

(Boston Early Music News, Volume XIV, No.11)

THE ORLANDO CONSORT: "The Art of Mediæval Polyphony," 6/11/97, Church of the Advent

MALA PUNICA: "Tal per sonar; Instrumental Tablatures in the Italian Trecento," 6/14/97, Faneuil Hall

LIBER UNUSUALIS: "Love, Loss, and Loyalty: Vocal Music of Machaut and Ciconia," 6/12/97, Lindsey Chapel, Emmanuel Church

ALTRAMAR: "Crossroads of the Celts," 6/13/97, Chapel of the Paulist Center of Boston

BEMF GOES MEDIÆVAL ON YOUR EARS

You who fear that the Boston Early Music Festival has become the Boston *Baroque* Festival, take heart and remember this: it's quality that counts, not quantity. And when it comes to mediæval music, this year's festival had plenty of the former.

For those with "The Earlier, The Better" T-shirts, *The Orlando Consort's* first BEMF appearance - and U.S. debut - was for you, taking the audience on a chronologically-circular journey from the Notre Dame School through Aquitanian polyphony to simple organum and back again, with a couple of quick trips through the Chunnel to the Winchester Troper.

Surprisingly, despite the unruly heat *The Orlando* got off to a rather cold start, with several cracked notes and some sinking pitch problems in the first half. By intermission they had found their mark, and the second half was like an entirely different ensemble with increased energy, better intonation, and more expressiveness.

The focus of the concert was Aquitanian (or "St. Martial") repertoire. Ironically, it was this music that provided both the highs and lows of the night. At one point baritone Donald Grieg told the audience, "Performing this music from original notation is like tightrope walking without a safety net...blindfolded!" Unlike the later Notre Dame School, Aquitanian organum has no "comforting stave lines," and - worse yet - there is little indication of how the parts should align rhythmically. *The Orlando* resolved this in the first half by performing from modern editions of Theodore Karp, who believes that this repertoire should be strictly rhythmicized. Aside from being a highly controversial (if not dubious) claim, the musical result of such an approach is less than satisfying, sacrificing the fluidity inherent to Aquitanian chant for a stilted, not-quite-Mode I rendition.

More ironic still is that in the second set they used self-prepared editions made in collaboration with musicologist Richard Crocker; the same who wrote a scathing review of the aforementioned Karp editions. Here at last the music was allowed to blossom and *The Orlando* visibly enjoyed themselves. Tightrope walking without a safety net may be dangerous, but is sure is more fun for the crowd!

A highlight of the concert was *O primus homo corrui*, performed by tenors Charles Daniels and Angus Smith with Grieg. The upper voices whirled above a gorgeously sung foundation, and they finally broke out of the dainty, oh-so-English approach to dissonance to let the crunchy 2nds really go. Countertenor Robert Harre-Jones was not in best voice, though he shone nicely on *Gaudio debita* and, appropriately, *Lux refulget*. A delightful moment happened during the English piece *Multifaire*, when a passing airplane joined in the polyphony with a drone precisely one octave below the final of the mode. They wrapped things up with perhaps the most beautiful - and impressive - selection of the night: a wholly improvised 4-part encore simply described as "in phrygian."

One thing is for sure: though born in Buenos Aires Pedro Memelsdorff is Italian. This was made patently clear in *Mala Punica's* concert of *trecento* instrumental tablatures, starting with the grandiose entrance. Preferring to die rather than skip onstage in Hawaiian shirts as *The Orlando Consort* did, Memelsdorff swaggered in with a well-choreographed entrance complete with Armani suit and flowing scarf (in 85° Boston?!). Pavoratti would have been proud.

Mala Punica then proceeded to make another thing clear: they are virtuosos in the truest sense of the word.

Throughout the concert the ensemble was airtight, executing every move and cadence with utmost precision. Vielleists Roberto Falcone and Guido Balestracci played exquisitely, proving that virtuosity and sensitivity are not mutually exclusive. Filippotto da Caserta's *Par le grant sense d'Adriane* performed by the two with harpist Mara Galassi was certainly one of the most beautiful and moving works of the night, if not the entire festival. Christophe Deslignes, organetto, was featured in *O dolce fiume* by Jacopo da Bologna; a gorgeous though decidedly non-HIP duet with Memelsdorff which opened the program. Maestro Memelsdorff pulled out all the stops in his "showcase set" for recorder: Antonio Zacara's *Non volere donna* and an anonymous istampita. Yes, the guy can play!

The remainder of the program, including Ciconia's masterpiece of complex canonical writing *Le ray au soleyl* was somewhat less successful. In the much-too-brief program notes Memelsdorff wrote "the *ars subtilior* style...reveals an unsuspected and overwhelming expressiveness when presented with innovative and provocative interpretations." Accordingly, *Mala Punica* took a very modern approach, treating the tablatures like jazz charts,

tradin' solos and inundating the music with Chopinesque rubato. Additionally, most of the pieces were played attacca with clever little segues, leaving much of the audience completely lost as to where they were in the program.

