



presents

Astonishing Saints

Lost and found songs of the 9th to the 12th centuries

10th anniversary concert
with special guest director Pascale Duhamel

June 1, 2019, 7 pm

Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel, Old Montreal

Ensemble Scholastica has carved for itself a privileged place in the field of medieval music as the only professional vocal ensemble of women's voices in Quebec dedicated to the plainchant and sacred polyphony of the Middle Ages. The ensemble has distinguished itself with its original programming, its numerous appearances at important festivals, as well as by the 2017 release of its disc *Ars elaboratio* under the ATMA Classique label. This 2018-2019 season marks the **10th anniversary** of Scholastica's foundation. Indeed, it was in November of 2008 that musicologist **Pascale Duhamel** assembled a team of singers with the goal of launching the ensemble that we would become. She directed us for our first concert in April 2009, and for all subsequent concerts until the end of 2011, after which Duhamel gave the directorial reigns over to our current director, Rebecca Bain.

In celebration of this tenth anniversary, we decided to invite our founder to put together a special program for us to perform, and to once again direct us in concert. Pascale Duhamel is currently professor at the University of Ottawa. She publishes regularly in her field and is currently preparing her second monograph. She also studied Gregorian chant at the Centre de Musique Médiévale in Paris and continues to perform as a musician.

As part of her teaching activities at the University of Ottawa, Duhamel directed the research project of master's student Sylvain Margot from 2015 to 2017 (Margot is currently a PhD candidate at McGill University). His research focused on the liturgical music of medieval Haute-Marche. This French region occupying a small zone bordering Poitou and the Limousin has preserved very little of its medieval musical heritage as a result of the numerous upheavals and wars which mark its history. Margot's research led him to the unexpected discovery of several manuscript fragments with unpublished music for the local liturgies of St. Yrieix, St. Pardoux and for the feast of the Conception of the Virgin Mary. A total of 46 works, most of these are not found in any other source, and almost all survived in their entirety. In effect this amounted to the exhumation of a long-lost regional culture.

Following this discovery, Duhamel and Margot began collaborating on a series of studies on this previously unpublished repertoire whose musical characteristics are rather unique. These mostly 12th century compositions are the result, as with much of the sacred music composed during this period, of a renewal of the older Gregorian chant repertoire – part of what medievalists refer to as the 12th Century Renaissance, which saw the development of polyphonic music, Gothic architecture and art, the renewal of European scientific disciplines, the creation of Europe’s first universities, as well as profound renewals in the fields of theology and literature. In the realm of sacred music, this was the innovative period of such figures as Hildegard von Bingen, Peter Abelard and Pérotin. The repertoire that is the subject of this project, though by anonymous composers, joins this musical and poetical corpus. Melodically inventive and at times unusual, these works bring to mind the famous sonorities of Hildegard’s compositions. Poetically, the lives of local saints are invoked, and more universal Christian liturgies are gracefully paraphrased.

Music has a particularly privileged place in the reconstruction of lost heritage. Throughout time, humanity has seen no end to the loss of artistic work, much of which has been integral to the spirituality and community of peoples. Music is one of those human activities which can help lead us through conflicted times and back to lost ages, like crumbs of bread left on a path to help us find our way. Just as with for instance the destroyed Buddhas of Afghanistan, medieval sacred music is an important part of humanity’s artistic legacy, illustrating the profound human aspiration to give meaning to existence. Our reconstructive work with this project, as with all of the work that Ensemble Scholastica has engaged in, contributes thus to the rediscovery of the human and esthetic value of historical sacred song. Here, we will shine light on the beauty of a small but significant heretofore unknown collection of works, whose surprising melodies, varieties of ornamentation and rhythmic movement are no less fascinating than the texts they are set to. Despite the religious context, at their core these works are all about telling “a good story”, which along with music, is the most universal of ways in which humans connect to each other.

