

# VOXFIRE - Songs to the Virgin

## Album Artists

Samela Aird Beasom, soprano

Christen Herman, mezzo-soprano

Susan Judy, soprano

## Album Credits

Recorded on June 16 and 17, 2001

Bridges Auditorium, Pomona College, Claremont, CA

Engineer: Fred Vogler

Production Adviser: Edward Cansino

Design: Dana Hursey

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Voxfire Photograph: Alexandra Palko

# VOXFIRE - Songs to the Virgin

## Album Reviews

"...THE FIRST CD FROM VOXFIRE..."

"...Samela Aird Beasom, Christen Herman and Susan Judy...features the three, night-beaming sopranos in the repertoire that has won them acclaim for their unique musical ecstasy. Using in many cases their own editions, and singing mostly unaccompanied, the singers of Voxfire have as their goal, "a balance between likely musical practices from the Middle Ages and sounds that bring some of the mystery of that era to modern ears." Not only have they brilliantly succeeded, they have produced a richly beautiful tapestry of sound that deserves wide distribution."

- Laurence Vittes, Southern California Early Music News

"...BEST HEARD IN THE WITCHING HOURS OF THE NIGHT..."

"There is a special feeling that permeates the senses while listening to this Voxfire compilation of Gregorian chants, canticles and hymns set to music. You float away on wings of sound that fill the soul and the spirit. All activity ceases, all thoughts are halted, the spikes of stress are flattened and smoothed out. It is not a soporific - you do not nod off - but you do feel the gentle force of a great power wash over you and you let yourself be taken away on these calming sounds. The voices comprising Voxfire are spiritual without denomination, transcendental in their astonishing vocal blend. These are the ethereal Samela Aird Beasom, Christen Herman and Susan Judy.... Befitting the beauty of the music of Hildegard of Bingen, Voxfire brings the sound and time of forever. There is no text of greater poetic power and beauty than that which forms the heart of this music. In their very quiet, unearthly way, Voxfire truly lifts the spirit."

- Dorian, Beverly Hills Outlook, 2002

# VOXFIRE – Songs to the Virgin

## Voxfire Story & Bios

Voxfire began as a professional vocal trio, with sopranos SAMELA AIRD BEASOM, CHRISTEN HERMAN and SUSAN JUDY each coming from a traditional classical background. From the beginning, the trio had a passion for exploring different styles and sound worlds, whether it was chant and part songs from the Middle Ages and Renaissance or compositions newly written for them. They enjoyed turning their audiences on to fresh, new, and rarely heard music.

To high acclaim, Los Angeles-based Voxfire has appeared widely in the western United States and beyond, crafting original early music concerts for festivals and series as varied as the Santa Cruz Baroque Festival, the Arcosanti Foundation Concert series, the J. Paul Getty Museum series, and the Pasadena Conservatory of Music *Mansions & Music* series. The trio has released two albums of their early music repertoire: “Songs to the Virgin” and a live-performance collection, “Echoes.” In the contemporary realm, their performances have showcased their virtuosic skills in works such as Benjamin Britten’s “A Ceremony of Carols” (sung one on a part), Steve Reich’s “Tehillim;” and newly composed pieces written for the trio by Martin Herman and Edward Cansino.

After sharing their distinctive and soulful sound with audiences for years – either unaccompanied or with instruments appropriate for the ancient and modern repertoire – they wanted to branch out, and thought it might be compelling to blend the “old” with the “new.”

*Why not perform ancient music with modern instruments and harmonies?*

In 2009 they began to realize this goal with the opportunity to do a concert highlighting songs from 14th-century Spain in collaboration with players of Middle Eastern instruments -- oud, Turkish clarinet, and hand drums. They were excited by the colorful sounds and invention that emerged from the marriage of East and West.

*Entering the realm of improvisation was new and exciting.*

The next step in their musical evolution was to go even more modern – both in instrumentation and the level of improvisation. They had an affection for the 14th-century songs they’d just performed, because the songs came from an interesting era – a time of relative religious tolerance, mixing of cultures and flourishing of the arts.