Trecento tablature is primarily the instrumental elaboration and ornamentation of vocal repertoire, which in turn is already the most elaborate and rhythmically complex of any music prior to Milton Babbitt. To further inundate the music with omnipresent ornamentations, drastic tempi changes and quasi-New Age orchestration blurs any sense of the original melodic lines, thus sounding like pure improvisation. It's not simply a question of HIP-ness, but of conveying the original intent and character of the music. Memelsdorff would have been well served by bringing a couple of the singers featured on *Mala Punica*'s fine CD to perform a few of these pieces in their original form, thus providing the audience with some timbral contrast and, more importantly, a context for their elaborations.

Aside from the two Big Guns on the festival series, BEMF goers had to turn to concurrent events to satiate their remaining mediæval desires. Unfortunately, due to a scheduling fluke several of the all-too-few mediæval concerts conflicted with one another, so difficult choices had to be made. Those who attended the *Liber unusualis* concert were well rewarded, having the chance not only to hear a preview of some of the *Mala Punica* repertoire in its vocal form, but also to witness some extraordinary music-making by gifted local talent.

The program was divided into two parts: music of Guillaume de Machaut and that of his great, indirect successor, Johannes Ciconia. The young trio (all of whom studied at Longy School of Music) approached this fiendishly difficult music with vigor, sensitivity and honesty; a tribute to their teacher/mentor Laurie Monahan. Unlike Monahan's *PAN*, however, *Liber* takes a strictly a cappella route à la *Gothic Voices* (albeit with more musicality, IMHO). Due to the group's vocal ranges they are forced to transpose many of the pieces up significantly - disconcerting to those familiar with the music, but ultimately not a major problem.

Two triple-texted motets by Machaut, *Li enseignement/De touz les biens/Ecce tu pulchra* and *Quant en moy/Amour et Biatue/Amara valde*, were particularly successful, with sopranos Carolann Buff and Melanie Germond effortlessly weaving an intricate and subtle web around tenor William Hudson. One could tell that they actually believed the texts - no matter that with three texts being sung simultaneously we can't decipher a word.

The Ciconia duet between Buff and Hudson, *La fiamma del to amor*, was absolutely stunning. I was thoroughly convinced that, as the text implied, Buff was about to burst into flames any second. Get out a pen and paper, as here is a name to look out for.

There were a couple of moments when the group's excitement drove the pitch upwards, and at times Germond was somewhat covered by the two lower voices. These are minor glitches, certain to be worked out by the time they travel to England as finalists (and the only American ensemble) in the York International Early Music Young Artists' Competition in July.

All in all, *Liber* demonstrated that despite what Pedro Memelsdorff says, this music simply does not need "provocative" additions in order to be "overwhelmingly expressive." No matter what happens in York, *Liber unusualis* is a group you will be hearing more about - and from - in the future.

Another young ensemble unfamiliar to many is *Altramar*. The Indiana based group specializes in lesser known repertoire from the mediæval period, rethinking HIP along the way. Their concert on Friday, "Crossroads of the Celts," focused on sacred and secular music (i.e. mythology and folklore) from the 11th through 16th centuries.

As with much music from the Middle Ages, there is frustratingly little information about the actual performance practice of this repertoire. Thus, *Altramar* was left to "reconstruct" their renditions using a combination of contemporary treatises, iconography, ancient slate fragments, and even modern field recordings! Difficult and time-consuming work, but ultimately relying as heavily upon the talent, creativity and imagination of the performers as on the thoroughness of their scholarship. If this isn't the very definition of HIP then I don't know what is.

Take for example the Irish chant *Cristo canamus gloriam*. I just about jumped out of my seat when tenor/percussionist David Stattelmann and soprano/harpist Angela Mariani started singing organum in parallel 3rds. It turns out, however, that in the course of their research they stumbled across some rather interesting indirect references by Gerald of Wales and Anonymous IV that caught their eyes. Combined with Celtic melodic types and fragments of notated early polyphony from the regions, this indicated to *Altramar* the "existence of an insular unnotated tradition of partsinging" with an emphasis on 3rds. Wierd? Yes. But who can argue with such risk-taking when they've obviously done their homework?

The concert opened with *Winter*, an anonymous piece from the Irish Liber Hymnorum from the 11th century, performed here by Stattelmann and Jann Cosart on crwth (a rare mediæval Welsh instrument that is a cross between a lyre and a vielle; so rare, in fact, that Cosart is one of the only crwth players in the world). After a haunting, ultra-minimalist two-minute introduction of solo crwth, Stattelmann entered in a beautiful *pp*. He does some bizarre things with his posture while singing, but no matter, as his is one of the most natural, resonant tenor voices I've heard in recent memory.

Chris Smith, cruit and gittern, utterly captivated the audience with his dramatic telling of *The Lay of the Forge*, a pre-Christian Celtic tale in old Gaelic. One could almost hear the footsteps of Lon the Giant and feel the heat

from the bellows in the Cave of Chorainn; it couldn't have been more exciting if we had all been transported to an open bonfire in ancient Scotland.

Despite the lack of ambiance in the Paulist Center Chapel (70's post-Vatican kitsch), *Altramar*'s concert was as magical and mystical as the Celtic tales they told. *Altramar* is scheduled to record this program for a Dorian Discovery CD sometime in the next year; let's hope it's as enchanting as their BEMF performance.

Lansing D. McLoskey