

**Performers:**  
New York Pro Musica

A Twelfth Century Musical Drama

# The Play of Daniel

New York Pro Musica

Noah Greenberg, Director

AS PRESENTED AT THE CLOISTERS, THE METROPLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK



## Cast:

Russell Oberlin (Belshazzar's Prince / An Angel / Herald Angel), Brayton Lewis (Belshazzar), Jerold Sien (First Wise Woman), Alan Baker (Second Wise Woman), Paul Ehrlich (First Envious Counsellor), Jean Hakes (Second Envious Counsellor), Arthur Squires (Third Envious Counsellor), Alan Baker (Habakkuk), Betty Wilson (Belshazzar's Queen), Charles Bressler (Daniel), Gordon Myers (Darius), Alva Tripp (First Advisor), Jerold Sien (Second Advisor).

## Satraps and Soldiers:

William Bohm & Boy choristers of Church of the Transfiguration, New York:(The Little Church Around the Corner): Richard Zahnd, David Kouri, Edmund Cortez, George Ryan, Ronald Frers, Ronald McLaren, Richard Bell Stuart Gardner, choirmaster

## Musicians:

Robert Montesi (straight trumpet), Paul Ehrlich (rebec), Paul Maynard (portative organ, psaltery), Martha Blackman (bell carillon, minstrel's harp), George Gaber (percussion), Bernard Krainis (recorders), Inez Lynch (vielle), Jean Hakes (minstrel's harp), James Petrie (miniature highland bagpipes).

Noah Greenberg, dir.

Recorded by Decca/USA

The Cloisters, New York, NY, USA 1/02/1958

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# The Play Of Daniel

(Ludus Danielis)

A liturgical drama of the XII-XIII centuries

This 12th century liturgical drama has been introduced in class. It is unique in its genre for several reasons: its quality, diversity and dramatic impact. The influence of plainchant is hardly felt in the music, except for masterly quotations (as the use of the *Laudes regiae* acclamation for Rex, in *aeternum vive*); otherwise, the music has a freshness and variety which marks Daniel as nothing less than an earlier operatic masterpiece.

About The Play of Daniel

The Play of Daniel, though correctly described as a Liturgical Drama, is nothing less than a mediaeval opera. The Introit at Easter Mass, telling of the three Marys at the Sepulchre, was lengthened and dramatised some time before the tenth century. This little scene quickly stimulated the production of other dramatic representations, particularly at the Christmas season. The earliest examples are merely elaborations of plainchant, but as time went on the musical and textual development reached a high peak. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Play of Daniel.

A similar dramatisation of this subject was put together in the mid-12th century by Hilary the Englishman, a pupil of the renowned Abelard. Only the words survive, but it is by no means as well developed dramatically as the present example, from Beauvais, whose massive Cathedral of Paris boasts the highest chancel in Europe. Another play from Beauvais, the Peregrinus, also survives from the mid-12th century. Musically it is less developed than Daniel, so it seems likely that the latter dates from, around, the turn of the 13th century, shortly before it was written down in the beautiful manuscript which now preserves this masterpiece for us.

In general, mediaeval liturgical drama used little in the way of elaborate costumes and scenery, forbade the use of instruments, and contained large quotations of unmeasured plainsong. Daniel is quite different: it is much grander than most other comparable plays. In particular, its music shows a high degree of technical skill. As was usual, much was borrowed from earlier works, but the way in which this earlier material is welded and moulded indicates a craftsman of rare skill. And when comparing the Beauvais 'Daniel' with that of Hilary, the dramatic possibilities which the later play realises and the earlier misses point to the rare talent of the anonymous Picardy playwright.

The Cathedral of Beauvais was planned as a massive testament to the wealth and enterprise of its citizens; it was so large that most of it collapsed (in 1284). It was for the earlier cathedral that the Play of Daniel was put together; and since that time it has never been performed in its original home. However, in 1975, as part of the *Année gothique de Picardie*, the Clerkes of Oxenford were invited to recreate the *Ludus Danielis* at Beauvais, a signal honour.

The music of the Play of Daniel was first transcribed by W.L. Smoldon; subsequently another version was performed by the New York Pro Musica directed by Noah Greenberg in 1958. Shortly before his death in 1974, Dr. Smoldon entrusted the revision of the text to David Wulstan. This version, used here, was published by the Plainsong and Mediaeval Music Society later that year. The present production seeks to restore the drama to much of its mediaeval character, rather than to transform it into a 'Hollywood spectacular'; experience has shown that if the performance is made to stray too far from the original conception, much is lost.

