

**CD review: “Angeli; Music of Angels” (Boston Early Music News, Volume XIV, No.3)
Ensemble PAN w/Tapestry & guest artists
Telarc CD-80448, 1996**

Several months ago PAN announced that after 16 years they were calling it quits (or taking an “undetermined hiatus,” depending on which member you speak with). The news was received as the loss of a good friend by many in the early music community; especially fans of 13th and 14th century music. For years PAN has been continuing and refining the Binkley tradition, delivering educated renditions of neglected repertoire and insightful renditions of the trecento’s greatest hits. Perhaps of equal importance, however, was that they provided much needed counterpoint to their medieval comrades and archrivals across the water, Gothic Voices. It was therefore with bittersweet anticipation that I looked forward to the release of their latest and last CD, “Angeli: Music of Angels.”

The CD represents their (belated?) move to the “majors,” namely Telarc. This is only the first of several surprises in store for longtime PAN-heads, and one of many subtle clues as to the current climate within early music. The CD is their second departure in a row from their namesake ars nova/trecento period. Subtitled “Chant and polyphony for the Nine Orders of Angels and the Queen of Angels,” PAN chooses to pair chant from primarily the 12th century with 20th century works by the Neo-Gothic composer, Patricia Van Ness, and two original works by PAN members themselves.

Laurie Monahan refers somewhat sarcastically to PAN’s past recordings as their “vanity series;” that is, the only criteria used in repertoire selection was whether *they* liked it or not...noble enough, you may say. Here, however, everything from title and coverart to label, liner notes and content show a clear move by PAN to “keep up with the times,” if you will, and to reach out to that newfound early music shopper - you know, the one that walks into Tower Records and says “Gimme some chant, man!”

That said, they do deliver the goods. Michael Collver is no newcomer to this music, and Laurie Monahan has performed chant for years with Sequentia and her local group, Tapestry. As in their more familiar trecento rep, they bring both experience and technique to this music, and are willing to make a statement and take some chances outside the norm.

An excellent example of this is *Sanctus Christe yerarchia*, a troped Sanctus from the Notre Dame school. Countertenor Collver spins and twirls above the drone like someone in a state of impassioned religious ecstasy. All aspects of the music - dynamics, tempo, dissonance/consonance relationships - are pushed and pulled to the extreme, and one cannot help but get swept along in the torrent. What contrast to the more reserved approaches by Ensemble Gilles Binchois, The Hilliards or Sequentia! Only Marcel Peres and crew traverse further out on the limb.

Though referred to as “guest ensemble,” Tapestry really deserve much more credit than that, as they contribute several cuts of their own and lend supporting vocals to the majority of the pieces. A highlight of the CD is *O vos Angeli*, one of Hildegard’s lengthy responsories that seem to span 5 octaves. Tapestry’s Hildegard is much more organic, more fluid, more *alive*, than many Hildegard recordings out there, including the popular-but-oh-so-stilted-and-dry Gothic Voices CD and even those by Monahan’s pals in Sequentia. Crucial to this is that they perform from Hildegard’s original notation, and understand intimately (as far as modernly possible) what the dots and squiggly neumes mean and *imply*.

While the two instrumental cuts are described as being “written” by lutenist Crawford Young and vielleist Shira Kammen, they really sound more like “improvisations within the style” - much as Sequentia and Medieval Strings do on a regular basis. Kammen’s *Au renouvel* is quite beautiful, at times tossing a bit of Ravel into Machaut. Nonetheless, the relationship of these pieces to the Nine Orders of Angels is a bit of a stretch, and the main purpose seems to provide timbral relief from the otherwise basically vocal CD. One cannot help but think that the breakup of PAN was well under way by the time the CD was recorded.

The two works by Patricia Van Ness (b.1951) are also very lovely. *Ego sum Custos Angela* is particularly nice, as is the middle movement of her “chant-cycle” *Arcanae*. With the advantage of being able to combine male & female voices, she can push the tessitura of a chant even further than Hildegard, which she does to good effect. As in her quasi-Renaissance works, Van Ness again shows mastery of the vocal idiom and early music style. Here she goes yet one step further and even notates her new compositions using 12th century neumes. The results are ethereal, lush, melodic pieces that PAN perform with musicality and commitment.

My guess, however, is that most listeners will not be able to tell when Hildegard or the Worcester Manuscript end and Van Ness begins. The notes claim that Van Ness is not trying to “re-create medieval music,” but if only the trained ear can tell the difference it is tempting to ask “Why?” Certainly modern music does not have to be ugly or dissonant to be valid, and there is much room left in the world of pretty, consonant tonality. But given her obvious chops and the extreme talent of her performers, Van Ness could take just a few more risks and *truly* explore the spirit and presence of early music in a fully contemporary setting. In many ways Hildegard herself was much more daring, probing and *avant garde* than Van Ness is here.

The only major drawback of “Angeli” lies in the fact that 30 minutes into it I was literally feeling seasick from the dizzying amount of reverb. While a fair amount of ambience is both pleasant and HIP, the amount of reverberation here exceeds The Ventures or Dick Dale in 60’s surf music. Aside from the aesthetics, the main issue is that you actually end up with implied polyphony (usually of some dissonant interval like a 2nd) in monophonic sections because each note is clearly audible many beats later. I’m sorry, but not even Notre Dame Cathedral has this amount of echoooooooooooooooooooo.

It is ironic that after struggling for a decade and a half, this CD may very well turn out to be PAN’s best seller to date and provide them with the expanded audience they’ve been looking for. The times, they are a’ changin’, and “Angeli” reflects some of these changes in the early music scene. After all is said and done “Angeli” is a fine CD - swansong or not - and is a worthwhile acquisition by longtime PAN fans as well as chant aficionados. Perhaps now we can look forward to the CD-release of PAN’s very first recording (music of Jacopo da Bologna) and a solo effort by Tapestry, who show here they are definitely up to the task.

Lansing D. McLoskey