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Interview with Benjamin Bagby, Medieval Musician
Conducted for *ICONI* by Edward Green

Benjamin (Ben) Bagby is one of the world's distinguished medievalists, and is particularly well-known for his scholarly, yet passionate performances of the music of the medieval epoch — both with the ensemble *Sequentia*, which he co-founded, and as a soloist. In the field of solo performance he is renowned for bringing to life the important Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* — presenting it, as far as contemporary scholarship and vivid artistic imagination can allow, in an authentic "bardic" manner. This wide-ranging interview has much discussion of his career in both regards, as well as his experience as a professor at the Sorbonne.

Readers who may wish, after reading this interview, to know more about this important musician and scholar can visit these two websites: www.BagbyBeowulf.com / www.Sequentia.org

Photo 1. Benjamin Bagby
[photo credit: Frank Ferville]

Бенджамин (Бен) Бэгби — один из выдающихся медиевистов мира, особенно известный изысканиями в сфере музыки средневековой эпохи и страстным её исполнением, в том числе и с ансамблем Sequentia, соорганизатором и солистом которого он является. В области сольного исполнительства он известен тем, что воплотил в жизнь англо-саксонский эпос «Беовульф», представив его, насколько позволяют современные знания и живое воображение, в аутентичной «бардовской» манере. В предлагаемом обширном интервью обсуждаются обе сферы его деятельности, а также опыт работы профессором в Сорбонне.

Читатели, пожелавшие после прочтения данного интервью узнать больше об этом известном музыканте и учёном, могут посетить эти два веб-сайта: www.BagbyBeowulf.com / www.Sequentia.org

Edward Green: *It's a pleasure, Ben, to do this interview.*

Ben Bagby: I'm honored.

Edward Green: *For readers of ICONI who do not already know something of the beautiful and extensive work you've done — especially with the ensemble Sequentia — in having the music of the medieval era known, loved, and enjoyed with new depth and richness, I imagine this interview will be an eye-and-ear opener. For those who have followed your work over the decades, perhaps even as "fans," I hope there will be surprises along the way for them, nevertheless.*

You're best-known, of course, for your one-man performances of the classic Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf. *Way before the movie with Angelina Jolie!*

Ben Bagby: That unfortunate mass-market movie had a specific task to perform, namely, to make a lot of money. It was never really about the Beowulf story. I have other priorities, and so I can dispense with Angelina Jolie and the other special effects. In any case, the most potent images are the ones which each listener concocts in her/his head.

Edward Green: *Well, unlike the film — which to my mind is a hyped-up, ultimately dull, artificial and superficial thing — you really brought the epic to life. The complexity and the depth of the emotions of all the "characters" were there. And you had to be all of them, which is an acting achievement.*

Ben Bagby: Thank you. In my mind, I am only 'speaking' the text (whether in singing in speaking, or something in-between) as honestly as possible. I'm never consciously trying to be an actor in the sense of psychological embodiment or anything strictly theatrical. I am always deeply embedded in the text, which has a poetic structure, and so my options are limited.

Edward Green: *When I saw you do it in New York, many years back, now, I felt as if I was transported, with accuracy, back more than a millennium to the world of the Anglo-Saxons; to the bards.*

Ben Bagby: Thank you. I was honored that you came to hear it.

Edward Green: *So — can you tell us how you came to create this powerful and marvelously engaging performance? I'm sure lots of thought, study, and effort went into the recreation of a work of "musical theatre" of which we have so few actual surviving records.*

Ben Bagby: I was first transfixed by *Beowulf* in a suburb of Chicago in the early

Photo 2. Ben Bagby performing Beowulf
[photo credit: Hilary Scott]

1960's, when my English teacher handed me Burton Raffel's translation of the poem and laconically said 'you need to read this' (she later handed me yet another bombshell: Dante's *Inferno*). Perhaps it's not a coincidence that a few years later, in high school, I was utterly swept away by the sound of medieval music and started my first ensemble (more about that later). The Anglo-Saxons would say that this was simply my *wyrd* (personal destiny).

In 1981, Sequentia (the medieval music ensemble I co-founded with Barbara Thornton) was invited to give a concert in Louvain, Belgium, as part of a university colloquium about performing historical vocal music. One of the participants in the colloquium was the Anglo-Saxonist Thomas Cable (University of Texas/Austin), who had recently published a book entitled *The Meter and Melody of 'Beowulf,'* discussing the theoretical background for various possible modes of performance. We began to talk, and our discussions, along with my close collaboration with Vermont harp-builder Lynne Lewandowski, sowed the seeds for making the *Beowulf* story into a performance.

The sound-image for this performance popped into my head a few months later, as I was driving through rural Arkansas one blustery March evening; perhaps my subconscious was prodded by the omnipresent local images of razorback hogs, kin to the wild boar, those symbols of fearlessness so dear to the Anglo-Saxons. An instrument was ordered and built, and the project slowly took musical shape, at first making use of shorter Old English poems (such as *Caedmon's Hymn* and *Deor*) and later expanding into a short scene from *Beowulf*, which had its first public performance in 1987 and was integrated into a Sequentia concert program of medieval English music. Initial guidance with the intricacies of Anglo-Saxon pronunciation and meter was generously provided by Thomas Cable, during several memorable working sessions in his stone library-tower in Austin.

In 1990, I was approached by the artistic director of the Utrecht Early Music Festival (Netherlands), about the idea of programming 'an entire evening of *Beowulf*' as part of the festival's storytelling theme that summer. How could I possibly say no? With less than 5 months to put together a performance lasting about an hour, I worked feverishly to solve the many problems of shaping an 'epic' performance instead of a 10-minute 'song'. I should note that there were numerous deletions in the text necessary due to festival time constraints and — those ever-pragmatic Dutch — the final departure times of Utrecht buses & trams following late-night concerts. This work was all accomplished with harp in hand and without the use of musical notation, and it was in this process of finding a new oral tradition to reconstruct a lost oral tradition that the project has its deepest roots. Following the premiere in the tiny crypt of the medieval Pieterskerk in Utrecht, this was the version of the story which I subsequently performed throughout Europe and North America during the mid-1990's.

Edward Green: *Including at Lincoln Center.*

Ben Bagby: Yes, and with the Lincoln Center Festival's invitation to give a series of performances in New York, in 1997, the project received a huge boost in energy and interest. And it was during those subsequent difficult years 1997–2000 — which witnessed the long illness and death of my partner Barbara Thornton and the uncertainty of Sequentia's future — that the *Beowulf* project took on a new importance and urgency: the memorization process was completed, deleted sections of text were restored, new instruments were acquired, and video titles were used for the first time. Sequentia's long-time agent Jon Aaron became the producer of the *Beowulf* project and gained an expertise in Anglo-Saxon which allowed him to effortlessly run the video titles from his offstage laptop.

