

Ambronay Festival - Weekend 4: October 2 - 4, 2015



Les Arts Florissantes, dir Paul Agnew - Ambronay Festival, October 2, 2015 - Photo © Bertrand Pichène

With the first mists of autumn the thoughts of early music enthusiasts are liable to turn to Ambronay and its festival, now in its 6th year. Certainly those of the present writer have now done so for some years, although the small village nestling up against the Alpine foothills of the Haut-Bugey is no longer as convenient to reach as it was when we enjoyed French residence. Nonetheless, one weekend at least of the four remains feasible, the choice, as last year, falling on the final one. Once again we were generously hosted by the festival in the beautifully renovated 18th century monks quarters added to the Benedictine abbey that serves as the festival's venue. Ambronay remains one of the most hospitable of festivals, being justly proud of the friendly ambiance that emanates from the happy mix of staff, volunteers, artists and journalists.

One good reason for the choice of the last weekend is that in addition to the festival concerts it adds a mini-festival in the shape of *eeemerging* (Emerging European Ensembles), in effect a competition between some of the leading younger early music groups for sponsorship by leading European festivals and organisations. For a variety of reasons I am no great lover of competitions, but this initiative does allow public assessment of some of the most promising younger performers. Indeed I described last year's inaugural *eeemerging* in *EMR* as a 'hugely encouraging and life-affirming experience that renewed faith in the future of early music'. If, as will become apparent later, I don't quite feel that way about this year's event the short concerts given by each

entrant still made for fascinating listening. But let's first turn to the three concerts heard in the main festival.

The first, held in the abbey on 2 October, brought a solo vocal ensemble from Les Arts Florissants directed by Paul Agnew singing madrigals from Monteverdi's Books 1 to 3. Set to poetry of the most elevated quality (Tasso and Guarini figure prominently) these beautifully crafted earlier books in five or six parts are generally regarded as Monteverdi's final secular tribute to the *prima prattica*, contrapuntal works standing in stark contrast to the radical Book 4 of 1603 and its successors. But Paul Agnew would appear to see things differently, for although the textures and chording were marked by superb finesse and finish (some of the *piano* chording was breathtaking), in madrigals such as 'Vattene pur' (Book 3) he inspired his singers to near operatic dramatic intensity. Elsewhere one noted the exquisite range of vocal colour brought to the highly mimetic 'Ecco mormorar l'onde', the sweetly sensuous lyricism of 'Baci soave', and the irresistible playfulness of 'La vaga pastorella'. Throughout this compelling programme, Agnew, who directed with understated authority as an ensemble member, seemed to be living every moment, each note. This was an unforgettable addition to the many memorable concerts I have heard at Ambronay over the years.

The following evening brought a programme of Vivaldi and Galuppi liturgical works given by the double-choir forces of the Ghislieri Choir and Orchestra under their founder and director Giulio Prandi. This Pavia-based ensemble is rather better known on the other side of the Channel than it is here. That is perhaps our loss, although the discipline of the choir at times struggles to equal that of the best choirs in this country. Nonetheless, Prandi had impressive control over his substantial forces, directing idiomatic performances replete with Italianate flair and lyricism that never overstepped stylistic bounds. Galuppi's sacred music is less familiar than it should be, a verdict here underscored by a succinct Magnificat receiving its first performance in modern times, a *Nisi Dominus* a 3 and a Credo of 1781, the penultimate of five settings made by the composer. The fine *Nisi Dominus* of 1777 is an expansive work in seven sections (including a double doxology, the first a long *da capo* aria for alto). I'm puzzled by the apparent existence of two versions, one in C minor, the other in F. A version of the latter for three soloists and strings can be found on Youtube, while a choral score 'a 4 concertato' can be examined online. I can find no provenance for the large-scale double choir version used at Ambronay by Prandi. The second half was principally devoted to more familiar fare, Vivaldi's resplendent double-choir *Dixit Dominus*, RV 594, which after a rather weak opening by the choral sopranos developed into a thoroughly impressive performance of real breadth in passages such as 'Donec ponam', and of high drama in 'Judicabit', with its antiphonal trumpets, though trumpet 2 did not emerge unscathed. The excellent solo team included sopranos Rachel Redmond and Marta Redaelli, alto Marta Fumagalli, who displayed some contralto-like chest notes, tenor

Luca Cervoni and, particularly exceptional, bass Marco Bussi. His singing of the declamatory 'Sicut sagittae' from the Galuppi *Nisi Dominus* was one of the memorable moments in a fine concert that also included a spirited performance of Vivaldi's Concerto in D minor, RV128.

