

# SEQUENTIA'S ORIGINS AT THE SCHOLA CANTORUM BASILIENSIS

by *Benjamin Bagby*



Schola Cantorum, Mittelalterklasse (1975)  
left to right (upper row): Sally Jans-Thorpe, Anne Smith, Barbara Thornton,  
Benjamin Bagby, Paul O'Dette (lower row): Catherine Liddell, Harlan Hokin, Alice Robbins.

Every ensemble has its origins in a feeling of sympathy among like-minded musicians: at first there are enthusiasms for specific repertoires, perhaps a vision of sound, shared goals, and a lot of late-night discussion, hopefully matched in intensity by endless rehearsal. This was also the case for the origin of *Sequentia*, which was conceived at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, beginning in 1975 as a student group, and which evolved until the first professional concert under the name '*Sequentia*' given on 29 March 1977 in Brussels.

By the autumn of that year, *Sequentia* was firmly established in Cologne. What follows are some memories of the ensemble's beginnings in Basel, and the transition from Basel to Cologne.

The crucible in which *Sequentia* was forged was the medieval music performance class of the ensemble *Studio der frühen Musik*, under the general direction of Thomas Binkley. As part of a unique new diploma program for medieval and renaissance music at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, called into life by Wulf Arlt in 1972, their ensemble had been invited to move to Basel from its longtime base in Munich.

vocalists Harlan Hokin, Sally Jans-Thorpe, Pilar Figueras, Barbara Thornton and Benjamin Bagby. Sometimes Hopkinson Smith would also sit in, and in subsequent years we were joined by others, such as Sigrid Lee & Dana Maiben (vielles), and Candace Smith & Willem de Waal (voices). I think every one of these musicians would agree today that those were extremely intense years in Basel.



Studio der frühen Musik (ca. 1970) : left to right: Sterling Jones, Richard Levitt, Andrea von Ramm, Thomas Binkley

The four members of the Studio made up the performance faculty in our program. The voice students worked principally with Andrea von Ramm but also with Richard Levitt, and the instrumentalists with both Binkley and string-player Sterling Jones. In addition to the intense practical work with these performers, the students in the program also studied theoretical subjects with Karin Paulsmeier (notation), Markus Jans (counterpoint and analysis), Christopher Schmidt (ear training, chant) and Wulf Arlt (music history). Another occasional teacher on the scene was the tenor Nigel Rogers, who had been a member of the Studio in its earlier years. Members of the 'Mittelalterklasse' in 1974-75 included Anne Smith (flutes), Paul O'Dette (lute), Alice Robbins (vielle), Catherine Liddell (lute, psaltery) and

The Studio der frühen Musik, founded in Munich in the late 1950's, was a well-known ensemble throughout the 1960's and until it ceased performing in 1977. The ensemble always maintained an identity as a quartet (in fact they were known in North America as *The Early Music Quartet*), and in that formation they toured worldwide under the auspices of the Goethe-Institut. During those long tours, they maintained a disciplined schedule of rehearsal: Thomas Binkley, the group's de facto director, always insisted that a touring ensemble should know three full concert programs by memory, with a fourth in development. But they also enjoyed life on the road, which in those days was glamorous and care-free in a way we can hardly imagine today.

Although originally conceived as a more generalized early music ensemble (as was usual in the 1960's), the Studio's focus rapidly turned towards medieval music, gaining an international profile with the release of multiple ground-breaking LPs on the Telefunken label '*Das Alte Werk*' and later the '*Reflexe*' series of EMI. It's difficult today to understand the importance of those releases in their time, and the sensation they caused among critics, music-lovers and especially students. The period of the Studio's greatest recording activity included some of their first years in Basel (1973-77), and in fact several students in the medieval music program were invited to participate in these recordings, giving the '*Mittelalterklasse*' an enormous cohesion, optimism for the future, and a professional sense of mission.

The center of the medieval program experience was a daily meeting between students and Thomas Binkley (often joined by Sterling Jones or Andrea von Ramm) which took place in the then-infamous Zimmer 1 of the Schola. This small room had been allotted to the Studio as their own dedicated domain, and housed their library of performing editions, books and musical instruments. It was a true 'atelier' in the sense of a practical working space. Students would cram into that room every day for hours on end, working out performance issues and being trained in a particularly rigorous – and not always very humane – approach to the basic questions of how text, voice and instrument might interact in a given medieval repertoire. The sessions were held in German, even though there was usually not one native German-speaker in the group. The intensity and stress-level of that daily musical encounter is difficult to imagine today – it was actually more like martial-arts training, challenging us intellectually, musically and emotionally. It was confrontational, demanding and frustrating work, but also extremely

stimulating. We emerged from the humid fog of Zimmer 1 always dazed, often angered, sometimes enlightened, but always provoked to move on to a new level of excellence and understanding. Out of this class a number of different ad hoc student ensembles were formed, some of them for specific concerts, others for class recitals. The most memorable of these was a Guillaume de Machaut "marathon concert" which followed an entire semester dedicated to studying and memorizing the works of that one composer. The medieval program also represented the Schola to the outside world by sending student ensembles to perform in other cities such as Geneva, Freiburg and Zürich.



