

of heterophony in parallel seconds which I imagine was not deliberate, and unison cadences frequently featured microtones spanning a semitone or more around the fundamental pitch. Many of the notes were well outside the comfortable range of the singers, melismatic lines were slithered over rather than articulated, the intonation of individual notes was wayward, the tone nearly always unsteady, the pitch relationships between sections of the same piece seemed haphazard and there was little variation of volume or tone. That said, there was an enthusiastic response from most of the audience.

Ensemble San Felice (from Florence) celebrated the anniversary of Carissimi with a foyer performance of semi-staged and costumed interpretations of three of his oratorios, together with instrumental intermezzi by Frescobaldi, Castello and Uccellini. Although the acting occasionally seemed a little self-conscious, there was some attractive singing, notably from Maria Chiara Pavone.

The musical standard was raised to much higher levels the following day by the viol consort Phantasm in a programme of music by Tallis, Byrd, Alfonso Ferrabosco I and Robert Parsons which might be seen to correspond to the sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic and choleric temperaments. Although the programme note initially proposed that the four composers reflected the different temperaments, it was clear from the music (and, indeed, from the note) that musical, and human, emotion is a far more complex combination of elements from all the temperaments. This was an outstandingly professional performance by any standards, well planned and brilliantly executed.

The mid-afternoon discussion between John Milsom, Timothy Day and Peter Phillips, 'The Sound of Tallis', veered some way from the billed topic (500 years of interpreting Tallis' music) and concentrated on the history of post-war English recordings. This was followed by Gustav Leonhardt's 'Flights of Keyboard Fantasy,' played on Malcolm Rose's recent copy of the harpsichord part of the 1579 Theewes claviorgan – a most impressive instrument that gave a much clearer aural representation of the Elizabethan keyboard repertoire than later ones. Although this was clearly one of the star concerts, pulling in the national press and an enthusiastic audience, I found the performance rather matter of fact, the persistently methodical pulse and articulation failing to get beneath the surface of the music. There were far too many note slips for comfort (notably in the tiny Tallis pieces and Byrd's *Carifica me, pater* – although some of them might have been curious interpretations), and lengthy sequences of semi-quavers rarely seemed to have any sense of direction. The frequently abrupt lift of cadential chords was also disturbing. In Byrd's Fantasia (IX, played without its attendant Praeludium), far more could have been made of the inherent drama of the work, its syncopated sections passed by almost unnoticed, and there was nothing of the dance in the triple-time section – the hiatus before the final toccata was devoid of that essential element of temporary repose. However, the virtuosic conclusion to

Strogers' Fantasia and Gibbons Pavan both caught the mood well.

What was billed as an open rehearsal with The Tallis Scholars turned out to be a lengthy hiatus while millions of casual singers were shepherded onto the stage in colour-coded groups – and then a single 'Singalong a Spem'. There was not even a rehearsal of that, let alone the promised rehearsal for the evening concert that many of us has sat patiently waiting for. But presumably they managed to rehearse in secret, because their evening concert (all Tallis) found them in extremely good form. They started and finished with *Spem in alium* and also included the first of the Lamentations of Jeremiah, *Loquebantur variis linguis, Salve intemerata*, and the nine Parker tunes. There were some magical moments, not least the pivotal section in *Sancte Deus*, on the cadence of *miserere nobis* and the following *Nunc Christe*, which was beautifully captured. They produced a particularly good tonal blend, with the upper voices being more than usually restrained and using only minimal vibrato, although they did get rather close to the wrong side of straining at the higher pitches in *Salve intemerata*. The final cadence of the Lamentations, for example, settled onto a beautifully clean and pure sound.

James Gilchrist (tenor) & Elizabeth Kenny (lute) gave a late night concert called, appropriately, *Welcome Black Night* with works by John Dowland, Thomas Campion, Anthony Holborne and two very impressive works by the present day composer, Rachel Stott. Her *Wooe her, and win her* featured some extremely complex lute writing, which Elizabeth Kenny bought off brilliantly. I have raved about James Gilchrist's singing many times before, but I don't think I have heard him in such an intimate repertoire. Perhaps he is used to singing in much larger venues than the Purcell Room, or he was just trying to project too much, but on this occasion I was disappointed with several aspects of his singing, including a rather forceful tone. His vibrato created rapid variations of pitch on most high or long-held notes, including cadences, and his frequent swoops between notes was similarly disturbing. He even managed to swoop within words on the same note, notably in Dowland's *Cease these false sports* when the words 'Good night, yet virgin bride' frankly sounded a bit creepy. But there were some delightful quieter and gentler moments and some nice ornamentation. I fear I was not the only one to get the giggles when the Purcell Room lights were dimmed to darkness on the final refrain.

