

POR NOS VIRGEN MADRE (Cantigas de Santa Maria)

Nancy Mayer - mezzosoprano

Annemieke Cantor - alto

Armin Janda - lute

Markus Tapio - fiddle

Jankees Braaksma - organetto, recorder

Arguably, the 'Cantigas de Santa Maria' is the finest medieval collection of music. These miracle stories of the Blessed Virgin Mary were collected by order of King Alphonso X (the Wise) (1221-1284), probably in imitation of the famous 13th-century collection of Marian miracle stories '*Miracles de Notre Dame*' by Gautier de Coincy (1177-1236), a *trouvère* (minstrel) from northern France.

Alphonso X's main reason for systematically collecting Marian songs – quite apart from his love of poetry and story-telling – may well have been his devotion to the Virgin Mary.

To him the Blessed Virgin is what the 'ideal lady' is to the troubadour; it is an instance of parallelism quite common in the Middle Ages. In this light the Cantigas may be regarded as a transformation of the courtly *fin'amor* of the troubadours into 'celestial' love.

Alphonso X was a successful patron of the arts and learning, and the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* is the most significant work in his extensive literary oeuvre.

It is remarkable that the Cantigas were not written in Castilian, the language spoken at the court of Alphonso X, but in Galician-Portuguese, an artificial language used for lyric poetry. The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* survive in four manuscript sources. The beautiful pictures in the most important manuscript, the richly illuminated *El Escorial (B.I.2) (Codex Princeps)*, provide plentiful information about the musical instruments used at the end of the 13th century.

Thanks to Alphonso's editorial skills these upward of 450 Marian miracles were neatly arranged: each series of nine *cantigas de miragre* is followed by a *cantiga de loor*, a song of praise in honour of Mary.

Since the melodies as found in the manuscripts are monophonic, each performance of the Cantigas is unique; they are a source of inspiration and, also, speculation. Possible approaches that are open to consideration for the performer are 'arabic' in character or show 'sephardic' influences.

The 'colouring' of our performance is inspired by the influence the southern French troubadours must have wielded in the north of Spain, after their expulsion from the south of France. It is mainly characterized by simplicity and a sparsity of embellishment.

In our opinion this manner of performance does full justice to the striking beauty of the melodies and the poetic strength of the Cantigas.