In the meantime, I have been performing *Beowulf* between Vancouver Island and the

Faroe Islands; synagogues in Poland and the Lower East Side of New York; a warehouse in Los Angeles and a medieval art museum in Cologne; Perth, Pittsburgh and Perugia; the Cloisters and the Sydney Opera House; a high school in rural Texas and the Cité de la Musique in Paris, and the Moscow Conservatory. I had much help with the text from the late John Miles Foley (University of Missouri/Columbia), the distinguished Anglo-Saxonist and scholar of oral poetry, who also oversaw the filming of the DVD in Helsingborn, Sweden, in 2006.

Edward Green: *Ben, if I'm correct, your Beowulf performance is a somewhat condensed form of the entire epic. Yes?*

Ben Bagby: That's true, and I am often asked if I plan to learn and perform the entire poem. In fact, during 2002 discussions were started about the possibility of preparing the complete *Beowulf* (3182 verses, or a performance time of roughly 5 hours) for a group of co-commissioners in the U.S., but sufficient interest and funding could not be found to make possible the development of such an intense, long-term project. The idea was reluctantly abandoned in 2004, but not before I had worked my way well into the scene with Grendel's mother.

Responding to the Lincoln Center Festival's invitation to return with *Beowulf* in 2006, I decided to expand my performance to include the final 20 minutes of the first episode (Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and the subsequent celebrations), thereby making 'Part I' complete and containing the uncut text of lines 1-1062, the same version as was released on DVD. I will soon turn 70 and so plan to leave to the next generation the task of working with the next episodes.

Edward Green: *Well, you've certainly given them a fine platform on which to build further. A question now on how your "medieval" career began. Since we happen to have been friends at Oberlin Conservatory in our undergraduate years — circa 1970 — I remember your orientation then was hardly focused on the distant past. You did a lot with contemporary music, yes?*

Ben Bagby: Yes. I was always interested in many kinds of music, including contemporary (in high school I was a charter subscriber to 'Source' — a new music journal which was avant-garde even by today's standards), and at Oberlin I did hang out with composition students (shall I name names?), some of whom were just discovering computers, while others were trying to emulate Webern, Terry Riley, or Aaron Copland. My tastes ran more to weird, anti-authoritarian composers like Harry Partch, with his self-made instruments and eclectic texts. And, of course, there was the ever-present grin of our generation's hero and provocateur, John Cage. But I also loved Berg's Wozzeck for its emotional intensity and the genius of his colors, structures, and the way he played with time.

Edward Green: *And, in fact, you introduced me to the Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau recording of Wozzeck. (Actually, you also ended up selling it to me. Do you remember?)*

Ben Bagby: I was sad to part from that LP you bought, but sorely needed the cash for a plane ticket to Iceland.

Edward Green: *Right — I remember that! Before that trip you were taking a correspondence course in the language, yes?*

Ben Bagby: You remember correctly: when we were both students living at Oberlin in its "German House," I was studying Icelandic by correspondence, in preparation for that upcoming summer escapade in Iceland. I had always been fascinated by Iceland, a passion triggered by some image I saw as a boy (possibly an article in National Geographic), and the thought that an 'ideal society' existed somewhere on our turmoil-filled planet, in a place of great natural beauty, isolation and mystery. I visited there several times as a student, learned to speak the language passably well, and even worked on a farm in Iceland one entire summer. Many years later, when I turned my medieval sights to the Old-Icelandic Edda, as texts which were clearly performed and not read in the Middle Ages, my experiences in Iceland gave me a good basis for the work which was to follow.

Photo 3. Ben Bagby (2nd from left in the front) in 1971 with the Oberlin Collegium Musicum [photo credit: L.D. Nuernberger]

Edward Green: *Back a bit again to Oberlin: I also remember your doing theater work with Julie Taymor — so many decades before* Lion King*! And singing Brahms in recital. And caring for Wagner. So: how did your professional orientation come to be pointed so firmly towards the Middle Ages?*

Ben Bagby: Yes, I put together the music for a student production *of 'The Lady's Not for Burning'*, starring Julie Taymor, but I doubt she even noticed me, so I would hardly say we 'worked' together. And as for your memories of me caring for Wagner, I think you may be confusing me with someone else. I admire Wagner, but as Mark Twain once said: 'His music is better than it sounds'.

Edward Green: *Maybe I was thinking of Robert Black — the pianist, and later conductor. A great loss that he died so young.*

Ben Bagby: Agreed. Bob and I worked on a lot of Lieder at Oberlin, and he was a wonderful collaborator and Mensch, and a dedicated Wagnerian with an intimate knowledge of the operas. And may I say a bit more about my "pre-Oberlin" days?

Edward Green: *Sure!*

Ben Bagby: In the spring of 1967, I was an idealistic and ambitious high school student, fanatically dedicated to classical music and to singing, and resolved to spend my summer holidays studying music as much as possible. I signed up for an intensive summer school in Michigan, to sing in a choir under Robert Shaw, and study German Lied. I suddenly found myself in an environment of like-minded kids, and the generally advanced level of music-making was thrilling. I was in heaven. As it happens, the New York Pro Musica Antiqua (America's premiere early

music ensemble in the 1950's and 60's) was also holding a summer workshop at the same school, and we students received free tickets to one of their concerts, which was of music by Machaut and 13th century French motets. I had no idea what this music was, or what the ensemble was, but went along with my new friends in a spirit of discovery. I think we were all high on music.

From the first moment of that concert, I was utterly transfixed by this music I had never heard before, and by the performances, which remain etched in my memory today. Many of these musicians would later become my mentors, friends, and colleagues, but on that magic night they were all gods. I felt transported as only a 16-year-old can, and left that concert feeling stunned, mystified, and delighted. The course of my entire professional life had been set in those hours, and a love affair with Machaut's introspective side which has lasted a lifetime.

After that experience, I wanted to read everything I could get my hands on and learn all about this incredible music I had just heard. I pestered the NYPM director to grant me an audience, and he very kindly gave me a basic reading list of books to consult. I wrote to my high school pals and informed them that we were going to start our own early music ensemble, and that we needed to procure the appropriate instruments. By the following November we had already given our first concert, and basically, with my ensemble Sequentia, I have been doing the same thing ever since. It's been a straight line from that evening of that concert, through the entire arc of my musical life. The following summer, I went to an early music summer school in Vermont, and my focus shifted increasingly towards New York. Then, as you remember, I spent five years at Oberlin Conservatory, as a voice major (also a German major in the College), but also pursuing medieval music on the side. During one of those years, I spent a semester as an intern to the NY Pro Musica and also did some performing with them, in the last years before they ceased to exist, in 1974. A golden age was over, but still, I was so lucky.

