



## **Contre le Temps**

***Ubi sunt mulieres?***

**National Centre for Early Music  
Saturday 14 December 12.00pm**

**Contre le Temps**  
**Karin Wesston, Cécile Walch,**  
**Julia Marty, Amy Farnell** *singers*

***Ubi sunt mulieres?***  
(‘Where are the women?’)

Salve decus  
Alleluia: O Maria pia  
Je me plains  
Cambrai Cathedral Choirbook  
**Guillaume Dufay** 1397-1474

Salve virgo virginum  
Alleluia V: Ave Maria  
British Library, Arundel 248  
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College,  
Winchester Troper

Ave gloriosa mater salvatoris  
British Library, Harley 978

O liliū convallium  
Quant voi l’erbe reverdir  
Cele m’a tolu  
Salve Virgo virginum  
Cividale del Friuli Cathedral Library  
Montpellier Codex

Ma belle dame souveraine  
**Guillaume Dufay**

Uterus hodie virginis floruit  
O tu illustrata  
O Maria virgo davitica  
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale  
**Hildegard von Bingen** 1098-1179  
Codex Las Huelgas

Toujours servir  
Cyprus Codex

This programme is a musical celebration of women in Western medieval sources from modern-day France, Spain and England. In the Middle Ages, the cult of the Virgin Mary gained immense popularity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and works dedicated to her emphasise sweetness, love and sensitivity. The language used to describe Mary also influenced the development of secular love poetry, where the tenderness of Marian devotion was superimposed onto the beloved woman. In the concert we explore the

sacred and secular praises of women, bringing these two realms into dialogue and showing the deep connections between religious reverence and courtly love.

Spanning the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, the programme illustrates the evolution of musical styles, from simple monophonic chant to intricate polyphony. Some sacred works, such as *Salve decus* from the Cambrai Cathedral Choirbook and *Alleluia V. Ave Maria* from the Winchester Troper, exemplify the devotion to the Virgin Mary, whose purity and grace were central themes in medieval Christian worship.

A particularly significant figure is Hildegard von Bingen, one of the few known female composers of the Middle Ages. Hildegard was not only a composer but also a mystic, writer and abbess, whose visionary works continue to resonate today. Her compositions, such as *O tu illustrata*, celebrate the divine feminine and stand out for their virtuosic beauty. Hildegard's role as a female composer in a male-dominated monastic world makes her a powerful symbol of women's creative contributions to medieval culture. Her music, alongside our own collaboration as a female ensemble, honours women's voices – both literal and figurative – throughout history.

Our work as Contre le Temps resonates with how this music may have originally been performed – by singers who knew each other well and shared a deep familiarity with the repertoire. In monastic settings, such as that of Hildegard von Bingen, nuns would have sung together daily, creating music that was not only worshipful but also reflective of their community. Similarly, we, as an ensemble of four women, work democratically and intimately, forming a close-knit relationship with the repertoire. Our process involves singing these pieces over and over, experimenting with different phrasings, tempos and vocal colours. The act of singing together, often by heart and without a single director, honours the traditions of female communal singing, blending personal sensibilities with the ancient sound world we are bringing to life.

The Marian devotion that permeates the sacred music of this programme also spills into secular songs, such as Guillaume Dufay's *Je me complains*. Here, similar language of admiration and adoration is applied to the beloved woman, showing how courtly love-poetry borrowed from religious imagery, elevating the earthly beloved to a near-divine status. Our choice of secular songs, drawn from sources like the Cyprus Manuscript and the Oxford Codex, demonstrates the complex interplay between sacred and secular themes, blurring the lines between spiritual reverence and worldly love.

By weaving these sacred and secular praises together, we celebrate not only the women who inspired these works but also our own collaborative journey as a female ensemble, continuing the legacy of women's musical and cultural contributions across centuries.

