

## Flanders Festival-Antwerp - *Laus Polyphoniae*

Flanders Festival - Antwerp and its annual flagship Renaissance music festival *Laus Polyphoniae* traces its roots back to post-war concerts held in the Rubens House. Since 2006, the administrative base of the organisation has been in AMUZ (Augustinus Music Centre) which incorporates the baroque church of St Augustine and its spectacular neo-Byzantine Winter Chapel (now a bar) and is used year-round for early music concerts. This year's *Laus Polyphoniae* festival focussed on the music of the countries alongside the Adriatic Sea and lasted from 24 August to 2 September. I could only get there between 26 and 31 August, slotted between the Innsbruck Festival and giving a concert of my own in England. I arrived in time to hear the Birmingham based group Ex Cathedra with *Concerto Palatino* (in their 25<sup>th</sup> year) and His Majestys Sagbutts & Cornetts, directed by Jeffrey Skidmore, in a programme celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Giovanni Gabrieli (St Pauluskerk, 26 Aug). The ceremonial *cori spezzati* vocal works were from the two volumes of *Sacrae symphoniae*, interspersed with instrumental pieces and focussing first on music for the Mass and then on Marian works. The performers were sited below the impressive baroque organ case and gallery at the liturgical west end of the church, allowing the possibility (and the logistical nightmare) of having some works, and some parts of works, performed, sometimes rather precariously, from on high. It is difficult to pick out highlights from a concert like this, but I particularly liked the way that Jeffrey Skidmore structured the *Litaniae B. Mariae virginis* with its endless succession of *ora pro nobis*'s before the concluding *Agnus Dei*. It was fascinating to hear a whole succession of Gabrieli cadences - he nearly always articulates the final held chord by having one of the voices adding a punctuating note,

After this start at the head of the Adriatic, the lunchtime concert the following day moved down the eastern flank to feature music from 16<sup>th</sup> century Croatia in 'O magnum mysterium' given by Ensemble Phoenix Munich in the mediaeval chapel of the old hospital of Elzenveld (28 Aug). The Venetian influence on coastal Croatia was clear in the works of Andrija Motovunjanin (aka Andrea Antico da Montona), publisher of the first volume of Italian keyboard music, Franjo Bosanac (Franciscus Bossinenses) and Andrija Petris (Andrea Patricio). Although there were attractive vocal contributions from Franz Vitzhum and Daniel Auchincloss, Ensemble Phoenix Munich as a whole seemed under-rehearsed, with a number of intonation and other slips and apparent uncertainty both within and between pieces. The bass singer, whose voice didn't really match his colleagues', was also almost always far too loud for effective balance.

The evening concert featured Ensemble Organum and a programme of Beneventan Chants from the south of Italy (St Andrieskerk, 28 Aug). Clad in white robes, but with rather scruffy looking trouser bottoms and shoes peeping out underneath, the seven singers processed around the church in a rather random fashion while chanting Eucharist hymns and a Mass for Easter from the 12<sup>th</sup> century Benevento manuscript, with a small group of Old Roman chants in between. I have always found Ensemble Organum rather difficult to fathom. I have heard them singing a wide range of repertoire from many different traditions, but they always sound the same. Either their scholarship has shown that, for example, Corsican, Gallican, Carolingian and Mozarabic vocal traditions were very similar - or they have a one-size-fits-all approach to their singing and use of ornaments (although their strong vibrato made it difficult to work out what was an ornament and what was just a wobble). I have also never quite worked out is whether they are highly trained professional singers, coping with the very hard job of trying to sound like the sort of throaty, off key wobbly-voiced bucolic monks that one might find in a remote monastery - or whether they are just ordinary folk singing to the best of their, rather limited, ability. One example was their processional singing, when it seemed to me as though the chap at the back started to sing when the voice of the one at the front reached him, resulting in a curious phasing to the sound. Many passages featured what could best be described as microtonally spaced heterophony - but was this deliberate? But whatever, the sound was evocative, if rather strange, with a few moments of Bulgarian-style throat singing.