Edward Green: *True. But if you'll forgive me, I think you were part of another golden age. Perhaps there's been more performances, recordings, and scholarship concerning the medieval period in the last 40 years than ever before.*

Ben Bagby: The demise of the old Pro Musica was definitely the end of a certain era in the institutional performance of early music in North America. But you are right, a new way of doing things was emerging, and our generation was incredibly lucky to live through a new and even richer period for the arts, especially between the late 70's and late 90's, when there were seemingly endless opportunities and sources of funding.

Edward Green: *Meanwhile, back to your biography. What happened after Oberlin?*

Ben Bagby: In a nutshell: my post-Oberlin interests led me to Europe, on a Watson Foundation Fellowship, then a diploma from the Schola Cantorum in Basel (in those days the teachers were Thomas Binkley and

Photo 4. The ensemble Sequentia, ca. 1993
Left to right: Elizabeth Gaver, Ben Bagby, Barbara Thornton
[photo credit: Markus Bollen]

Andrea von Ramm), where I met Barbara Thornton. We started *Sequentia* together and moved to Cologne, Germany, where we remained until her tragic death in 1998. Later, I moved to Paris, where I still live. *Sequentia* is in its 43rd year of existence, and I am now trying to train the next generation of young artists.

As a teacher I sometimes run into a highly motivated and energetic student who reminds me of my young self, and at those moments I remember the thrill of that 1967 concert, the gravitas of soul in their singing, and the wonderful feeling of harmony and cohesion which that music-making provoked in me. And at those moments I sense the slow passage of time's long cycle, and the gifts which we may bequeath to those who follow us.

Edward Green: *Do you know Eli Siegel's essay "The Middle Ages, Say," which appeared nearly a century back in the December 1923 issue of the "Modern Quarterly"?*

Ben Bagby: No. Do you have it on-hand?

Edward Green: *Yes. And here's why I'd like to continue the interview by asking you to comment on it: because the passion he shows in the essay — a passion that justice come to the people of the medieval era — seems to me to strike a powerful ethical keynote for this interview. Equally, a scholarly and an artistic keynote, very much in keeping with the passion which has been at the center of your own pace-setting career as a scholar and performer of medieval music.*

Here's some of what Eli Siegel wrote; these sentences come from the end of the essay. It's prose, but the language is so beautiful and ardent, it's clear a poet is writing. What I love here is the ethical intensity: how he wants the full reality of the Middles Ages seen and honored; how he wants to put an end to any making it "picturesque," far-off, quaint, strange — wrongly distant from our own lives now, our own most immediate emotions.

> We need to look upon the people living then, as men — there were "individuals" and "personalities" and "egos" in the Middle Ages too — like our friends, our enemies and the people we meet on the street we don't care about much
>
> We should look on the past passionately; we should see all reality passionately, not only the part we have right under our noses or nearly that. Our feelings should have no limits in either extensity or intensity... Then we shall see the Middle Ages, that man-made division of reality in time, as having along with monks, kings, wars, Charlemagne, Battles of Hastings, Catholicism, ignorance, guilds, Thomas Aquinas, serfs, feudal systems, Marsiglio, Battles of Tours, and all, all the rest of such things — to be found in some text book or other every one; complexes, moonlights, moments for every century, creative instincts, repressions, amœbae, dirty stories, pains and pleasures, individual aspirations, desires, frustrations, adrenal glands and the others, ravishments, deaths for every person with the death pangs for each person, named and unnamed, love with all the details of love, and lastly, possibilities. The men of the Middle Ages had possibilities; part of them are seen working in man today. The rest of them are ours.

Ben Bagby: This is a very moving and heartfelt text about the universality of human experience, which in turn is reflected in the music we hear from any given period. Thank you for introducing me to it.

Edward Green: *You're very welcome.*

Ben Bagby: And I couldn't agree more that we should — we must — look on the past passionately, in detail, and not make generalizations based on stereotypes. For the Middle Ages, these stereotypes were too often formed by 19th-century Romanticism and later, by Hollywood (and by Wagner), in a process which continues to this day in fantasy series such as 'Game of Thrones', but also in the ubiquitous blandness of the 'Medieval Fair' and the clueless banalities of certain role-playing groups. I think Siegel's wise words could be equally applied to any

period, and any place and social condition in human history: pre-Confucian China, hunters on the African savanna, Frenchmen in powdered wigs discoursing on the rights of man, swooning Romantics in the German forests or Viennese salons, passionate Roman Republicans, the court of the Shogun, the cities of the Inca and Aztec, any empire you can name, or that elusive beast called 'Modern Democracy'.

Edward Green: *Recently, in these months of pandemic, you did a marvelous on-line presentation of the music of Oswald von Wolkenstein. I "zoomed" in on it, along with my wife, Carrie — and we both felt it was wonderful.*

Ben Bagby: Thank you. It was my first 'virtual concert' of the Covid era, and the experience was intensely weird, sitting alone in my room, singing into my laptop, knowing that perhaps 200 invisible people were listening, across the ocean. I suppose this is going to remain the new normal for a while yet.

Edward Green: *Including the work of your collaborator, the translator Lawrence Rosenwald. The English version he came up with was very moving. Sincere. Deep. The counterpoint of you singing the original, and Dr. Rosenwald reading his translation was thrilling.*

Ben Bagby: Yes, he is one of the most sensitive translators I know, with an ear for the singer, and for the essential orality of these texts, their structures and word-games. To that, he adds his own very distinctive voice. As a reciter of his translations, he is wonderful, very unique and inspiring. We had a lot of fun during that presentation, in spite of being on two sides of the Atlantic.

Edward Green: *Now, I was a bit amazed at how much of Wolkenstein's German from roughly 600 years back was immediately understandable — at least if one has some degree of fluency with modern German. It was very different with Beowulf; there — except for an occasional phrase like "any other man," most of it was impenetrable to modern English ears. Which made me glad when you performed it live you had a screen with a running translation. Why the difference?*

Ben Bagby: We need to bear in mind the telescoping effect of looking back in time. Both Beowulf and Wolkenstein count as 'medieval' but they are possibly 600 years apart, or more, in time. By the time Wolkenstein was making his poems, he was a sophisticated traveler who had seen the world and spoke (by his boasting) ten languages. When he wanted to record his songs for posterity, he personally oversaw the production of two manuscripts, and chose to write his songs in a more-or-less standardized literary German which he himself did not grow up speaking. This written language qualifies as 'early modern German' although it predates Luther's Bible by almost a hundred years. This is probably why you, and many other speakers of German, can understand so much of the text. The native German speaker can understand almost everything, in a way which might approximate our understanding of Chaucer or even the early Tudors. Wolkenstein also understood the musical notational system of his time (mensural notation of the 15th century), and so could accurately notate rhythms as he heard them.