In 2015 they began working with composer/arranger players Ross Garren and Nick DePinna to explore ideas for arrangements, and all were ecstatic about what they were collectively coming up with – resetting and expanding their vocal lines while adding piano, harmonica, trombone, sax, percussion, layers of computer-generated riffs on their early music vocals...a lot of jazz, a dash of rock, a hint of experimental and who knows what else...in short, decisively non-14th century, absolutely genre defying.

*Shattering notions and boundaries, the new Voxfire was born.*

## Voxfire – Bios

SAMELA AIRD BEASOM, a founding member of Voxfire, began her career as a soloist in Renaissance and Baroque repertoire, touring extensively throughout the United States and Japan with the Roger Wagner Chorale. She has since been featured with numerous other Los Angeles-based ensembles, including I Cantori, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, and L.A. Opera, for whom she has performed in over 100 productions. Samela has been a featured soloist at the Carmel Bach, Santa Cruz Baroque, Corona del Mar Baroque, and Ojai Festivals, and was one of the founding members and primary soloists of Musica Angelica Baroque Orchestra. Her extensive studio work includes sessions for composers Hans Zimmer, Danny Elfman, James Horner, Jerry Goldsmith, James Newton Howard, Thomas Newman, and John Williams.

CHRISTEN HERMAN, mezzo-soprano, is a founding member of Voxfire. Known primarily for performing music written before 1750 and after 1950, she has appeared as a soloist with numerous California-based ensembles, including I Cantori, Musica Angelica Baroque Orchestra, Paulist Boy Choristers, Los Angeles Cambridge Singers, Millennium Consort, and Artists' Vocal Ensemble in San Francisco. She was featured in Long Beach Opera's production of Charpentier's *The Imaginary Invalid*, and in I Cantori's production of Hildegard von Bingen's chant-drama *Ordo Virtutum* in the lead role of *The Soul*. Recently, she performed with *Tonality*, a new vocal group dedicated to promoting social justice. Festival and series appearances include the Ojai, Santa Cruz Baroque, and Los Angeles Bach Festivals, Music at St. Matthew's, Armand Hammer Museum, and Colly Soleri Series at Arcosanti. In addition to film score solo and ensemble singing, she has performed and recorded premieres of works by Steve Reich and Joan La Barbara.

SUSAN JUDY, a specialist in both early and contemporary music, has appeared as soloist throughout the Southwest at various festivals and series including the Ojai, E. Nakamichi, Santa Cruz Baroque, and San Luis Obispo Mozart Festivals; the Berkeley Festival; the famed Monday Evening Concerts at Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Skirball Center and Diljian Chamber Music Series. Susan has debuted a number of new works, including west coast premieres by Steve Reich, John Adams, and Otto Luening, and as a soloist with the California E.A.R. Unit. She performed for many years with Los Angeles-based ensembles Musica Pacifica, I Cantori, and Musica Angelica as a soloist, and as a principal in staged productions of medieval and Baroque works. More recently, she sang with the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Millennium Consort, and the Grammy®-winning Los Angeles Chamber Singers & Cappella. In addition, she has performed with American Bach Soloists and other ensembles throughout California. As a founding member of Voxfire, Susan has researched, arranged, produced and performed numerous concerts of ancient and newly-commissioned repertoire.

