

# Neidhart – A Rebel Amongst the Minnesingers

## A Concert Programme with the Earliest Surviving Minnesang Melodies

Ensemble LEONES

### In a Nutshell

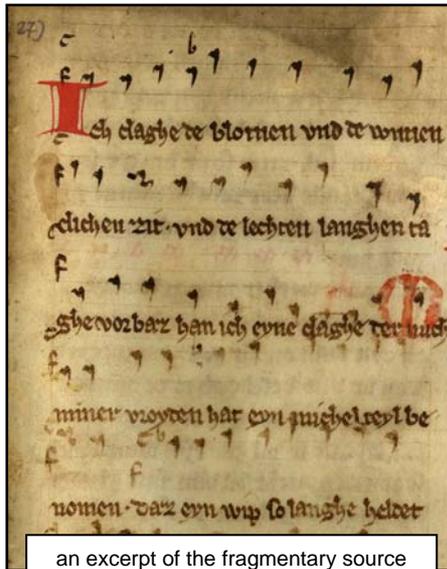
Neidhart was one of the most famous Minnesingers of the 13th century and unusually his musical as well as his poetical legacy survives to this day in numerous manuscripts. The earliest of these – the fragmentary Frankfurt Neidhart source – has yet to be adequately appreciated; no recording or concert programme of this source has hitherto been made, even though the quality of the material is exceptional. This oversight is primarily due to insufficient research on the manuscript. Ensemble Leones has filled this gap, doing the necessary research of transcribing, editing and reconstructing the songs to create a beguiling concert programme of this remarkable earliest source of German Minnesang.

### Full Description of the Project

One of the most renowned poet-composers of the late Middle Ages was a man often known today under the name “Neidhart von Reuental”. However, recent scholarship suggests that this surname is a 19th-century misnomer and that by his contemporaries he was simply called “Neidhart”. His songs, although firmly within the conventions of classical Minnesang, usually contain a twist which has compelled modern scholars to label them “anti-Minnesang”. While his colleagues of the late 12th and early 13th centuries dwelled still in the idealistic realms of courtly love, the slightly younger Neidhart (c1180-c1240) turned such an ideal on its head by placing his songs not in a courtly, but in a rural, even rustic setting. With this trick he opened the possibility of layering new meanings into his poetry. On the surface he turned the serious, philosophical world of courtly love into a jamboree; his characters engage in rough pub-brawls, dance songs, erotic scenes and amusing arguments between mother and daughter – always over men, of course. His noble audience must have been delighted to listen to simpletons trying to imitate them in the art of love and, naturally, failing miserably. But behind these burlesques Neidhart actually pursues a harsh criticism of the ruling classes. Characters who at first seem to be peasants (Neidhart calls them “dörper” which can mean “villager” but also “villain”) under closer inspection turn out to be ciphers for something else entirely; in fact, Neidhart is portraying the very courtly society he saw around him, mimicking the out of place behaviour and degeneration of its members. Some of the more perceptive courtiers must have swallowed hard behind their laughter.