The neo-Gothic splendour of St Joriskerk was the venue for the lunchtime concert (29 Aug) by the local vocal group Vox Luminis. Following their commissioning of musicological research (by Catherine Deutsch), they presented sacred music interspersed by madrigals by the Renaissance Dalmatian composer Julije Javetić (Giulio Schiavetto), who flourished in the 1560s. Javetić's motets are generally in four or five voices and seem to have their roots in Venetian and Franco-Flemish polyphony, an example being the slow unfolding of the imitative voices of the opening *Asperges me*. The repeated *iacentum* in the concluding *Ave maria* of his *O magnum mysterium* showed his ability to build tension in his music, an aspect that Vox Luminis's director Lionel Meunier explored well. Vox Luminis produced some very fine consort singing, with clean, unaffected voices and some well placed cadences. They also made good use of the space, singing the madrigals from the two side aisles, and placing the singers of the *Sancta Maria, oro pro nobis* and *Ave Maria* cantus firmus lines (in *Ave sanctissima Maria* and *Suspice verbum*) from just behind the main group of singers.

One of the flagship events of the festival (the pressure of tickets meant adding an additional late-night performance) was the performance by Zefiro Torna & Corpo Barocco in St. Augustine Church in the AMUZ centre (29 Aug). Conceived and choreographed by Sigrid T'Hooft, the programme was entitled 'Odeo', in honour of the 1530 octagonal music room, Odeo Cornara, in Cardinal Cornara's residence in Padua, now known as the Chigi Palace and the residence of Italy's Prime Minister. The music came from various settings of texts from the *Libro delle Greghesche* by Manoli Blessi (the pseudonym of Antonio Molino, a 16th-century Venetian poet, composer and theatre producer). His eclectic poetry was written in an invented language called '*lingua greghesca*', a mixture of Venetian and Greek dialects. Using the architecture of St. Augustine Church, with the chancel at one end and a semi-circular arcade supporting the organ loft at the other, a dancer and an actor (Karin Modigh and Luca Lomazzi) performed burlesque entertainment in style of the *commedia dell'arte*, while the singers and instrumentalists (positioned either side of the nave) performed the musical settings (and, towards the end, got involved in the action), ranging from simple folk to sophisticated madrigal style by the

likes of Willaert, Gabrieli, de Rore and de Wert. The audience sat, collegiate style, either side of a central aisle where the action took place. Although there were times when I had trouble relating the texts of the songs to the action being depicted, the concept was sound and it was an imaginative way of presenting music. There was some attractive cornetto playing from Marleem Leicher.

The Venetian influence on Croatian music in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century was further explored the following lunchtime with the concert by the four singers and four instrumentalists of Suonar Cantando, directed by the Croatian violinist Bojan Čičić (Elzenveld Chapel, 30 Aug). The Croatian composers included Francesco Usper (aka Sponger), a pupil of Gabrieli who ended up as organist of San Marco and whose music is now being revealed through recent research at Oxford University; Ivan Lukačić, who studied in Italy but returned to become organist at Split Cathedral (a church, incidentally, formed from a Roman mausoleum in Diocletian's Palace); and Vincenz Jelić, a pupil of Ferrabosca in Graz. These composers were contrasted with native Italians such as Bassano, Sorte and Puliti. As well as the excellent violin solos and diminutions from Bojan Čičić (a violinist I have long admired), there were attractive contributions from cornettist Gawain Glenton and Eligio Quinterio, lute. The continuo organist, Mahan Esfahani, greeted me with a threateningly jovial "don't write a shit review", so I had better not mention that his Lang Lang style showmanship was not only distracting (with every chord enlivened with a odd facial grimace and with frequent glances towards the audience to make sure that he still had our undivided attention), but was also, in my view, disrespectful to the other musicians and to the group's director, all of whom demonstrated a professionally restrained stage manner. Instead, I will say that it was nice to hear the little box organ's 4' Principal stop played down an octave – a sound that is so organ-like, but is not often heard on such organs. Of the singers, soprano Esther Brazil had the most impact, her attractive, articulate and agile voice being particularly impressive in Jelić's beautiful *Deus canticum novum*. The countertenor had the sort of vibrato-laden voice that really does not do it for me.

