

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS: Catherine Groom and Adrian Horsewood

The audience reaction to the final concert of the series, Roman *concerti grossi* played by the dazzling European Union Baroque Orchestra (led by soloists Enrico Onofri and Maggie Fauldss) seemed almost to render a review redundant; it was surely loud enough for *EMT* readers, scattered to the four winds, to have heard for themselves. At first glance the all-*concerti grossi* programme seemed something of an indulgence, but in the event it was constantly engaging and not in the slightest indigestible. Corelli's so-called 'Christmas' Concerto fared particularly well, illuminated by Stephen Johnson's *Discovering Music*, recorded in public beforehand. The programme will be broadcast on BBC Radio 3, as will other elements of the festival. Do listen. With sponsorship and funding in the arts world dropping off alarmingly, the BBC, along with principal sponsors Luthans and Rolls-Royce, are to be commended for continuing to bring us such a high standard of artistry.

The Italianate theme of this year's festival gave great scope for effervescent, risk-taking music-making, in which arena the superb gambler Paolo Pandolfo (who harked back to his experience as a jazz bassist to give a mesmerising performance, playing for 80 minutes almost without stopping as he stretched and twisted snatches of musical ideas almost to breaking point) must surely take the palm. But an unfortunate side-effect is that it tended to leave the English musicians rather open to the charge of Englishness in performance. I Fagiolini's concert was rendered rather vulnerable to that accusation by the quality of the Italian pronunciation on offer, in spite of some imaginative staging and thoroughly engaging verbiage from Hollingworth (not to mention an ardent lament rounding off Monteverdi's *Ballo delle ingrate*). The following evening at Westminster Abbey it appeared that the Abbey Choir with St James's Baroque under James O'Donnell might be heading off in the same direction. Notwithstanding O'Donnell's mastery of pacing and build, some exciting bass playing from Peter McCarthy and sterling, rhetorically aware leadership from Simon Standage, their first-half offering of Vivaldi's D major Gloria was more homogeneously English than operatically Italian. The (female) soloists were all engaging, but all three had been chosen for their match to the choir's straight-tuned English-cathedral sound, which seemed to me to be a missed opportunity: given that the female soloists stand in relief to such a choir in any case, why not take the opportunity to introduce some dramatically contrasting colours?

However, I had no such caveats about Handel's *Dixit Dominus* in the second half which was a triumph. The choir relished every *scabellum* and *conquassabunt*; consonants flew around the Abbey like lightning bolts, and Julia Doyle's and Charlotte Mobbs' 'De torrente in via bibet' was heart-breaking in its simplicity, sincerity and purity. Handel's Italianate side had been given due consideration by the festival this year: the second concert of the series featured La Risomanza (with first-rate soprano Emanuela Galli replacing mezzo Romina Basso) considering Handel's chamber cantatas with instruments in their Italianate context, to moving effect. The following week, Paul McCree and the Gabriellis offered us a rare chance to enjoy Handel's Roman oratorio *La Resurrezione*, as rich in colour and drama as any of his operas. The band was on fine form, crisp of rhythm and sparkling of articulation, but this is inevitably a singers' piece, and three deserve particular mention. Mahari Lawson's Angel was a joyous, appealing presence, coloratura bubbling over the orchestra and erupting intermittently with what festival director Lindsay Kemp described in his programme note, with not a whit of hyperbole, as 'dazzling vocal pyrotechnics'. Romina Basso, taking the stage after her earlier cancellation, has the kind of unique, highly personal sound that conservative training all too often smoothes out of young singers. Physically she appeared tense, but her depiction of Mary Cleophas was charged with a level of emotion that hit me right in the solar plexus. Gillian Webster appeared in an 11th-hour replacement as the lamenting Mary Magdalen, singing with restrained eloquence and almost unbearable poignancy. This was consummate artistry of the highest order.

The subject of this year's Luthans festival was 'Italian Pioneers from Monteverdi to Vivaldi', and the 400th birthday of Monteverdi's Vespers was celebrated with a sparkling performance by La Venexiana and Claudio Cavina. The solo contributions were excellent; tenor Makoto Sakurada the outstanding performer. Monteverdi was also the topic of the annual Luthans lecture, given by Robert Hollingworth of I Fagiolini, who talked of his affinity with Monteverdi's music and explained why it seems so 'modern'. Focusing on the four aspects of expression, lyricism, texture and sound, Hollingworth spoke variously of dissonance, the harmonic series and mud-wrestling – for a fuller picture, the text of the lecture is available on the festival website.

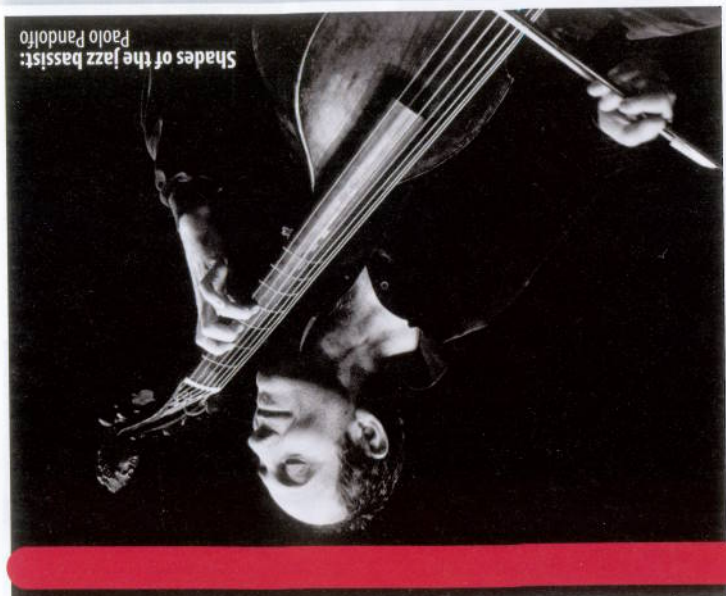
La Serenissima's recent recordings of Vivaldi's solo concertos have received high praise, and they showed why in a slick and colourful performance. Peter Wheelan's solo contributions on bassoon were full of verve and swing, while Pamela Thorby's G major fragment for soprano recorder was a brilliant, masterful demonstration of technique.

There was plenty of room for chamber music alongside larger-scale events: in one concert Baroque Fever explored the birth of the trio sonata in a stunning ensemble performance. This was fun, free-spirited and playful, and showed us the extremes of the genre, contrasting early Rossi and Buonamente with later Uccellini and Purcell. Imaginarium Ensemble gave a display meltingly intimate and flagrantly extravagant in turns, Enrico Onofri taking the lead in a programme dedicated to early Italian violin repertoire. His bright, limpid and always exhilarating playing showed us how thin was the line between vocal and instrumental music, juxtaposing a sacred sonata by Cima with arrangements of Monteverdi madrigals. All sounded utterly idiomatic yet strangely naked without sung words. Ably supported by Alessandro Tamperi, Onofri sounded thrillingly theatrical in sonatas by Castello, Uccellini and Fontana, while the final item, Vivaldi's take on La Follia, brought the house down with breathtaking virtuosity from all four musicians.

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Shades of the jazz bassist: Paolo Pandolfo
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LUTHANSA FESTIVAL OF BAROQUE MUSIC

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