## Salve decus

Salve decus puritatis  
Virgo mater inclita  
Radix sancta pietatis  
Ex qua salus et vita  
Thronus summe maiestatis  
Mira dote predata  
Cuius vis humilitatis  
Eve solvit debita

Stella Maris spes salutis  
Portus indulgentie  
Sponsa regis flos virtutis  
Vena potens venie.  
Cerne pondus servitutis  
Humane miserie  
Mole criminum obrutis  
Opem fer clementie.

Instat hostis urget pestis  
Torquet conscientia  
Servit plagit nunc infestis  
Divina iustitia.  
Virgo Maris  
tam molestis  
Occure potentia  
Et te piam prece mestis  
Mater plena gratia.

Eva Virgo licet gravis  
Sit pressura sordium  
Tua tamen mens suavis  
Sistit fluctus cordium  
Que salutis nostre navis  
Reparas nofragium  
Moribus offensum pravis  
Placa nobis filium.

Amen.

Hail, glory of purity,  
Renowned Virgin Mother,  
Holy root of piety  
From whom salvation and life arise.  
Throne of the highest majesty,  
Endowed with a wondrous gift,  
Whose humility  
Has undone Eve's debt.

Star of the Sea, hope of salvation,  
Harbour of forgiveness,  
Bride of the king, flower of virtue,  
Powerful source of mercy.  
See the weight of the servitude  
Of human misery,  
Crushed by the burden of sins,  
Bring the help of your clemency.

The enemy presses, the plague threatens,  
Conscience torments,  
Now the wound of divine justice  
Strikes guilty souls.  
Virgin of the sea,  
against such trials,  
Come to our aid with your power,  
And in your goodness, answer the prayer  
Of the sorrowful, O Mother full of grace.

Though, O Virgin, the heavy weight  
Of Eve's defilement remains,  
Your gentle spirit  
Stills the storms of our hearts.  
You, who repair the shipwreck  
Of our salvation,  
With your virtues, soothe our offences  
And appease your Son for us.

Amen.

**Alleluia: O Maria pia**

O Maria pia mater Christi  
 Tu post ipsum nostre robur spei  
 Gloriosa ubi quem fuisti  
 Frumenti vas mellis et olei  
 Tibi iubilat atquem  
 te laudat chorus noster.

F-CA MS II, f. 1r  
 (Cambrai Cathedral Choirbook)

**Je me complains**

Je me complains piteusement  
 a moi tout seul plus qu'a nullui..  
 de la grieste, paine e tourment,  
 que je souffre plus que ne di.

Dangier me tient en tel soussi  
 qu'eschever ne puis sa rudesse,  
 et fortune le veult aussi,  
 mais par ma foy ce fait jonesse.

**Salve virgo virginum**

Salve lumen luminum,  
 Radius splendoris,  
 Salve flos convallium,  
 Stilla veri roris,  
 Nostra spes in te.

Salve virgo regia,  
 Orta salutaris,  
 Verax viri nescia  
 Quia Deum paris,  
 Ave, quia deica  
 Prole fecundaris,  
 Nostra spes in te.

Ave nostre spei  
 Finis et salutis,  
 Ave, perquam rei  
 Letantur cum tutis.  
 Ave, speciei  
 Decus et salutis.  
 Nostra spes in te.

GB-Lbl Arundel 248, f. 155r

O Mary, devout mother of Christ,  
 After Him, you are our strength of hope.  
 Glorious, you who have been  
 The vessel of grain, honey, and oil.  
 To you, our choir sings  
 and praises with joy.

I lament pitifully  
 To myself more than to anyone else...  
 Of the sorrow, pain, and torment  
 That I suffer more than I say.

Dangier (Danger) holds me in such anxiety  
 That I cannot escape its harshness,  
 And Fortune wills it so as well,  
 But truly, it is youth that causes this.

Hail, light of lights,  
 Ray of splendour,  
 Hail, flower of the valleys,  
 Drop of true dew,  
 Our hope is in you.