# VOXFIRE - Songs to the Virgin

## Album Track Listing

1. Ecce virgo concipiet 0:55 — Gregorian chant, Liber Usualis
2. Magnificat 5:35 — Byzantine canticle, Anonymous
3. O virgo splendens 4:28 — Chant / round, Llibre Vermell
4. Alleluia 1 0:30 — Gregorian chant, Liber Usualis
5. Ave generosa 4:48 — Hildegard of Bingen
6. Alleluia 2 0:18 — Gregorian chant, Liber Usualis
7. Ex semine 0:48 — Perotin, Las Huelgas Codex
8. Alleluia 3 0:14 — Gregorian chant, Liber Usualis
9. Beata viscera 1:18 — Worcester MS Fragment
10. Salve Regina 2:58 — Marian antiphon
11. Ave, mater summi nati 5:04 — Anonymous
12. Ave regina coelorum 1:48 — Marian antiphon
13. Ave regina celorum 1:00 — Las Huelgas Codex
14. Alma redemptoris mater 1:40 — Marian antiphon
15. Alma redemptoris mater 4:38 — John Dunstable
16. Alleluia 4 0:14 — Gregorian chant, Liber Usualis
17. Stabat mater dolorosa 6:35 — Chant / sequence
18. Bell Alleluia 0:35 — Gregorian chant adaptation
19. Regina caeli laetare 1:57 — Marian antiphon
20. Ave stella matutina 3:22 — Anonymous
21. O quam mirabilis 2:45 — Hildegard of Bingen
22. Alleluyia psallat 1:18 — Worcester MS
23. O pastor animarum 1:27 — Hildegard of Bingen

# VOXFIRE - Songs to the Virgin

## Notes from the CD

The music presented on this recording seems to reflect the very essence of the mystical quality of the Middle Ages, where boundaries between the mundane and the celestial quite often are blurred, and poet's texts flow freely from concrete description to ecstatic metaphor.

Likewise fitting seems to be a theme that concerns the Virgin, probably the most fervently adored subject of medieval Europe, whose story could be the very definition of the word "mystical."

Perhaps no one from the time can flow between planes of existence as effortlessly as does the great Hildegard of Bingen - the early 12th-century mystic, abbess, diplomat, poet, natural historian, composer and visionary - writer of some of the most beautiful hymns and sequences from the Middle Ages. Most remarkable is her impassioned, sensual poetry and distinctively beautiful melodic lines, such as the upwardly sweeping fifths in 'Ave generosa' and 'O pastor animarum'.

The Gregorian chants on this recording include a number of short, liturgical Alleluias from the Liber Usualis, as well as the four "Marian" antiphons, in honor of the Virgin, composed circa the 10th century and chanted in the Office services of the early Roman Catholic Church.

Settings of these popular texts from later centuries are represented here, as well: 'Alma redemptoris mater' by John Dunstable (c. 1370-1453) is a beautiful example of early English writing; and 'Ave regina celorum/Alma redemptoris mater', from the late 13th to 14th century Las Huelgas Codex, is a double motet or polyphonic piece with two different simultaneous texts.

Also from Las Huelgas is another double motet on Marian themes, 'Ex semine rosa prodit spine/Ex semine Abrahe divino', attributed to Perotin (c. 1160-1220), who was

called the greatest composer of "discant," the practice of writing parts against an existing plainsong (chant melody).

'Magnificat', one of the most important of the ancient Byzantine canticles, is still used today in Roman Catholic liturgy. Its Biblical text, Mary's reaction to Angel Gabriel's profound message, is a perennial favorite for composers of church music.

Because knowledge of medieval music and its performance is incomplete, modern-day interpreters have many options and decisions to make. Most obvious here is Voxfire's upward transposition of this mainly men's music to fit treble voices.

Vocal droning has been added to chants such as 'Salve regina', 'Ave generosa', and 'O quam mirabilis'; and organum, or the adding of parts a fourth or fifth above or below the original melody, is also used.

In another Voxfire arrangement, for 'Stabat Mater dolorosa', the famous lament of the Mother over her Son on the cross, verses alternate between Gregorian chant and 13th century two-voice writing.

For all of these interpretations, a balance is sought between what are thought to be likely practices from the Middle Ages and what creates the sound that will bring some of the mystery of that era to our modern ears.

# VOXFIRE – Songs to the Virgin

## Translations

### 1. Ecce virgo concipiet

Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son;  
and his name shall be called Emmanuel.

### 2. Magnificat (LUKE 1:46-55)

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit  
doth rejoice in God my Savior;  
For he hath regarded the lowliness of his  
handmaiden; for, behold, henceforth shall  
all generations call me blessed;  
For he who is mighty hath done great things  
for me, and holy is his name;  
And his mercy is from generation to  
generation on those who fear him.  
He hath shown might with his arm,  
he hath scattered the proud  
in the imagination of their hearts.  
He hath put down the mighty from their seat,  
and hath exalted the humble and meek.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he hath sent empty away.  
He hath holpen his servant Israel, mindful  
of his mercy. Even as he spoke to our forefathers –  
Abraham, and to his seed forever.

