



BENJAMIN BAGBY'S *BEOWULF*

PENN LIVE ARTS DEBUT

VOICE/ANGLO-SAXON HARP Benjamin Bagby

FRIDAY, **JANUARY 27** @ 8 PM

Annenberg Center, Harold Prince Theatre

There will be no intermission.

PENN LIVE ARTS

22/23 SEASON

PROGRAM NOTES

The Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* survives in a single manuscript source dating from the early eleventh century (British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. XV). Although scholars do not agree on the dating of the poem — theories range between the sixth century and the date of the manuscript — it is clear that the story has its roots in the art of the *scop* ('creator'), the storyteller and reciter at formal and informal gatherings, whose services were essential to the fabric of tribal society in early medieval England. The *scop* would re-tell the story of *Beowulf*, in song and speech, perhaps accompanying himself on a six-stringed harp (this we know from contemporary accounts, although musical notation was superfluous and only remnants of instruments have survived). His courtly audience was attuned to the finest details of sound and meaning, meter and rhyme, timing and mood. The 'performance' — which, for the whole epic, might last five hours — would never be exactly the same twice, as the 'singer of tales' subtly varied the use of poetic formula to shape his unique version of the story. The fact is that the written source can only represent one version (and usually not the best version) of a text from a fluid oral tradition; it is the central dilemma of any attempt to re-vocalize a medieval text as living art. The impetus to make this attempt has come from many directions: from the power of those oral storytelling traditions, mostly non-European, which still survive intact; from the work of instrument-makers who have made thoughtful renderings of seventh-century Germanic harps; and from those scholars who have shown an active interest in the problems of turning written words back into an oral poetry meant to be absorbed through the ear/spirit, rather than eye/brain. But the principal impetus comes from the language of the poem itself, which has a chilling, magical power that no modern translation — and there are dozens — can approximate.

The Instrument

The 6-string harp used in this performance was built in 1997 by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, Germany), based on the remains of an instrument excavated from a 7th century Alemannic nobleman's grave in Oberflacht (south of Stuttgart). The remarkably intact pieces of oak clearly show a thin, hollow corpus with no sound holes. Like a similar instrument unearthed at Sutton Hoo in England, there are strong indications, supported by contemporary iconography, of six gut strings, a tailpiece and a free-standing bridge. This storyteller's instrument serves as a key piece of evidence in reconstructing the performance, for it provides a series of six tones. Although several possible tunings present themselves, the six tones used tonight were arrived upon through a careful study of early medieval modal theory, yielding an octave, three perfect fifths, two perfect fourths and two minor thirds. The resulting 'scale' serves as a musical matrix, upon which the singer can weave both his own rhetorical shapes and the sophisticated metrics of the text (each line, divided into two halves, contains four stresses which are linked by a common vowel or consonant sound). The Anglo-Saxon ear was finely tuned to this web of sounds and syllable lengths; it was always experienced as an aural event, inextricably bound up with the story being told. The harp is a relatively quiet instrument, but in the ear of the performer it rings with an endless variation of gestures, melodic cells and repetitive figurations which give inspiration to the shape of the vocalization: in the course of the story, the performer may move imperceptibly or radically between true speech, heightened speech, speech-like song and true song. The instrument acts as a constant point of reference, a friend and fellow performer, a symbol of the *scop* and his almost magical role in the community.

***Beowulf*: The Story**

During the performance, video titles will be projected with a translation of the sung text. The following summary will give an overview of the story up to the point where Bagby's re-telling of *Beowulf* will stop, encompassing roughly the first quarter of the entire epic (lines 1-852):

The poem begins with the legendary coming of Scyld as a baby set adrift alone in a boat and arriving on the Danish coast with no possessions. But when he grows up, he becomes a unifier, leader and king of the Danes. On his death, he is again set adrift, but now the boat is piled high with treasure and the standard floats in the wind on the mast above him. He leaves a son, Beow, already famous as a king in

South Sweden (the northern part of Denmark in the fifth century). Beowulf carries on the Scylding line as a good and able ruler and is succeeded by his son Halfdane. Halfdane in turn is a worthy king, and has three sons — Heregar, Hrothgar and Helga — and a daughter, Yrsa, who marries Onela of the royal line of Sweden. Eventually, Hrothgar becomes king and rules long and well.

With the kingdom stable, Hrothgar orders that a great banquet hall be built. Workmen from far and near are brought to build and decorate this royal building. Its fine workmanship and gilded gables are famous in Denmark and abroad. Hrothgar names the hall *Heorot* (Hart). (Tradition places it near Leare on Zealand, a few miles south of Roskilde). The drinking and laughter of the warriors, and the harping and songs of the *scop* provoke a savage monster named Grendel (descendant of Cain), who cannot bear this human gaiety in his loneliness. Only gradually do we learn details of the creature: that it takes four men to carry his head on a spear, and that his hand has sharp claws like steel spikes. For weeks and months, Grendel visits the hall nightly, devouring sleeping warriors and carrying off others to the moor to feed on later. At last, only drunken, boasting fools will linger in the hall after dark, until they too are slaughtered.