Schola Cantorum student ensemble  
(concert in Freiburg, 1976)

(front): Barbara Thornton, Sigrid Lee, Sally Jans-Thorpe,  
Alice Robbins, Dana Maiben (behind): Benjamin  
Bagby, Harlan Hokin



The most ambitious of these expeditions was an October 1975 concert tour organized by Andrea von Ramm, using her many contacts at the Goethe-Institut, and generously supported by the Schola's co-founder and benefactor, Paul Sacher. She planned a concert tour with performances in Istanbul, Teheran, Shiraz, and Athens. A student ensemble called 'Ensemble Médiéval de Bâle', also featuring Andrea as vocalist, would perform a mixed program of medieval song, but also meet with local musicians, engage in 'cultural exchanges', learning about the musical traditions of the host country. The aspect of this tour which made it unlike any other, before or since: we all travelled by train from Basel to Munich, and then on the 'Orient Express' to Istanbul, finally from Istanbul across Turkey and eastern Iran to Teheran. All of the rehearsals took place in our old sleeping car as we slowly rambled across Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and later, the vast Anatolian plain. We arrived 24 hours late in Teheran, exhausted, dehydrated and filthy, just hours before our first performance at the university. It was the kind of crazy and unpredictable adventure which only young musicians can survive. A complete documentation of the trip is stored in the archives of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, and somewhere in the Turkish TV archives in Istanbul there may still exist the tape of a recording we filmed in their studios. Returning to Basel in October from this magical and epic voyage, we were immediately plunged again into the reality of Zimmer 1.

At the end of 1975 it was becoming clear that a more committed and autonomous student ensemble needed to take shape, but it was a long time coming. Barbara Thornton had come to Basel in 1973 (after a brief interlude at the opera studio in Zürich), attracted to the medieval program by her encounters with Andrea von Ramm and the recordings of the Studio.

Previous to this, she had studied music and voice in New York City (Sarah Lawrence College), and then spent several years studying voice at the Amsterdam Conservatory, drawn specifically to that city's thriving early music scene. I had arrived in Basel in 1974, coming from studies in America (Oberlin Conservatory) and from a period of working professionally in New York City, for the New York Pro Musica Antiqua. Since the opportunities for serious study of medieval music in the USA were non-existent in those days, I moved to Europe (with the aid of a fellowship from the Watson Foundation) in order to pursue an intense study of medieval song. I had been passionately involved with medieval music since the age of 16, but always remained an autodidact, searching for guidance. When I learned about the medieval program at the Schola, it seemed like a dream come true. In this sense, Barbara and I were among kindred spirits from similar backgrounds (and many of these from the USA), all coming to Basel for the same reason. The two of us first met in 1974 at Andrea von Ramm's summer house in the Istrian village of Groznan (now in Croatia), where Andrea hosted a 2-week summer course on the songs of the troubadours. We each had our strengths and weaknesses, but we shared a passion for performance, a desire to study, and a commitment to excellence. We also had our share of disagreements, but that made for a creative tension in the working situation which was to serve us well in the years to come. By February 1976 we were sharing an apartment in Klein-Basel.

It was during this period that Barbara Thornton and I resolved to create something new, different from the Studio in sound, approach and repertoire, but still informed by the Studio's sense of adventure, intellectual curiosity and professionalism.

Our focus was always on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and especially monophonic song in all its manifestations. In the autumn of 1976 we were both beginning to research and write our diploma theses: she was working on Aquitanian vocal style, and I was involved with the planctus in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. We shared one old mechanical typewriter (which Andrea had bought for us) and took turns clattering out our pages of endless analyses of which we imagined Binkley or Wulf Arlt would approve. One evening, each in a different room – she was reading about Old French lais and I was studying something by Bruno Stäblein – we simultaneously called out: ‘Sequentia – wouldn’t that be a logical name for our ensemble?’ It was done.



Proto-Sequentia (Festival de Saintes, 1976)  
Barbara Thornton, Benjamin Bagby, Sigrid Lee,  
Harlan Hokin, Dana Maiben

By the following winter, as we were planning our joint diploma concert, the idea was taking shape of a future for our ensemble. The Diplomkonzert itself, which took place in the St.-Alban-Kirche in February 1977, was a program of music around the figure of Aliénor d'Aquitaine and the Plantagenet dynasty. Basically, it was the first concert of Sequentia.

