



Basevi Codex - Music at the Court of Margaret of Austria

aud 97.783

EAN: 4022143977830



www.musicweb-international.com (2022.08.17)
source: http://www.musicweb-international.com/Cl...



Marguerite of Austria lived from 1480 to 1530. From 1507 until her death she acted as governor of the Low Countries. Her court in Malines was not only a centre of political power, but a cultural centre as well. She herself was well educated, spoke several languages, wrote poetry, painted and played the clavichord. During her reign many writers and artists visited the court. Music had a special place at the court, to a large extent because of the dominance of Franco-Flemish musicians and composers in Europe. Marguerite left a couple of books with music, generally known as her 'chanson albums'. These contain some sacred pieces, but mainly secular works by composers such as Josquin Desprez, Alexander Agricola, Gaspar van Weerbeke, Heinrich Isaac, Jacob Obrecht and Pierre de la Rue.

The present disc is devoted to one of her chanson books. However, the name is that given to a copy which was commissioned by a wealthy Italian family, probably the patrician family Agostini of Siena, as the codex includes its coat of arms. In the 19th century an Italian collector, Abramo Basevi, acquired the codex and eventually donated it to the conservatory at Florence, where it is still preserved today.

The Basevi Codex comes from the workshop of Peter Alamire, the most famous music scribe of his time. To him we owe numerous collections of music by Franco-Flemish composers. The results of his work disseminated across Europe, often as a gift from one ruler to another. The Codex is divided into two sections: the first includes pieces for four voices, the second three-part items. In total the collection comprises 87 pieces, mostly secular, in Latin, Italian, French and Dutch. It opens with a motet in praise of the Virgin Mary.

The performers point out what are the problems modern interpreters have to solve if they want to perform the pieces from such a collection. One problem is the text: often the lyrics are incomplete or entirely absent. This problem has to be solved if one wants to perform them with a singer, as is the case here. But even in a purely instrumental performance, knowing the text may help to find the right way of performing them. It was decided to perform the chansons in two different ways. Some items are entirely played, in others the upper voice is sung, whereas the remaining voices are played by recorders. These were very common practices, apart from performances by voices alone. The upper parts could be ornamented, both in a vocal and an instrumental performance, as is the case here.

The Codex also bears witness to the popularity of some melodies which were set or arranged by different composers. The chanson Fors seulement, for instance,



appears in eight different versions in the Codex. Four of them are included here. The versions by Johannes Ghiselin and Matthaëus Pipelare are performed instrumentally, whereas in those by Pierre de La Rue and Johannes Ockeghem the upper voice is sung; in those cases the text is divided among the two versions. Notable is that the Codex also includes some sacred works, and several of them - among them sections from Jacob Obrecht's *Missa Fortuna desperata* - are performed here. It attests to the fact that this kind of repertoire could also be performed outside the liturgy, as domestic entertainment, in the same way as secular music.

If it is decided to perform this repertoire with a consort of instruments and a voice, it is of utmost importance that the latter does not act as a soloist. He or she should rather be part of the ensemble, like a register in the organ. The Boreas Quartett Bremen could hardly have made a better choice: Dorothee Miels has a vast experience in early music, and is able to adapt her voice to the sound of the recorders. Her performances are admirable, and her skills in the addition of ornaments very impressive. They are sometimes quite virtuosic and come off very well thanks to the flexibility of her voice. The Boreas Quartett Bremen is one of many recorder quartets, which often play English renaissance music and music of our time. This quartet has made an interesting choice of repertoire: a copy of the Basevi Codex was given to them after a concert, which has turned out to be a most fruitful gift. This disc is not only an impressive testimony of their qualities, but - more importantly - sheds light on music life at the court of Marguerite of Austria and performance practice in her time. This is a disc every lover of renaissance music may want to have,

On a technical note: in the digital booklet the order of the lyrics has been mixed up.

**Basevi Codex - Music at the Court of Margaret of Austria**

Dorothee Mielsds (soprano)  
 Boreas Quartett Bremen  
 rec. 2020, Bassum, Germany  
 Texts and translations included  
 Reviewed as a stereo 16/44 download with pdf  
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**Johan van Veen**