Subject: Today's Recommendation: Medieval
Posted by elektratig on Wed, 23 Mar 2005 17:02:06 GMT
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Little is known about Perotin, also known as Magister Perotinus. He flourished in the late Twelfth Century (c. 1190-1200), apparently living in Paris, and is associated with Notre Dame. For our purposes, the important thing is that Perotin's works include the earliest known examples of Western music written in four parts. Perotin's surviving works are of two forms. In the conductus, the different voices move at the same speed. In the organum, the voices move at different speeds. The organa (plural of organum) consist of a lower voice that produces long, sustained pitches that barely change (in fact, the long tones are the opening tones of plainsong, stretched out so that the melodic character is essentially lost). Above this foundation are higher voices, which create a steady yet ever-changing pulse of dancing sound-patterns that ebb and flow, rise and fall.The "feel" of the forms is also different. In conductus, both music and words were newly composed, and the texts were in verse form. It is related to medieval lyric forms, and it has a correspondingly more secular feel. Organum, by contrast, was liturgical music, based on existing material (a plainsong melody and its words). These elements, together with the eerily-shifting and contrasting voices make organa smell more of the cathedral.In "Perotin", the Hilliard Ensemble, under the direction of Paul Hillier, performs six works by Perotin and three anonymous works to stunning effect. Particularly in the organa, the seven male voices (one countertenor, four tenors and two baritones – there is no instrumental accompaniment) create a haunting sound world of solemn beauty, making you feel (in the words of one Amazon reviewer) "as if you are in a vast and dark cathedral, lit only by stained glass and candlelight."At the same time, the works at times sound as if they could have been written in the second half of 20th Century. They contain surprising leaps and changes in tempo, and the ebb and flow of the great organa bring 20th Century minimalism to mind. Indeed, the booklet includes a quote by Steve Reich comparing his "stretching out" of a 15-second chord "as the basic pulsing harmony for a five minute piece" to Perotin's technique in his organa.The performances and recording are outstanding. The Hilliard Ensemble is widely regarded as one of the finest ensembles of male voices in the world, and Paul Hilliard one of the leading practitioners of medieval and early renaissance music. The ECM recording, made in a priory, is spacious and atmospheric yet clear, a perfect compliment to the music. I really cannot do justice to the beauty of this record. Listening to it is not a historical or academic exercise. The music just leaves you in awe, enveloped in its richness and mystery – which I suppose was Perotin's intent.
Perotin