

PROGRAM NOTES BY ANNE AZÉMA

The Night's Tale: A summary

Le Tournoi de Chauvency, written circa 1285 by the French poet Jacques Bretel, is a narration of a courtly celebration in the Lorraine region of France, and the inspiration for *The Night's Tale*. Our performance evokes a day's festivities at the chateau of Chauvency. Daylight is the domain of men, who joust and fight in ritual encounters; when night falls, women converse in music and dance, far from the masculine violence of the daytime. Mutual desire aroused during the day culminates in the evening's rites – aggressive and courtly, passionate and playful.

Why the focus on the *Tournoi de Chauvency*?

The recent menace by fire to Notre Dame de Paris rightly reminds us of the importance of the Middle Ages in the realm of religion and spirituality. Equally important, in the view of many, is the way medieval men and women wrestled with the big questions of life in the here and now, and most precisely, with the issue of interpersonal courtship, love, and commitment. Many of the views and values we hold to this day were evolved during this crucial epoch. The ever-contemporary quest for salvation through love is the main concern of the wonderful manuscript that has inspired our musical play.

That manuscript – from Oxford Bodleian, Douce 308 – contains the *Tournoi de Chauvency*, an important source for the understanding of medieval society, from many points of view – literary, historical, visual, aesthetic, and musical. It reveals much about medieval love relationships and their social context. The *Tournoi* text, a rhymed narrative of over four thousand lines, relates with verve and evident relish a weeklong program of combats and jousts, and the amorous exchanges of a privileged, youthful European “crowd.” To be found within this narrative are to be found the keys to a vastly important code of behavior, which we now call the system of Courtly Love.

What does this mean, precisely? In short, this system or code signifies something new in feudal society: the possibility of a love relationship between two equal partners. Unlike the more rigid and tribal view of marriage so widespread in medieval society, in this ethos one partner or the other is free to accept or refuse the suit of the other.

The tournament or ritual combat – whether it be physical or metaphorical – is, within the Courtly Love framework, one of the steps that can lead the two partners to the plenitude of a shared love. “Love makes one heart from two,” says Jacques Bretel, author of the *Tournoi de Chauvency*.

The steps required towards this yearned-for union are: Waiting for the Other, who can ask the key question (Homage); the Test through combat or struggle (physical or poetic/spiritual); and finally, the response, the Gift, freely offered, permitting a union in Love. These steps correspond, approximately, to the different chapters of our program.

There are certain constants in human nature. Our own society, justly preoccupied with increasing the chances for equality in so many domains, can take inspiration from this audacious-for-its-time medieval experiment, and its blend of old and new insights into a universal quest.

Yet another reason for our interest in the *Tournoi* is its vivid evocation of music, dance, and festivity. But

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for all that, the manuscript itself contains not a single scrap of notated music. And so, the poem obliges us – i.e., performers already familiar with many dimensions of medieval music – to push our inquiries still further, and to create something new based on the skills we have already acquired in more familiar, less enigmatic contexts.

Important among these is the practice, widespread already in the Middle Ages, of adapting or “twinning” new texts to already-existing medieval melodies. Using this and other techniques, we set out to create a new performance piece meant to give delight and pleasure, guided every step of the way by Jacques Bretel’s narrative, so generous and detailed in its descriptions of the festive music and dance at Chauvency circa 1310.

We cannot, of course, recreate with total precision the music of 1310. Even as we proceed with as much care and respect for our sources as possible, using Douce 308 and other related manuscripts of the period, we hope to avoid the pitfalls of pseudo-historicism. Many decisions about performance style and manner must, out of necessity, be supplied by the performers and by the artistic director; we embrace the large responsibility of making such decisions with humility, but also with enthusiasm and joy. What we present to you is a work for our time, drawing on the incredible life force that emerges from the manuscript’s folios, and redirecting this magnificent force, to the best of our abilities, into our own ears, minds, and hearts.

Anne Azéma, 2007; 2016; 2020

Translated by Joel Cohen

Production History

The Night’s Tale was premiered in Metz, France in 2007 at the Arsenal, with the help of the following partners: Fondation BNPParibas, Fondation Orange, Fondation Telecom, Le Grand Théâtre du Luxembourg, Le Couvent St. Ulrich, Conseils Généraux Lorraine et Moselle, ARCADI. It was performed to great acclaim in Boston (2016) with further touring in 2017 and 2018 (Switzerland, Holland, France), and is currently touring through the United States.

Subsequent to the Metz performances, a recording of *The Night’s Tale* was released on the French label K617.

Several other publications have appeared related to the 2007 premiere, including a scholarly collection (Lettres, musique et société en Lorraine médiévale: Autour du Tournoi de Chauvency [ms Oxford Bodl. Douce 308], Mireille Chazan, Nancy Freeman-Regalado, eds. Droz, Geneva, 2012) and general educational material for teachers and schools (BNPParibas – Arsenal).

This production was also the focus of a semester-long residency (entailing a full academic course and several on- and off-campus activities), including a staged performance with students at the University of Oregon, Eugene (2012); and at the Longy School of Music of Bard College (2016). It has also been performed at various summer school sessions, including at the San Francisco Early Music Society (2016).
