

The Ambronay Festival 2022

Brian Robins



Paul Agnew directs Les Arts Florissants in Bach cantatas. Photo © Bertrand Pichène

Regular readers of *Early Music Review* may recall my long-standing love affair with the Ambronay Festival, one summed up in my personal retrospective on the occasion of the festival's 40th anniversary in 2019. For those not familiar with earlier reports or the festival, I'll remind readers that Ambronay is located in a village some 35 miles northeast of Lyon. It lies close to the foot of the pastures and thickly wooded hills of the Haut Bugey, pre-Alps forming a southern continuation of the mountains of the Jura. It's a pleasant if unremarkable kind of place, the kind you might easily drive through without noticing the medieval Benedictine *Abbatiale* set back from the main street. Yet Ambronay and its abbey, blessed with outstanding acoustics, are home not only to one of Europe's most prestigious early music festivals, but also to an ambitious cultural centre of worldwide importance, founded in 2003. Over the years both festival and facilities have grown considerably; since 2009, my first year at the festival, the sensitive restoration of the 18th century monk's cells to provide accommodation for artists and even critics (!), and the Monteverdi Salle for the presentation of smaller-scale concerts have been notable landmarks.

The Covid pandemic and the many problems associated with it have ensured a longer than usual break in visits to Ambronay, but we (my partner Anne and myself) were delighted to be able to resume acquaintance for the 2022 festival, where the welcome was as warm and hospitable as ever. The major change that has taken place is that the festival now has a new director, or more correctly *directrice générale*. Isabelle Battioni may have been appointed only fairly recently (this was the first festival the planning has been fully in her hands), but she is not new to Ambronay, having been deputy-director when we first started going to the festival.

As is customary the 2022 event is spread over four weekends from mid-September into early October, this year with the characteristically enigmatic theme 'Musiques Enjeux, Musiques en jeu' (a play on words for which I cannot come up a satisfactory English version). We had chosen the first weekend (16-19 September), which incorporated the splendid *journées européennes du patrimoine*, a weekend promoting cultural places and activities during which historic buildings normally closed to the public open their doors, while others grant free admission. Ambronay contributed with guided tours of the abbey, a *fête* day in its park and spectacular illuminations projected onto the outer walls of the abbey. Musically the weekend featured revered artists such as René Jacobs and Les Arts Florissants that have played a major role in the festival over the years, but a younger generation of musicians like the vocal ensemble Cantoría and the medieval group Sollazzo were also represented. Completing the programme were the 'fringe' events involving 'world music' that have always played an important role at Ambronay.

A delayed flight determined that we arrived too late to hear Cantoría's early evening concert, so our first taste of the festival came from René Jacobs's concert of a pair of Handel's early Italian cantatas, *Il Delirio amoroso*, HWV90 (not 99, as was incorrectly given in both the advance publicity and the programme for the evening) and *Apollo e Dafne*, HWV122). A generously constituted Freiburg Baroque Orchestra included a harp in the continuo section, an unnecessary anachronism in which Jacobs has now indulged for some time. The days when Jacobs was an outstanding early music director are indeed long past – he is now a far more reliable interpreter of Romantic repertoire – and his conducting here was stolidly north European, draining the youthful Italianate exuberance from Handel. It was an approach that provided little help to his singers. The Ukrainian soprano Kateryna Kasper has a voice of great character (she was an adorable Ännchen in Jacobs's recent recording of Weber's *Der*

Freischütz) and in HWV 90 she displayed a good grasp of Baroque technique, with some neatly turned ornamentation and well-articulated *passaggi*. But the voice is too ample and unevenly produced for this repertoire, with impressive chest notes that nonetheless sound like those of a different voice. Ornamentation at cadences was wild and unstylish. *Apollo e Dafne*, drawn from Ovid, tells the familiar story of the god's chase of the follower of Diana who in her desperation to escape Apollo's clutches begs her father to change her into a laurel bush. Kasper was joined by the German bass Yannick Debus for the cantata. Like her, he is not an early music specialist (he was also in the *Freischütz*), but the voice is well produced and beautifully rounded; he also sounded more comfortable in this repertoire than Kasper despite, like her, not having a trill. The performance of what is one of Handel's most dramatic early cantatas in fact built to an effective climax before Apollo's lovely final aria, here taken at a funereal tempo that compromised its effect. In addition to the cantatas the programme included the overture to *Agrippina* and a capable if unmemorable performance of the Organ Concerto, op 4 no 5, played by Sebastian Wienand.

