

actually listened to the way that Anne Freitag was playing – he would learn a lot. During his own solo improvisation slot he made a great play of inviting somebody from the audience (that he clearly knew) to offer themes, keys etc, and then produced the sort of standard issue neo-baroque noodling based on hackneyed sequences that can be heard every Sunday played by half-competent German organists. He ended by descending into music-hall frivolity and showmanship of the most toe-curlingly embarrassing type. Apart from the extraordinary lack of musical sensitivity, this was an outrageous attempt to outshine and dominate an extremely gifted student, something I believe is unforgivable for any teacher. I wonder why he was accompanying anyway – there must be harpsichordists studying historic improvisation in Basel who could have done a far better, and far more appropriate, job. I would rather listen to a three-note phrase played by Anne Freitag than any amount of the unmusical ramblings of her accompanist.

Having come away with very mixed emotions from the previous concert, it was a relief to hear another very fine performance, this time by the impressive Ensemble Cordia, playing without a conductor (in the Altes Rathaus). Instrumental works by Telemann, Bach and Corelli contrasted with two Bach cantatas for solo Soprano (*Ich bin in mir vergnügt*, BWV 204, and *O holder Tag*, BWV 210) sung by the excellent Czech soprano Hana Blažiková, her focussed and unforced voice carrying well into the long narrow room, despite her refreshingly subdued volume. Her control and articulation of runs was spot on, as were her elaborations and ornaments. As with Margot Oitzinger in an earlier concert, Hana Blažiková demonstrated an outstanding understanding of the role of the recitative, with extended examples in both cantatas. This time it was members of the audience who were misbehaving with cameras, with several standing and firing off camera flashes within feet of the performers – do these idiots realise just how disturbing that is, not least to the eyesight of the players? I speak from experience – I once had to play the first piece of a recital entirely from a combination of peripheral vision and memory because somebody had hailed me and fired off a flash just as I went on stage, leaving the flash image embedded at the centre of my vision for about 15 minutes.

The festival ended with the traditional performance of the B minor Mass in the Thomaskirche, given by the sailor-suited Thomanerchor Leipzig and the Freiburger Barockorchester conducted by Thomaskantor Georg Christoph Biller. A recording of this concert, and the opening concert, can be found online.

The whole festival fielded 115 events attended by 65,000 people, with many more attracted by the many free events around the city. There were also several trips out of town under the banner of Bach Out & About, which I will discuss in the next issue. Next year's festival is from 13-22 June 2014 and will feature the music of CPE Bach, Telemann and Handel – the outlines of the programme are already available online. My own time in Leipzig

ended by playing the new (2000) 'Bach' organ in the Thomaskirche, an organ based on an instrument he knew when he was a young man, in a case that he would recognise based on the University (St Paul's) church, demolished during GDR times. It was a very moving experience to play Bach in Bach's own church, only a few feet from his grave.

## York Early Music Festival 2013: 'The Eternal City'

David Vickers

The 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Corelli and The Sixteen's choice of Palestrina and Allegri for this year's choral pilgrimage led to a natural theme of 'The Eternal City' for the York Early Music Festival. Naturally, a conceptual theme is only ever intended to be a useful coat-hanger upon which to drape musical entertainments by artists who are sympathetic to a festival's aims and priced within its budget – a practicality worth remembering when speculating about an array of missed possibilities for interesting Renaissance and Baroque repertoire connected to Rome. The Arcadian Academy was often mentioned in programme notes and especially lectures by John Bryan (on Corelli) and the present author (on Handel in Rome), so it would have been ideal to have reconstructed a *conversazione* featuring bona fide Arcadian cantatas. However, it is only fair to acknowledge that the festival's team of artistic advisors (John Bryan, Lindsay Kemp, Liz Kenny and Peter Seymour) and a host of guest musicians offered plenty of events that confirmed the extraordinary richness of Roman 'early' music.

The opening concert by the York Bach Choir was entitled an 'Arcadian Celebration', but focussed predominantly upon Handel's Latin church music: Mhari Lawson's florid divisions, diction and charismatic delivery were flawless in the exuberant Carmelite-related psalm *Laudate pueri Dominum* and motet *Saeviat tellus*, and it was impressive that all the performers managed to shape the music coherently in the washy acoustic of the Minster. Bethany Seymour sang sweetly in Handel's *Salve Regina*, and also performed two of Piacere's arias from the oratorio *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (Seymour avoided the trap of making "Lascia la spina" seem just the same as its more familiar *Rinaldo* revision "Lascia ch'io pianga", but did not come over so well in the fierce coloratura of "Come nembo che fugge"). The Yorkshire Baroque Soloists, led capably by Lucy Russell and featuring three theorbos, produced a gorgeously sonorous performance of Corelli's concerto grosso Op. 6 No. 4; the airy splendour of the Minster may not look much like a baroque Roman church, but it seemed appropriate to hear Corelli's sublime concerto played magnificently yet also judged according to a tricky rich acoustic.

