

# A pilgrimage through time with Camerata

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**G**reat singers, as we all know, make us feel they are our personal property and we theirs. They do this with their individual timbre, the absence of technical self-consciousness, and the right mixture of loyalty to the music and spontaneous touches that give us the feeling we're being spoken to in the deep heart's core.

When the singer is a medievalist like the French-born soprano Anne Azéma, there is an extra thrill. Time and space seem to collapse, and we encounter a long-lost lover from Aquitaine or Provence.

This season, Azéma has taken over the artistic directorship of the Boston Camerata and put together a three-concert series on the theme of pilgrimage to places and people of distant desire and imagination. The third and last of these, titled "The Distant Haven," on Sunday at the First Lutheran Church, was all-French, covering several regions and accents.

In the first half, Azéma gathered Provençal love songs from the 12th century, followed by another collection of songs from the same period on the theme of violence and loss during the Crusades. (The contemporary relevance was



SIMONE POLTRONIERI

Soprano Anne Azéma is artistic director of the Boston Camerata.

## MUSIC REVIEW

### BOSTON CAMERATA

At: First Lutheran Church,  
Boston, Sunday

underlined by Azéma: "This was close to 'You're either with us or against us.' ") The second half was a saint's life told as it might have been in a cathedral square, with music and declamation. A narrative in English (based on a 12th-century Norman text) was recited by Joel Cohen, now the Camerata's music director emeritus, with a Mr. Rogers-like earnest friendliness.

This was a simple production, with four singers (Michael Barrett, Dan Hershey, Eric Mentzel, and Azéma) and a single accompanist (Shira Kammen), playing the *vielle* (a medieval fiddle) and harp. They produced a procession of masterpieces, not one of them less than dazzling. There might have been more variety of mood and texture. (Didn't Crusaders ever come home? Didn't courtly lovers ever, um, get together?) It would have been nice, too, if the men had added some raw, folksy touches to their solo troubadour songs, to distinguish them from the smooth, disciplined sacred chants.

The singing was flawless, and Kammen's exuberant, inexhaustible, and sensitive accompaniment was like a live electrical charge through the afternoon. Azéma herself was a radiant presence, in person and voice. She allowed herself just the right number of moments to shine, including two solo pieces that were among the most memorable moments of the afternoon: "Chanterai pour mon courage," in which a young woman sings of her lover's departure for battle, and the charming lay, "Flur de virginité." When, in the latter, Azéma sang of how Mary "nourished [Jesus] from her breast," she diminished her tone on the word "alaité", which suggested everything there is to suggest of motherly tenderness.

It's details like that that collapse centuries.