

pre 15th century
RECORDINGS

Medieval

ALFONSO X EL SABIO: CANTIGAS DE SANTA MARIA, STRELA DO DIA
La Capella Reial de Catalunya, HESPÈRION XX, Jordi Savall
76:06
Alia Vox Heritage vol. 20, AVSA9923 (c) 1993/2008

The *Cantigas* have been core repertoire for Jordi Savall and his ensembles over many years, and the present recordings date from 1993 and 2008. This means that the distinctive voice of Savall's late wife, Montserrat Figueras, features prominently on several of the tracks, adding its unique timbre to proceedings. Savall was one of the first and most successful exponents of an improvisatory approach to this early material, providing extensive renditions of the music to give it time to unfold; this is very much in evidence in these performances. If the sound quality doesn't have quite the gloss of his more recent recordings, these are beautiful and involving accounts of this haunting music. I still have vivid memories of Savall's performances of this music in Glasgow Cathedral as part of the late lamented Glasgow Early Music Festival, and these recordings capture something of the magic he has brought to this repertoire over the years. Perhaps most importantly, the CD receives the full Alia Vox treatment, with extensive scholarly essays and lavish illustrations to enhance the listening experience. I have sometimes been critical of Savall's slightly fanciful approach to early music, but he brings an undeniable religiosity to these *Cantigas*, adding a suitably metaphysical dimension to our appreciation of them. I think it was in his notes to the Glasgow performances that he wrote about the need for 'southern voices' fully to realize the potential of this distinctively Iberian repertoire, and Savall's Catalan singers and instrumentalists certainly add an indefinable something to their presentation here.

D. James Ross

PARLE QUI VEUT: MORALIZING SONGS OF THE MIDDLE AGES
Sollazzo ensemble
46:00
Linn Records CKD529

A CD of moralizing songs from the Middle Ages may not, on the face of it, sound like the most attractive prospect, but when I put on this CD I was instantly captivated by the superb performances. Soaring and fluttering around with perfect tone and intonation, these impressive young singers breathe astonishing new life into the music of the 14th and 15th centuries which they sing here. In recent years, a number of ensembles have tackled this repertoire with such virtuosity and musicality that I have been converted to hearing it as beautiful and beguiling music in its own right rather than puzzling repertoire that it was important to listen to for its historical merit. As an example of the group's stunning technique and persuasive performance style, listen to track 4, a breathtaking account of Andrea de Firenze's *Dal traditor*, and then, for sheer beguiling beauty, listen to the next track, *Le basile* by Solage. Throughout this CD, the blend between the voices and the instruments is superb, and again and again new meaning is breathed into music which I had previously heard only in rather worthy performances, if at all. At 46 minutes, this is a rather short CD, but the performers have absolutely made the repertoire their own and turned conjured up 46 minutes of vocal and instrumental perfection. Magical!

D. James Ross