The situation is much different with Beowulf, where we have an orally transmitted text which was, by serendipity, written in a manuscript in ca. 1020 by monks interested in preserving a [Christianized] pagan tale which was obviously beloved. It is the sole manuscript source for this text. There are many scribal errors and indeed there were two different scribes who understood the text in different ways, so that what we have in front of us by no means represents the work of a poetic creator who is documenting his masterpiece. It is a haphazard survival, from the early 11th century, of a text which may date back to the 8th century or earlier (this is still being debated). It's no wonder we do not understand the Anglo-Saxon language (also known as Old English), apart from a few phrases or specific words (ship, anker, man, sword) which have remained

unchanged since then. As the language of the ruling elite, English was replaced by Norman French in the 11th century and that transformation is audible now, so that modern English is a hybrid language, whereas Old English is a strictly Germanic language much more related to Old Norse than to Latin. But modern Germans and Scandinavians also have problems understanding it, and in fact only today's Frisian speakers (in the Netherlands) can really follow along with some success. There is no musical notation of any kind, and in fact we would have no reason to expect to find such a document. We know such tales were sung, often self-accompanied on the harp, but these performances never found their way into writing.

Edward Green: *Thanks for the detailed explanation. I want to say also that I cared very much for how you both spoke about Wolkenstein: the man, himself. And when you explained his text, it is remarkable that someone was so candid back then. I mean, it's more than a century before Montaigne! It made me wonder. I know Montaigne was affected by Rabelais, who was affected by Villon. But was there any impact — direct or indirect — of Wolkenstein?*

Ben Bagby: I'm not aware of any connection between Villon and Wolkenstein, but it might have simply been two parallel phenomena, or the 'Zeitgeist'. Wolkenstein was certainly an ambitious man with an oversized ego, which we might expect from a talented and ambitious youngster brought up in a lonely Alpine valley, who had dreams of the court, exotic faraway places, and hanging out with powerful aristocrats. He made himself into the poetic persona we venerate today, but his actual life was of course filled with petty strife, problems with women, with his family, and with money. Yes, his persona was huge, but probably the man himself was solving life's problems on a day-by-day basis, and, as Siegel reminds us, concerned with "...complexes, moonlights, moments for every century, creative instincts, repressions, amœbae, dirty stories, pains and pleasures, individual aspirations, desires, frustrations, adrenal glands and the others, ravishments, deaths for every person with the death pangs for each person, named and unnamed, love with all the details of love, and lastly, possibilities." Wolkenstein was particularly concerned with his own death, and wrote movingly about it in his songs.

Edward Green: *Montaigne is usually seen as the 1st person to make Self the "subject of subjects." And without Montaigne, it's hard to think Shakespeare would have achieved all he did. One more thing I'd like to ask you about now: from one point-of-view, Wolkenstein is not all that engaging as melodist. Compared to Machaut earlier, or Dufay, a bit later. Let alone some of the great early composers of the Sequences. But you took what he presented on that parchment manuscript and gave it your all. What you did (including knowing just when NOT to sing, or accompany on harp — also how to vary the rhythms so richly) — sparked the song, from a musical perspective, to life.*

Ben Bagby: Thanks.

Edward Green: *And am I right in thinking that the melodic core of "Es fugt sich" is a lot like "Scarborough Fair?" In other words: does it make sense to think of Simon & Garfunkel when listening to Wolkenstein?*

Ben Bagby: In a sense, sure. Meanwhile, like any medieval artist or musician, Oswald had no trouble 'borrowing' melodic material from elsewhere. Not across centuries, naturally — *not* from Simon and Garfunkel.

Edward Green: *For sure!*

Ben Bagby: And borrowing was common in a world which had no concept of artistic copyright or ownership. To copy was to venerate, and creative re-purposing was the rule. A long story song like the Wolkenstein one you mention, which lasts almost 15 minutes, doesn't really require a complex melody, since it must serve many purposes. This is why you hear a relatively simple and straightforward modal melody, mostly syllabic, which contains no rhythmic information whatsoever, so that the text itself can determine the rhythm. This type of melody is also commonly found in late

medieval Germany: honest and balanced, slightly neutral, a vehicle the poets called a 'Ton', to which any number of texts might be sung. But Oswald also wrote some of the strangest and most sophisticated melodies of the 15th century, with chromatic alterations, and complex rhythmic play. So, it's more a case of using the right tool for the job. In addition, he happily adapted well-beloved French and Italian courtly songs, some of them polyphonic, to his own texts. He was omnivorous.

Edward Green: *Yes, I heard all that on your album of his songs. I was very glad, too, for your compact — yet vivid — explanation of the level of musical education Wolkenstein would have had. And the fact that in other of his manuscripts he was up-to-date as to music theory. I assume this meant rhythmic procedures and notation, and — perhaps? — polyphony, too. Yes?*

Photo 5. Dr. Lawrence Rosenwald, Wellesly College [photo credit: Kenneth Freundlich]

Ben Bagby: He was a curious and ambitious man, with many interests, and widely travelled. As such, he would have come into contact with the greatest musicians of his time, especially in ca. 1415–17, when he was present for much of the Council of Constance, a huge gathering of high churchmen and nobles, who arrived with their retinues, their knights, courtiers and entertainers, and their own clergy, cantors, composers and chapel choirs. That must have been a heady mix of ideas, sounds, and personalities, perfect for a polyglot like Wolkenstein. Musical notation was a hotly debated topic in those days, but also the increasing virtuosity of polyphony, about which Wolkenstein certainly understood a great deal. But at the same time, he was also performing his own story-songs and entertaining the German-speaking high nobility with his witty verses, even to the point of criticizing the local taverns, brothels, and price gougers. Like all big meetings or conferences, this was a unique chance to network and schmooze with the rich and powerful, and there was no lack for big egos, hustlers, and ambitious men in the medieval church.

Edward Green: *But above all, what I loved most about the presentation was the sheer joy of it. So often that's missing in the modern presentation of medieval music; a certain "grayness" comes over it too, too often in my experience.*

Ben Bagby: There are so many genres and shades of medieval music — after all, we are discussing a period of 700 years or more, across the wide geographical area of Europe, so it's very hard to make generalizations. Some types of music are indeed introspective, ritualized, and intellectual, whereas others may well be extroverted and designed to entertain, to amuse, to provoke. Again: the spectrum is vast. In the case of this one song which we performed and discussed, it was a modern performer giving voice to a slightly neurotic egomaniac, telling his life-story, and hoping the listeners will sympathize. So of course, the energy in the presentation was intense, often hilarious, but not always joyful. In fact, he ends the song on a dark note, fearing the fires of hell which may await his soul.