Corelli took more of the limelight in a concert of trio sonatas by violinist Riccardo Minasi and Musica Antiqua Roma, whereas La Risonanza provided a glimpse of what

Corelli's lost sacred vocal works might have been like in their beguiling experiment 'Voicing Corelli'; they performed four intriguing adaptations of trio sonatas from Corelli's Op. 3 and Op. 4 by the itinerant cellist Antonio Tonelli (1686–1765) and collected in his MS *Corelli transformato in quattro Antifone ed otto Tantum Ergo*. Seemingly made as a teaching tool, these transformations were surprisingly effective and idiomatic for voices, with the original trio sonata parts retained to provide solemn ritornelli and concertizing instruments in dialogue with newly added voice parts (often but not always doubling the violins). The pick of the transformations was *Alma redemptoris mater*, in which Yetzabel Arias Fernandez (soprano) and Elena Biscuola (alto) sang with spellbinding subtlety. Fabio Bonizzoni also threw in two *echt* Corelli trio sonatas and a couple of less-than-obvious chamber duets by Handel, both written in London: *Se tu non lasci amore* (1720s) and *Beato in ver chi può* (early 1740s).

Some concerts had tenuous connections to Rome. The most obvious conceptual spanner in the works was an entire day devoted to celebrating the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dowland's birth. Although no excuse is really necessary, John Bryan pointed out that the melancholic Elizabethan/Jacobean master got almost all the way to Rome to learn from Marenzio before getting cold feet on account of becoming mixed up with some exiled English recusants (we know he got as far as Florence). The Rose Consort of Viols and expert quartet of singers Grace Davidson, Clare Wilkinson, Jeremy Budd and Timothy Scott Whiteley combined sublimely in a programme entitled 'Teares of Sorrowe and Gladness'. The intelligently contoured set-list included not only music for viols from *Lachrimae*, but also Marenzio's madrigal *Ahi, dispietata morte* (published Rome, 1585, and which Dowland borrowed a dozen years later for *Would my conceit*), and Lassus's version of *Susanne un jour* followed by Dowland's galliard based upon it. We even heard music by Danish colleagues at the court of King Christian IV (Borchgrevinck and Pedersøn – both of whom studied in Venice with Gabrieli). Dowland's lute music was showcased by Paul O'Dette in a late night concert at the NCEM, and some of the most popular songs (*Flow my tears; In darkness let me dwell*) were offered with poetic intimacy and musical sincerity by countertenor Iestyn Davies and lutenist Thomas Dunford at the ideally tiny church of St Olave's, Marygate.

From the evidence of events like these, the York Early Music Festival is in rude health artistically. So it was a pity that venue capacity was sometimes about half-full for some outstanding award-winning international artists. However, one guaranteed box-office smash was The Sixteen's packed-out Choral Pilgrimage appearance. This attracted several wildly enthusiastic audience members whose feverish applause started before the Minster's echo-drenched acoustic had quite finished off the concluding cadences; still, it's always good to hear people hungry for early music (and James MacMillan). Palestrina's famous double-choir *Stabat mater* was sung with the sort of refinement that one expects from The Sixteen, but no doubt many of the audience came to hear Allegri's

*Miserere*. If so, their preconceptions might have been pleasantly thrown thanks to Harry Christophers' use of Ben Byram-Wigfield's recent scholarly edition based on original sources in the Vatican library and elsewhere. Established on principles of historically-plausible text, elements of embellishment and an avoidance of *that* editorial top C in the refrains, Byram-Wigfield's text reminds me of hypothetical versions recorded by The Taverner Choir, Ensemble William Byrd and A Sei Voci, but Christophers instead presented an evolving arrangement that morphed gradually from historically-informed Byram-Wigfield to the cosy familiar version, with precise top Cs floating from the distance (one wonders whether such ethereal spatial effects were really part of the plan in the boxy Sistine Chapel, but one cannot blame The Sixteen for milking the acoustic properties of English cathedrals for all their worth).

Another event that attracted a good crowd was the epic all-day Young Artists Competition at the National Centre for Early Music. Chief adjudicator Laurence Cummings praised that the ensembles of young professional period-instrumentalists from across Europe were all winners – hardly surprising when their CVs reveal plenty of EUBO alumni, young players already working with top international baroque orchestras, and specialist training at prestigious conservatoires. No vocal ensembles made the final cut this year, and this also meant that this long day of competitive (but relaxed and friendly) music-making featured very little music written before the 17th century. The only group to play any 16th-century music was the Dutch recorder quintet Seldom Sene; they swapped between numerous sizes and types of instruments during their performance, using five bright voice flutes for Boismortier's Concerto in A minor, Op. 15 No. 2 (their only baroque piece), but swapping to a lower range of mellower instruments for Tallis's *O sacrum convivium*, and concluding with the full range of recorder types for a Pavan and two Almans by Anthony Holborne. Seldom Sene perceptively exploited a range of contrasting textures, and was the only ensemble of the day whose memorisation of the dots enabled unbridled spontaneity.