The Story

At the beginning of the Play, choristers announce that what is about to be enacted is the work of the students of Beauvais; immediately a processional chorus, in which Belshazzar comes to his throne, is heard. This stirring introduction tells the story of the play. To the modern listener it might appear incongruous that the plot should be 'given away' in this manner.

Seated on his throne, Belshazzar calls for the sacred vessels, looted from the Jewish Temple, to be placed before him. His satraps sing of his

many deeds while the gold and silver is brought forth; but scarcely have his nobles finished their task when the portentous writing appears, on the wall, to the stupefaction of the assembly. When the king recovers himself, he calls for the soothsayers to be brought to him so that they may interpret the mysterious words. Wise men come forward and greet him with Rex, in *aeternum vive* (O King, live forever); this acclamation, already heard from the Satraps, recurs throughout the drama as a sort of - theme - a nice dramatic touch. The King offers honour to anyone who can read the writing; but the doddering Soothsayers, who have no idea of its significance, retire in confusion.

Belshazzar's Queen now enters, to a processional chorus extolling her virtues. She tells the sulking King that if he wishes to know the meaning of the writing, he must send for Daniel, one of his subject Jews. The King orders him to be found; the nobles obey, addressing the prophet in a mixture of Latin and (Old) French, the latter suggesting that Daniel is being spoken to in his own tongue. Somewhat hesitantly, Daniel comes before the King who, although not particularly impressed by this lowly prophet, nevertheless promises him high honour if he can interpret the arcane words. For his part, Daniel is equally unimpressed by the King's promises; but he tells the King what the writing portends for him.

Although shocked by this message of doom, the King keeps his word and clothes Daniel in majestic purple, and orders the sacred vessels to be taken away. The Queen departs to a processional chorus; and in a further processional the vessels are removed before Daniel while the court retires.

Immediately, the approach of Darius and his army is heard. As the procession nears Belshazzar, two men run ahead and kill him. Darius mounts the throne and the court acclaims the new king. Two counsellors tell him of Daniel, and advise that he should be given his former status. Darius orders them to send messengers for the prophet, who entreat him to come before the king. He agrees, and is led forward to the sounds of a majestic processional. This, like the opening chorus, is somewhat curious to the modern ear, in that it celebrates the birth of Christ. Again, however, it must be considered as a prelude to the second part of the story of Daniel, ending in his prophecy of the birth of Christ.

The King greets Daniel, and the prophet pledges loyalty to the King, but envious counsellors seek ways to overthrow the object of their jealousy, and cause the King to reaffirm his decree of self-deification. This the King does, whereupon Daniel returns to his own house to worship the true God. The envious counsellors, spying on him, again ask the King to reaffirm his decree. The King, not knowing of the trick, irritably does so; Daniel immediately is brought before him by the triumphant schemers. Darius tries to release Daniel, but the Satraps remind him of the law which admits of no exceptions. The King reluctantly condemns Daniel, who entreats him in a moving lament. Darius, unable to set him free, commits him to the care of the true God. Daniel is cast into the lions' pit, but in answer to his prayer, an angel protects him from the jaws of the hungry animals.

The scene changes (there are copious stage directions in the manuscript). The rather comic figure of Habakkuk is seen carrying a harvest supper to the reapers in the field. Another angel instructs him to take the food to the lions' pit in Babylon. Not unnaturally, the old man refuses; however, pulled by the hair of his head he is marched off to Daniel, who accepts the supper thankfully.

Darius now descends tearfully from his throne, to enquire as to the fate of Daniel. To his surprise the holy man is alive, and tells the King of his miraculous deliverance. Joyfully, the King orders the release of Daniel and consigns his rivals to the pit. They sing some curiously self-condemnatory last words before they meet their fate. It is interesting to note that the mediaeval associations of stage right for the good characters (Daniel's house) and left for the bad (the lions' pit) continued in theatrical tradition and that the expression the sinister side has passed into common parlance.

The lions having done their work, Darius orders the worship of Daniel's God to be proclaimed. Restored to high honour, the prophet foretells the birth of Christ; immediately, an angel, bringing us back to the Christmas season in which the play was performed, confirms this prophecy by announcing the birth of Jesus. With the singing of the *Te Deum* the play comes to a triumphant close.



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- 1 *Processional* 3:52
- 2 *Jubilemus Regi nostro* 4:19
- 3 *Vos Danielem quaerite* 4:00
- 4 *Solvitur in libro Salomonis* 6:35
- 5 *Ecce Rex Darius* 5:11
- 6 *Rex, in eternum vive!* 1:30
- 7 *Heu, heu, heu!* 4:35
- 8 *Te Deum Laudamus* 10:29

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