Edward Green: *On this point — the joy, the fun which was very much part of medieval times — I'd like to quote a poem I love very much. And having already quoted some prose by Eli Siegel on the medieval era, it's a poem*

of his: "Night in 1242," which appeared in his book "Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana," [Definition Press]. It's very surprising in its everydayness: no popes; no drawbridges; no crusades: just two children wanting to have fun! A mother is in it, too.

And this from a year which — as Eli Siegel knew — had lots of "bigger" events: Alexander Nevsky defeating the Teutonic Knights in the famous "Battle on the Ice;" or the battle of Grobnicko Polje, where the Croats halted the Mongolian invasion of Europe. How meaningful the "everyday" is in this poem:

In 1242 people looked at the sun.
Let's have some fun,
Said Jane Terrell to John Hodge in 1242.
Jane was so little, John was so little,
in 1242.
So they tried to pull off some branches
from a tree,
a tree that was near them.
John couldn't and Jane laughed.
John laughed back and said she couldn't
do near as well as he.
Jane laughed back and said anyway
it was funny the way he tried.
Jane's mother came out. Where have
you been all this time? she asked.
Jane said: Mother, I haven't been
out long.
Why, it's almost dark, said Jane's mother,
and I haven't seen you since
noon when the sun was right above
us shining very hotly
and brightly.
Goodbye, John, said Jane, laughingly.
John was rather angry at the way she
laughed;
he didn't like her then for it.
It was about dark now.
Very soon it was night in 1242.
There were other nights in 1242,
and the sun came every time
before these nights,
and came every time
there was a night;
So there were sun and night in 1242.
In 1242, there were sun and night.

Ben Bagby: Specificity is everything! As this thought-provoking, charming poem makes clear, there is no such thing as 'the Middle Ages', but rather a multiplicity of specific persons, places and events. The dates and definitions we use today were largely inherited from the 19th century, including the term 'Middle Ages' — how ridiculous is that? And the word 'Gothic'? It's evocative and provokes a feeling which probably a thoughtful Jungian could explain to us, but as history it's completely without real meaning. Who knows what scholars and performers, 700 years from now, will be calling the times we currently live in, times which contain for us so much specificity, such a clear identity. Our era will certainly be given a name we would find ridiculous and hopelessly clueless.

Edward Green: *Let's hope not! But you may well be right.*

Ben Bagby: To return to the poem: when I was a student, I kept a little memory notebook which was devoted to historical events in one particularly fertile century in European cultural and political life (1150–1250), with one page reserved for each year in that period. And as I learned details about a given year, I filled those pages with notes and descriptions, so that the individual years themselves, previously expressed only as impassive numbers, slowly took on life, identity, and personality. If I could ever find that notebook again, I'd be curious to see what I wrote on the page for 1242.

Edward Green: *For me, as a fan of the Eisenstein movie and Prokofiev's great score for it, had I done what you did, I'm sure Alexander Nevsky would have been my choice.*

Ben Bagby: Well, I hope my notebook shows up sometime; then, we'll compare notes. Meanwhile, it's the same for you and me even now. If somebody mentioned to us the year 1970, we would each call up a host of similar and specific feelings, pictures, people, images and sounds from that one year, in our student days. It would have a quality, an aura, a vibe. But if you mentioned that year to one of my students born in the

1990's, they would stare blankly and perhaps mention the Beatles or something about their parents being born then. Events and people slip into the foggy past so quickly.

Edward Green: *Speaking of academic circles, you recently retired from a position at the Sorbonne — yes?*

Ben Bagby: Between 2005 and 2018 I was on the music faculty of the Sorbonne — University of Paris, as a part-time associate professor, teaching in a newly-created master's degree program for the performance of chant and medieval music. Our students were quite international (we had students from France, Italy, USA, UK, Ireland, Argentina, Colombia, Spain, Russia, Poland, and Japan) and mostly vocalists, wanting to specialize in music before 1300, learn techniques for accessing medieval manuscript sources and bring them to performance. There was an emphasis on liturgical chant, but also polyphony and secular song, and they studied notation, counterpoint, history, languages, and medieval techniques for improvisation. Each year ended with a public student concert, which was usually of an extremely high quality.

Edward Green: *Was that your first academic posting? Or had you held formal positions earlier? If so, where?*

Ben Bagby: Although I have taught many courses, summer workshops and limited guest professorships regularly over the past 40 years, the posting at the Sorbonne was my first and only such formal position. Previous to that, my entire career had been spent as a free-lance musician, as a founding member of my ensemble (Sequentia) and as a soloist. More recently, I have been teaching as an adjunct instructor in medieval performance practice as part of a master's program at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen (Germany). We presently have students from Germany, Slovenia, Korea, and USA.

Edward Green: *I'd like now to engage you in something like a lightning round — for the purpose of your giving us apt, if surprising,*

Photo 6. Sequentia, 2020.
Left to right above: Jasmina Črnčič, Bagby;
left to right below: Norbert Rodenkirchen, Ian Harrison
[photo credit: Gesine Bänfer]

relations between medieval music and musicians, and people (and compositions) more familiar now. Kinships of spirit, say. Or of technique. Or of subject matter. So — I'll name someone, or something, and then who or what comes to mind, say, roughly between the years 500 and 1500, or so. And perhaps you might swiftly say why you see or hear that kinship.

Ben Bagby: Good; I'm up for it.

Edward Green: *OK — first: Franz Joseph Haydn.*

Ben Bagby: What comes to mind is structural clarity, the desire for an established order and hierarchy, but also the occasional surprise. I suppose the medieval musician who first comes to my mind with that combination of qualities in his music is the 15th century Gilles Binchois, who wrote charming, pristine little polyphonic chansons in the 'Burgundian' style.

Edward Green: *Next: the Beatles.*

Ben Bagby: The overwhelming power of love. Music can be the love-potion, similar to the one which Tristan and Isolde drank. Humans are powerless to act in that moment.

Edward Green: *And were there any "performance / composition" collectives, so-to-speak, that could be seen as roughly parallel to the Beatles, that come to mind to you from the medieval centuries?*

Ben Bagby: We might look to the assembly of composers, arrangers, scribes, artists, translators, and poets who were, we assume, called together by the Castilian King Alfonso X ('The Learned') in the mid-13th century. He ordered that a collection of sung Marian miracle-stories and canticles of praise be put together, the 'Cantigas de Santa Maria', of which he was the nominal author but for which he actually functioned more as editor, facilitator, and paymaster. More than 400 Cantigas were gathered together, in luxurious illustrated manuscripts, in a process which must have involved a huge amount of collaboration, coordination, re-writing, translation and design. There were certainly multiple sources, possibly even the king himself, but all these songs were normalized into the Galician-Portuguese language, considered more fitting for such poetry, and not Castilian or Latin. There is no direct witness to this process, but it can only have come to pass in a 'collective' such as you describe. Of course, those amazing artists, true to their beliefs, remained forever anonymous.

