

Folk Evolution

Classical Review

By [Rick Walters](#)



What is early music? Once in a while an innovative concert on the excellent Early Music Now series raises that question. The vocal ensemble Trio Mediaeval, from Oslo, pushed boundaries and definitions in a program of Norwegian folk songs last Friday night at All Saints' Cathedral.

Folk music is old music by nature, its anonymous origins lost in time, passed from one singer to another, and undoubtedly undergoing changes along the way. I recall folk music as incidental content on past Early Music Now concerts, but not as an entire program. There is no need to be a philistine about it. This was an exciting, fresh, musically accomplished evening.

As implied by its name, Trio Mediaeval has more customarily performed conventionally composed old European music (though, by necessity, with some arranging), as well as contemporary pieces. In this compelling concert of intricate folk song arrangements one sensed the group evolving into something new.

Anna Maria Friman, Linn Andrea Fuglseth and Torunn Østrem Ossum all have voices that are pure and naturally light in vibrato, blending easily and singing wonderfully in tune. Each is a capable soloist, and can also sustain complex vocal accompaniments to the principal tune.

Many numbers were accompanied by Terje Isungset on jaw harp (also known as the jew's harp) and an array of natural percussion (stones, tiny bells, drums). Isungset is a jazz musician, and applied that free, improvisatory aesthetic in his work with the trio. Throughout the evening one could sense the lonesome, barren landscape of the north. Isungset helped paint these canvases of northern sounds with taste and subtlety.

The program was beautifully paced, presenting a variety of moods, often enhanced by the strange, stylized words common in folk song. The captivating wordless pieces, based on the folk tradition of tralling (or tulling, or sulling) would not be out of place at a Present Music concert. The lakk (or laling) is another wordless folk tradition derived from summoning cattle home. A vivid number in this style was a highlight, with Isungset on ram's horn answering the women's lively calls.

Harmony enriches Trio Mediaeval's austere melodies

By ELAINE SCHMIDT, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Posted: Nov. 22, 2008

Trio Mediaeval, a female vocal ensemble from Oslo, Norway, brought an entrancing program of traditional Norwegian folk music to a packed house Friday evening at All Saints Cathedral.

Presented under the Early Music Now Series, the three vocalists were joined by percussionist Terje Isungset, who served as something of a medieval backup band, playing ram's horn, jaw harp and an intriguing collection of simple percussion instruments.

The singers, Anna Maria Friman, Linn Andrea Fuglseth and Torunn Ostrem Ossum, are as respected for their work with contemporary music as with the early music. Friday's program consisted mostly of folk songs arranged for their voices.

The women sing with exceptionally clear, mostly non-vibrato sounds. Singing in harmony, they lock pitches and allow the overtones of the pitches they're producing to create resultant tones.

The result is a richly layered sound that gives the impression of more than just three voices at work.

At times, the women blended softly articulated sounds to create a ringing swell that resembled the "humming" of crystal wine glasses.

They used the natural acoustics of the performing space to amplify this effect, facing away from one another or strolling through different corners of the church as they sang.

The program ranged from snappy, up-tempo tunes with precisely executed lyrics to a tender lullaby, a spirited ballad and some haunting prayers and wordless melodies, many of which segued gracefully into the next selection.

In addition to presenting numbers featuring their trademark a cappella sound, the women accompanied themselves with hand-held chimes on several selections and were joined by Isungset on quite a few tunes as well.

Isungset played a colorful mix of ancient-sounding percussion instruments that ranged from familiar drums, bells and tambourines to pieces of wood and bones suspended like chimes, and small stones struck together or scraped across one another for various effects. His jaw harp, one of the oldest musical instruments in the world, added an earthy sound to several numbers.

Many of Isungset's contributions to the concert, including the timeless wail of a ram's horn, added an ancient, earthy flavor to the crystalline sounds of the vocalists.

But a few times over the course of the evening, the rattles and clicks of the instruments became more clutter than musical enhancement.