



Founded in 2008 by musicologist Pascale Duhamel, Ensemble Scholastica is a female vocal ensemble based in Montréal, the only one that specializes in the performance of medieval plainchant and polyphony (circa 800-1300 A.D.). We study and sing from medieval manuscripts, but not only in the name of "authenticity". We wish to share with listeners the true beauty and intricacy of medieval music, in particular medieval liturgical traditions, the very roots of Western music. Our audiences thus have the chance to experience the remarkable joy and complexity of medieval spirituality and culture.

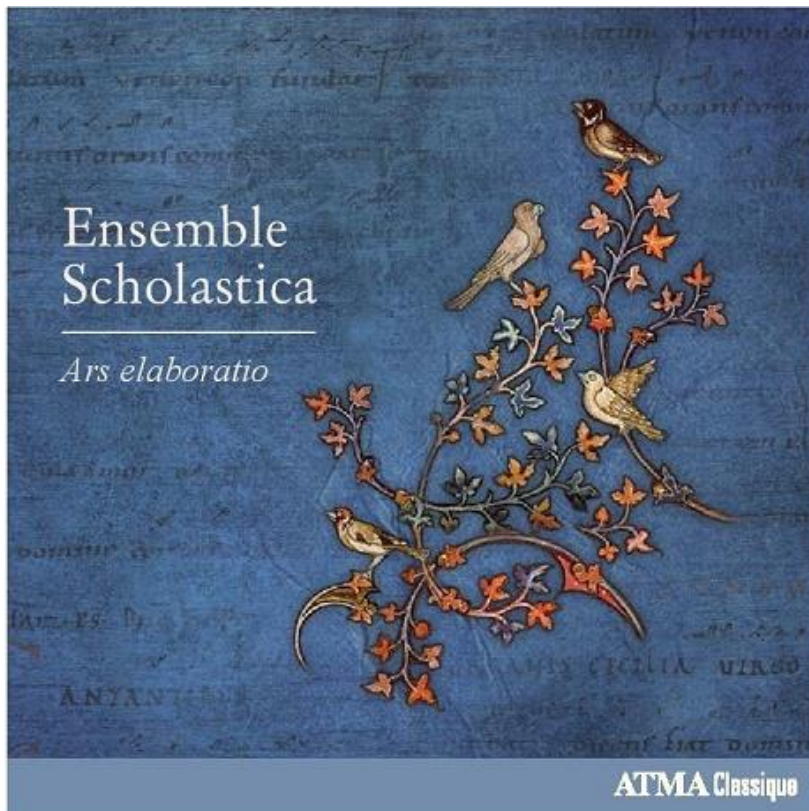
In recent years, Ensemble Scholastica has been involved with several projects, including collaborations with the baroque ensemble Les Idées heureuses, with the goal of expanding its repertoire's time frame. The music of New France will be a particular focus in the coming years: our ensemble is uniquely placed to explore this rarely performed repertoire.



The ensemble is comprised of a selection of talented and dedicated vocalists, some of whom also play medieval instruments, from Montréal's thriving early music community. We are currently directed by leading medieval music specialist Rebecca Bain.

[www.ensemblescholastica.ca](http://www.ensemblescholastica.ca)

Rebecca Bain, Artistic Director  
info@ensemblescholastica.ca



*Ars elaboratio*  
 Ensemble Scholastica's  
 first CD recording,  
 was released under the  
 ATMA Classique label  
 in January 2017

"Don't miss the @cbr2inconcert Disc of the Week, by @EnsScholastica: haunting medieval music, beautifully sung by this Montreal group"

- Twitter feed, Paolo Pietropaolo, CBC Radio

"A very, very beautiful disc. The sound is magnificent, inhabits the space, sublimely simple and terribly calming!"

- René Homier-Roy, Radio-Canada

"[Presenting] the magnificent ARS ELABORATIO, which the superb women's vocal ensemble SCHOLASTICA, under the leadership of Rebecca Bain, has just released under the ATMA label. As far as I know, the work of this ensemble is unique in Quebec. Reading through the booklet, one sees how the research done in preparation for the restoration of this repertoire is absolutely in keeping with the spirit of creativity of the period."

- Jean-Pierre Harel, Founder and et Director, Les Concerts de la Chapelle

"I just listened to your marvellous disc! HUGE bravo on this achievement!"

- Geneviève Soly, Founder and Director, Les Idées heureuses

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# EMA

EARLY MUSIC AMERICA

## Ensemble Scholastica Makes Fine CD Debut



Ensemble Scholastica performing in Montreal's Church of St. John the Evangelist in May 2015.

### *Ars elaboratio: a musical collaboration with the past*

Ensemble Scholastica (Rebecca Bain, musical director)  
ATMA Classique ACD2 2755

**By Karen Cook**

CD REVIEW — Ensemble Scholastica, a female vocal group based in Montreal, was founded in the fall of 2008. This album, their debut recording, therefore is certainly long-awaited.