The Sunday concert started with *Sonnerie's* entertaining journey into the world of Haydn and the Gypsies. At Esterházy, gypsy bands played verbunkos (recruiting music) in the courtyard to accompany the lively dancing of soldiers and works such as Haydn's famous Gypsy Rondo were inspired by the music of the wandering Roma, often labelled as being in the Hungarian style. Many gypsy inspired works (or works by composers with gypsy origins) were written or transcribed for piano, and for this performance *Sonnerie* used some of Linda

Burman-Hall's transcriptions of these piano versions back into instrumental form. Matthew Halls (piano) was plucked from the ranks and given solo billing – deservedly so, for these virtuosic works were a far cry from his normal continuo organ or harpsichord role. Indeed, the whole group revelled in doing all the things they would avoid in their 'normal' repertoire, with portamento, rubato and string vibrato very much in evidence. Wisely, the performers resisted the temptation to treat this music as a joke, and revealed some remarkable musical depth in this overlooked and largely misunderstood repertoire. An exciting and inspiring concert, even if there were times when I couldn't quite get my mind off hours spent in Budapest bars.

A foyer performance by Apollo and Pan followed – an insight into the Birth of the Baroque with sonatas, capriccios and ciaconas by Marini, Castello, Rossi, Merula, Vierdanck and others. Against an unhelpful background of staff walkie-talkies, hubble-bubble from the bar and café areas, and (at one point) a loud cry of 'Ben, stop it!', they managed to retain their sense of propriety and decorum and gave us an extremely sensitive and musical performance. (*Sonnerie's* repertoire would have been better suited to this environment than Apollo and Pan's.) Violinists Tassilo Erhardt and Ben Sansom managed to avoid the excesses and unnecessary effects that seem to be popular today (particularly in Castello cadences). Sally Holman's dulcian provided a very effective contrast of tone to the strings and an audible bass line in the troubled acoustics, and Steven Devine provided excellent continuo support on organ and harpsichord. Given the audience and acoustic, concluding with a 'walk into the sunset' fade-away (in Vierdanck's rather disjointed *Capriccio auf quotlibtische Arth*) was probably not the best idea; but overall this was a concert that deserved a great deal more respect than the foyer venue offered – they deserve to be moved to the Purcell Room next year.

The Dufay Collective are masters of stylish presentations, and their stunningly staged Queen Elizabeth Hall performance of the seven *Cantigas de amigo* by the Galician troubadour Martin Codax (from the court of Alfonso the Wise) was one of the most effective I have seen from any group of musicians. While the instrumentalists struck statuesque poses stage right in what seemed to be white pyjamas, Vivian Ellis sang within an elongated diagonal triangle of light defined by a white rope spanning the stage area and lifting up to the top corner of the stage. Spot lights occasionally picked out the singer, or one or more of the players, while the hall was in total darkness. The setting, the repetitive nature of many of the words, and the steady pulse of the accompaniment combined to produce an almost hypnotic effect. The *Cantigas de amigo* reflect the feelings of a woman awaiting the return of her lover from the sea, and is set in Vigo on the northwest coast of Spain – a quest that eventually proves to be fruitless, as the lover does not return. The sound of the sea (produced on what I guess could be called 'wave drums') opened and closed the concert, and formed a backdrop to a number of the pieces, each of which was

#### IMPROVISATIONS – THE SOUTH BANK EARLY MUSIC WEEKEND (16-18 SEPTEMBER)

Under the Artistic Direction of Tess Knighton, the latest South Bank Early Music Weekend focused on the role of improvisation and imagination in music ranging from 12th century Spain to present day Italy. The concerts were held in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and the shared foyer.

Ensemble Organum recreated a Vespers service for the feast of St. James, based on the repertory of the Codex Calixtinus currently preserved at the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The Purcell Room is not the most obvious venue for liturgical reconstruction or processions, and their attempts at the latter were frankly little more than aimless wandering about. The music was fascinating, as was the wide range of musical textures and the elaborations that were applied to this early polyphony. But I have difficulty in working out how to review the vocal qualities of the eight unaccompanied male singers. If they were all professionally trained singers, then it was a remarkable achievement to sing so badly. Does this sound really reflect medieval practice in North-West Spain? And, if so, why does it sound so similar to their singing of 7th-century Byzantine to 18th-century Parisian chant? In the frequent lengthy unison melismas, notes seemed to be arrived at, or not, by some form of majority vote. There were several passages that ended up being sung in a type