Most finalists presented mixed programmes, with the exception of Ensemble Versailles (confusingly named because they're from Trossingen): this quartet of flute, violin, gamba and harpsichord understandably devoted their slot to a solemn yet sweet performance of Telemann's Paris Quartet No. 6 in E minor; their playing was articulate without feeling forced, although it took a few movements for the players to warm up to the occasion and generate some interaction. I was astonished by the programme note's bold claim that Charpentier (d. 1704) subscribed to Telemann's Paris Quartets (pub. 1737) – I would have liked to have seen a better standard of programme note writing from almost all of the finalists.

The smallest ensembles of the event were Duo 1702 (Denmark), Repicco (UK) and Duo Domenico (UK). The first presented little-known Danish composers with an abundance of glee – I don't think I've ever seen quite as happy an organist as Katrine Kristiansen, and Louise

Hjorth Hansen's virtuoso recorder work dazzled in Mealli's *La Biancuccia* (originally written for fiddle). The Danish duo had an exquisite understanding and a delightful lightness of touch in the galant conversational music of Raehs and Scheibe. Repicco offered a tantalising perspective into the friendship between Bach and Silvius Leopold Weiss, with violinist Kinga Ujszaszi and theorist Jadran Duncumb performing the Suite in A major (BWV 1025) with delicacy and passionate involvement; the intimate Sarabande was judged beautifully. However, the competition's most exciting players to watch were Duo Domenico. The spoken introductions by Vladimir Waltham (cello, fretted bass cello) and Jonathan Rees (5-string cello, 7-string bass viol) were mildly stilted but amiable, but there was no disputing the fluency of their playing of Boccherini's Sonata in A major ('L'Impératrice'); the duo achieved masterful pianissimo passages in the central Largo and exciting 'shredding' in the final Allegro of the sort some of us might admire in heavy metal guitar virtuosos. The physical commitment and energy of a canon by Domenico Gabrielli was a dynamic conclusion, and the combination of two musicians, four instruments and a liberal infusion of musical imagination caused a beguiling range of colourful sonorities and moods. It was unsurprising that Duo Domenico was awarded the Friends of the York Early Music Festival Prize (the closest thing to an audience prize).

In comparison, neither Ensemble Daimonion nor Der Musikalische Garten seemed to enjoy themselves all that much. Both groups of graduates from the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, each seemed severe in their comportment, although the music-making was technically astonishing. Ensemble Daimonion had the unfortunate position of having to be the first performers of the day; their playing of early 17th-century works by Picchi, Bassano and Castello was ardent and accomplished, although four continuo instruments (keyboard, theorbo, gamba and cello) sometimes felt like quite a lot, and there was no hiding from Anaïs Chen's bold violin flourishes in a sonata by Bölddecker. Der Musikalische Garten was similarly serious, but communicated more engagingly as the performance progressed, despite saying nothing and letting the music do all the talking. This quartet (two violins, cello and harpsichord) seems to be going places, with a residency at the Ambronay Early Music Festival already under its belt; its members caught the shifting juxtaposition of melancholy and zestiness smoothly in Biber's Partita No. 1 from *Harmonia artificioso-ariosa*, and the group was awarded the EUBO Development Trust Prize. There was much more visible enthusiasm from On Air (an oboe band from Bremen), who looked as if they enjoy the act of music-making. The convivial interplay between a range of all kinds of oboes (and bassoon) was an entertaining breath of fresh air, and their playing had plenty of cantabile finesse. I admired how intelligently the short programme balanced sacred and secular, instrumental and vocal (a chorus from BWV 38 transferred to just woodwinds), and German and English music.

Les Mélomanes (roughly translated as 'Mad about music') is a British quartet formed at the RAM, and which

has already appeared on Radio 3. They were the last performers of the day and the heat of the afternoon caused some problems with tuning, but it was worth the wait to hear their unforced inégales and lilting phrasing in a suite by Marais. Sincere and stylish but never merely saccharine, the Marais was finely contrasted with Telemann's Trio Sonata in D minor (TWV 42:d10), and it was fun to hear the quartet cut loose in the thrilling rustic Presto finale. However, my favourite group of the day was Thalia Ensemble (named after the Muse of Comedy and Idyllic Poetry). A quintet of flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon that formed at the Conservatory of Amsterdam, their sophisticated and mature performances were a delectable advocacy of late classical wind quintets by Franz Ignaz Danzi and Antoine Reicha. All the most important virtues of a top-class ensemble were abundant: flowing physical movement, lots of amiable eye-contact between players, drawing the audience in to the music, rock-steady technique (the natural horn was spot-on), and masterful use of rhetoric to convey emotions artistically. After such a strong day of music-making, nobody could predict the result, but the audience in the NCEM was delighted when the eminent panel of judges announced Thalia as worthy winners of this year's first prize, handed them a useful cheque, and granted them the opportunity to make an album for Linn Records. It is a timely reminder – should one be needed – that classical and later repertoires remains vital and revelatory fields for new explorations in 'early' music.