Hail, royal virgin,  
 Source of salvation,  
 Truly you know not man  
 For you give birth to God,  
 Hail, for by the divine  
 Offspring you are made fruitful,  
 Our hope is in you.

Hail, end of our hope  
 And of our salvation,  
 Hail, through you the guilty  
 Rejoice with the saved.  
 Hail, beauty  
 Adorned with grace and salvation.  
 Our hope is in you.

**Alleluia V: Ave Maria**

Ave Maria gratia plena  
Dominus tecum  
Benedicta tu in mulieribus.

GB-Ccc MS 473, f. 164r  
(Winchester Troper)

Hail Mary, full of grace,  
The Lord is with you,  
Blessed are you among women.

**Ave gloriosa mater salvatoris**

Ave gloriosa  
mater salvatoris  
Ave speciosa virgo,  
flos pudoris,  
Ave lux iocosa,  
thalamus splendoris,  
Ave prociosa  
salus peccatoris:

Ave vitis, via,  
casta, munda, pura,  
Dulcis, mitis, pia,  
felix creatura,  
Parens modo miro,  
nova partitura  
Virum sine viro,  
contra legis iura.

Virgo virginum,  
expers criminum,  
Decus luminum,  
celi domina,  
Salus gencium,  
spes fidelium,  
Lumen cordium,  
nos illumina,

Nosque filio tuo, tam pio,  
Tam propicio, reconcilia,  
Et ad gaudia nos perhennia  
Duc prece pia, virgo Maria.

GB-Lbl Harley 978, ff. 9v–10r

Hail, glorious  
mother of the Saviour,  
Hail, beautiful virgin,  
flower of modesty,  
Hail, joyful light,  
chamber of splendour,  
Hail, precious  
salvation of the sinner.

Hail, vine, path,  
chaste, clean, pure,  
Sweet, gentle, pious,  
blessed creature,  
Mother in a wondrous way,  
a new form of childbirth,  
A man without a man,  
against the laws of nature.

Virgin of virgins,  
free of sin,  
Ornament of lights,  
queen of heaven,  
Salvation of nations,  
hope of the faithful,  
Light of hearts,  
enlighten us,

And reconcile us with your Son, so kind,  
So merciful, reconciling,  
And lead us to everlasting joy  
Through your holy prayer, Virgin Mary.

**○ liliū convallium**

○ liliū convallium,  
Flos virginum, Stirps regia;  
Spes omnium Fidelium,  
Lux luminum, ○ filia;  
Eve matri contraria,  
Ave matris de gratia  
Nos redimens per filium,  
Ave, ave, remedium  
Nos eximens miseria.  
*Benedicamus Domin*

Cividale LVI, f. 252r

○ lily of the valley,  
Flower of virgins, royal stem;  
Hope of all people who are faithful,  
Light of lights, ○ daughter!  
How opposite to the mother Eve,  
From woe by a mother's grace  
Redeeming us through thy son,  
Hail! hail a remedy  
Releasing us from our wretched condition.  
Let us bless the Lord

**Quant voi l'erbe reverdir**

*Triplum:*

Quant voi l'erbe reverdir  
Et le tans seri et cler  
Et le rosier espanir  
Et le rossignol chanter,  
Adonc me covient penser  
A amors servir;  
Car la riens que plus desir  
Voil amer  
De cuer sans fauser,  
Car tant me pleist a veir  
Son vis cler,  
que nus ne porroit souffrir  
sanz mentir  
de ses euz le regarder  
ne li covenist amer.

*Motetus:*

Salve, virgo virginum,  
Dei plena gratia  
verum lumen luminum,  
peccatorum venia,  
salvatorem omnium  
in propicia,  
vera salus gentium,  
regia  
Dei filia,  
nobis hunc propicium,  
o pia,  
dansque, flos convallium,

*Triplum:*

When I see the grass turning green  
And the weather becoming clear  
And the rose bush blooming  
And the nightingale singing,  
Then I must think  
of serving Love;  
for nothing makes me desire more  
than to love him  
with a heart unbroken,  
for it pleases me so much to see  
his bright face,  
that no one could endure  
without lying  
to look into his eyes,  
nor would it be fitting for him to love.

