Forbidden Love: the Passion of Héloïse and Abélard
Program Notes

Two hundred years ago, in 1818, the newly-formed state of Illinois reportedly tried to attract immigrants to the city of Chicago by advertising that “Her men are all like Abelard, her women like Eloy (Heloise)”; a slogan akin to, if several degrees more sophisticated than that of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, where “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” There is no denying that the 12th-century lovers Héloïse and Abélard hold a storied place in the western pantheon of famous lovers that includes Dante and Beatrice, Guinevere and Lancelot, and Tristan and Isolde. But this medieval French couple endures not only because of the tales told about them; they left their history in their own words to give us a glimpse into extraordinary lifelong affair.

David Douglass started talking about basing a concert on their story at least three years ago. We read Betty Radice’s wonderful book The Letters of Héloïse and Abélard, with her beautiful translations of the lovers’ late correspondence, and we explored 12th-century repertoire possibilities. But the deal was sealed last year when we spoke with Barbara Newman (Northwestern University) about her work on the more than 100 love letters newly attributed to the couple that could now be considered part of the canon.

Professor Newman’s book Making Love in the 12th Century (Penn Press, 2016) argues convincingly that the Letters of Two Lovers, or Epistolae Duorum Amantium, previously thought to be anonymous, can be attributed to Héloïse and Abélard with confidence. (I encourage you to read her very engaging book, available at a nice discount with the coupons at our will-call table!) The picture finally completed, we followed the story of a teacher and his student, an egotistical and passionate man and an brilliant and unconventional woman; two lovers who found physical ecstasy and intellectual passion and wrote about it.

And how they wrote about it! The Letters of Two Lovers are deeply personal, and give us a glimpse into everything from amorous longing (think sexting) to lovers’ spats. They speak of lovemaking anticipated and remembered, of shame and delight, and of slights both real and imagined. The fact that the letters were kept anonymous makes perfect sense when you read them; nothing is held back, nothing indicates that these were meant for reading by anyone other than the writers.

We know the story of our lovers primarily from Peter Abélard’s letter The History My Misfortunes, or Historia Calamitatum, written some 10 years before his death to console a friend by sharing his own sad story. Abélard describes insinuating himself into the household of Héloïse’s uncle Fulbert in order to get to know this girl, already renowned for her intellectual powers - she had an education beyond the usual for a female of her time, and is said to have known Greek and Hebrew, as well Latin. What Abélard describes as a one-sided seduction seems to have been embraced and reciprocated by Héloïse; she continues to recall their early, unbridled
passion long into her life, when their physical relationship was a thing of the past. In this day of “me too”, we might squirm at the idea of celebrating an older man taking advantage of an innocent young woman and calling it all terribly romantic. Indeed, Abélard sounds unappetizingly cold and calculating in his boastful description of his first meeting with his pupil, reporting his glee when Fulbert encourages him to be strict with Héloïse, suggesting physical punishment if she did not study assiduously enough. But Professor David Wulstan (the late scholar and conductor) suggests that Abélard may have been trying, in this late letter recounting his past, to clear Héloïse of any wrongdoing in the relationship, and to take the blame upon himself. In her letters, she certainly doesn’t sound reluctant, although some years later she accuses Abélard of having had only sex on his mind. But by all their accounts, she was an enthusiastic and equal partner in their physical ardor.

This physical relationship lasted only about eighteen months, but produced a child, Astrolabe, and eventually was sanctified by a marriage despite Héloïse’s objections. In an attempt to save his reputation and honor Héloïse’s feelings against the institution of marriage, Abélard sent Héloïse to stay in the same convent at Argenteuil where she had lived as a young girl. The family reacted violently to the move, and thinking that Abélard was trying to repudiate his wife, sent a group of kinsmen to castrate him. After this indignity, both lovers agreed to enter monastic life, Abélard at the abbey of St. Denis, and Héloïse in the convent at Argenteuil. The two lived out their lives teaching, studying, and writing, and, after a hiatus of some years, corresponding with each other again. Their later letters gradually become more and more about theology and only the greetings and closings betray their continuing affection for one another.