### 3. O virgo splendens

O Virgin resplendent on this lofty peak  
glowing with splendid miracles,  
whither the faithful of all lands ascend.  
Ah, with the gentle eye of kindness  
behold those caught in the bonds of sin;  
let them not endure infernal blows, but through  
your intercession admit them among the blessed.



#### 4. Alleluia 1

#### 5. Ave generosa

Hail, noble young lady,  
shimmering and pure;  
you, the very eye of chastity,  
you, essence of sanctity,  
who were pleasing to God!

For the celestial infusion  
was poured into you,  
in that the heavenly word  
became incarnate in you.

You, dazzling lily,  
whom God knew before all  
his other creatures.

O most beautiful and beloved;  
how greatly God delighted in you!  
with His fiery embrace  
He implanted in you so that His Son  
might be suckled by you.

Thus your womb held joy,  
while all the celestial harmony  
resounded for you,  
because, virgin, you bore  
the Son of God,  
whence your chastity blazed in God.

Your womb knew delight,  
like the grass which dew has touched  
and drenched with its freshness;  
so was this done in you,  
O mother of all joy.

Now let all the Congregation  
glow with joy  
and resonate with music  
for the sweetest virgin  
and most praiseworthy Mary  
mother of God. Amen.

#### 6. Alleluia 2

#### 7. Ex semine

From the seed of Abraham, by divine direction,  
in the holy fire of your will, you bring forth, O Lord,  
the salvation of humanity from stark poverty,  
by the birth of a virgin from the tribe of Judah.  
Now you set forth an egg for a new birth,  
you will give the fish and the bread  
by this birth without seed.

From the seed of a thorn, a rose springs up;  
fruit of the olive is plucked from the olive tree;  
A virgin is born from a descendant of Judea;  
The ray of the morning star shine forth  
from the cloud's darkness;  
the sun from the star's ray;  
A stone flows with honey.  
the flower of a maid gives birth to the Word  
without a seed.

## 8. Alleluia 3

## 9. Beata viscera

Blessed is the womb of the Virgin Mary,  
who bore the fruit of eternal truth  
with the cup of life because of her sweetness.

## 10. Salve Regina

Hail, Queen, Mother of mercy,  
Our life, sweetness and hope, hail.  
To thee do we cry, banished children of Eve,  
To thee do we sigh, lament and wail  
In this vale of tears..  
O, then, our advocate,  
Turn thine merciful eyes toward us;  
And after this exile,  
Reveal to us  
The blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus,  
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

## 11. Ave, mater summi nati

Hail, Mother of the son most high  
Hail, solace of the desolate,  
Maria, hope of sinners,  
Giver of life, light of the way.

Hail, sweet consoler,  
Reviver of the sinner,  
Because she loves us all  
Beseeches, atones, reforms  
Our wavering nature,  
Through you, loving Mother,  
The fruits of holiness are instilled,

From His Father's bosom,  
So that your first feeding  
Would satisfy his people  
And would give them all comfort  
Through the sweet assistance,  
Of His holy Mother.

Therefore, mercy and kindness,  
Is to be our consolation  
In whatever distress,  
Pain and sadness,  
For in your good faith  
Our hope is confirmed.

12. Ave regina coelorum

13. Ave regina celorum

Hail, Queen of Heaven.  
Hail lady of the angels,  
save us, O holy foundation,  
from whom the light of the world has arisen:  
Rejoice, glorious one,  
splendid over all things,  
prevail, most gracefully  
and intercede with Christ always for us.

14. Alma redemptoris mater

15. Alma redemptoris mater

Fostering Mother of the Redeemer,  
Who art the open door to heaven  
And star of the sea,  
Come to the aid of the falling people  
Who strive to rise again.  
Thou who gave birth  
To the wonder of Nature,  
To thy holy Creator,  
Virgin before and after,  
Receiving from the mouth of Gabriel  
That "Ave,"  
Have mercy on us sinners.