*Motetus:*

Hail, virgin of virgins,  
full of divine grace,  
true light of lights,  
forgiveness of sinners,  
saviour of all  
in your kindness,  
true salvation of nations,  
daughter  
of the King,  
be gracious to us,  
○ pious one,  
grant us, flower of the valleys,

lilium,  
Vera Semper Gaudia  
in eterna gloria.

*Tenor:*

Cumque evigilasset Iacob  
quasi de gravi sompno ait

F-MO H 196, ff. 77v—79

### **Cele m'a tolu**

*Triplum:*

Cele m'a tolu la vie,  
qui lonc tans m'a fet  
grief maus sentir;  
car pour s'amour pleur,  
de cuer souspir.  
C'est la riens del mont,  
que plus desir,  
n'ainc n'en poi joïr;  
si me covendra languir  
et dolour souffrir  
et nuit et jour.  
Et tout son plaisir  
fera[i] tous jours,  
que que m'en doie avenir;  
si la servirai,  
n'autre amie n'avrai.  
Adés l'amerai,  
ne ja ne m'en partirai.

*Motetus:*

Lonc tens a,  
que ne vi m'amie;  
trop me greva,  
quant m'en covint partir,  
car je l'aim et desir.  
Trop m'aïr,  
quant pour li servir  
m'estuet languir,  
et si ne m'en puis tenir.  
Quant la remir,  
de cuer souspir,  
si que tout me fait fremir;  
car je l'aim de fin cuer

lily,  
true eternal joys  
in eternal glory.

*Tenor:*

When Jacob awoke  
as from a deep sleep.

*Triplum:*

She has taken my life away,  
who has long made me  
feel great pains;  
for her love, I weep,  
I sigh from my heart.  
She is the thing in the world  
that I desire most,  
I cannot enjoy it;  
I will have to languish  
and suffer pain  
night and day.  
And all her pleasure  
will be mine forever,  
no matter what may happen to me;  
I will serve her,  
I will have no other friend.  
I will always love her,  
and I will never leave her.

*Motetus:*

It has been a long time,  
since I saw my friend;  
it weighed too heavily on me,  
when I had to leave,  
for I love her and desire her.  
I suffer too much,  
when I must languish  
to serve her,  
and I cannot hold myself back.  
When I see her,  
I sigh from my heart,  
so that everything makes me tremble;  
for I love her with all my heart,



sans mentir.  
N'en puis joir,  
Dieus, ne repentir,  
si m'estuet souffrir  
les maus, dont ne puis garir.

*Tenor:*  
Et sperabit.

F-MO H 196, ff. 116v-118

### **Salve Virgo virginum**

*Triplum:*  
Salve, Virgo virginum,  
salve, sancta parens,  
salve, lumen luminum,  
salve, labe carens!  
Nostrorum sis criminum  
nebulas exarens!  
Amen.

*Motetus:*  
Salve, sancta parens,  
salve, lumen luminum,  
salve, labe carens!  
Nostrorum sis criminum  
nebulas exarens!  
Amen.

*Tenor:*  
Omnes

F-MO H 196, f. 346

### **Ma belle dame souveraine**

Ma belle dame souveraine  
Faites cesser ma grief dolour  
Que j'endure pour vostre amour  
Nuit et jour, dont j'ay tres grant painne

Ou autrement, soiés certaine  
Je finneray dedens brief jour.

Ma belle dame souveraine  
Faites cesser ma grief dolour

Il n'i a jour en la sepmainne  
Que je ne soye en grant tristour;

without lying.  
I cannot enjoy it,  
God, nor regret it,  
if I must suffer  
the pains from which I cannot heal.

*Tenor:*  
And he will hope.

