

CAMA Masterseries @ the Lobero

LUX FEMINÆ

By ERIN J. SMITH / CASA

EXTENDING FROM ITALY TO THE TIP OF AFRICA, the area known in antiquity as Hesperia lay exposed to the musical flavors of both the east and the west, resulting in a rich tapestry of sound.

Since founding Hespèrion XXI, early music superstars Jordi Savall and his wife Montserrat Figueras have dedicated more than 30 years to the study, reconstruction, and performance of the ancient music that sprang from the area, especially that of the Hispanic and European musical repertoire before 1800. At a recent CAMA Masterseries concert held March 18th at the Lobero Theatre, Hespèrion XXI performed a musical program entitled *Lux Feminae*, a musical invocation of the archetypal aspects of woman spanning the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

"*Lux Feminae* is an homage to the light of Woman," wrote Figueras in the program notes. "Having sung of that light for so long through music and poetry, I naturally became aware that it has not always been free to shine. *Lux Feminae* is also a story with music about women and an invocation to femininity, as the key to the spiritual world."

An opening procession set the spiritual tone of the performance, creating a quiet, meditative listening space for the audience. In a solitary ascent up the aisle toward the stage, Pierre Hamon played one of his many ancient flutes. The reedy sound floated over the top of the beat of a small drum he skillfully balanced under his arm while the rest of the musicians met him on stage, including Savall on rebab and lira de gamba; Figueras, voice and cithara; and Dimitri Psonis on the oud, santur, and morisca.

In the hands of these master musicians, the deceptively rustic instruments became vessels for the musicians' own expression. While the rhythms and the texts certainly contributed to the antiquated sound, much more than just the shape and material of the instruments gave the music its flavor. What may surprise some is that the method used to create the early music is much closer to jazz than anything else. Because so little of the music was written down, what's left to these modern-day musicians is often nothing more than the words. But the language itself sings, and combined with the early instruments, the musicians can improvise, much like they would in a jazz ensemble, effectively transporting the listener back in time.



Photo by Alexandre Cousin

Montserrat Figueras of Hespèrion XXI

In a seamless stream of music unbroken by the audience's clapping, the musicians moved through each of the pieces celebrating seven aspects of woman from the years 900 to 1600: mysticism, sensuality, motherhood, love, lament, rejoicing, and wisdom. With her dark flowing hair and almost monastic robes, Figueras' very presence embodied the wisdom of the ancient feminine. Seated at the cithara, her playing was as beautiful to watch as it was to listen to, as her fingers danced over the instrument.

Along with music from the Andalusian, Sephardic, and Christian traditions, the group performed music from the Codex de la Huelgas and *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat* as well as music by composers Beatriz de Dia, Martin Codax, and Bartomeu Càrteres.

After a final procession, where the musicians moved slowly off stage and up through the aisle to the back of the theatre, the musical spell was broken by only the sound of clapping and cheering. The audience gave Hespèrion XXI a standing ovation, and as an encore, Savall and Figueras invited their son Ferran Savall onto the stage to join his mother in singing a Jewish lullaby. While his voice wasn't as seasoned as his mother's or as resonate as his father's playing, the picture of the family performing together on stage along with their fellow musicians was appreciated by all.

If you missed the concert, find Hespèrion XXI on iTunes. Several of the songs performed during the concert, such as *Saeta Antigua* and *Soleta Sò Jo Ací*, can be heard on *Lux Feminae 900-1600*, the companion album produced by the group's music label, Alia Vox (www.alia-vox.com).

I carried the moon on my back,
and I walked and I wept.
Moon, you are hungry,
you are sleepy,
all of nature shivers with cold.

I met Sleep,
and he asked me
what I carried on my back.
I answered that I carried
nothing but the moon,
and he said:
Rock her to sleep, rock her to sleep.

~From *Amazigh Lullaby*, Morocco