Edward Green: *Continuing: how about the musical* West Side Story*?*

Ben Bagby: In a rigid world of 'them' versus 'us', the forbidden lovers must meet in secret, but their 'loved ones' conspire against them. The medieval story it most reminds me of, at least in the basic feeling, is the fateful love affair between Abelard and Heloise, in 12th-century Paris. The older scholar (a brilliant and controversial lecturer in philosophy, obviously an irresistible man) and his beautiful young student fall into a passion which is discovered, and results in his being castrated by her male relatives. This event does not end the enmity of their clans, but the lovers do remain true to one another throughout their lives, exchanging letters from their respective monasteries, trying to transcend their youthful passion into a love which is more spiritual. Their letters are studied and admired to this day.

Edward Green: *Let's now have Beethoven. This interview is taking place almost to the day of his 250th birthday!*

Ben Bagby: And certainly it's right that there's a world-wide celebration. So, with Beethoven, again, what comes immediately to mind is the awesome mastery of structure and tonal language — as I said about Haydn — but with Beethoven even more the desire to push past its limits in finding expression for basic human emotions: love, freedom, justice, transcendence. In a similar way the earliest church polyphony (here thinking of Leoninus, ca. 1200) built upon the venerable structure of Gregorian Chant, to create new vertical and temporal structures, sung freely at times, which transcended the original, to the point where that 'Gregorian' original was almost entirely imperceptible (in the time of Perotinus, early

13th century). In turn, bits and pieces of these radical polyphonic creations served to carry a new text, which could be about The Virgin Mary, or about erotic love. These were called motets. A constant re-purposing of the past, dynamic and fearless — (did someone mention Beethoven?)

Edward Green: *And Bartøk.*

Ben Bagby: Here I think of the power of modal music, oral tradition and local practice, and of the power of language to inflect rhythm and hence musical expression. Where would Bartøk be without the magnificent cadences of Hungarian, and the folk traditions of his countrymen which he knew and studied so closely? And where would Machaut be without the complexities of French, and the melodies of his predecessors, the trouvères, whose work he surely knew and venerated?

Edward Green: *And sticking with the famous "B" composers, how about Bach?*

Ben Bagby: I'll pass on Bach. Too monumental.

Edward Green: *Sure, I understand that! Switching a bit: as you know, I've done a lot of scholarly work in relation to jazz, and in particular, Duke Ellington. So — what parallels do you find there? And, specifically, does any medieval person remind you, in a strong way, of Ellington? Any great and constantly innovative "band-leaders," for example?*

Ben Bagby: We have no direct information that such a thing as a 'band' existed in courtly music of the Middle Ages. Of course, there were gatherings of minstrels and performers of all sorts whenever a Church council was called, or an official court festivity, or a yearly trade fair, and we cannot rule out that musicians got together to combine their forces on such occasions. But we should bear in mind that medieval instruments were not standardized by any means, neither in sound quality nor in tuning, so that it would require a monumental effort simply to get a group to play in tune in any given mode. Duke had the piano as a basis, and standardized band instruments which were all tuned the same way. To continue this comparison: medieval instrumental music was transmitted uniquely by oral tradition, and there was no such thing as a score, arrangement, or lead sheet of any kind. In fact, most musicians would have had no need to read musical notation at all. Add to this the simple fact that players had their own personal way of performing and were used to being soloists (or in a few cases, we read of duos), and you have a recipe for disaster with a large group of individualists. Although we can see depictions of idealized 'angel consorts' in 15th-century painting (4–5 instruments or more), the band tradition, as such, did not really come into being until the 16th century, with the formation of courtly instruments into matched 'consorts' (especially viols and winds), for which composers wrote new pieces, which could be performed from part books. So, I'll have to pass on the Ellington comparison.

Edward Green: *Well, despite the absence of "The Duke," that was one enlightening answer, anyway! Now, turning in a different direction: who, among your colleagues these decades, do you admire most for their contributions to the understanding of medieval music? And/or to the compelling performance of it?*

Ben Bagby: One performer in particular whom I admire is Katarina Livljanić, the founder and director of the ensemble *Dialogos*, who has done amazing work with the rediscovery of Glagolitic Chant from her native Dalmatia, as well as Beneventan chant, the earliest polyphonies from Winchester, and ground-breaking music-theater productions such as Tondal's Vision and the tale of Barlaam and Josaphat. An amazing artist and scholar.

Edward Green: *We have, in this territory, at least one colleague in common: Edward Roesner. When I was doing my PhD at NYU, I took every medieval course he offered. I remember conversations with him about the value to any jazz or blues scholar of being trained as a medievalist — including how to reconstruct music for which very little detailed notation (if any) exists. This, of*

Photo 7. Katarina Livljanic, Dialogos and Kantaduri Ensembles in concert. Zagreb, July 2014

course, brings us back to the question I asked earlier about how you did the "Beowulf" and the Wolkenstein.

Circling back a bit: as I said, early on in the interview, I vividly remember your Oberlin performances of non-medieval music. Also, your theatrical performances. Do you branch out still? Or have you pretty much focused your life as a performer and scholar on the medieval era?

Ben Bagby: Sequentia was founded in 1977 and since then I have been doing basically nothing but medieval music, and almost exclusively with my own ensemble or as a soloist. In our early years of poverty in Cologne, I took limited jobs with other ensembles (Ensemble Organum, Collegium Vocale Köln) simply to remain active and pay the bills. In those first years in Cologne (ca. 1977–1981), most of our friends were young composers in the scene around Stockhausen, Kagel, Kontarsky and their students, and several of them (Clarence Barlow, Kevin Volans, Johannes Fritsch, Walter Zimmermann) wrote pieces for us. There was a flourishing loft-music culture. I once sang in a production of Stockhausen's 'Sternklang' in Bonn, which gave me the unique opportunity to work with him, his son Markus, and the conductor Peter Eötvös. It was a heady time: a lot of loft concerts, intense conversations, and many cigarettes (remember those?). But after that time, the scene shifted, our ensemble started working full-time, and I ceased performing other repertoires. My love of theater has been kept alive by my work with Beowulf and the dramatic nature of Sequentia's concert programs in general.

