

interview : 05/10/2010

A conversation with Björn Schmelzer of Graindelavoix

For the ensemble **Graindelavoix**'s fifth recording for Glossa, *Cecus*, **Björn Schmelzer** has gathered together musicians from Spain, Estonia, the UK, France and Belgium to complete a triptych of recordings presenting an alternative view of performance practice from across a century of Franco-Flemish polyphony. After *Joye* and *La Magdalene*, *Cecus* focuses on music by Alexander Agricola and his contemporaries and concerns itself with music associated with blind players (notably two fiddlers from Bruges) and memory and commemoration (laments on the deaths of Agricola and Johannes Ockeghem) coming from the chapel of Philippe le Beau and Juana of Castile. In the midst of a busy international performing summer Schmelzer took the opportunity to provide an introduction to this new recording, full of character and colour and replete with the athletic vocal gestures which signify the group. In illuminating fashion, he also reflects in this extensive interview on how he – along with the ensemble – goes about creating the programmes, what kind of sound he is trying to achieve, and performing in front of an audience of 900 in Berlin!

How do you consider now Graindelavoix's development since the time of the group's beginnings?

I think the first so-called concert was in 2002, although I was starting to experiment with some fellow singers a little bit earlier. So, when did it start? In fact, as always, the origin has faded away: one always has to invent a sort of mythical start!

That's maybe one of the features of our group that we don't care so much about – beginnings. But referring back to the outset at least points at the changing character of much of our productions, CDs, projects, and so on. You could see it as a development, in the sense that in the last five years we really have unfolded a large part of the group's potentialities, although I'm convinced there is still much to come. I still work with a lot of people from the beginning and I think we have also developed what is sometimes called a 'typical style', even when I don't know myself what it is and how it exactly functions. Next to these musicians from those early times we have found more and more international artists with whom to collaborate: people who share the underlying aesthetical feelings and a desire to experiment with repertoires and sonorities. Very often it's not so much the music itself which is the common ground of the work together but a sort of aesthetical climate. I remember Thomas Baeté, one of our viol/fiddle-players, comparing a **Graindelavoix** project to a novel by the German writer WG Sebald, trying to reinvent history and events on the basis of remnants and ambiguous traces, creating a world of images and sounds which is very hard to point at in time...

In fact we haven't changed so much, I think, it's more a question of the listener's attitude towards us which has changed a lot in the last years. In fact, we were a quite suspicious and unknown animal in the concert zoo, difficult to describe and even more to criticize: critics didn't know how to cope with voice-colours and types which they hardly could imagine as being professional, but at the same time could not accuse us of mere amateurism. We created a sort of sound *hors catégorie* and that made some people feel unwell! Now, most listeners accept and even welcome our projects as fertile and inventive musical alternatives of those early music repertoires, which are still too much seen as the prelude of the great classical music of the West. I endeavour to show other connections with these repertoires. I make other and different cuts in the aesthetic regimes which very often shed another light on them. Our listeners know this and are prepared for it. I like the idea that maybe we have freed some repertoires from the imprisonment of historical and musicological clichés.

How do you feel that your first four recordings on Glossa have reflected the intentions of yourself with the group?

I'm proud to claim that **Graindelavoix**'s development is also the work of Carlos Céster and Glossa. We started with Glossa and are still 'in residence' – a collaboration of intensity and affection! For myself I would put the question the other way round: it is only after making the recordings that some of my intentions became clear to myself. Although I start working with some intuitive ideas and concepts, I never try to realize so-called intentions. I just work with the people who are performing the repertoires I offer them. I give them suggestions and do a sort of coaching, an animation, but I never know in advance where it will end. We start very often from scratch and in chaos. A lot of inspiration comes from the musicians of course. You explain them some line and then they perform it. I listen what happens and tell them what I like and what I don't, what works for me and what I think is not interesting. I try to sing a lot so that they can almost 'imitate' in the beginning the 'intentionalities' (a word I use to describe the combination of intensity and intention) of a line.

As you see, we never work with a sort of commonsensical 'early music' approach. What I particularly like doing is working with people who know nothing about early music, but are just very good performers or musicians, with or without a diploma from a conservatory. It's no secret that I'm fascinated by eccentric or outlandish vocal sounds. These are very often windows to new sonorities. I like to explore the possibilities of *glissandi*, ornaments, non-tempered tunings, musical gestures, *rubati*, etc. And you need very sure and stable

people for this kind of work.

So for me, a recording is just a point or mark in time, a sort of freezing of a process which carries on, of course. I like considering our recordings in this logic. Time will show if they can unfold a character of 'untimeliness'. Anyway, I try to increase this potentiality of giving every disc a sort of personality, a new world to be discovered, a typical climate – indeed, a very concrete *couleur locale*. I like also the idea that we can make CDs with this kind of music for everyman – 'Kenner und Liebhaber' – listeners with a total heterogeneous and mixed intentionality, through the different levels we try to work on. All these levels are nonetheless connected: the physical and the intellectual, the old and the new, the spiritual and the carnal, the philosophical and the affective, the historical and the geographical.

This work would really be impossible without the input of Glossa. The making of a CD and its intentions are therefore inseparable.

The ensemble is now performing more frequently outside Belgium. How are you finding the reception of the audiences in other countries compared to that which you receive at home?