To bring this story to performance, we realized that we had to embrace multiple styles of transmission. We decided that the letters must have center stage, so we engaged actors to read excerpts from them. To help us all forget the concert hall and travel back in time, we have used costumes, and images from period art. And because stories such as this were the inspiration for the medieval courtly love tradition, we chose to include music from the 13th and 14th centuries as well as the 12th, illustrating the lasting influence of romantic figures such as these on love poetry and its musical settings beyond the age of the trouvères. Each song and instrumental piece was chosen to serve as a reflection on the letter it accompanies.

Music from three trouvères is included in this program. Trouvères, poet-composers from the time of Héloïse and Abélard, were performers supported by the aristocracy, or often, aristocrats themselves. Composing in Northern French dialects, trouvères flourished from the mid-1100’s until about 1300, and wrote poetry in the courtly tradition, idolizing the lady and extolling the faithfulness and persistence of the lover. Music by Jehan Erart (c.1200-1259) and Blondel de Nesle (d. 1251) is used as a basis for instrumental works in this program. Erart’s lighthearted pastorelle and Blondel’s beautiful hypnotic melody bring a true taste of the 12th-century musical aesthetic to our program.
Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377) is often called the last of the trouvères, as well as one of the greatest composers of the fourteenth century. His poetry was greatly admired and imitated by other poets, including Geoffrey Chaucer. Machaut wrote nearly 400 poems, most set to music, and his poems bridged the trouvère works with the new poetic forms emerging in the fourteenth century. His music advanced the new style of the Ars Nova and set us on a trajectory to the Renaissance style of the next century. His Joie, plaisance is a traditional trouvère pastourelle, but Machaut is also credited with a new, epic storytelling form called the lai. He also set a new standard of melodic complexity for secular song writing, as you'll hear in his ballades “Amours me fait desirer” and “Amour et biauté”.

The generation of French composers after Machaut brought us a style of composition called the ars subtilior, or the “subtle art”. Jacob de Senleches (fl. 1378-1395), like many French and Italian composers of his era, used complex rhythms to create ethereal-sounding compositions that seem more recent than something 650 years old. One theory suggests that the ars subtilior arose in imitation of improvised music, and that is very much what it feels like to perform it.

The most visually beautiful music you will enjoy in our program is Baude Cordier’s “Belle, bonne, sage”, calligraphed in the shape of a heart, and which will appear in our projections. Baudier was a contemporary of Senleches, and “Belle, bonne, sage” displays some of the rhythmic complexity of the ars subtilior. But the song has a simplicity and transparency that presages Renaissance composition, and has a fitting text and mood to reflect Abelard’s feelings for Heloise.

We also present on our program two works attributed to our title characters. Peter Abelard composed lamentations, sequences, and hymns, including the famous “O quanta qualia”, the tune for which is still used in the modern Episcopal hymnal! The song “Hebet sidus”, long attributed to Abélard, is found in the medieval work Carmina Burana, but without music. However, a melody by Walther von der Vogelweide is appended to it, (as is the case for another piece in the Carmina) and in the same meter. Wulstan proposes that it is quite likely that Abélard wrote “Hebet sidus” for Héloïse during the period of the Letters of Two Lovers, and its sensual imagery and description of longing for an absent lover certainly support this idea. Héloïse is thought to have composed several liturgical dramas, and recent scholarship has also attributed the Easter sequence “Epithalamica”, formerly thought to be by Abélard, to Héloïse. It quotes heavily from the Song of Songs. If it was (as is proposed) from her early days at the Paraclete, this is consistent with Abélard’s letters around that time that discourage her from dwelling on their past relationship. The subject of the Bride greeting her Bridegroom resonates with the nun entering into “wedlock” with Christ, but the imagery also reflects on our lovers’ earlier references to the Song of Songs in their correspondence.

Like so many love affairs, this one ends on a sad note. But the ecstatic record of their romance remains, and continues to give us hope for true love.
Hope holds the door open,
To the place where anyone can find reward;
Hope is of such noble substance
That he who has Her with him cannot be
Confounded; and without Her one cannot
Have abundance of joy for long.
He can take some consolation in this,
That man who knows not how to live without Hope.
-Senleches

Ellen Hargis, with David Douglass