

CITY OF FOOLS: Medieval Songs of Rule and Misrule

Program Notes – The Boston Camerata (2025)

We read about it in the papers – and feel it in our hearts: There is anxiety and incertitude abroad in the land, and much anger against political leaders and pretenders to power. These feelings, alas, were not born yesterday, nor the day before. They are a constant in human life, as we hope to demonstrate in the very old songs and poems you are about to hear.

Our medieval minstrels cry out their yearning for worthy leadership (*Bel m'es can vei chamjar*) and denounce, with unrestrained vehemence, all forms of abuse, from whatever quarter (*D'un sirventes far*). We are used to hearing the tender strains of courtly love, passionate desire, and religious adoration from the poet-musicians and clerics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but this strain of protest and indignation is also very important in their output. We recognize in their dissonant verses the kind of abuse and manipulation that we, too, must undergo. From a simple broadside against a stingy king who pays for entertainment with beer instead of hard cash (*Der kuninc Rodolp*) to the graver accusations of corruption and predation (*Tartarassa ni vautour*), these bills of attainder cover a lot of ground. The minstrels refuse to submit and question the people and institutions who are their erstwhile protectors.

Here, then, straight from the polemics of the Middle Ages, we are confronted with the so-contemporary question: what is the role of arts, and the artist, in society? Voicing the climate of historic tension in regard to the institutional priestly caste, the diatribe of Guilhem Figueira, minces no words on the "betrayal" of Rome (*D'un sirventes far*). The moralizing parable of Peire Cardenal on the state of the world and the condition of Man estranged from his fellow citizens by covetousness is probably one of the most striking texts in this entire repertory (*Una ciutat fo*) – 'this fable describes the world' he tells us. Alas.

The minstrels sang, and they also played. The inventory of the talents of Peire de Corbiac (*Lo tezaurs* -13th c.) gives us a glimpse of the kinds of skills that the minstrels of the Middle Ages would have been expected to acquire. These activities ranged from that of storyteller and poet to musician, improviser and entertainer; and their sphere of activity encompassed different *milieux*, ranging from the world of the court and courtly love to the liturgical and spiritual world of the Church. In attempting to follow the traces of Peire de Corbiac, we have devised our own instrumental performance material, basing it on pre-existing vocal sources, and drawing on medieval learning methods (embracing such aspects as performance from memory, improvisation, knowledge of rhetoric). "I know my profession well (writes the minstrel Peire). And all kinds of people are grateful to me for this. The Lord God allows me to accomplish many things that will earn me salvation at the Day of Judgement."

We play, and we sing, hoping to conjure order from disorder, and to cast out the demons from our midst. May the work of our hands, the sweat of our brow (*Bonum est confidere*) and the hope for righteousness restore a measure of sanity to the City of Fools.