

"Adam de la Halle (fl.1280): Le jeu de Robin et Marion." Thomas Binkley, musical dir., Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

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Reviews of Recordings

Thomas Binkley, musical dir., Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. *Adam de la Halle (fl. 1280): Le jeu de Robin et Marion*. Focus 913. Early Music Institute, Indiana University School of Music, 1991.

Binkley's decision to include chant in prefacing this secular vernacular play, may be somewhat perplexing if one considers the courtly setting of *Le jeu de Robin et Marion*.¹ Still, the idea of preparing the audience for the play by establishing a contemporary musical world, of which the play was but one part, is exemplary. And experiencing that process on disc forces the listener to imagine the event as a live spectacle, staged and acted, rather than a more abstract reading removed not only from its own historical context but even from the theatrical framework.

As with the monophonic trouvère repertoire, there are questions regarding the rhythmic interpretation. It is a debate, more than a century old, that still rages on; but any performance must perforce take a stand. It is refreshing to hear Binkley reject the all-or-nothing alternatives regarding rhythm, the strictly modal on the one hand and the entirely free "declamatory" style on the other. He offers a performance that, while metrically bound, allows the rhythmic patterns themselves to be flexible in accordance with the word stresses. In all but one of the songs, Binkley interprets the Franconian notation (found in both manuscripts of the play) as modal rhythms. His version is roughly in accordance with Coussemaker's 1882 (r1967) edition (which shows both the original notation and the modern transcription). While the modal rendition may appear on the page to be rather dry and uninspired, Binkley's is by no means a pedantic or monotonous performance. Rather, each of the brief notated melodies provides him with a core idea, as it were, from which an imaginative, well structured, lively, and rhythmically quite flexible modern rendition grows. This seems appropriate, as Adam's tunes do not represent his own definitive, creative "works,"

¹The play, written ca. 1283, was first presented at the Italian court in Naples of Robert II, Count of Artois, who had taken his army there following the Sicilian Vespers massacre of 1282. It served the diversion of the expatriate Northern French aristocrats and soldiers during Christmas festivities. This mixed audience may explain the cross-overs between courtly and popular styles in the play.

but come from contemporary artsongs that formed part of the original audience's cultural heritage.

Although no instrumental parts are preserved in the notation, a number of instruments are mentioned in the play: Robin plays a silver flageolet, Huars a musette, Boudon and Gautier the tambourin and the cornamuse *au grand bourdon*, and two other have horns. This suggests that instruments did have a role in the performance of the play, and justifies their addition by Binkley.

The director's choice of timbres, taken from a whole array of medieval instruments, is intriguing for its variety, but particularly for its descriptive power. Instruments are selected judiciously to underscore changing moods and situations in the plot, but are used discreetly and stay well in back of the voices. The instrumental contributions to the songs range from simple doublings of the vocal line to heterophony and occasional two-part counterpoint. Drones are also employed, although sparingly, and the percussion never overwhelms. In the added interludes between scenes and in the stickdance the excellent musicians are given their chance for virtuoso display.

The only regret about this CD is that the play itself is cut short—indeed one cannot get enough of the wonderful declamation of the language. Several longer passages, most notably a lively dialogue between Warnier, Robin, Guios, and Rogaus, but also the original ending of the play are left out. Instead, the added "pre-play music," which occupies nearly one third of the disc could have been shortened. Although some of the cuts seem justified because of internal repetitions, it is regrettable that this fine performance does not make accessible to a modern audience the entire delightful play.

Marianne Richert Pfau