Edward Green: *Speaking of non-medieval music, I was happy to learn, from a conversation we had at Lincoln Center some years back, that you are in the direct family line of George William Bagby (1828–1883) — one of America's best humorists of the time. He was also, I gather, a physician. I learned of his work from a lecture Eli Siegel gave in which he read an "Account" by Bagby of the impact of a concert given by Anton Rubinstein in New York. Do you know it?*

Ben Bagby: Yes. A little history: the Bagby family came to Virginia from northern England in the early 17th century, probably to plant tobacco, and stayed there well into

the 19th century until some of them (my branch) ventured 'out west' (in those days, west meant Kentucky). I am not proud to be a very distant relative of the racist essayist G. W. Bagby, active in Richmond, who was an unapologetic defender of the Old South, the Confederacy, and Slavery. His comical piece on Rubinstein is anything but subtle, and must have struck a chord at the time. If you read his other essays, you'll see that he lived on another planet, a planet I do not care to visit. I would much prefer to have a drink with another distant cousin, Albert Morris Bagby, who had studied piano with Liszt in Weimar, not with much success, it seems, and later lived in New York City where he became an impresario, organizing the city's first public chamber music series in the ballroom of the old Walldorf Hotel. He also published a truly awful novel about the adventure of an American girl studying piano with Liszt: 'Miss Träumerei'. Later, he started a charitable foundation to help care for elderly and infirm musicians who had fallen on hard times (this was in an age before musicians' unions), and in fact The Bagby Foundation still exists. Moral? We all have good and bad skeletons in the closets of our family trees.

Edward Green: *Perhaps! In any event, this is the point in the interview where readers can learn a bit more about your background: family, early years, etc. Anything in particular which you'd like to share? The most obvious question is: what was your first big emotion about music? And that leads to the next obvious question: when did you decide that music was the career for you? — and why?*

Ben Bagby: My brother was a jazz musician, and my father had a lovely voice, so there was always music around our house, also in church and in my schools. I have a distinct memory of Van Cliburn at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow (1958?) and the intensity of his playing. My mother had an LP of Chopin polonaises which I simply adored, and when she noticed that enthusiasm, she gave me for my birthday an LP of Mozart and Beethoven symphonies (which I still own). Of course, I had to endure the obligatory piano lessons which were *de rigueur* for a child of my time and circumstances. But later, in middle school around age 12, I discovered singing, and how music liberated us kids from suburban banality. At age 14, I saw a performance of Tosca in Chicago which totally blew me away, and then obtained a recording of Fischer-Dieskau singing Schubert. The musical blessings were falling around me, right and left. In school, I was in every musical production, every play, every vocal concert. But also counting the days until my escape. The rest of the story has been told already.

Edward Green: *As you know from our many conversations over the years, I see the philosophic work of Eli Siegel — like his poetry — as having permanent cultural value of a very large kind. In fact, I think the one solidly universal statement of aesthetics that exists, is the one he made: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." To my mind, this principle joins Art and Life in an eternal bond of friendship; it explains both.*

So, I'd like to ask you: what particular aspects, or persons, or works, of medieval music seem to you to exemplify, in a particularly vivid way, certain relations of opposites. Of course, feel free to explain in deep technical detail if you like.

First: the opposites of Energy and Repose.

Ben Bagby: Here, I would call to mind the liturgy of the medieval church, in which singing played an absolutely essential role, together with movement and gesture, the spoken word, and silence. I think the constant juxtaposition of these elements creates a kind of Neo-Platonic vision of the cosmos, wheels turning within wheels, at different speeds, and yet totally interconnected, and the total harmony which this represented for the medieval mind. A vast world-machine oscillating between energy and repose, run by a 'master mechanic' or prime mover. Anyone who has heard a medieval mass, or a real sung Latin mass, will have sensed a

Photo 8. Sequentia, 2017.
Left to right: Norbert Rodenkirchen, Hanna Marti, Ben Bagby
[photo credit: Johannes Ritter]

faint glimmer of what that was felt 700 years ago and more.

Edward Green: *Next: the opposites of Freedom and Order.*

Ben Bagby: From one perspective, we can say that there was no concept of Freedom as such in medieval music, just as the concept of personal freedom was a non-starter in a world ruled inexorably from above, both in this life and the next. In fact, Order was ordained in all things and respected, and anything not ordered was either the work of the Devil or it was darkness, chaos. Therefore, it's very difficult to discuss this particular set of opposites, which would have had little or no clear meaning for the medieval intellectual. As an example of the status of order, I might mention Hildegard von Bingen's 12th century music drama, *Ordo Virtutum* (literally, 'The Order of the Virtues'), in which a human soul is seduced by the Devil away from the Virtues and salvation, and into 'the world', only to be abused. She comes crawling back, bruised and beaten, and is received again by the Virtues (led by Humility), regaining her immortal soul. In this play, the parts of the Soul (Anima) and all of the Virtues are notated for singing, often with quite virtuosic vocal parts. But the lines delivered by the Devil, words of insult, blasphemy, and abuse, are not sung, but spoken with a rough voice (Hildegard specifies: 'strepitu'). The Devil, being from the world of evil and bondage, cannot know the gift of singing, which is the essence of order and liberation.

Edward Green: *Liberation — sounds like "freedom."*

Ben Bagby: True! And there is, indeed, another aspect to the relation of order and freedom in the musical sphere of the Middle Ages, which centers on what we would today call 'improvisation'. The bedrock of all medieval musical creation (at least that

we can see in manuscripts) was the corpus of Frankish liturgical chant known as Gregorian Chant. I will have to make a long story short: this huge body of music was transmitted orally during a period of several hundred years, before being first written down during the reign of Charlemagne (early 9th century). For this purpose of documentation, musical notation was first codified in the West. All of the many manuscripts attest to an enormous uniformity and respect for tradition. But then, upon this solid base, the idea of the 'cantus firmus' emerged, a platform for the creation of new melodies (polyphonic extemporization in two and three, or even four voices), sometimes sung 'ex tempore' but later notated, or the addition of new texts (sequences, tropes, and later the polyphonic motet), all done without violating the sacred order of the original chant. This was certainly a field of creativity for medieval musicians, who were searching for ways to respect the untouchable liturgical essence, while at the same time engaging in the freedom of building new vertical polyphonic structures, adding new texts, adding rhythmic elements, and manipulating the sense of time. It began as a spontaneous process of extemporaneous singing (we know of treatises which teach this by giving models), which later was codified into compositional techniques. And so the original freedom slowly went back into the world of order.

Edward Green: *Yes, the opposites do merge, in so many ways. Now, let me ask you about the opposites of Roughness and Smoothness — so big in the physical world, but also in the world of human feeling: how things are impeded, difficult, but also easy-going, even sweetly so.*

Ben Bagby: I could once again mention the scene between the Soul and the Devil: the angelic quality of sing vs. the roughness of the Devil's rough spoken voice ('strepitu' — we still say 'strep throat').

