

## Echter'Barock 2011 –

### The European Union Baroque Orchestra in Echternach, Luxembourg

One of the highlights of my concert reviewing is the annual visit of the European Union Baroque Orchestra to the UK. For those not familiar with this orchestra, it was founded in 1985 during European Music Year and is currently funded as an official Cultural Ambassador for the European Union, still under its founding director, Paul James. Every year around Easter time, about 100 young musicians aged up to 30 from EU countries are invited to an audition – a few days of intensive teaching and playing with instrumental specialists. Around 20 are then selected to join the orchestra. This involves rehearsing and touring four different programmes throughout Europe, usually in blocks of two to three weeks, under the direction of some of the world's leading baroque specialists. As well as their role in the full orchestra, each participant also plays in a couple of smaller chamber groups, where they explore a wider repertoire. Many groups have formed out of friendships and contacts made through EUBO, and there are very few established professional period orchestras that do not contain some past members. Each of the programmes includes an experienced leader, often a previous member of EUBO who has gone on to make a mark in baroque violin performing. Unfortunately, given the current size of the EU, they usually only manage to give one concert in the UK, recently years as part of the Spitalfields Christmas Festival, when the concert season is very full. So it was lovely to be invited to join them for a few days during their first rehearsal period and concert in Luxembourg.

For the past few years EUBO have been Orchestra in Residence in Echternach, close to the German border north east of Luxembourg City. Echternach is the oldest town in Luxembourg, with roots in a vast Roman country estate and one of the largest excavated Roman palaces north of the Alps. Much of the land eventually passed to the Northumbrian monk Willibrord in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, and the resulting Abbey later became renowned for its library. Given the role of Luxembourg in the creation of the EU, this Echternach residency is particularly appropriate and greatly benefits the town. EUBO rehearses in the impressive new Trifolion Cultural Centre and show their appreciation by giving performances of all four of their touring programmes in the town.

The first programme of the 2011 series of four tours is 'Bach & Sons', with music by JS Bach, three of his sons (WF, JC and CPE) and a second cousin, and exact contemporary, Johann Bernard. The director for this programme is Lars Ulrik Mortensen and the concertmaster is Huw Daniels, a member of the 2004 incarnation of EUBO. When I arrived, they had already spent about a week working together, and were clearly gelling well as a

group, musically and socially. They were also getting used to the very different post-baroque style of the generation after Bach, with its distinctive articulation and phrasing. I was very impressed with the technical and musical ability of all the young players, some of whom I was surprised to learn were new to period instrument playing. I have commented in past reviews about Lars Ulrik Mortensen's extravagantly flamboyant conducting style with its sinewy contortions and giggle-inducing gesticulations, but he is clearly an inspiring communicator of musical ideas and personal encouragement to the young musicians.

Their opening concert was given on 28 July in St Peter & St Paul, a church dating back to Merovingian times and built within the remains of a Roman fort. The evening started (appropriately, as it was the anniversary of his death) with a punchy and vigorous performance of Father Bach's third Brandenburg Concerto, immediately exposing both the excellent consort playing ability and the individual talent of members of the group, all of whom had their moments of glory. The second piece moved us into a very different musical world with JC Bach's prettily rococo, if rather predictable, harpsichord concerto in F minor, soloist Lars Ulrik Mortensen adding a whimsical element in his dreamingly exploratory cadenza to the song without words *Andante*. WF Bach's Sinfonia in F brought a darker hue to the evening, the mercurial side of his nature coming to the fore in the sharp contrast between *Sturm und Drang* and delicacy and charm before the lush courtly dance of the concluding minuets. Concertmaster Huw Daniels showed absolute mastery of his instrument and musical line in an outstanding performance of Johann Bernhard Bach's fascinating Overture in G minor for violin and strings (a return to the baroque idiom), displaying, amongst other things, the ability to play confidently and responsively at the very edge of audibility. The plucked accompaniment and elegiac melody of the *Air* was an absolute delight, with some inspired ornamentation from Huw Daniels in the repeats. Hearing a member of a EUBO incarnation of just seven years ago playing so beautifully must have been an inspiration to the current EUBO members. The concert ended with the *empfindsamer stil* of CPE Bach, the scurrying passagework of the opening his B flat Sinfonia leading into the sensuous *Adagio* before the concluding *Presto* with its playful passing of passages from one section to another. It might be invidious to mention individual players (the section leader and desk position change with each programme) but there were particularly noticeable contributions from Liv Heym, violin, Femke Huizinga, viola, Gulrim Choi, cello, Pippa Macmillan, bass, and Tom Foster, harpsichord, (and, one of only three males in the 16-strong orchestra.

*They perform in London on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> December at Shoreditch Church (7.00 pm) and in Oxford Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> at St John the Evangelist (6.00 pm). European concerts are listed in our Concert Diary. Information about EUBO and these concerts can be found at <http://www.eubo.org.uk/index.html>.*