The following day brought two concerts by Les Arts Florissants. The first was an *a cappella* concert largely devoted to a complete performance of Schütz's First (and only) Book of Madrigals, published in Venice in 1611. The concert opened with Giovanni Gabrieli's 8-part *Lieto godea sedendo* and *Questo felici erbette* (from his 3rd Book of Madrigals, 1589) and Monteverdi's *O primavera, gioventù dell'anno*, a welcome to spring which also forms the text of the opening of Schütz's publication. As with Handel's youthful Italian visit, the young Schütz's stay in Venice under the tutelage of Giovanni Gabrieli played a fundamental role in developing not only an understanding of Italian culture but his mastery of composition. In the Madrigals we find an extraordinarily adept assimilation of madrigal style. Mostly written for five voices, the 19 madrigals employ (with a single exception) texts by Battista Guarini or Giambattista Marino, poets that will be familiar names to anyone acquainted with the repertoire. I've written in previous reports from Ambronay of the enormous pleasure of hearing tenor Paul Agnew's madrigal performances with a special *a cappella* group drawn from Les Arts Florissants. They are characterised not only by a now near taken for granted finish and finesse, but also the intensely full-blooded and dramatic performances that Agnew inspires from an ensemble in which he is most of the time a participant. If there is perhaps less scope here for such drama as in the Monteverdi we've previously had from Agnew, it has to be recalled that these *prima prattica* madrigals were stylistically slightly old-fashioned by 1611. None the less a piece like 'Alma, afflitta che

fai' (no. 3) came across with impressive power, while the rapid exchanges of 'Fuggi, fuggi, o mio core' were of several instances of an impressive level of virtuosity.

In the evening Agnew was back in the abbey with a largely new group of singers (bass Edward Grint is given the award for stamina, having been the only member of the consort to have sung in every item in the Schütz programme and a soloist in the Bach), oh, and, yes, an orchestra. The programme was devoted to four cantatas composed by Bach during his years in Weimar (1708-1717), thus continuing the theme of young composers developing compositional mastery. For some curious reason Agnew chose to use two voices per part in the chorus. Now, I'm a great advocate of one-per-part Bach choruses, but two is neither fish nor fowl. Put simply it doesn't work because the voices will near-inevitably clash with each other rather than cohere like a chorus. It was interesting to find another singer appearing in the festival (not participating in this concert) in agreement when we discussed it. That said it was disconcerting that too many elements of the generally disappointing performances suffered similar problems to Jacobs's Handel. Throughout Agnew seemed intent on drawing out of the music more than there is in it, or at least things other than what is in it, with mannerisms underlined by slow tempos not just in arias and choruses, but also recitatives. Thus the very deliberate tempo for the alto aria 'Leget euch dem Heiland unter', from *Himmelskönig, sei Willkommen*, BWV182 did little to help countertenor Maarten Engeltjes, whose diction was in any event poor, a defect that also marred his performance of the sublime solo alto cantata *Widerstehe doch der Sünde*, though he maintained an admirable sense of sustained line in the opening aria. The tragic power of the opening chorus of *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* elicited from Agnew an excessively deliberate tempo and a breadth full of pain, but to these ears an overt 21st century pain. In general the soloists seemed over-parted by their music, the exception being Hannah Morrison, whose only solo contribution, the final aria from *Nun komm, der heiden Heiland*, BWV61, was very nicely done, despite yet another excessively slow tempo. It was left to the orchestra to provide most of the highlights of the evening, some exceptionally well-played obbligatos providing particular pleasure.



The Sollazzo Ensemble. Photo © Bertrand Pichène

Those that like the present writer are ancient enough to remember the early days of the 20th century early music revival may recall that one of the questions that came up for debate was lack of information regarding performance practice of medieval music. For some, like David Munrow, such ambiguity was relished, since it gave a freedom otherwise unavailable. But for others like Christopher Hogwood (who of course started as a member of Munrow's Early Music Consort of London) it proved a frustration that so little authentic information was available, so, as did Hogwood, moved on. Critics are in a not dissimilar position, since few, including myself, bring specialist knowledge to the topic. All this provides preamble to the final concert of our Ambronay visit, given by the Sollazzo Ensemble, who we last heard as eemerging contenders in 2015, when the group was rather differently constituted. They didn't win, but were victors in the York Early Music Competition and from 2017 to 2020 were associate artists at Ambronay's Cultural Centre. This year's concert, under the direction of founder Anna Danilevskaia, featured what I understand was an unusually large version of the ensemble, no fewer than 18 performers in all. The concert, divided into five sections, included works by Johannes Tapissier, Matteo and Niccolo da Perugia, Guiraut du Bornelh, Johannes de Florentia, Vincenzo da Rimini, Pierre de Moulins, and, of course, a fair sprinkling of Anon. Inserted in the middle of the section entitled 'Ecstasy and Faith' contrast came with Arvo Pärt's mesmerizing five-part *a cappella* setting of the Magnificat (1959),

evocatively performed by recessed singers. It may well be that ignorance is indeed bliss, but as one that now rarely hears medieval music I found this concert as compelling as anything heard during the weekend, appreciating the sheer professionalism and exuberant verve of the more upbeat numbers, transported by the ravishing beauty and pain of a piece like Johannes de Florentina's 'Quand' amor'. It was touchingly sung by soprano Carine Tinney, the standout among the ensemble's eight vocalists, who were none the less all excellent as was the instrumental contingent of various wind, bowed string and plucked instruments. More of a show than a concert, it was truly heart-warming to encounter so many outstanding young musicians on a concert platform.