There certainly was 'rough' music at all times in history (also in 1242) but since it lived uniquely in oral tradition, it was not deemed worthy of being documented for posterity. The musical manuscripts which have survived, did so for a reason: they were important, authentic, repositories of worthy song, having 'auctoritas' and 'gravitas', and meriting the incredible expense and effort of making a parchment manuscript, which required hundreds of animal skins, precious ink and pigments, a team of expert scribes and designers, and the whole laborious process of making those individual folios into books. No 'rough' music was going to be thought worthy of such treatment. That would have to wait for the invention of printing, in the 15th century, which made more kinds of music available to people of more limited means. The world of parchment manuscripts is a world of smoothness.

Edward Green: *Finally: the opposites of Heaviness and Lightness — including, as they are in our feelings, so much — Seriousness and Playfulness.*

Ben Bagby: Here, I should stress again that the music of the liturgy (which accounts for a vast majority of the surviving medieval music manuscripts) involves the vocalization of holy texts, destined for reflection, contemplation, and study. As such, they are not considered Light or Playful, and yet within the liturgy there certainly can be lighter and heavier moments, when the relative lightness of an antiphon envelops the more profound texts of the Psalms, or when a complex and highly virtuosic responsory follows a reading of scripture. Then, in response to this liturgically heavy seriousness, there are new creations from the 12th and 13th centuries, usually associated with a certain class of clerical orders: young men and boys, who had their own feast days in the time following Christmas (especially Saint Stephen, and the Holy Innocents, as well as the feast of the Circumcision). For these holy days, the Church created a certain amount of lightness, frivolity, and role-playing, with a boy bishop, processions with a donkey, and even some tolerated misbehavior (which we learn about from the complaints of visiting priests). Whether as a means of letting off steam after strenuous liturgies of Advent and

Christmas, or as an expression in the joy of youth, the idea of winter darkness turning back towards light (more opposites!), these are definitely moments of "the making one of opposites."

Edward Green: *Yes, and just how much light and dark affect people is a field for constant study. Delightful study. So — I'd like to conclude with a question that is meant quite seriously, but off-hand seems paradoxical: "What is the Future of Medieval Music?" By which I mean, what new direction of understanding do you think musicians need to go in, in order to even more richly and fully be fair to the reality that was the medieval world, medieval aesthetics, medieval thought, emotion, and music?*

Ben Bagby: Any discussion of the future of medieval music must start with the way music is taught, and how students gravitate towards one repertoire or another. Medieval musicians generally lived in a series of interlocking oral traditions and had memory skills which we can hardly imagine. They learned by listening and doing, in a process of long-term dedication and endless repetition. The main modern convention which is contrary to something we might call a 'medieval way' is the slavish veneration we have for written sources, for the primacy of 'the score.'

In the Middle Ages, musical notation was known since the 9th century, but mostly for the documentation of chant. However, notation was basically never used for purposes of performance. Throughout most of the medieval period, cantors would rarely put a manuscript on a music stand and sing from it. The later concept of the performance score was unknown, and the cult of the genius composer was basically still in its infancy as late as the 14th century. Most medieval musical works were created — and later written down — anonymously.

Although the last forty years have witnessed an expansion of the number of music schools which teach early music performance, the spectrum of repertoires and styles in music before, say, Beethoven, is simply too large to offer instruction in all types and genres of historical music. Early music (which is now generally called HIP — 'Historically Informed Performance'), once thought to be a limited body of primitive works (which a music-history professor of mine once referred to collectively as 'pre-music'), is in fact an overwhelmingly varied complex of repertoires. In contrast, the traditional classical-music conservatory is inevitably evolving into the role of 'specialist' school, offering instruction in a period of music which encompasses roughly 250 years, whereas an early music program must contend with at least a thousand years of documented musical creation. The trend is clear: along with jazz, world music, and electronic music, most professional music schools today offer a course of study in something called early music, which in most cases means instruction in Baroque-music performance. But in the environment of early music study, the medieval period — and for that matter, the Renaissance — is still largely neglected.

Edward Green: *Having spent myself now close to 40 years teaching in a major Conservatory and knowing a fair amount about other schools of music in the United States, I can vouch for what you are saying. We've strayed far from the most time-tested mode of music education: Master-Apprentice.*

Ben Bagby: Right — and, of course, that relationship was an integral element of oral transmission as a way of keeping traditions alive and strong. Later it was formalized into something we associate with guilds, a process which began for musical composition and poetry in the 13th century. But the guild phenomenon is already a sign of formalization and rigidity, and it was only a matter of time until learning could be shifted to printed documents, books, and musical scores. Then came the shift to screens, and here we are, with our fabulous capacity for information retrieval and storage, but our vastly diminished capacity for memory. Orality in musical transmission can be a fertile ground for

creative tension, but this is not what music schools are generally interested in pursuing in the training of young musicians. The basic course of study in all early-music schools remains focused on the traditional model for performers: the technical mastery of an instrument or voice, the learning of the canon of pieces most performed, the acquisition of a sense of appropriate style and ornamentation, the chance to work in ensembles with expert coaches, advanced master classes with famous performers, and finally, competitions. We can hardly expect students of Baroque music to be interested in a world where music was transmitted orally, where rhetoric and ancient languages are as important as music, where improvisational skills are valued more than sight-reading. It's messy, time-consuming, and difficult to evaluate with traditional exams and juries.

Edward Green: *All the more reason for music educators in general — not just in the field of medieval music — to rethink these "traditions." We should start with the bedrock question: what will most encourage our students to keep alive their beginning emotion about music — their love for it — and not squelch that love, or stunt it, through a cold and impersonal academicism.*

Ben Bagby: Right. And that's why I think a dedicated school for medieval music would need to approach this type of study very differently. I have always dreamed of starting a school which pursues these essential aspects of musical study, but it remains a dream and I am the first to admit that there is simply not a critical mass of students — especially paying students — who would be interested, nor is there enough solid employment opportunity waiting for such students when they finish their diplomas.

Without a doubt, the big energy field now in early-music performance is the Baroque — and for singers, especially, Baroque opera — where there is an infrastructure, a solid career to be built and a decent living to be earned. We lack enough passionately interested and gifted candidates for serious, full-time institutional programs in medieval-music performance, and this situation guarantees that the general level of performance skill will continue to remain generally static. Expectations remain correspondingly low, and as a result medieval music performance

Photo 9. Sequentia, 2006

does not enjoy the competitive ascending spiral of excellence which the Baroque music scene has so brilliantly created. Luckily, there are some wonderful exceptions to this state of affairs, but they remain exceptions. Recent students of mine have given me cause for hope that this situation will change in the years to come. I hope I'm around to witness that.

Edward Green: *I do, too. And thank you very, very much for this engaging interview.*

Ben Bagby: You're certainly welcome.

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