We moved, musically, to one of Croatia's most attractive Dalmatian islands for the evening concert (St. Jacobskerk, 30 Aug) from Faroski Kantaduri, a group of traditional singers from Hvar who are apparently well-known in world music circles. Their quasi-liturgical performance of Glagolitic (Old Slavonic) chants was based on a Slavonic tradition dating back to a Papal decree in 1248 that allowed the use of the local vernacular and Glagolitic alongside Latin. Dressed in full liturgical garb (complete with a colour-coded hierarchy, palm leaves and olive branches, candles and a processional crucifix), they processed and chanted their way around the church (a pilgrimage church on one of the routes to Santiago de Compostela) to reflect the music and rites that local fraternities enact during Lent and Holy Week. The ritual reached a climax when what I had taken to be two very large handbags turned out to be huge rattles with large metal hinges that clanged noisily against their wooden backboard as the crucifix was exchanged for a cross depicted what I guess was a symbolic image of the risen Christ. The music was fascinating, and ranged from unison chants, organum, microtonal slithers around and up to notes, to more traditional harmony, but all at a low sonorous pitch. One particularly attractive work was *Zazivi*, with its repeated low refrain of *Gospodine pomiluj nas*. Although there were a few moments of vocal subtlety, it was mostly sung full-belt. I did wonder how committed believers might react to this theatrical re-enactment of a liturgical rite, but I suppose it is no different from mediaeval groups dressing up as minstrels.

The late night concert in the church at AMUZ was given by the four male singers of Capilla Flamenca with bagpipe player François Lazarevic under the fascinating title of 'Adraen Willaert on bagpipes'. As well as celebrating the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Willaert's death, this concert also raised the question "Why did Petrus Alamire draw bagpipes on the *Missa Benedicta* by Adriaen Willaert?" Although the question wasn't exactly answered, the aural investigation was a fascinating and evocative one. It started in almost complete darkness with a sound like a distant snake charmer as the bagpipe player processed from the back of the church to the chancel stage. We then had a number of Willaert motets and an *alternatim* Magnificat, each with the ornamented plainchant played on the bagpipes – which later joined in with the sung motets.

My time in Antwerp finished with a little lunchtime lute music from Alfred Fernández, exploring the music of Francesco Spinacino – "a Great Lutenist veiled in Mystery" (AMUZ 31 Aug). Spinacino was born in an Italian village near the Adriatic sea, and his music was published in Venice in 1507 - and that is all we really know about him. His two volumes of *Intabolatura de lauto* (1507) are the earliest examples of printed lute music, and Recercares (varying widely in style) from those books formed the backbone of this concert, paired with transcription of vocal works by Josquin des Pres by Enriquez de Valderrábano. This was a wonderfully peaceful concert – it would have made an ideal late night event. Alfred Fernández was already on stage as the audience filed in, slowly walking around the chancel stage, tuning and quietly playing his lute. When he sat, his head was almost resting on top of the lute, a lovely indication of the link between a musician and his instrument. His subsequent playing of the actual pieces was magical, his delicate touch and delicious sense of musical rhetoric giving a real sense of direction to the music. And after some of the showmanship that I had witnessed in one of the earlier concerts, it was a delight to see a musician who was totally involved in his own music making. That really does engage the audience, in the right way, far more than look-at-me antics that some people seem to feel they need.

The concerts are only a small part of the Laus Polyphoniae festival, which also included an International Young Artists Presentation and a vocal summer school. This was my first visit, but it will be a festival that I will look forward to attending again.

**Andrew Benson-Wilson**