

Gregorius: The Holy Sinner

Hartmann's astonishing story, 'Gregorius', recounts how a young man, at first unaware of the curse of his sinful origins, searches for his path in life, comes close to death, and finally finds redemption, reunited in spiritual harmony with the woman who is at once his mother, aunt and wife.

Sequentia celebrates its 48th season with this addition to 'The Lost Songs Project', combining the talents of three extraordinary storytellers/singers, with the accompaniment of two matched Romanesque harps, for this surprisingly modern medieval tale. Sung and spoken in the original medieval German verse, with video titles in English, the artists will assume the roles of various characters, but also function as narrators, in direct communication with their courtly audience.

The story in brief: Gregorius begins life as a nobleman's son in Aquitaine, secretly born of incest between brother and sister, and as a newborn is put out to sea in a small boat, left to fate, provided with gold and a note about his aristocratic origins. He is later found by a fisherman, survives and thrives, and is subsequently raised to manhood in a monastery, a promising scholar and the favorite of the abbot who nurtured him. But he turns his back on a spiritual life, following instead his dream to become a knight. He rescues an unmarried noblewoman from disaster and marries her, but then realizes that his marriage is incestuous (he has married his own mother). Horrified, he flees into the wilderness to live as a starving hermit. After many years of lonely penitence, chained to a boulder in an isolated lake, he is revealed in dreams to high churchmen to be a holy man. Discovered near death, he is brought back to Rome and declared the new Pope, triumphing over his dark past. He is reunited with his mother/aunt/wife, who is also searching for release from sin. Their lives end with forgiveness, grace, and a completion of the circle of love.

This ancient tale reaches far into the past, where we sense the tragic presence of Oedipus and even the unwavering, transformative spirit of Job in its most fateful moments. Hartmann confronts us with one of the most repulsive transgressions imaginable (two cases of incest), a basic human taboo made more deeply painful since it was unintentional and hidden. But he shows us that even such a dark sin can be forgiven, as long as the believer never yields to despair -- it is despair alone which pushes all sinners outside the loving circle of divine forgiveness and grace. Hartmann teaches us, through his grim story, about the need of the soul to heal itself, responding to the worst snares of the Devil with the transformative power of self-knowledge, perseverance and love.

As late as the mid-20th century, Hartmann's Gregorius inspired the Nobel Prize-winning author Thomas Mann to re-tell the story in modern prose, published under the title of 'Der Erwählte' (The Chosen One) in 1952.

Although the medieval version by Hartmann von Aue survives in multiple text manuscripts, his tale was probably told orally: sung, spoken and accompanied, for courtly gatherings of sophisticated listeners who could never get enough. Sequentia's reconstruction of Hartmann's masterpiece features three singers (performing in the original Middle High German verse), two of whom also play Romanesque harps, to retell this story in the same style which captivated

binge-listening courtly audiences in the years around 1200. Benjamin Bagby (voice & harp), known for his performance of the 'Beowulf' epic, will share a narrator role with the exciting young artists Jasmina Črnčič (voice & harp) and Lukas Papenfusscline (voice).

The musical sources for our reconstruction include the masterful large-scale creations of the Minnesänger Heinrich von Meissen (a.k.a. Frauenlob), who drew on a long tradition of modal music in Germany. His setting of the Song of Songs is based on a repeating cycle of the eight musical modes, and has inspired our work. The Romanesque harps are exact copies of instruments depicted in sculpture from the late 12th century.

Benjamin Bagby