the opening song.

Kammen and Zajac were superb, the latter surveying the psaltery , flute, shawm , and hurdy-gurdy with élan. An instrumental duo turn, with Kammen's giddy bowing and Zajac's unexpectedly virtuosic jaw harp , was an occasion for spontaneous applause. But all the performers wore their deep learning lightly, putting zest and elegance up front. Early-music performers try to make the past come alive; this group was so committed and immediate, you forgot that the music was 700 years old. That's entertainment. ■

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