

Paul van Nevel's Second dimension of silence

Jan Baťa, Opera Plus, 11.10.2017 12:59, Reviewer's appraisal: 95%

After a ten year break, the Belgian group Huelgas Ensemble made another guest appearance in Prague. Their programme, underpinned by the mass for six voices *In illo tempore* by Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), who's jubilee we celebrate this year. The charismatic artistic director of the ensemble, Paul van Nevel surprised the audience not only with the unusual programming, but above all the non conventional placing of the ensemble in a circle in the middle of the church that required a certain shift in the familiar and age-proven 'seating order' in the 'hall'. Some members of the audience at first reacted with disapproval, but they were rewarded by not only an artistically but also acoustically unusual experience of a particular and direct ensemble sound.

The concert started with a couple of madrigals for five voices by Philippe de Monte (1521-1603), in which Paul van Nevel skilfully used the contrast of solo voices (*Solingo in selve*) and ensemble tutti (*Fui preso*). Monteverdi's *Missa In illo tempore* for six voices, which like a thin thread ran through the whole evening, is part of the collection *Cantus Sanctissimae Virgini* published by an Italian printer Ricciarda Amadina in 1610, and also contains his famous *Vespro della Beata Vergine*. But unlike the vespers, this mass ordinarium is composed in a conservative style of vocal polyphony of the 16th century. Its model was a motet for six voices *In illo tempore* by the Flemish composer Nicolas Gombert (1495-1560) from 1539. In a masterful way, Nevel presented Monteverdi's score not in the light of an early Baroque interpretation, as is usual practice with this composer, but on the contrary – as a culmination of the Franco-Flemish art of polyphony, as he has been discovering it with his ensemble for four decades. Monteverdi sounded in a 'Gombert-like' interpretation with seemingly endless phrases and full sound, amplified by placing the high tenors in the alto's position.

The remaining four composers, whose compositions created an imaginary counterpoint to Monteverdi's mass *In illo tempore*, were presented here with settings of texts by one of the greatest Italian poets – Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374). From the first of them – the composer and pioneering music theoretician Nicola Vicentino (1511-1576) – we heard a challenging chromatic madrigal for five voices *Laura che 'l verde lauro*, sung by solo voices. Similarly audacious harmonic progressions are notable in the madrigal *Amor i'ho molti e molt' anni pianto* by a little known composer Cesare Tudino (†1591). In this piece Nevel brilliantly worked with dynamics, primarily with pianissimo (which he calls the second dimension of silence). The last couple of composers – Giaches de Wert (1535-1596) and Luca Marenzio (1553/54-1599) – rank among the most distinct representatives of the late Italian madrigal; for its expressivity Nevel found an adequate interpretational approach, free of any theatricality or pretence.

Agnus Dei from Monteverdi's mass concluded the concert, and the ensemble showed some fatigue and lack of concentration on completing this challenging programme. But the tension remained until the end, also thanks to the omission of applause between compositions, the audience responding to the artist's demand (the silence was affected by the noisy amplification system in the church). The idea of placing the ensemble in a circle in the central part of the concert hall - although appearing bizarre at the beginning - proved to be a good plan. It invited the audience to draw closer, or even be 'sucked in' to the musical event more than in the case of a traditional 'stage' performance, making the overall experience more intense. However, the favourable acoustic disposition of the church was unforgiving to even the smallest incoordination or fault in intonation. But these were, throughout the whole evening, very rare, and the overall impression was nothing but brilliant.