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The ensemble focuses on plainchant and medieval polyphony, making use of original manuscript sources to generate their interpretations. Their past concerts have been organized thematically for particular liturgical seasons or by a particular composer; this album, however, is rather different. While the original chants were selected to pay homage to the group's favorite saints (Scholastica, Cecelia, Catherine of Alexandria, and St. John the Baptist), the approach taken by the ensemble is not a simple question of whether to sing in equal durations or a bit more fluidly. Rather, it seeks to explore a different approach to the idea of "authenticity" by participating in the medieval practice of *elaboratio*.

In her liner notes, musical director Rebecca Bain states that the possibilities for such elaboration included the insertion of musical or textual tropes, the addition of composed passages of two-, three-, or four-voice polyphony, improvisation against a plainchant tenor, and so forth. On this album, the ensemble uses all of these techniques and more. In her description of each of the thirteen selections on the recording, Bain specifies not only the original purpose of the piece or genre but also what kind of elaboration the ensemble has chosen for it and why. On pieces such as "Sancti baptiste," the elaborator (here Catherine Herrmann) has added an organal voice to the early 12th-century monophonic setting of a Notker Balbulus sequence.

On other pieces, the elaborator has added not a voice but a text: "Quinque prudentes virgines" includes a textual trope taken from the *Speculum Virginum*, a 12th-century text discussing female monastic life, while "Dilexisti iustitiam" adds textual tropes from poems dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria in the *Las Huelgas Codex*. Two antiphons have had new verses composed for them: the first selection, "Celsa secreta in columbe specie," and "Dum aurora finem daret." Bain used a melisma from an Alleluia for the feast of St. John the Baptist to create a brand new four-voice motet, borrowing texts for the top three voices from an anonymous English poem. And in several pieces, the elaborations are not vocal but instrumental; the ensemble includes dances and accompaniment performed on organetto, fiddle, psaltery, and symphonia.

Even from the brief descriptions given to each piece, the amount of careful thought and planning that the ensemble put into each selection and into their approach to elaboration is obvious. It seems clear they envision this album speaking to knowledgeable consumers, whether performers, scholars, or both. Given that kind of audience, I wonder whether it might not have been more prudent, and certainly think it would have been more useful, for the ensemble to have gone into greater detail in their liner notes about the "medieval rules of polyphony" and of elaboration that they are stating they have worked to follow. An extra page of detail on that front, or even including the "original" alongside the elaborated, would not have gone amiss.

The overall recording, from a listener's standpoint, is nicely varied and well performed; the ensemble sings with a tasteful sense of unity and phrasing, and the perfect intervals resonate well in their acoustic space. I, for one, will be quite interested to see whether they continue to pursue *elaboratio*.

### **Karen Cook – Early Music America**

*Karen Cook specializes in the music, theory, and notation of the late medieval and early Renaissance periods. She is assistant professor of music at the University of Hartford in Connecticut.*

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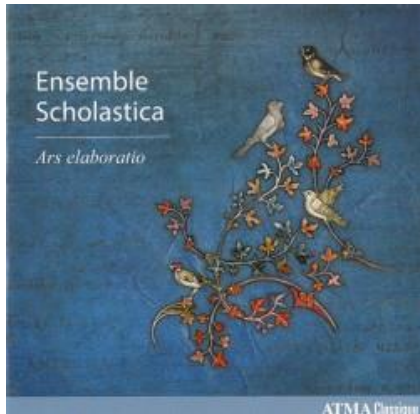
# theWholeNote

## Ars elaboratio - Ensemble Scholastica

Written by Vanessa Wells

Category: **Vocal and Choral**

Published: 28 February 2017



**Ars elaboratio Ensemble Scholastica ATMA ACD2 2755**

These days, the kids call them remixes, but in the hands of musicologist Rebecca Bain, the music on *Ars elaboratio* is the product of taking plainchant and adding tropes from other sources to create new versions. This was not unheard of in the millennium that was not litigious about intellectual property and it was common because of a more flexible and oral, rather than notated, tradition of handing music down. Think of this as more serious Mediaeval Babes repertoire with scholastically informed liberties, which in that era were called elaborations.

The result is litanies, antiphons, poetry and scripture that are often mesmerizing and calming, especially with the addition of symphonia or, in the instrumental version of *Claris vocibus*, of organetto, a portable precursor to the pipe organ, played with one hand on the keyboard and the other working the bellows. The medieval pronunciation charmed this Latinist, although I may have heard some elision, as in spoken Latin poetry recitation, which may throw some listeners. And there are spots in the CD booklet that omit the original liturgical text that is discussed (e.g. the melisma on “mulierum” in *Velox impulit*) so that only the tropes can be followed, if that is your wont.