*Triplum:*  
Hail, Virgin of virgins,  
hail, holy mother,  
hail, light of lights,  
hail, without stain!  
Be the removal of our sins,  
dissipating the clouds!  
Amen.

*Motetus:*  
Hail, holy mother,  
hail, light of lights,  
hail, without stain!  
Be the removal of our sins,  
dissipating the clouds!  
Amen.

*Tenor:*  
Everyone

My beautiful sovereign lady  
Make my great sorrow cease,  
Which I endure for your love  
Night and day, for which I suffer greatly.

Or else, be certain  
I shall die within a few days.

My beautiful sovereign lady  
Make my great sorrow cease.

There is not a day in the week  
When I am not in great sadness;

Se me veulliés par vo doulcour  
Secourir, de volonté plaine  
Ma belle dame souveraine  
Faites cesser ma grief dolour  
Que j'endure pour vostre amour  
Nuit et jour, dont j'ay tres grant paine

If you would, with all your kindness,  
Help me with your full will,  
My beautiful sovereign lady  
Make my great sorrow cease,  
Which I endure for your love  
Night and day, for which I suffer greatly.

**Uterus hodie virginis floruit**

Uterus hodie  
virginis floruit  
Nec matrem dum gignit  
libido torruit  
Que virgo permanens  
virum aborruit  
O partus mirabilis.

The womb of the virgin  
has blossomed today,  
And lust did not burn  
the mother in childbirth,  
The virgin, remaining always a virgin,  
has not received a man.  
Oh, marvellous birth!

De radice lesse  
virga progreditur  
Et de virgule flos  
Christus exoritur  
Cuius in Libano cedrus extollitur  
O partus mirabilis.

From the root of Jesse,  
a branch springs forth,  
And from that branch,  
Christ has arisen,  
Whose cedar is exalted in Lebanon.  
Oh, marvellous birth!

Hic flos  
davitico signatus calamo  
Et sponsus regio  
procedens talamo  
Celesti seculum  
perunxit balsamo  
O partus mirabilis.

This flower,  
marked by the pen of David,  
Comes forth like a bridegroom  
from his royal pavilion,  
Anointing the world  
with a heavenly balm.  
Oh, marvellous birth!

Hic flos est in Syon  
rosa nec aruit  
Et in Ierusalem  
lilium conduit  
Utrisque genera  
cruce composuit  
O partus mirabilis.

This flower is in Zion;  
the rose has not withered.  
And in Jerusalem,  
the lily shines with whiteness.  
And on the cross,  
it has adorned the cheeks of the dove.  
Oh, marvellous birth!

**○ tu illustrata**

O tu illustrata  
de divina claritate  
clara Virgo Maria  
Verbo Dei infusa,  
unde venter tuus floruit  
de introitu Spiritus Dei,  
qui in te sufflavit  
et in te esuxit  
quod Eva abstulit  
in abscisione puritatis,  
per contractam contagionem  
de suggestionem diaboli.

V. Tu mirabiliter abscondisti in te  
inmaculatam carnem  
per divinam rationem,  
cum Filius Dei  
in ventre tuo floruit,  
sancta divinitate eum educente  
contra carnis iura  
que construxit Eva,  
integritati copulatum  
in divinis visceribus.

D-WII 2, ff. 466v-467r (Riesencodex)

**○ Maria virgo davitica**

O Maria Maris Stella  
Plena graciae  
Mater simul et puella  
Vas mundicie  
Templum nostri redemptoris  
Sol iusticie  
Porta celi spes reorum  
Tronus glorie  
Sublevatrix miserorum  
Vena venie  
Audi servos te rogantes  
Mater Gracie  
Ut peccata sint ablata  
Per te hodie  
Qui te puro laudant corde  
In veritate.

