

Press Cuttings

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A bit safe, then wild and tangy

Reviews

CLASSICAL

Improvisations: Early Music Weekend

SOUTH BANK CENTRE

THIS year's South Bank Centre Early Music Weekend was a wonderfully rich one, ranging all the way from 12th-century sacred chant to Haydn piano trios.

What held all the variety together was the idea of improvisation, a musical practice which flourished for hundreds of years until printing, copyright law and the cult of "genius" killed it off.

But what the word "improvisation" actually meant wasn't always obvious. In the opening concert, from the Ensemble Organum, it meant recreating the lost performing tradition of 12th-century polyphony.

Eight male singers gave us an entire Spanish Vespers service, complete with be-robed processions around the Purcell Room, the austere plainchant leavened by sudden flourishes of ecstatic, Near-Eastern sounding decoration (that fascinating Arab flavour came back later, in the Dufay Collective's evocation of medieval Spanish love songs).

In the late Renaissance a new kind of improvisation arose, consisting of embellishments spun over harmonic patterns, particularly repeating ones. It suits modern ears better, which was why the predominant colour of the weekend was the rich thrumming

of lutes and harps, with violins and voices spinning more and more elaborate and exciting patterns over the top.

We heard them in the semi-staged oratorios on Saturday evening from Ensemble San Felice, we heard them in the "Birth of the Baroque" concert from Apollo and Pan. But these were put firmly in the shade by the fabulous Akademie für Alte Musik from Berlin, which performed Baroque sonatas and concertos with a panache as much visual as musical.

Marvellous and stimulating though this was, it all felt a bit safe. Nowhere was there that sweaty-palms, seat-of-the-pants improvisation you hear at Ronnie Scott's. Fortunately, at the very end of the weekend we got something like it.

The marvellous part-"early", part-jazz group L'Arpeggiata gave us a brilliantly conceived programme of improvisations over those irresistible Renaissance repeating basses. There were ardent love songs, wild dances, harpsichord solos with tangy blues notes unsanctioned by any treatise on Baroque performance practice.

When jazz clarinetist Gianluigi Trovesi stood up to play, a whiff of klezmer was added to the marvellous jangling noise of lutes and drums and viols and hammered dulcimers. And when singer Lucilla Galeazzi sang her song *Ah, vita bella!* we got something else missing until then - a spell-binding personality. It was a joyous and brave way to end.

Ivan Hewett