

SACD Review by [Ronald E. Grames](#)

 **HISTORIA SANCTI OLAVI** • Alexander M. Schweitzer, Adrija Čepaitė, Antanina Kalechyts, cond; Consortium Vocale Oslo; Graces & Voices • LAWQ 1106 (2 SACDs: 104:59 )



Historia Sancti Olavi
AUDIO CD; HYBRID SACD - DSD
Lawo Classics
 Buy from [amazon.com](#)

This is a recording of a significant portion of the most important Medieval Norwegian musical document extant, the chants of the divine office for the celebration of the feast of St. Olaf on 29 July. Olaf Haraldsson was the Viking noble who converted to Christianity as a young man while on raids in England and France and returned to Norway as king and proselytizer. Attempts to convert the people, undertaken with Norwegian-born Bishop Grimkjell, involved political machinations and coercion in addition to persuasion. These met with both success and resistance, the latter in part from local nobility whom he sought to supplant, and from the Anglo-Saxon King Canute of Denmark and England, with whom he had a complex relationship. Olaf was killed in 1030, at the age of 35, in a battle (or ambush) at Stiklestad, approximately 60 miles northeast of Trondheim. Within a year, he had been canonized at the behest of Grimkjell, and his remains were martyr's relics held at Trondheim's Nidaros Cathedral, built where he was buried. With this the Church created a rallying cause against the rule of the supplanting Danes, who were eventually driven from Norway. Olaf's illegitimate son Magnus became king, and Olaf was declared patron saint and Perpetual King of Norway.

It is easy to be cynical about this, a hagiographic version of his life's story and the miracles attributed to him. Yet, one has to appreciate the devotion that many in Norway felt for the "martyred" King Olaf the Holy to grasp the sincerity with which this liturgy was assembled beginning a little over 100 years later. Yes, there was a great deal of politics and rewriting of history here, and yes, Nidaros had become a major destination for pilgrims to nobody's disadvantage.

However, in the minds of most people, including, one must imagine, the monks

or priests singing his story in this liturgy, the political stability achieved in a unified Norway after his death was God acting through his (imperfect) servant Olaf.

As in most of the major Church institutions of Medieval Europe, patron saints of the cathedral/monastery were honored with special liturgical rites on designated feast days, sung by the clerics. Using those already written for earlier saints as the model, a liturgy was created to honor Olaf on the day of his death. As was the custom, these began with Vespers the night before, continued through the night in a Matins (Vigils) of three parts, resumed in the morning with Lauds and concluded on the evening of the feast with another Vespers. It is several hours of chanted psalms, canticles, lectionary readings, responsories, and antiphons appropriate to the day, sung not as a performance—there might or might not be lay people present—but as an act of meditation and devotion to God and to the sainted person.

Historia Sancti Olavi exists in dozens of fragments that survived the Protestant Reformation in Norway, plus two nearly identical full sources that date from the early 16th century. There are 30 chants, in a variety of styles that point to various times and sources, dating from the 12th and 13th centuries. Of these, an hour and a quarter of the music is presented here, corresponding to nearly all of the First Vespers, Matins, and Lauds. Left out are elements of the liturgy that are repeated—there is a note identifying these—as well as scripture readings, versicles and responses, and hymns. It is a reasonable compromise to accommodate the presentation of the unique elements of the liturgy for an audience, allowing the listener to experience the interplay of story and psalm—the latter sometimes shortened—that makes up the *historia* of the liturgy. It still demonstrates many of the variations in style that can be found in the liturgy as a whole and gives a good sense of the effect of the meditative discourse.

Adding to that experience is some remarkably fine singing of the chant. There are two specialist ensembles involved: the six-voice Consortium Vocale Oslo, a men's chorus led by Alexander M. Schweitzer, and Graces & Voices, a Graz, Austria-based ensemble of eight women's voices, including Adrija Čepaitė and Antanina Kalechyts, the founders and conductors. The authenticity of women singing this liturgy is not addressed—and I only raise the question because so much else about authentic style is discussed in the extensive program notes—but it seems unlikely that men and women would have sung it in alternating sections, within the same service, as they do here. Pragmatically, however, the use of both women's and men's choruses, as another concession to an audience, does add contrast and variety.

Both ensembles sing with remarkable technical perfection and unanimity, like a single voice, shifting in scope and timbre as solo cantors sing, or smaller groups emerge. Particularly notable is the flexibility of line—the men, led by renowned chant-expert and former Benedictine monk Schweitzer, are particularly nuanced—reflecting, as it should, the flow of the Latin text. The solo cantors are

outstanding. The recording, made from a slight distance in the 500-seat Ris Church in Oslo, places the voices believably in the resonant space, enhanced further in SACD surround. In addition to notes on edition and performance, the nicely designed booklet offers enlightening essays on the history of King Olaf and of the liturgy itself. Texts, however, which are certainly essential to an appreciation of this release, are only available in a PDF version of the booklet, which can be downloaded from LAWO's website. With those in hand, this is an engrossing experience for anyone interested in Medieval chant, or in the early history of the Christian church and its liturgies. **Ronald E. Grames**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 40:6 (July/Aug 2017)
of *Fanfare Magazine*.**