

SUMMER ARTS GUIDE

How a Boston ensemble is using medieval music to address modern concerns

‘A Gallery of Kings: Uses and Abuses of Power’ is a program meant to assure audiences that questions of the present have confronted people in the past

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 16, 2025, 4:49 a.m.



Members of Boston Camerata performing "Gloria! An Italian Christmas" in 2023. ROBERT TORRES

By some measures, the modern-day Boston Camerata scarcely resembles the ragtag group of players that first assembled in 1954 at the Museum of Fine Arts and performed with plentiful gusto but scattershot knowledge on historic instruments from the museum's collection.

But in one key respect, it hasn't changed from those early years, said music director and soprano Anne Azéma. That would be the mission to have listeners "connect to our music at large, and to transmit this music from the past to people around us, by pointing at relevances today."

At June's Boston Early Music Festival biennial, Camerata – now in its 70th anniversary season – will deliver a program that might look tailor-made for the present moment: "A Gallery of Kings: Uses and Abuses of Power ca. 1300." In fact, though "A Gallery of Kings" has never been performed in Boston, Azéma created it in 2011 on commission for the 800th anniversary celebration of France's Reims Cathedral.

Might it still feel especially resonant, considering President Trump's penchant for publicly styling himself as a monarch? "Exactly," Azéma said. It's her intent that "A Gallery of Kings" will "comfort people that they're not alone; that others have thought about these questions before them."

"Every single program of ours has been thought about very deeply; we don't operate in a vacuum, and being inscribed in where and how we live is very important to us," Azéma said. "Being 70 [years old] shows that what we're saying is important."



Anne Azéma leading the Boston Camerata in 2023. ROBERT TORRES

In creating “A Gallery of Kings,” Azéma was inspired in part by medieval history and in part by the cathedral’s Kings’ Gallery, which was constructed between 1300 and 1350 and features 56 15-foot statues of biblical and French monarchs. The program features songs about biblical kings such as David and Belshazzar; songs insulting or glorifying real historical kings and mythological kings; and even some music allegedly written by kings.

People tend to think of music from the Middle Ages as being “all Gregorian chant or love songs,” said Camerata emeritus director Joel Cohen, who is married to Azéma and still frequently works with the ensemble. “But there’s quite a bit where the author, the poet, the musician, is reflecting on the world around him or her.” That can help audiences feel connected to the past: “When you get a song that says to a king - you’re really fumbling it up ... these texts and melodies can go right to the core of our concerns as people in a society.”

For example, the gist of one of those insult songs is “this king made me come and play for him; do you think he’s paying me? No, he’s giving me beer,” Azéma said with a laugh.

Azéma is only the third director in Camerata’s history. Founder [Narcissa Williamson](#), an employee of the MFA and viol player, passed leadership in 1968 to Cohen, who had been recruited to the ensemble as a 21-year-old lute player a few years prior.

Cohen led the ensemble as music director until 2008 and introduced many current staples in the Camerata repertoire, including several Christmas events, “Carmina Burana,” and programs focusing on American music including 2004’s “Borrowed Light,” a collaboration with the Helsinki-based Tero Saarinen dance company featuring live performances of Shaker hymns. Earlier this year, Camerata reunited with Saarinen’s company for several 20th-anniversary performances of “Borrowed Light” in Europe, and three more dates are scheduled in Germany and Austria in July. Though it has been performed at Jacob’s Pillow in Becket, it has yet to come to the Boston area.



Boston Camerata circa 1974. Music director Joel Cohen is pictured in the first row at the far left, holding a lute. COURTESY OF BOSTON CAMERATA

In contrast to some of their peer groups in Europe, which tend to focus heavily on a particular time period or geographical area – sometimes both – Cohen and Azéma share an interest in “ranging around the repertoire,” Cohen said, as well as creating a tailored experience for the audience. “We don’t just do madrigal one from a 1632 book, and then madrigal two and madrigal three,” he said. “We’re interested in finding a way into the music for ourselves, and for people.”

Under Azéma’s direction since 2008, Camerata’s focus on theatrical narrative has flourished. She added distinct theatrical elements to existing concert programs that were based on medieval stories such as “Tristan and Iseult” and “The Play of Daniel.” She also introduced concert programs including “City of Fools,” which was first performed in fall 2016 and features even more medieval songs that address societal issues of the day, including a “philosophical fable” by 13th-century troubadour and satirist Peire Cardenal

in which a man falls asleep only to wake and find “everybody has gone crazy, and they say he’s the crazy man, but they abuse people who don’t agree with them,” she said. That program is scheduled for a reprise performance this fall.

In the United States more so than Europe, Azéma has found that medieval drama and history is often associated with museums or academic institutions. Audiences thus tend to perceive it as dry and inaccessible, “until they get the experience of it - until they realize that there is a common thread with our own lives,” she said. “Once you can give people the experience of a narrative story, you have their attention.”

In the case of “A Gallery of Kings” and “City of Fools,” modern audiences’ fears about abuse of power are nothing new. “It’s an unfortunate part of the human condition, so we have medieval texts about that – of course!”

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