For the final concert of the festival Hervé Niquet and Le Concert Spirituel gave a liturgical reconstruction of a Mass based around Alessandro Striggio's rediscovered 40-part *Missa sopra Ecco si beato giorno* and the more familiar 40-part motet *Ecce beatam lucem*. The programme noted that Niquet dismisses Venetian influences on the former, which is known to have been given in various European centres in the 1560s, concluding that rather than the five choirs being spatially separated, Striggio had intended his forces to be placed in one large central block. I'm no scholar of music of this period, but have to confess to finding the results unconvincing, even an excellent position and the grateful acoustics with which Ambronay is blessed failing to disguise the fact that what we heard was largely an unrelenting wall of sound that lacked definition or contrast. I also felt that Niquet missed a golden opportunity to provide at least a few moments of greater intimacy with Monteverdi's 8-part setting of the Elevation psalm *Memento Domine David*, where the employment of the full complement of singers was certainly inappropriate. Having said that, the performance was certainly impressive, with Niquet notably in full control of his large forces and obtaining some excellent singing from his five choirs. But I do wonder if I'm alone in finding the musical interest of *Missa sopra Ecco* rather thinly spread. For all its grandiloquent gestures the harmonies are frequently simple, textures equally so; I remain convinced it makes a more striking impression with its choirs placed spatially.

To return to eemerging. This year's event, given in the Salle Monteverdi, expanded the number of ensembles competing from four to six chosen from a total of 82 applications, a quite extraordinary number. The complexities this involved for the jury of festival and early music centre artistic directors were enhanced by a wide variety of music ranging from the *ars subtilior* to the era of Bach and Handel. How possible it is to judge between the relative merits of the performance of a rondeau by Landini and a Handel concerto grosso seems to me just one of several problematical questions attached to this kind of competition. At the time of writing the verdict of the eemerging partners had not been announced, but in a further innovation audiences were also invited to register their vote. This resulted in the unsurprising choice of Repicco, a violin and theorbo duo who gave technically stunning performances of a group of 17th century virtuoso Italian violin works by the likes of Nicola Matteis and Mealli. Far from awarding them a prize, I found it depressing that after some half a century of the period instrument movement a supremely gifted violinist such as Kinga Ujszászi did not have her instrument set up correctly for 17th century music and made no attempt to play in anything approaching 17th century style. There was little hint of *chiaroscuro*, no suggestion of the fantasy or

bizarrerie that is the lifeblood of this repertoire. My own prize would have been split between Sollazzo, whose 'Cacciando per gustar' programme of Landini, Matteo de Perugia and Ciconia notably featured exceptionally expressive and sensitive singing by soprano Perrine Devillers and tenor Vivien Simon, and Camerata Bachiensis, whose soprano Julia Kirchner communicated strongly utilising Baroque gesture in an accompanied recitative and aria from Melchior Hoffmann's opera *Die Asiatische Banise* and also gave a quietly satisfying performance of Bach's cantata *Ich habe genug*, BWV 82a. In the remaining concerts Barroco*Tout* gave unfussy and enjoyable performances of two of Telemann's 'Paris' Quartets, marred only by nervous technical slips by their violinist, to her own obvious annoyance, while the gimmicky presentation of both Les Contre-Sujets (Telemann and Vivaldi) and the larger Amsterdam Corelli Collective (concerti grossi by Corelli, Handel etc) was not to the taste of this listener, who also noted the anachronistic use of 16' bass by the former. Finally, it seems that these younger string players are moving away from the détaché bowing and clear articulation that was such a feature of earlier period string playing. The tendency to dig more deeply into the strings may result in greater expressivity, though it seems to me that it runs the risk of taking us back to the wrong kind of expressivity, exactly the kind the pioneers of the mid-20th century early music movement sought to escape from...

Brian Robins