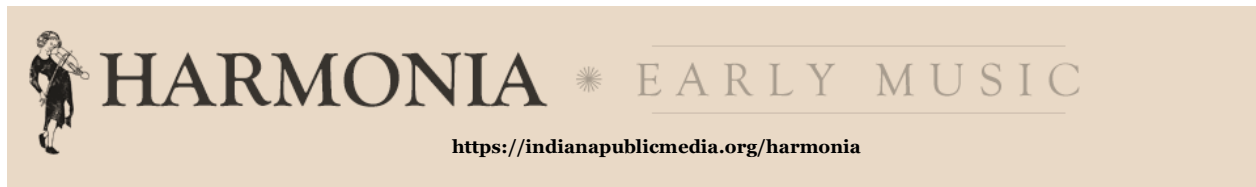
The fascinating background to some of the elaborations contains some ballsy feminist stuff (praise of the chastity of innocent virgins aside), such as the one in *Dilexisti iustitiam*, in which St. Catherine of Alexandria kicks some male philosophical-debate butt. The approachable narrative in *Sancti baptiste* of “amice Christi Johannes” ([O] John, friend of Christ) reflects the presumed (relative) egalitarianism of the coeducational abbey of St. Martial de Limoges in the 1100s.

The acoustics of the Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours in Old Montreal lend themselves to a lovely presentation of the organic nine-voice Ensemble Scholastica. Hildegard of Bingen must be pumping her fist *in coelis*.

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## ***Ars Elaboratio***

By JANELLE DAVIS

Posted July 21, 2017

### **Medieval musical methods and practices**

The further back we go in history, the less we know how the music of that era may have sounded.

Today's concept of medieval music is based on a sort of educated speculation from rare manuscripts, literary descriptions, iconography and other circumstantial evidence. The transmission of medieval music from all-the-way-back-then until the here-and-now is also complicated by the fact that notation systems for music were just beginning to develop; the effort to visually document and represent musical ideas and intentions in a standardized way was still a long time coming. There are extant versions of pieces from this era that do survive in manuscript, but much music was also handed down by oral tradition. Add to this the ubiquitous practice of improvisation, and we are left quite naturally with ever evolving possibility in the medieval repertory.

This is especially true in the development of polyphony. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, musicians were adding extra parts to monophonic plainchant creating 2, 3, or even 4 voiced polyphony. There were different rules for improvising or creating polyphony through various kinds of organum, troping, and the like, in a system that was likely second nature to medieval musicians.

The Montréal based female vocal group, Ensemble Scholastica has devoted themselves to learning and applying these medieval musical methods and practices, and can be heard on a new CD from ATMA Classique. Specifically, their recording *Ars Elaboratio* focuses on the medieval practice of **elaboration**.

### **Process**

Ensemble Scholastica focuses less closely on how to reproduce a definitive version of a surviving work in a particular manuscript, and instead aims to recreate a medieval musician's process. As such, they have taken liberty to adapt pieces from the liturgical chant repertoire, and, following medieval rules, composed several of their own polyphonic versions of surviving monophonic pieces. New versions, that is, new works sung according to the practices and principles of the medieval period thus combine with the old and codified.

As an example, certain parts of the medieval mass were sometimes elaborated by the addition of tropes—new melodies and texts inserted between phrases of the original chant. Ensemble Scholastica employs this practice in their performance of *Quinque prudentes virgines*. First, they sing it all the way through, and on the repeat, add their own newly composed tropes using another existing 12<sup>th</sup> century text.

### **Woman-centric**

The text of *Quinque prudentes virgines* retells the biblical parable of the five wise virgins, and Ensemble Scholastica's added tropes draw from the *Speculum Virginum* which served as a guide for female monastic life in the Middle Ages. This and many of the other tracks on this CD reflect a woman-centric program including the musical homages to the ensemble's namesake, Scholastica in *Celsa secreta*, to Cecilia the patron saint of music in *Cantantibus organis*, and to Catherine of Alexandria, champion of justice and female wisdom in *Dilexisti iustitiam*. In the *Velox impulit*, Ensemble Scholastica uses a melisma on the word mulierum from music the feast of St. John the Baptist as the tenor line over which the ensemble composed three more new parts to make an original four-voice motet.

Another piece on the program, the *Alleluia. Adducentur regi virgines* was sung for the feasts of several female saints. In the *Alleluia*, Ensemble Scholastica also demonstrates the practice of double organum according to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Notre Dame style of polyphony. In double organum, each note of a plainchant is held while another voice improvises a florid line above it.

### **Organum**

The ensemble takes organum a step further with their elaboration that uses three-voiced organum in the style of the famous Congaudeant Catholici, the first known composition for three voices, and one of the only mid-12<sup>th</sup> century pieces with surviving organa with more than two vocal lines. There is some question among scholars if all three voices of Congaudeant Catholici were actually meant to be sung at once, but Ensemble Scholastica has taken an affirmative stance on the matter. Using Congaudeant Catholici as their model, the ensemble elaborates another 12<sup>th</sup> century piece, *Ad sit Johannis baptiste* first with two voices, and then with three.

Founded in 2008, Ensemble Scholastica is comprised of all female singers. But beyond the purely vocal music, a few tracks on this disc also feature members of the ensemble doubling on vielle, psaltery, and symphonia, including one improvisatory track for solo organetto.

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