One month later, we performed a similar program in Brussels and elsewhere in Flanders, but for the first time under the name Sequentia. We began planning in earnest for a life after Basel.

As the final semester ended, Binkley began to plan his own departure from Basel and from his own ensemble, to take his young family to live in rural California. The Basel period came to a close for Barbara and me following our diplomas, since it was clear that we could not remain in Switzerland as freelance foreign musicians, and we had never even considered returning to America. In conversations with Binkley we learned a lot about the advantages of living and working as freelance artists in Germany (then West Germany). At that time, we were considering relocating to three candidate cities: Brussels, Berlin, and Cologne. We made exploratory trips to visit these places and get a feel for the musical life in each. In the end, it was clear that Cologne was the best candidate (although in those days a much less charming place to live than it later became). Barbara and I discussed the idea with several Schola colleagues who might have felt a similar motivation, and be willing to join us in Cologne for the venture called Sequentia. But in the end, we were the only two ready to make this huge leap into the unknown.



Proto-Sequentia (Festival de Saintes, 1976)  
Benjamin Bagby, Barbara Thornton, Dana Maiben,  
Harlan Hokin, Sigrid Lee

Once in Cologne, we were joined by lutenist Paul Shigihara Haltod, who was studying lute with Michael Schaeffer at the Musikhochschule, and in the following year by the Dutch string player Margriet Tindemans, whom we had contacted after hearing Binkley praise her playing. She lived in Maastricht, not far from Cologne. This was the first form of the ensemble, although both Paul and Margriet were still finishing diplomas and could not always be free for concerts. We made a conscious effort to remain totally available for freelance musical work within the framework of the ensemble, and did not look for employment elsewhere. This city had been chosen for its flourishing musical scene (especially in early music and new music), its ideal location in Europe, its 12 romanesque churches, and the presence of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk, at that time Germany's most

certs (in Cologne, Göttingen, Hamburg and Geneva) took place in the winter of that year, with an ensemble of four: two voices, lute and vielle. This disposition of the ensemble looked suspiciously similar to that of the Studio, and one wag even remarked that Sequentia was simply a clone ensemble, but pitched a fourth lower. On the contrary, we pursued programming concepts, sound ideals and instrumental usages which were totally unlike those of our former teachers (but with whom we remained on very cordial terms). The first new program was entitled 'Tradition and Avant-Garde in 13<sup>th</sup> Century France'. Through our contacts with Cologne's flourishing new music scene (Johannes Fritsch, Walter Zimmermann, Kevin Volans, and others in the circle around Stockhausen), we found a large industrial loft in the center of the city, which remained the ensemble's ho-



Sequentia (concert in Milano, 1978)  
Crawford Young, Margriet Tindemans, Barbara Thornton, Benjamin Bagby

activecenter for early music production. The move from Basel was completed in September, 1977, just as a period of intense anxiety was beginning in Germany, caused by the RAF terrorists. The first con-

meand ours for the next 23 years. The incredibly low rent made it possible for us to survive those difficult and impoverished first years. It is now used by my colleague, Norbert Rodenkirchen, but

Sequentia sometimes still rehearses in that space, forty years later. In 1978 and 1979, the ensemble expanded to perform vocal polyphony from Aquitaine, English songs of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a new program of music from the Angevin empire, and vocal works from Notre-Dame de Paris. Lutenist Paul Shigihara withdrew after one year, to follow his lute studies full-time (and jazz guitar – eventually he became the guitar soloist of the WDR Big Band) and Crawford Young joined the ensemble in summer 1978, remaining for three years. After his departure, we no longer used the lute on a regular basis, and the ensemble sound shifted towards voices, harp and vielle, including the organetto and symphonia, and I began a serious study of the medieval harp. New instruments were introduced. Among the many colleagues who performed with Sequentia during the early years (1977-1981), I should also mention Mary Springfels & Rosamund Morley (vielles), David Hart (flute), and Candace Smith, Harlan Hokin, Dominique Vellard and Paul Hillier (voices).

