

I don't know what it is with the French recording industry, but they really do love their awards. It seems as if every other CD that comes into Grove Music from across the Channel is adorned with gold labels. As an antidote to this relentless hype, I would like to instigate my own award. *Le Canard Mort*. Any number of CDs fail to take wing, but for the initial presentation of this award I would like to nominate a quite spectacular plummet. This is a new recording of Ockeghem's *Missa Caput* by a Belgian group called Graindelavoix, directed by Björn Schmelzer.

The reason I say that this recording plummets, rather than fails to take off, is that it actually begins with a lofty premise. First let us read the booklet. Quoting the Parisian art-history academic, Georges Didi-Huberman, it starts with an epigram: 'there is not history but anachronisms'. Potentially, I find that quite interesting. Only potentially, though, because out of context, and translated, I don't quite know what it might mean. But it is a good start, since any early music recording which raises the issue of anachronisms shows a level of awareness which, frankly, many lack. Perhaps Schmelzer, in the following note, will illuminate what he takes these words to mean...

So. Schmelzer cites a French 18th century chant historian, Lebeuf, describing the technique of *machiotage* ('distasteful to those who encounter it for the first time') as practised by the contemporary singers of Notre-Dame - the 'machiots'. Lebeuf says that this ornamental technique involves 'frequent descents to the third', but neither he (nor anyone else) gives specific examples of *machiotage*. Exactly what was it, and was it heard in music other than chant? Answering this question specifically does not trouble Schmelzer, who is more interested in what *machiotage* might stand for than what it actually is. (Or is that was?) '*Machiotage* is above all a fold in the current of time of oral, operative practices', Schmelzer says, further adding that '*machiotage* is a symptom of the infamy and complexities of the history of music'.

The plot thickens when Schmelzer cites a Catalan treatise from around 1600 which happens to mention an ornament of 'diminishing third', referring to it as the 'glosa francesca'. 'Perhaps it is not far-fetched to point out the common background of the Rite of Toledo and the Parisian Rite', Schmelzer continues, noting that both share the Mandatum rite - the washing of feet on Maundy Thursday. Although Schmelzer acknowledges that the *Missa Caput* by Ockeghem (ah yes, him!) could not have been composed for the Mandatum ritual, its cantus firmus is based, albeit at one remove, on a piece of chant from the Rite.

I am trying to get this straight in my mind. What I think Schmelzer is suggesting is that Parisian singers around 1740 were heard ornamenting chant. Perhaps, he posits, they had learnt this practice from an earlier tradition, which may have also had currency in polyphony. He supports this by noting that in Spain a certain ornament was thought of as French, and that a certain liturgical observance was common to Spain and France. Let me illustrate this further with an analogy. From an old description by a naturalist, someone notes that there was once an oddly-coloured leaf on an oak in a forest, and by tracing this back to its roots in the ground, he wonders whether the same coloured leaf may at an earlier time also have been found on a neighbouring elm. As supporting evidence for this, he then notes that in another forest, at another time, a like-sounding leaf existed, thought of as having some connection with the first forest. Both forests were inhabited by a similar breed of squirrel.

On a rational level this is almost too easy to ridicule, but thus far I reserve judgement. Schmelzer's evidence may not prove that Ockeghem would have been sung in a certain way, but neither does it suggest that it would not. I am all in favour of questioning received notions of style. I would have no objection to hearing Ockeghem on steel drums if it illuminated the music in some way. A proof of this particular pudding will only come in the eating - which means listening to the disc. But before we leave the sleeve note, it is worth letting Schmelzer further prepare us for what we are about to hear. Graindelavoix are, he says, 'professional non-singers': singer-mediums who make the work function rather than only make themselves function... singers were selected for the unusual sound of their voices, for their improvisational talents, for their capacity to push the vocal lines to the limit, for their elaborate and 'smoky' sound.'

So now let us listen to the disc. To my ears, it sounds like a joke. I have written before that my brain is, I suspect, simply not big enough for Ockeghem's music. Here, though, the music itself sounds brainless. Nobody could guess, from the waves of sound that surge past, that below the murky surface are the most intricate forms. Considering his claims for them, it is ironic that Schmelzer's singers, through a mixture of their technical incompetence, uncompromising stridency and (lest we forget what this is all about) improvisational work, become the inevitable centre of attention. Compare Schmelzer's criteria for good singers, and those of Ockeghem's contemporary Ornithoparcus (for whom clarity, softness and humility are paramount) and it becomes clear why Graindelavoix sound so comical in this repertoire. Ockeghem's music is washed away by their effortful efforts and their director's pseudo-intellectual conceit. Yes, it really is ridiculous.

Yet for all this, I want sincerely to commend Glossa, which shows more boldness and scope in the artists it chooses to record polyphony than any other label. Of course, boldness carries with it risks. With La Colombina's Victoria, or Michale Noone's Morales, in my book Glossa have soared so gong-winning heights. With Schmelzer's disc of sounds purporting to be Ockeghem, they have just dropped a clanger.

Simon Ravens (Early Music Review, october 2005)