Smearing and sliding: Huelgas Ensemble a revelation at Laus Polyphoniae

Hearing the music of Pérotin as a teenager, I could barely believe it was real. Hypnotic, coiling, colourful, imbued with the rhythms of folk dance while at the same time obviously unearthly. In the 13th century it was a musical experience that threatened to destabilise those that heard it – contemporary treatises describe it inducing hysteria and hallucinations.

Pérotin represents the culmination of a tradition of polyphonic singing elaborated in Paris beginning in the 12th century. It is a mainstay repertoire at the Laus Polyphoniae festival in Antwerp, dedicated to medieval and Renaissance music, which celebrates its 32nd edition this year. Yet in their festival-opening concert, the Huelgas Ensemble showed that our ideas about what this music is – and can be – are always in flux.

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While the Huelgas Ensemble's singing is muscular and precise in a way that only modern singing can be, director Paul Van Nevel also pushed his singers towards a more flexible, smeary, slidy kind of performance, where things are always on the verge of instability. It is motivated by an attempt to find the way this music might have been sung at the time: replete with ornamentation.

English philosopher John of Salisbury reported as much when he went to Paris in the mid 1100s: "These immoral hymns could be the trills of seductive women. The singers pile ornamentation upon ornamentation, they sing high then suddenly low, breaking notes off, only to repeat them quickly." While the Huelgas' basic tone is familiar from liturgical singing of the modern era, solid and supported, the upper line (*vox organalis*) of Léonin's two-voice organum *Hec dies* wavers and smears, yips and throws, in ornamental fashion.

Léonin, of the generation preceding Pérotin, was the real pioneer, codifying the elaborated Gregorian chant by setting down in notation the improvised lines singers would routinely add. Under the added upper line, the syllables of the held chant melody beneath expand virtually to the point of infinity. The moment the syllable changes, from a closed 'ee' to an open 'aa', is like light breaking through a window.

In this performance, these syllable changes were emphasised to a remarkable degree, particularly in Pérotin's *Viderunt omnes*. Here the whole ensemble would lean towards the syllable change as a giant cadence, the portamento smearing, the tempo slowing, the dissonance frying. Tempo and dynamics were in constant flux: new sections could be slower or faster, louder or quieter. While previous performances of this music have been hypnotic, this was the first I'd experienced that really seemed improvisatory.

At the end of the concert, the man next to me leant over and said: "In 50 years of attending concerts of polyphony, this was the strangest I'd ever heard." The flexibility of ornamentation, tempi and dynamics, we agreed, was striking. Yet in other respects the Huelgas' performance is in keeping with typical expectations: vowels are mostly rounded and classical, unlike the brighter ones heard in folk choirs of Eastern and Southern Europe. Tempos, while flexible, were precise, as was the prosody. The ensemble was tightly together. The singers perform from individual parts, rather than a single choir book (as would be the custom in the Middle Ages). Performers wear modern dress.

This is living repertoire, whose aspects change as new ideas in performance practice emerge. At a distance of eight centuries, we can do nothing but make it our own. The Huelgas Ensemble use sources of the time to mine ideas as to how to perform it, but as music it exists now, not then. At Laus Polyphoniae it is performed in a secular space, the civic Handelsbuers trade hall in Antwerp town centre, at a secular time of the evening. It is separated from its original liturgical function. Puffing a cigar at a nearby bar afterwards, Paul Van Nevel is a charismatic, unliturgical presence. To be *alive* is what this music deserves.

Lawrence Dunn, bachtrack.com, 23 Aug 2025