

An Evening at *La Salle des Ardents*: Smoky Medieval Jazz

Trio Tramontana
8 August 2022

SMOKE ALARM

Rescoés! Rescoés! (ballade) anon 14c; Reina codex, BNF n.a.fr. 6771, f. 58r

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...

Fumeux Fume par Fumee Solage, late 14c;
(rondeau, which we're cutting short to AB) Chantilly codex, F-CH ms 564, f. 59r

Puis Que Je Suis Fumeux (ballade) Johannes Symonds Hasprois, late 14c;
Chantilly, f. 34v

KEEPIN' IT COOL

De Ce Que Foul Pense (3-part ballade) Pierre des Molins, late 14c; Chantilly, f. 53v

De Ce Que Foul Pense (2-part ballade) anon late 14c;
Faenza codex, I-FZc ms. 117, ff. 40r-40v

I'Vo Bene (virelai) Gherardello da Firenze, mid-14c;
Squarcialupi codex, I-Fl ms. Med. Pal. 87, f. 29r

Puis qu'en oubli (rondeau) Guillaume de Machaut, mid-14c; various mss

HERE WE GO AGAIN

Sanz cuer (3-part canon) Guillaume de Machaut, mid-14c; various mss

La Harpe de Melodie (2-part canon over tenor) Jacob Senleches, late 14c; Chantilly, f. 43v

Tousjours servir (3-part canon) anon Franco-Cypriot, late 14c;
Trent I-Tn ms. J.II.9, f. 158v

SMOKE ALARM (redux)

Alarme! Alarme! Grimace, late 14c; Chantilly, f. 55v

One of our early-music mentors used to say of European music around the year 1400, "if it sounds like jazz, you're doing it right." Several of the pieces on tonight's program come from a musical movement called "*Ars Subtilior*", the "most subtle art", characterized by complex interlocking rhythms which could be written down precisely only due to notational innovations in the late 14th century, but which sound lazily improvised in performance. Others are from a generation earlier, but carry the same feel of a contemplative late-night jam session.

In late 14th-century France a group of poets (think of the “Beat Poets”) called themselves the “*Société des Fumeurs*”. We’re not sure whether the Society’s activities involved literal smoking, or if so *what* they were smoking — tobacco wasn’t known in Europe yet, but hemp was widely used for making rope and fabric, and opium was known as a medical anesthetic. The word “fumeux” also meant “fuming with rage”, or just “grumpy”. As the Society’s founder Eustache Deschamps wrote of himself and his proudly misfit, tortured-artist friends,

“They want to be considered wise;
They are full of wind and bare of sense,
And they ask pointless questions;
They offer no solution;
They are exceedingly wise after they’ve had wine,
But they know nothing in the morning;
They contradict what others say
And never admit that anyone is right.” (trans. Julie Singer?)

Two of their poems survive with music, and you’ll hear both of them.

14th- and 15th-century European secular music was often built on standard poetic forms — like today’s “sonnet”, “haiku”, or “limerick” — of which the three most popular in France were the Ballade, the Virelai, and the Rondeau, any of which could have multiple verses. Each verse of a Ballade has the form AA’B: a section of music with lyrics, the same music repeated with different lyrics, then a second section of music with a third set of lyrics. The Virelai is usually ABB’A’A, with the initial section of lyrics and music returning at the end. The most complex, the Rondeau, was ABA’AA”B’AB: after the opening AB statement, the A music returns with different lyrics, followed by a repeat of the first line that typically takes a different meaning in the context of the A’ lyrics, and so on, ending with a full repeat of the opening statement. Since we only have half an hour, we’re presenting only one full rondeau and an “abbreviated” rondeau tonight.

14th- and 15th-century European composers also delighted in “canons”, or music performed “according to rule”. The simplest form of this is a round: each part does the same music, starting at different times, like “Row Row Row Your Boat” or “Sumer is Icumen In” (actually two simultaneous rounds); sometimes later parts also start at a different pitch, *e.g.* down a fourth or fifth as in “Non Nobis Domine”. Trickier canons might have each part do the same music at different speeds, or in different time signatures, or one part reading another part backwards, or upside-down and backwards, or skipping all the notes written in a particular color of ink, or treating all the whole notes as quarter notes. We’re doing three relatively straightforward rounds, of which “La Harpe de Melodie” is famous for being written in the manuscript in the shape of a harp.

The Instruments: We’re playing several shawms (medieval ancestors of the oboe) made by either Robert Cronin or Joel Robinson; a flute by Friederich Von Huene; a vielle made by John Pringle; medieval and Renaissance style recorders made variously by Jean Boudreau, Monika Mutsch, or the Mollenhauer workshop; a harp by Marcelo García Morillo.

Trio Tramontana comprises three waytes living in the East Kingdom: Deonna von Aachen (Beth Gurzler), Rufina Cambrensis (D. Peters), and John Elys (Stephen Bloch), who have been playing and singing together for over 25 years, although it was easier when we all lived within an hour’s drive of one another.