It's nice to perform abroad. We had a very warm and enthusiast public, first in The Netherlands, later in Germany and Poland and then also in Italy, Portugal and Spain. Last summer we performed at some important Belgian festivals in Bruges and Antwerp. There we performed often our most difficult – and at first sight – obscure repertoires, but the concerts were always sold out. The top this year has been the concert for the Musikfest (Festspiele) in Berlin, with 900 people attending! It's not a festival limited to early music (quite the opposite), but the organizer just believed in our trans-disciplinary impulse and it worked! But I have to add that audience reactions are not always 100% enthusiastic and sometimes people are dazzled, or even shocked. They are bored or ask me why I work with such ugly voices. I think it's important. People are not coming to such a concert so much for enjoyment or affirmation of their aesthetical preferences. They want to be challenged and tell me afterwards if they didn't agree. This is fantastic. It reminds me of the way people go to theatre, film or dance and it's that what I always wanted to create: a climate or an event which would be a challenge for people's sensibility or taste, without any elitist or intellectual barrier (an argument very often used to eliminate the listener's sharp intuition). Next year we probably will perform for the first time in France, but I hope to go to the UK and other countries as well. We will see, we are not in a hurry. Not anymore.

You have been engaging in a public correspondence with Sigiswald Kuijken. What have you been hoping to achieve with this? (1)

The correspondence was done without any specific intention. I did it just because I was asked to do so and because I liked the idea. Of course it was a great honour and a pleasure to write these letters with Sigiswald, although our ideas were sometimes coming from different worlds. After the presentation of the correspondence we went to eat mussels. Sigiswald liked them so much that the table and even his suit were covered with the sauce! That surely represented the apotheosis of our *belles-lettres*! Apart from that, the early music world or society is, for me, without perspectives. I am just interested in the theoretical and practical potentials of these repertoires. The early music scene as such is for me without any interest, and I do not see myself as a defender of its ideas. In order to hear early music I go to villages in various Mediterranean countries and listen to the local performers. This has nothing to do with being well-informed in *the* history of music.

In medieval and Renaissance times, the region in which you are based – that of Antwerp – was very much at the centre of musical and cultural thinking. How does this inform your own 21st century thinking of the performance of such music?

When I first considered this question I did not see any direct relation between what I do and where I'm living, except maybe for the touch of exoticism that offers a port like Antwerp, now and in the past: its complex openness to cultures, but also to different spaces. But it's true that space and image are very important for our performances and that this is something which has been trained by long walks in a city like Antwerp, with its layered and hybrid past, its baroque and southern mentality, its café culture, the rich architecture and patrimony – with sublime art collections such as the Mayer Van den Bergh museum, where you can find Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* next to Melchior Broederlam and Jan Gossaert. All extremely fascinating, and the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that a group like **Graindelavoix** is somehow connected with unconscious, almost environmental, spatial impulses of a city like Antwerp.

Your fifth recording programme for Glossa, *Cecus*, involves the music of 'known' composers, such as Alexander Agricola, Pierre de la Rue, Juan de Anchieta *et al*, but from this you have constructed a very individual programme centring on blindness and memory. Can you explain how this works?

I like creating CDs which offer strong artistic tools to the listeners, not just nice music of so-called first rank Franco-Flemish polyphonists. Composers like Agricola or de la Rue composed really unusual music for that time and I wanted to give listeners some tools or keys to feel this when listening. I started asking myself questions such as 'what makes a composer like Agricola (or de la Rue) so special and made him compose

music which is different from that of his contemporaries?' Yes, of course he was highly professional and the music was performed by specialists for the upper classes, but what is the meaning of these kind of sociological generalities? So, I started to dive into the climate of the music itself, the texts used etc. With this information you can write a sort of musical biography without any real biographical element. The key words for Agricola are indeed 'blindness' and 'memory'. Although Agricola was probably not physically blind, he had a strong fascination for the consequences of blindness and moreover, its conditions and potentialities, marking a very strong aesthetical and social limit of the performers of that time. But memory, so important for blind performers is also a key-word of the polyphonic repertoire in general, focusing essentially on the commemorative and the memorial.

What would loss or absence of sight have implied in late medieval times? How would this have applied to music?

If I am right in my thinking Alexander Agricola was one of the first who invented new values for the writing and performing of polyphony, affirming the possibilities of a 'musical blindness', rather than following the common critical social rejection of blindness (which were fundamentally considered as a deprivation of sight). Notation and reading/performing the notation is one issue. Another is to create a tactile relationship with it: to give it a palpability which goes beyond the mere interpretation of visible signs. In this sense I try to represent Agricola's position in our own practice.

Beyond *Cecus*, what further plans do you have?

We have a lot of upcoming projects, ranging from a collaboration with old Italo-Belgian miners performing the old repertoires of their native villages, to the repertoire of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo in the 12th century, featuring Sufi singers and Italo-Greek singers, through to a large multidisciplinary project centred around the practice of the 13th century cathedral builders in Picardy and the mysterious drawings of Villard de Honnecourt. Although I like to keep these things limited, we try to use more and more some very democratic media-tools to offer backgrounds and more profound information of our approach which quite correctly can be described as 'a-disciplinary'.

(1) This debate, *Musica Antiqua Revisited*, between Björn Schmelzer and Sigiswald Kuijken can be read in an English version at

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