

The secret's out: Cantiga may just be the most talented renaissance folk music band performing today. Those of you privileged enough to see Cantiga perform on the renaissance faire circuit or as a special guest with Cirque du Soleil know exactly what I am talking about.

Originally founded at the Texas Renaissance Festival in the early 1970s, harpist Martha Gay, recorder player Bob Bielefeld, cellist Max Dyer, Chilean multi-instrumentalist Conrado Garcia, and fiddlers Mark Caudill and Michele Levy (original fiddler Malcolm Smith died in 1996) create a wonderfully melodic hullabaloo. The term Cantiga means "song" in the subset Romance Language spoken in 13th-century Spain by the royal court of King Alfonso X. King Alfonso was a lover of music and a serious patron of the arts, and he filled his city with bards from around the four corners of Christendom, as well as with Jewish and Muslim musicians. If Cantiga existed at that time, they would have been the première group in the kingdom.

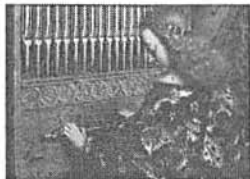
Martha's Dragon is Cantiga's fourth record, and arguably their best to date. Joyous and brimming with melody, this album raises the bar for bardic troupes everywhere. Improvisation is the key word here. Martha's Dragon provides the listener with a smorgasbord of cross-cultural tunes. With a repertoire of strong, traditional songs such as "Cantiga 108," a 13th-century Spanish melody, which tells an odd tale involving the mage Merlin, a Jewish sage, and the blessed Santa Maria, to "Branle de Bourgogne," a

16th-century French dance tune originally composed by Adrian Le Roy, Martha's Dragon delivers the goods.

The ancient dance song "Spagnoletta," dedicated to the Court Dancers of Scarborough Faire, moves the soul with precision. The rousing Irish jig "White Petticoat à la Turk" is commingled with a medieval Bulgarian time signature to produce what essentially sounds like a Turkish folk tune.

Of special note on Martha's Dragon is the musicianship of harpist Martha Gay, who apprenticed with Derek Bell of The Chieftains, and guest artist Jamal Mohamed. Martha, who studied at Rice University and Oxford University before being immersed in renaissance culture, is immaculate on harp. Jamal, who has performed with a variety of artists from Sting to Giovanni Hidalgo, is a virtuoso on the doumbek.

—Michael Lohr



CANTIGA

Martha's Dragon

Cantiga Music

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