

Joel Cohen: Beyond

An interview in which the modern day troubadour talks about his recent production and his plans for the future



PHOTO: PAUL KYTE

EMA: Last time we checked in, you were working on Medieval Spanish music with an Arabic ensemble from Morocco. Recently, you've finished a run of performances of *Borrowed Light*, based on Shaker song, and your collaborators have been a modern dance company from Finland. That's a big jump.

JC: Yes, the Boston Camerata and I often get nicked by people who wish we would concentrate more on one specific repertoire or another. There was a lot of flack a number of seasons back when we began adding early American repertoire to our Medieval/Renaissance performing profile. We even lost a state arts council grant one year because the review committee said our programming "lacked focus."

Well, focus is where you find it. I suppose we could record 30

madrigal books published in Venice between 1550 and 1580, but that's just not how my mind works. I like to find connections that go farther afield and that are a bit surprising perhaps. To quote my favorite early music guru, William Blake, "the tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction."

EMA: Have you had trouble convincing people of the connections between 13th-century Cantigas and Shaker songs?

JC: Externals of style to one side, there are in fact deep affinities. You have two considerable bodies of religious monod-

ic song. In both cases the wellsprings of inspiration come not from theological speculation but from the lived, or imagined, experience of divine intervention in human life – the miracle tales of Cantigas on one side, the mystical visions of the Shakers on the other. And in both cases you have bodies of art music, written down by literate scribes, that nonetheless draw melodic inspiration from oral traditions, from currents of folk and popular music.

EMA: You've done two Shaker recordings, given many performances, and collaborated on a book of Shaker songs. How did the Finns come into the picture?

JC: The choreographer, Tero Saarinen, has been very interested in religious expression and in the life of religious communities and spent time in Japan on a kind of spiritual quest. On the other hand, the dance work he fashioned from Shaker song did not turn out to be an illustration of Shaker life or belief. The dance movements, the black costumes, and the mostly somber lighting sometimes even contradict the tranquil simplicity of the songs. There's a lot of struggle in the piece – among the members of this imaginary religious community and within individual lives. At other times there is a happy flow and a glimpse of something beyond the travails of earthly existence. It's not a simple work at all.

EMA: So did you need to adapt the Shaker music to the choreography?

JC: Not really. Tero and I worked hard to find an ordering of the material that would give an overall architecture to the evening and that would support his choreographic ideas. The songs themselves, however, were performed as we have always done them, *a cappella*, in straightforward fashion, as best we

Borrowed Light

understand the Shaker manner. One exception is the famous “Simple Gifts,” which we sang very slowly, as one solo dancer did a spiritual exercise.

EMA: Do you have an orchestra pit or a reserved space for the live music?

JC: The eight singers are onstage at all times, and they move around almost constantly, relating to the eight dancers and their movements. It’s the most brilliant integration of live music and dance I have ever witnessed.

EMA: How have your audiences related to this?

JC: Last season there were 17 performances in Europe, in six different countries. The Italians had the most trouble with it; the dance is not “decorative” in ways that are familiar to them. They loved the singing, however.

In other venues – Germany and France – we had enthusiastic welcomes. The Brits loved it; there were a slew of excellent reviews in the London press. Not surprisingly, the most electric interactions with the public took place in Scandinavia: Stockholm and Helsinki. I think they recognized the place that Tero’s mind inhabits and related to it immediately. I remember the stunned silence after the first show in Stockholm – it felt like we had all, dancers and singers, participated in a prophetic moment with the Swedish public.

EMA: And in America?

JC: I was a little nervous about how this production would be received here at home, at *Jacob’s Pillow* in Beckett, Massachusetts. Nobody on the European continent – except perhaps in England – has any particular knowledge or awareness of Shakerism. In the U.S., on the contrary, the Shakers are almost a part of our collective self-image. Would our ingrained ideas of Shakerism get

into the way of Tero’s very specific vision?

As it turned out, I needn’t have worried. The reviews ranged from excellent to ecstatic, and this despite a deeply deficient sound transmission on the opening night: an overhead fan that was supposed to be turned off during the show was blasting ugly decibels of noise all over our precious Shaker music.

It worked anyway – *bandullah*, as they say in Morocco. And there are more U.S. and international tours in the works for this show – of most interest to your readers, perhaps, a week-long run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in autumn 2007. It will be tough to schedule because *Camerata* has an important semester-long residence at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville that very season, but it’s going to happen.

EMA: Apart from dancing and education, what’s coming up? More Americana? More Medieval?

JC: Neither, exactly. Starting in the autumn of 2008, I’ll be going part time with the Boston *Camerata*, and the board will be recruiting new talent to plan and direct programs. I’d love to say more about *Camerata*’s future, but for a few more months at any rate, the ensemble’s plans are still under wraps.

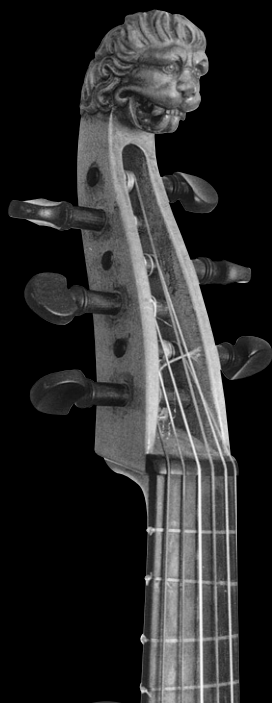
I have a big new project in mind for myself, one that will probably take years to work through and that will open up a new chapter in my career.

What I want to do next is an

PHOTO: JONAS LUNDQUIST



Starting in the autumn of 2008, I’ll be going part time with the Boston *Camerata*. What I want to do next is an outgrowth of the *Cantigas* project. I want to create an institute where Arabs and Europeans, Christians and Muslims and Jews, can do serious work in music and related disciplines.



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outgrowth of the Cantigas project and other things we have done in that vein – *The Sacred Bridge*, the recent Warner Classics recording of *A Mediterranean Christmas*. As we have worked with musicians of Middle Eastern origin, both here and in Morocco, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing more important at this point in history than to explore the common roots and meeting points of our respective civilizations.

There is such a huge gap of knowledge and understanding – the first thing we need to do is to talk and learn from each other. I can't do this with politics and economics – and wouldn't want to if I could – but on the level of music, culture, and the arts, there is so much to be discovered! I have a little piece of that knowledge accumulated in my brain; there are others who hold other pieces. We need to meet and talk to put the fragments together once again.

So, I want to create an Institute of sorts where Arabs and Europeans, Christians and Muslims and Jews, can do serious work in music and related disciplines. I figure this is the best contribution I can make at this stage of my life to the global malaise we all feel.

EMA: That could be a major undertaking. Have you had any results so far?

JC: Once again, I can't spill all the beans. But I can say that initial talks with a European umbrella organization have gone very well. It looks like this new institute may have a place to operate quite near a major European capital city, with physical space, logistical support, and a portion of the necessary operating budget.

What they and I will be seeking in the coming months is more help in the form of both in-kind services and funding. I think I'm allowed to say that partnership with American individuals and institutions will be warmly welcomed. Other nationalities, too! This is intended to be a multi-layered partnership. Hey, anybody else out there want to help me put this thing together? We might actually have some fun! ☺

Those interested in obtaining more information about Coben's emerging plans for an international institute can write joglar@comcast.net.