

Music of the Camino

“Barbarians and people who live in all corners of the earth come to this place, fulfilling their vows in thanksgiving to God and taking away with them the rewards of their prayers.” (from the *Codex Calixtinus*, 12th century)

The remarkable document known as the *Codex Calixtinus* bears witness to the enormous historical popularity of the Way of St. James, the medieval pilgrimage route traveled by countless European pilgrims – whether devout Christians or “barbarians” (non-believers). The *Codex*, an early version of our modern tour guides, offers both spiritual guidance and down-to-earth advice to all those who would undertake the arduous pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

Most importantly, it includes a valuable set of chants and polyphonic music, much of it in veneration of St. James, along with vivid descriptions of performances. This strongly suggests that Compostela pilgrims were exposed to, and even participated in, a range of high-quality vocal and instrumental music. One passage depicts a large ensemble of singers and players celebrating the feast day of St. James in the cathedral, including flutes, fiddles, shawms, trumpets and drums. What an impressive welcome this must have been for weary pilgrims. As if to corroborate this *Codex* account, a magnificent façade at the west entry of the Santiago Cathedral portrays 24 white-robed and golden-crowned “elders,” all holding different musical instruments. Even though the passage from the Book of Revelations on which this scene is based clearly states the elders all held *citharas* (harps), the 12th-century sculptor exercised his artistic license by giving them instruments such as fiddle, psaltery, harp, organ, recorder, pipe and tabor, shawm, crumhorn and, at the top of the arch, a two-man hurdy-gurdy.

In complete contrast to these sacred works, we also find in the *Codex Calixtinus* seven intimate and sensuous love songs by the troubadour Martín Códax in which a young woman sits on a hillside overlooking the ocean, imploring the sea to return her lover. These extraordinary *Cantigas de Amigo* are among the earliest examples of secular music in Europe. It is easy to imagine that our pilgrims heard and even learned to sing these beguiling songs in their travels.

In addition to these historical testaments pointing to the importance music on the Camino, we have a fascinating 13th-century musical and pictorial collection called the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. Many of these 420 hymns to the Virgin Mary tell of miracles – some of them occurring along the Camino – in which she invariably intercedes in human foibles and astounds us with wondrous acts. The *Cantigas* were written in Galician, which at the time was the favorite language of Spanish lyric poets, and are significant for being the earliest surviving manuscript in the Galician language.

Today there is a new wave of pilgrims on the Road to Compostela, and they are sure to hear a rich mix of music as they make their way westward along the Camino, just as their 13th-century counterparts did. In the taverns and on the streets they will hear the ubiquitous *gaita* as it accompanies a lively dance or leads a procession for a local festival. In the village churches they can hear some of the rich sacred Spanish choral music from ages past. And when they arrive at their ultimate destination, if their timing is good, they will stand in awe to hear the ethereal voices of the Santiago Cathedral choir intoning a Renaissance motet or a spirited Baroque *villancico*.

We too, in our 2013 *Christmas Revels*, are on a musical journey through an ever-changing landscape. Like the distinctive *pasaporte* stamps (seen throughout this program book) representing stops along the way, each musical piece offers a fresh and distinctive experience. The music of the Camino continues to this day to be as appealing and compelling as ever. The pilgrim – even the barbarian – who takes the time to listen will return home with a heart full of song, a soul renewed and a life changed forever.

George W. Emlen, 2013