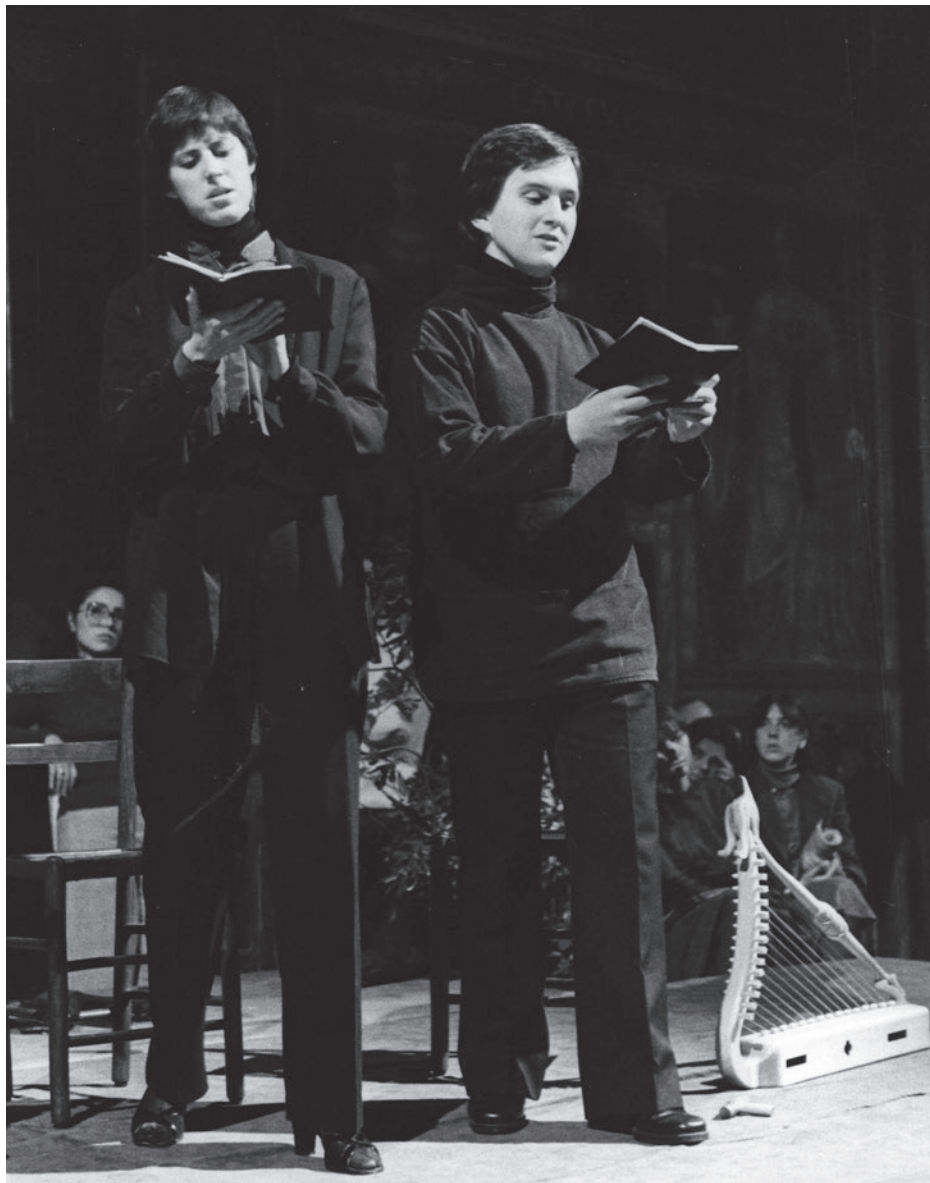
Thanks to the good offices of Schola director Peter Reidemeister, we were able to receive grants for several research and performance residencies at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (Germany), one of the greatest research libraries in Europe.

A new phase in the ensemble's existence had begun. By late 1981, four years after leaving Basel, Sequentia was performing extensively in Europe and North America, and the first LP recording for the Deutsche Harmonia Mundi label was planned for 1981 ('Spielmann und Kleriker'). This was also the period in which Sequentia began a long and fruitful relationship with the Goethe-Institut, with concert tours in Europe, India & Pakistan, the Middle East, North Africa, South America, Australia and Japan/Korea. In 1981 began a

long-term project (in co-production with the WDR Köln) to perform and record the works of Hildegard von Bingen. The core ensemble began touring as a trio (voices, harp, fiddle), a formation which would remain fundamental to touring programs during the following 20 years and more.

Throughout those first years, we maintained close contact with the Schola and with our former teachers and many fellow students. In Basel, Sequentia performed a new Notre-Dame program (developed in Wolfenbüttel) together with a Schola chant choir (conducted by Christopher Schmidt) in 1979, and then returned in 1980, for the first time hosted by the Freunde Alte Musik Basel, with the program 'Dante and the Troubadours'. With many subsequent visits to Basel for performing, teaching and participating in juries, it was the beginning of a new relationship which has flourished to this day.

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Sequentia (concert in Milano, 1978)  
Barbara Thornton, Benjamin Bagby

**SEQUENTIA**  
[www.sequentia.org](http://www.sequentia.org)