

Early Nights in Orkney

D James Ross

at the St Magnus International Festival 2023

It is a few years now since Ashley Solomon and his ensemble Florilegium attended the St Magnus International Festival, but this year they made a very welcome return with a mini-residency and three very different concerts. The Orkney islands assist Festival director Alasdair Nicolson by offering a surprising range of conducive venues as well wonderfully light evenings in June, referred to locally as the *Simmer Dim*. When the weather plays along, as it did to a miraculous extent this year, the effect is simply magical, and Florilegium's first concert in the stunning St Magnus Cathedral was cleverly timed to start at 8.30, meaning that we emerged after it just before 10pm into a balmy bright night.



[St Magnus Cathedral, the main focus of the St Magnus International Festival.]

Featuring music from the Court of the ‘Sun King’, Louis XIV – how appropriate for the land of the midnight sun - the programme *Le Roi s’amuse* proved an utterly enthralling sequence of instrumental music by Leclair, de Visée, Couperin, Marais, Rameau and Rebel. The two melody instruments, Baroque flute and violin, were accompanied by a continuo ensemble comprising harpsichord, viola da gamba, Baroque triple harp and theorbo, providing wonderfully rich and varied textures – at times I felt I had to remind myself that there were only six performers playing. The authentic performance of this French repertoire involves elaborate encrustations of ornamentation, and Florilegium managed to make this elaboration sound entirely natural and utterly convincing.



[Reading the current Orcadian at midnight on the Summer Solstice – a family tradition!]

Intelligent programming alternated pieces for the full ensemble with a *Suite for Therobo* by Robert de Vissée, exquisitely played by Paula Chateauneuf, and a *Suite for Viol* by Marin Marais, given a memorable rendition by Reiko Ichise, a wonderfully committed musician whose contribution to the full ensemble was also wonderfully dynamic and proactive. Harpsichordist Pawel Siwczak was also given his moment in the sun as soloist in Rameau's *Piece de clavecin en concert no 5*, perhaps the most strikingly beautiful music of the evening. Jean-Féry Rebel's *Characters de la danse*, a sort of compendium of the currently popular dance forms, provided the perfect conclusion to this concert, impeccably performed and presented by a group of consummate musicians who consistently communicated their joy in performing together.

Florilegium's second concert was at lunchtime in Stromness Town Hall, another lovely venue, a former church repurposed into a performance venue and reminiscent of the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh. Ashley Solomon had clearly chosen the venue to help evoke the atmosphere of Café Zimmermann, the venue in Leipzig which witnessed the performance of a wealth of secular repertoire by J S Bach and his contemporaries. The Town Hall had been appropriately set up with tables, and an extended interval allowed for the serving of a fine packed lunch by the Birsay Tearoom. Although pleasantly resonant, the Hall proved also to be engagingly intimate, in short the perfect setting for chamber music by J S and C P E Bach, Telemann and Handel.

Florilegium adapted with ease to the very different world of the High Baroque German repertoire, but the trump card of this performance was the voice of guest soprano Hilary Cronin. She joined the ensemble for a cantata by Telemann, *Ihr völker hört*, an unfamiliar treasure, Bach's witty *Coffee Cantata* and two of Handel's German arias : the sublime *Süsse Stille, sanfter Quelle* in which voice and flute duet in evocations of birdsong, and the synaesthetic *Meine Seele hört im Sehen*, both to texts by Barthold Brockes. Cronin's wonderfully radiant tone combined with an impeccable technique was further enhanced by her vivacious animation of the texts to make her performances utterly irresistible.

Compared to the French programme, these composers were all established stars in their own right, and it was a pure delight to hear such consistently superb music played and sung so convincingly. Even the relatively simple J C Bach duet in G major for flute and violin without continuo proved a miniature masterpiece. Ashley Solomon's Baroque flute technique is simply breathtaking, allowing him to exploit and luxuriate in the instrument's endless subtleties without apparently having to worry about its technical challenges. The very enthusiastic audience response to another peerless performance elicited an encore, rather surprisingly a ravishing performance of Thomas Arne's *Where the Bee sucks* – might this song also have featured at the eclectic Café Zimmermann?

The group's third appearance at the Festival involved less of a shape-change with a concert entitled *Tafelmusik* in the charming St Nicholas Kirk, by the sea near St Mary's Holm. Another repurposed church and a simply charming small venue, St Nicholas proved an astute choice for a concert which gave us so much more than its title promised. At the heart of the concert was the B-minor Sonata from Telemann's *Tafelmusik* and the event opened and closed with Trio Sonatas by Bach and Handel respectively, with a further Handel Trio Sonata also involving the whole consort. It was in the interspersed items for solo instruments however that we were taken far beyond the realm of *Tafelmusik*.



[St Nicholas Kirk, St Mary's Holm.]

The towering *Chaconne* for solo violin by J S Bach was given an almost unbearably intense performance by Bojan Cicic – visibly moved by this eloquent music, he seemed in a world of his own and held the audience utterly spellbound. Reiko Ichise’s account of one of the recently rediscovered Telemann Fantasias for Solo Gamba was delightfully involving, while Siobhan Armstrong’s magnificent Baroque triple harp was allowed to step out of its continuo role to give us a stunning account of the *Chaconne* for solo lute by Sebastian Leopold Weiss and a movingly tender reading of Johan Jakob Froberger’s *Lamento for Leopold IV*. Many of these official laments for crowned heads are dull and formulaic, but this piece betrayed a genuine sense of the tragic loss of a young ruler, and in Siobhan Armstrong’s hands and the mellow tones of her Baroque harp we were treated to a genuinely moving experience. Constantly aware of the 17-century grave slabs set in the church walls behind the performers, I was reminded of the words of Philip Larkin – in the presence of this timeless music and these consummate performers this was indeed a place ‘proper to grow wise in, if only that so many dead lie around’. In the case of the chamber music by Handel and Bach we were also very aware of being in the presence of genius.

Again enthusiastic applause elicited a beautiful encore, a setting by Francesco Barsanti of the beautiful traditional Scots tune, *The Lass of Peatie’s Mill* – like Ashley Solomon, Barsanti was a flautist, and this encore seemed to embrace so many elements of the Festival, including the essence of the Orkney fiddle tradition. Over coffee and pastries from the Eviedale Bakehouse, we mused that after attending these three contrasting concerts, we did feel wiser but also emotionally enriched – I know that the performers were entranced by these magical islands, and their pleasure in this place and the musical company of one another infused these concerts with a very special energy.