16. Alleluia

17. Stabat mater dolorosa

There stood the Mother grieving  
Beside the cross weeping,  
While on it hung her Son.

Whose saddened soul,  
Sighing and suffering,  
A sword pierced through.

O how sad and how afflicted  
Was that Mother  
Of the Only-begotten!

Loving Mother, who saw  
grieving and suffering,  
While she beheld the torments  
Of her glorious Son.

Who is the man who would not weep  
If he should behold the  
Mother of Christ  
Suffering with her only Son?

Who could not be saddened  
If he should behold the  
Mother of Christ  
Suffering with her only Son?

For the sins of his people,  
She saw Jesus in torments  
And subjected to stripes.

She saw her own sweet Son,  
Whose dying caused desolation,  
While he yielded up his Spirit.

Oh Mother, fount of love,  
Make me feel the force of your grief,  
So that I may mourn with you.

Grant that my heart may burn  
In loving Christ my God,  
So that I may be pleasing to him.

Holy Mother, may you do this:  
Fix the stripes of the Crucified  
Deeply into my heart.

Share with me the pains  
Of your wounded Son  
Who deigned to suffer so much for me.

Make me lovingly weep with you,  
To suffer with the Crucified  
Song long as I shall live.

To stand with you beside the cross,  
And to join with you in deep lament:  
This I long for and desire.

O Virgin all virgins excelling,  
Be not inclement with me now;  
Cause me to mourn with you.

Grant that I may bear the  
death of Christ;  
Make me a sharer in His Passion  
And ever mindful of his wounds.

Let me be wounded by His wounds,  
Cause me to be inebriated by the Cross  
And the Blood of your Son.

Lest I burn in flames enkindled,  
May I, through thee, O Virgin,  
Be defended on Judgement Day.

O Christ, when from here I must  
depart,  
Grant that, through your Mother,  
I may obtain the pain of victory.

When my body perishes,  
Grant that my soul be given  
the glory of Paradise.

## 18. Bell Alleluia

## 19. Regina caeli laetare

Queen of Heaven, rejoice, alleluia.  
For He whom you did merit to bear, alleluia.  
Has risen, as he said, alleluia.  
Pray for us to God, alleluia.

## 20. Ave stella matutina

Hail! Star of the morning, lily of purity  
beaming in the crystalline wonder of moderation  
Mother of the King and beloved Queen of Heaven  
Lead us from destruction with the gift of your grace.

From you, Maria, the light shines in words of pure truth,  
In you then appears wisdom before the radiance of the deity.  
Walking the life, the law and the way of the virgin chaste,  
For the world, you alone lead the way to the holy Love of salvation.

This sequestering by the Creator supports us  
Refreshing the cloister of the unfailing brilliance of the spirit's sweetness.  
Fragrant rose, vessel of fragrance, you can hasten in easing  
The weight of our belittling idleness with the joy of laboring.

The glowing throne of Solomon in the stars  
Illuminates our withering sins in the fleecy fountain of Gideon.  
Scented bush of wondrous vision, hasten to succor  
The lowly in giving hope by your inviolate birth.

Ah, sweet advocate, tutor and refuge,  
By the Creator rightly was not violated for the sake of the prize.  
And, through you, are we open to the somber mystery,  
the kingdom whose throne welcomes us as citizens of heaven.

## 21. O quam mirabilis

O how miraculous is the perception  
of the Divine Understanding,  
that He knows all creation.  
For with Jesus He examines  
the doings of man, whom He has made,  
likewise He beholds all His works  
made whole in the form of man.  
O how miraculous is the inspiration,  
that mankind thus is elevated.

## 22. Alleluyia psallat

Alleluia sings this congregation.  
Alleluia to the drum and alleluia  
sing the joyful of heaven in harmony.  
Alleluia sing praise and honor to God.  
Alleluia.

## 23. O pastor Animarum

O shepherd of souls  
and O primal voice  
by which all was created  
now as it pleases  
and deigns you  
free us from our miseries  
and weaknesses.