

Getting Medieval

The rise of medieval and neo-classical bands

by Jason Pitzl-Waters

An ancient world. Songs filled with mystery and sense of the ominous. By turns bawdy, holy, austere, and complex. Medieval, medieval-influenced and neo-classical music have been casting a long shadow on the musical underground for years. Now due to a talented crop of artists from around the world, it seems the mainstream will soon take notice of this dark flower in the musical garden of delights.

The Middle Ages spanned a period from the 5th century to the early 16th century. The music of this era spanned styles from early chant forms to wandering troubadours singing of chivalry and courtly love. Early music seems an unlikely place for contemporary artists to draw from, yet dozens of bands and artists are looking here to create a unique lens for viewing our modern world. Many of us who are Pagans most likely have heard songs that incorporate medieval elements but never knew what it was; we only knew it sounded "ancient" and created a musical atmosphere that invoked a different time and place.

One of the bands that is exploring medieval and neo-classical song forms is Mirabilis. A side-project of Summer Bowman (from the darkwave band The Machine in the Garden) and Dru (from the ethereal band This Ascension), Mirabilis (Latin for something that is wonderful, miraculous, or unusual) explores vocal music from many different eras and cultures. I recently asked Summer why she feels that medieval and neo-classical music is so well liked, and why those who would never shop from the "classical" section of the music store are picking up albums by bands like Estampie and Mediaeval Baebes.

"Groups like Mediaeval Baebes, The Soil Bleeds Black and Unto Ashes were already paving the way of releasing complete albums of neo-classical music with a darker twinge and doing quite well with it. The trick is getting people who normally listen to rock or alternative to find an album of vocal music with little instrumentation to be interesting. What I find so unusual is that people who wouldn't normally buy a classical album pick up our music and they are entranced by it. I can't quite put my finger on why that may be. Perhaps this type of music has a purity of emotion behind it. The pieces can cover a wide range of emotions, from sadness to pure joy. There is something about the way the vocals are framed in the genre - either because vocals are the only instrumentation, or because they are minimally backed up - that captures your attention. The human voice is a powerful thing, and when combined with many other voices, whether in unison or in harmony, amazing sounds are created."

The power of the human voice, it seems, is strong indeed. That power is currently fueling a "medieval renaissance" in CD shops and Internet mail-order catalogues. The record label Dancing Ferret is quickly becoming a leader of this trend. A recent promotional poster from the label exclaims: "Get Medieval," and highlights recent releases by the bands Qntal (interviewed in the previous issue of newWitch), Corvus Corax and Estampie, all of whom work with medieval songs and song structures. But Dancing

Ferret is hardly alone. Several American and European labels such as Projekt, The Fossil Dungeon, and Middle Pillar Presents are releasing these "neo-medieval" bands to an ever-growing audience hungry for a new kind of authenticity.

Another interesting spin on this recent trend is that many of these artists are also fascinated with the occult or with modern Paganism. This is unusual, considering that much of the surviving material from this period is overwhelmingly Christian in focus and intent. Yet bands like The Soil Bleeds Black and Unto Ashes produce work that has a decidedly Pagan bent. The Soil Bleeds Black may sing "Kyrie Eleison," but you're never quite sure which "Lord" they are praising. I'm sure that many of the strict Christian composers of the songs that are performed by the modern medieval movement would shake their heads in wonder at who is singing their songs, playing their arrangements and attending concerts filled with their music.

Perhaps in the end the answer to the popularity of these medieval and neo-classical bands is that humanity hasn't changed all that much in a thousand years. Perhaps Summer Bowman of Mirabilis has the right idea when she tells me that *"people can relate to the music of yesterday, even if it is produced and mixed with the technology and sounds of today."* It may as simple as that.

A Brief Guide to the Modern Medievalists:
(this would make a great side-bar to the main text)

Mirabilis

"Mirabilis crafts original musical compositions as well as interprets traditional classical vocal pieces from a number of different periods. The music is melodic and rich and borrows from classical, ethereal, darkwave, and gothic genres."

<http://www.mirabilismusic.com/>

The Soil Bleeds Black

"Envision a journey through ancient times of medieval life and legend. The Soil Bleeds Black explore the traditions and customs of medieval Europe with the ambition of drawing the listener into a world of the ancient past."

<http://www.soilbleedsblack.com>

Unto Ashes

"Unto Ashes, a neo-Medieval dirge band.. are primarily focused on the exploration of beauty and terror in the realms of shadow and loss. They utilize acoustic and synthetic instruments to produce a foreboding gloom-scape of trance and drone; many of their songs are hauntingly beautiful, a dark harvest of abandonment and failure"

<http://www.untoashes.com>

Qntal

"Medieval music, instruments and languages with a touch of modern electronics. Simply Spellbinding."

<http://www.qntal.de>

Estampie

"For twenty years, Estampie had faithfully recreated medieval music using authentic instruments, texts, and languages. Featuring members of Qntal, their music is captivating, lush and spellbinding"

<http://www.estampie.de>

Corvus Corax

"Since 1989. Corvus Corax has recorded real medieval music with authentic instruments in a modern rock-n-roll style. Period pieces performed with a plethora of pipes, plenty of percussion, and an abundance of attitude"

<http://www.corvuscorax.de>

Irfan

"Haunting, beautiful, dark and mystical. This Bulgarian newcomer band blends Balkan instruments, percussion, strong male voices/chorus and a wonderful female voice."

<http://www.prikosnovenie.com/groupes/Irfank.html>

The Mediaeval Bæbes

"The Mediaeval Bæbes are nine talented female singers of eight different nationalities who sing music from a time long gone, in such languages as Mediaeval Welsh, Latin, Middle English, Mediaeval French, German and Italian"

<http://mediaevalbaebes.com>