E-BUIh, f. 102v (Codex Las Huelgas)

O you who are illumined  
by the divine radiance,  
radiant Virgin Mary,  
suffused with the Word of God,  
whence your womb blossomed  
from the entrance of the Spirit of God,  
who breathed upon you  
and, within you, sucked out  
what Eve bore away  
in the breach of purity,  
through the contagion contracted  
from the Devil's suggestion.

V. You wondrously hid within you  
immaculate flesh  
through the divine reason,  
when the Son of God  
blossomed in your womb,  
holy divinity bringing him forth  
against the laws of the flesh  
that Eve built,  
coupled to integrity  
in the divine bosom.

O Mary, Star of the Sea,  
Full of grace,  
Both mother and maiden,  
Vessel of purity,  
Temple of our Redeemer,  
Sun of justice,  
Gate of heaven, hope of sinners,  
Throne of glory,  
Relief of the miserable,  
River of pardon,  
Hear your servants asking you,  
O Mother of Grace,  
That their sins may be taken away  
Today through you,  
Those who praise you with a pure heart  
In truth.

### **Toujours servir**

Toujours servir je veuil la douce flour  
De bon voloir, honorer et chierir,  
Amer, loer, purement sans mentir,  
Pour la biauté qu'en elle est et l'odeur.

D'arme, de cuer e cors par gran ferveur  
Sans oblier on ques mais ne faillir,

Toujours servir je veuil la douce flour  
De bon voloir, honorer et chierir,

Que pris, biauté, bonté, toute douceur,  
Tous les biens honnorer sans menrir,  
Soingneusement, volentiers, par plaisir,  
Et par droit hait en tous lieux  
de fin cuer,

Toujours servir je veuil la douce flour  
De bon voloir, honorer et chierir,  
Amer, loer, purement sans mentir,  
Pour la biauté qu'en elle est et l'odeur.

I always want to serve the sweet flower  
With good will, to honour and to cherish,  
To love and to praise, purely without lying,  
For the beauty she has and her fragrance.

With soul, heart, and body, with fervour,  
Without forgetting or ever failing,

I always want to serve the sweet flower  
With good will, to honour and cherish,

That value, beauty, goodness, all sweetness,  
To honour all good things without falsehood,  
Carefully, willingly, with pleasure,  
And by sure haste in all places  
with a sincere heart,

I always want to serve the sweet flower  
With good will, to honour and to cherish,  
To love and to praise, purely without lying,  
For the beauty she has, and her fragrance.

Cyprus Codex, f. 158v

## **Contre le Temps**

Contre le Temps is a female vocal ensemble specialising in medieval music. Emerging as a prominent force in today's medieval music landscape, Contre le Temps interprets a variety of musical genres from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries, blending personal musical sensibilities with historically informed knowledge of period sources. The name Contre le Temps is borrowed from two songs – one by the French troubadour Gace Brulé and the other from an anonymous author in the Oxford manuscript – and signifies the ensemble's commitment to interpreting this timeless music in an original and fresh manner. We embody this music as only the voice used as an instrument can, moving our audience with its intrinsic emotional power, heightened by the melodic strength of four female voices in unison.

We work democratically, without a single director, taking the time to sing the music again and again, trying different phrasings, tempos and colours, embracing the slow process necessary for creating our sound. We minimise the distance between the music, ourselves, and our audience, spending time with the repertoire to internalise and memorise it. This gradual process contrasts with the current culture of speed in freelance work in the field of early music. Our approach allows us to delve deeper into the music and offers us the opportunity to rediscover a different sense of time.

Contre le Temps performs across Europe, including in France, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland. The ensemble recently participated in the IYAP programme organised by the Laus Polyphoniae festival in Antwerp, and won the Audience Award and second prize from the jury at the International Van Wassenaer Competition in August 2023. As part of that competition, Contre le Temps also won the OOM Prize which includes an upcoming concert tour during the Utrecht Early Music Festival Season 2024-2025. The ensemble's 2024-2025 season also features performances with the Voix et Route Romane festival, the York Early Music Christmas Festival and AMUZ.

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