

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

Concert review: Medieval women celebrated

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(October 12, 2005) — Anyone who thinks medieval music is dry, esoteric and largely unapproachable has clearly never attended a Lionheart concert.

This remarkable a cappella group, which appeared Tuesday evening at Kilbourn Hall, devoted its entire program to music that explored images of women in medieval England. Make no mistake, the aptly named Lionheart sang highly charged songs and chants that were far more erotic than esoteric.

What else can one say about William Cornysh's magnificent 16th-century *Blow Thi Horne, Hunter*, a doozy of a double entendre that treats the sexual pursuit of women in terms of bagging a deer?

Clearly, Lionheart — countertenor Lawrence Lipnik, tenors John Olund and Michael Ryan-Wenger, baritones Richard Porterfield and Jeffrey Johnson and bass Kurt-Owen Richards — are all musical meat eaters.

Of course, medieval views of women weren't simply limited to bawdy, Chaucer-like tales. Sexual tensions and ambiguities abounded in Tudor England. Some things never change. As Lionheart outlined in its program notes, medieval songs portrayed women as figures that were alternately maternal, beloved, unfathomable, hunted and sorrowful.

Lionheart, which has been in-residence at New York City's St. Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church since 1993, performed all of these songs in high style.

The concert began with the singers out of our view, intoning a chant at the rear of Kilbourn and entering up a center aisle in single file, like monks entering a cathedral.

Then, they divided into two groups of three and sang at opposite sides of the hall, creating the sort of antiphonal effect that was a trademark of medieval church music. Kilbourn, with its warm and intimate acoustic, served as a worthy substitute for a reverberant cathedral.

Not surprisingly, the dominant female figure in medieval Europe was the Blessed Virgin, who figured prominently in a variety of Lionheart's songs. The concert's opening processional, *Salve Regina Misericordie*, from the Sarum Chant of Catholic liturgy, was remarkable for its utter sensuousness, which in turn served as a splendid metaphor for the Virgin's spiritual perfection.

Lionheart showed off its virtuosity in the next song, Cornysh's *Ave Maria Mater* from the Eton Choirbook, which called on the six different voices to dovetail in vocal acrobatics.

There were some wonderfully intimate moments, especially countertenor Lipnik's silky solo rendition of *Iff I Had Wytte for To Endyght* from Henry VIII's Book; and wonderfully wanton ones, such as *And I War A Maydyn*.

Lionheart sang all of them with luminosity and love.