

Middle Aged for 50 Years... Working as a Singer and Storyteller with Medieval Poetry and Music by Michael Dollendorf

2027 is an anniversary year for me since I vividly remember what got me started on Medieval Music. It was in 1977 that Dieter Kühn's book 'Ich Wolkenstein' was published and that Ben Bagby, Barbara Thornton and Margriet Tindemanns founded 'Sequentia', moved to Cologne and did their first concerts close to my home.

As a child I had already been fascinated by everything antique, growing up very close to a Roman aqueduct, knowing the castle my father's family came from and where the Dollendorfs had lived for a thousand years from the 9th to 19th century before they moved to Aachen, Cologne and Upstate New York. I was going to weekly drawing classes at the archaeological museum and we were visiting my parent's friends who happened to work for the German Castle Association living on the 'Marksburg' castle overlooking the Rhine valley.

After graduating from High School I enrolled at the Bonn University to study musicology, art history and Italian but was soon disillusioned by the purely historical approach that devalued everything before Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and Wagner as transitional not worthwhile your time. I escaped to the University of Michigan, where I studied with William Malm ethnomusicology and performance and absorbed the technique of 'close description', developed by ethnologist Margaret Mead. I didn't apply it to tribal cultures in the South Pacific, but to societies of the past. To me this is the only meaningful process to immerse into a foreign culture, no matter if the distance is geographical or chronological.

The next decade was filled with playing, recording and touring with a number of great Baroque orchestras: Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in San Francisco, the Smithsonian Chamber Players in Washington DC and Les Arts Florissants in Paris. Meanwhile I kept reading, building a medievalists library and researching historical sites whenever I could.

Later I enrolled again at the Bonn University, this time in the German and English department to learn the old languages. It was Karl Reichl who directed us through 'Beowulf' word by word, line by line, during the course of one and a half years. Manfred Kaempfert introduced me to Old High German and Gothic, Christoph Cormeau and Monika Unzeitig worked on Middle High German and Minnesang. Soon everybody knew that I was not just learning the grammar but that I was reciting, singing and performing the repertoire. I got first invitations to conferences of German scholars to perform. There I met Ulrich Müller from Salzburg, who was the editor of an incredible series of facsimiles with Medieval author's works published by Kümmerle, Göppingen. He became a fan and supporter right away. A week after our first meeting a big cardboard box was delivered to my door containing all volumes of Walther, Neidhart, Oswald, Tannhäuser. Ulrich had gone through his backstock and send them to me as a very generous gift.

A very important aspect is the collaboration with instrument builders, who are able to come up with plausible reproductions of historical instruments for which we have just pictorial evidence or in some rare cases archaeological finds. In the 1980ies and 90ies that was a difficult task, since they didn't know the repertoire and especially harp makers could not be convinced that 12-15 strings are just enough for music around 1200. I'm lucky to have started out on guitar as a child and later choose harp as my second instrument at university. Romanesque and Gothic harps were the first instruments I bought, followed by a symphony and an organistrum (two types of hurdy-gurdy), vielles, cytharas, citoles and lutes.

A few instrument makers of exceptional quality I would like to mention by name. Claus Henry Hüttel, Düren, for harps, Kurt Reichmann, Frankfurt/Main, for the organistrum, Florian Jougneau, Strasbourg, for my citole and Leszek Pelc, Nockowa (Poland), for vielles, giga, proto-violis and cytharas. Equally important are the gut-strings that Valentin Oelmüller, Potsdam, has custom made in Morocco.

I'm very thankful to presenters who invite me with my programs. They are often universities with departments to study old languages, museums with Medieval art, libraries with Medieval manuscripts, historical castles and palaces and big historical exhibitions. My repertoire is almost exclusively secular. Therefore churches don't play a big parts, even though I have studied plainchant extensively, since it would have made up most of the music a person in the Middle Ages would hear throughout life.

Here I just want to mention a few highlights:

Performing music from the early middle ages at the 1200 year anniversary exhibition of Charlemagne's meeting with Pope Leo III in Paderborn 799, the year before his coronation in Rome.

At Staatsbibliothek Berlin the inauguration of the newly merged manuscript collections of East and West after the German unification.

At Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin the opening of the historical exhibition 'Europas Mitte um das Jahr 1000'.

The synagogues in Salzburg and in Worms for the first performances in Austrian and German of my program on Süßkind von Trimberg, the only Jewish Minnesinger in the Manesse manuscript.

In Stuttgart for the transfers of a 'Nibelungenlied' manuscript from private ownership (Donaueschingen) to the Landesbibliothek Baden-Württemberg. For the celebration I could pick a section of the poem I liked to perform. The manuscript was behind glass, open at the very part, so the audience could see it and read along.

Universities in Berlin, Bonn, Cologne, Greifswald, Hamburg, Salzburg, Utrecht and Vienna.

Now teaching takes up a good part of my time. Students of Medieval music need to learn first that mastering the languages is essential, since it is 80% poetry and 20% music we'll be working with. One needs to start with recitations and try to draw a lot of interesting sounds from the words alone.

Self-accompagnement is desirable and requires some instrumental skills. The instruments and their stringing and tuning will provide the soundscape for the performance. Some find it hard to leave modern tonal relationships behind and be happy with drones and modal harmonies.

The instrumental music from before 1400 encompasses less than 50 pieces, mostly dances, often quite demanding. For instrumental teaching and improvisation I find it more interesting to study the song repertoire and compare different manuscripts that contain the same melodies with added ornaments. Working with variants keeps us closer to the original composition than embarking on free improvisation. We'll never be able to ignore the fact that we are living in the 21st century and listened to Jazz.