Years pass, and news of Hrothgar's assailant travels eventually to other lands. Beowulf, sister's son to Higelac, King of the Geats, hears of Hrothgar's distress, and with somewhat grudging consent from his uncle, sails with chosen companions from southwestern Sweden on the east coast of the Oslofjörd. When the Danish coastal watchman learns that they have come to Hrothgar's aid, he shows them the path to Heorot. The Geatish warriors march with their spears, swords, helmets, shields and chainmail to the high-gabled hall. At Heorot, Beowulf and his men enter with greetings and courtesies on both sides that show the observation of etiquette in the court. King Hrothgar had earlier given protection to Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, during a feud. Learning Beowulf's name, Hrothgar recalls hearing of the extraordinary strength and reputation of the Geatish hero.

The strangers are warmly received, and Beowulf is seated on the bench with Hrothgar's young sons. No Dane has confronted Grendel and lived. But the enthusiastic welcome shown to the Geats provokes the jealousy of Unferth, a drunken courtier sitting at Hrothgar's feet, who taunts Beowulf for having been defeated in a legendary swimming contest with Breca. Beowulf sets the record straight by recounting the dangers — attacking sea-monsters, storms, vast distances — and claiming that they had merely arranged a boyish hunt for sea-beasts. Separated by the winter storm, they swam, carrying swords and wearing chainmail, two different paths: Breca to Norway and Beowulf to the land of Finns. Beowulf ends his retort with a taunt that Unferth has slain his own brother, the ultimate crime, even though by accident. With such "heroes," it's no wonder the Danes can't deal with Grendel themselves! Beowulf boasts that he will defeat Grendel or die in the attempt.

At nightfall, Hrothgar and all the Danes leave Heorot to sleep elsewhere, leaving Beowulf and his men to occupy the hall benches. As darkness descends, Grendel comes gliding up from the misty marshes, and pushes open the great door, his eyes gleaming with evil. Immediately, he grabs and eats a sleeping warrior. Beowulf has vowed to use no weapon in this fight, since Grendel uses none. (Later, the Geats learn that Grendel has put a spell on all weapons so that none can harm him). Next, the monster reaches for Beowulf, but the hero grasps his arm and rises to his feet. In the ferocious struggle that follows, the hero wrenches off Grendel's arm. The sounds of the combat terrify the Danes outside: Grendel howling with pain, benches torn up and overturned, the hall shaken to its foundations. Grendel, leaving a trail of blood, escapes without his arm and limps back to the fens where he dies. Beowulf fixes the arm high above the hall as a symbol of victory. Heorot is cleansed of the evil monster, and in the morning, people come from far and near to inspect the sight, following Grendel's trail to a boiling pool of bloody dark water in the marshes.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Benjamin Bagby is descended from a Germanic clan that emigrated from Jutland to northern England in ca. 630, where they remained until his branch of the family emigrated to the colony of Virginia almost a millennium later. Following 321 years of subsequent family wanderings, he was born on the shores of Lake Michigan, and 12 years later, was captivated by *Beowulf*. Several years after returning to Europe in 1974, he founded, together with the late Barbara Thornton, the ensemble for medieval music Sequentia, based in Cologne, Germany, for 25 years. Both Bagby and Sequentia are now based in Paris.

In addition to his work with *Beowulf*, Bagby and Sequentia have produced a series of programs under the title "Lost Songs Project." These are musical reconstructions from the early Middle Ages: two CDs based on the medieval Icelandic *Edda*, including *The Rheingold Curse* (2002), which retells the story of Sigurd, Brynhild, the dragon Fafnir and the cursed Rheingold; *Lost Songs of a Rheinland Harper* (2004), which explores Latin and German song in the period around the year 1000, using as its source the famed *Cambridge Songs* manuscript; and *Fragments for the End of Time – 9-11th centuries* (2008), featuring some of the earliest apocalyptic texts in Old German, Latin and Old Saxon. A DVD production of Bagby's *Beowulf* performance, filmed by Stellan Olsson in Sweden, was released in 2007 and includes interviews with noted Anglo-Saxonists and with the performer. In addition to his activities as a researcher, singer, harper and director of Sequentia, Bagby is much in demand worldwide as an author, teacher and coach. He taught from 2005 to 2018 in the medieval music masters program at the University of Paris – Sorbonne. He also teaches courses in Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada, Switzerland and the United States. Bagby has received the Early Music Artist Award 2016 by REMA, the European Early Music Network, and has received the Howard Mayer Brown Lifetime Achievement Award from Early Music America. He has lived in Paris since 2001. BagbyBeowulf.com