Neidhart: besieged by village-villains



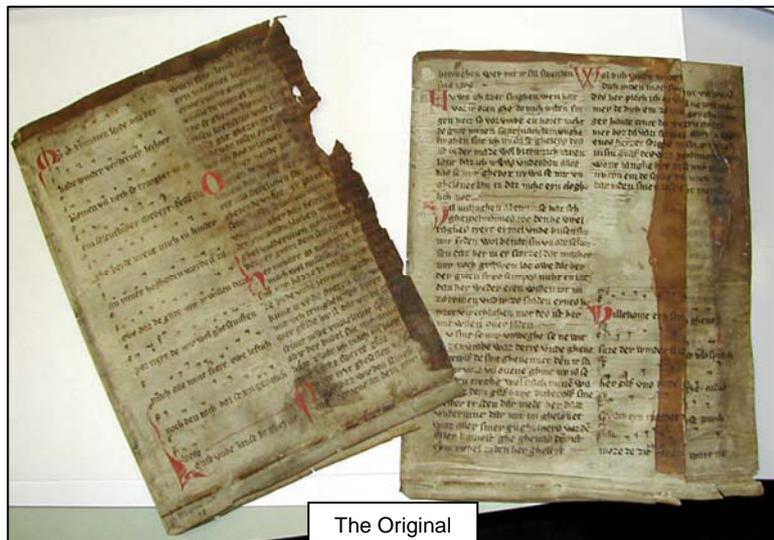
an excerpt of the fragmentary source

The body of source material for Neidhart's oeuvre is a windfall compared with that of other Minnesingers; with 55 surviving melodies, his music is by far the best documented. Most manuscripts, however, date from some time after his death (some as late as the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century), and their contents thus reflect later musical styles. The so-called "Frankfurt-Neidhart-Manuscript", although it survives in a fragmentary state, is the very earliest musical source for Neidhart's songs, thus bringing us as close as possible to his musical world. Moreover, the six melodies contained therein are also the earliest existing examples of German Minnesang in general. It is therefore surprising that this source has not yet been duly appreciated; no recordings or concert programmes have so far been disseminated. This may very well be due to the fragmentary and occasionally barely decipherable state of the manuscript which, along with other considerations, has in the past led

scholars to the conclusion that this source was corrupted. New research, however, now shows that the transmitted melodies and texts are of a very high quality.

Prior to their practical work with the music, Ensemble Leones obtained high-resolution photographs of the manuscript. On this basis, they made new transcriptions of the pieces, in many cases reconstructing the fragmented songs in such a way that a performance became newly possible.

In their concert and programme, Leones present all the melodies with their full texts from the early Frankfurt source, complemented by other extant Neidhart melodies arranged for instruments in the style of his time. The ensemble worked on finding an appropriate style of accompaniment. Due to the songs belonging to a monophonic tradition, the musicians had to develop an instrumental style that supports the vocal line in such a way that it doesn't become a counterpoint



The Original

to the song, but operates instead as its own musico-poetic language; underpinning and enhancing the melodic line by speaking the same "musical grammar". Since fiddle and lute are mentioned as the most popular of accompanying instruments for monophonic song, the singers work with these instruments to create a programme that combines the highest level of historical integrity with a seductive variety in instrumental colour.

An alternative version of this purely musical programme is also being offered in the form of a lecture-concert: a selection of Neidhart's songs is thoroughly presented with projected, colour-images from the manuscript source, combined with an interesting commentary about the manuscript, its reconstruction, and performance practice.

## Ensemble LEONES

Founded in 2001 by director Marc Lewon, Ensemble Leones is dedicated to presenting medieval music through concerts, recordings, and radio broadcasts. The ensemble's work is characterised by performances that take into account historical sources to create subtle reconstructions and stylistically informed arrangements. Because of the diversity of the music it performs, the size and configuration of Ensemble Leones varies according to the nature of every project.

Ensemble Leones have performed at various medieval conferences and symposia, presenting concerts on the themes of the "Cantigas de Santa Maria", "Carmina Burana" and the music of Oswald von Wolkenstein. They also performed music associated with the images of Angels and Instruments for the opening of an exhibition at the Willisau Instrumentenmuseum in Switzerland. Current activities include the preparation of a semi-staged version of the famous "Bordesholmer Lament of the Virgin Mary" as well as the present programme of Minnesang. This project, entitled "Neidhart: A Rebel Amongst the Minnesingers" is a new presentation of the earliest surviving musical fragments of German Minnesang, selections from which they performed to great acclaim at the Niedersächsischen Musiktage in 2006.

The musicians performing with Ensembles Leones are well established in the world of performance, recordings, and broadcasts and are also playing and singing with other leading ensembles for medieval and renaissance music, such as *Ensemble Gilles Binchois*, *Ferrara Ensemble* and *The Earle his Viols*.

homepage: [www.leones.de](http://www.leones.de)  
email: [mail@leones.de](mailto:mail@leones.de)



Marc Lewon

### Ensemble LEONES

**Els Janssens** – soprano

**Baptiste Romain** – fiddle, bagpipes

**Marc Lewon** – tenor, lute, keyed fiddle; director



Baptiste Romain



Els Janssens