

Utrecht explores the incessant metamorphoses of early music

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Highlights: The Dutch festival reflects on the idea of early music conceived as the fruit of the ambition to recreate the past in the heat of the most diverse ideologies. The most prominent word on the poster and cover of this year's book-program is Revival, an "avoidable" Anglicism, according to the Panhispanic Dictionary of Doubts. Henry Purcell, Mateo Flecha, Claudio Monteverdi and Josquin des Prez are among the artists performing at the festival.



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As a prologue, the Huelgas Ensemble offered three consecutive concerts in the cathedral on Friday afternoon. The program included the names of the works, but not their authors, and the festival invited the public to guess, if not each and every one of the composers, not an easy task, at least if it was "old" music (until 1600) or "not too old" (until 1900). Paul van Nevel began by making things easy, with the gradual *Viderunt omnes*, by Pérotin, although the interesting thing was to see how this music of the thirteenth

century can sound, interpreted with a meter as inflexible as proposed by the Belgian, unequivocally modern, which completely blurs the boundaries between past and present. In the first concert, after a *chanson* by Josquin and an *Agnus Dei* by Brumel, Van Nevel introduced two sacred songs by Max Reger, this is already much more difficult to guess for a simple amateur, especially since the German is an unjustly neglected composer, although several of his music were played in the three concerts, a gesture with an unmistakable air of vindication. Reger also knows how to compose when he wants deliberately the old-fashioned way, imitating the Renaissance or Baroque harmonizations of Lutheran corals, which makes it even more difficult to keep track of him. The drama and expressive intensity of *Der Mensch lebt und besteht nur eine kleine Zeit, O Tod, wie bitter bist du* and *Ach Herr strafe mich nicht* sent shivers down the spine in the cathedral.

From registration it was already guessing the identity of the Belgian Willem Ceuleers, a former member of the Huelgas Ensemble, as well as organist and prolific composer, who is able to imitate almost perfectly the Renaissance style, as demonstrated in his *Missa super 'Iam navis adventat'*, in the madrigal *Io non so ben* or in the *Stabat Mater* that sounded in the third concert. Much more modern sounded the conclusion of the triptych, *Da pacem Domine*, by the German Jörg Schnepel, where, before such harmonies, few must have missed the correct answer. But when Van Nevel was seen to enjoy especially it was in the rarities (the *Missa Praeter rerum seriem* by Ludwig Daser) and, even more, in the most intricate contrapuntal music, such as the penitential motet *Sustinuimus pacem*, by Pierre de Manchicourt, in which he raised two tenors to the pulpit to sing the *cantus firmus* of the *sixth pars* (with a different text taken from an antiphon, *Da pacem Domine*, the same as Schnepel's motet that would sound just below: Paul van Nevel does not give stitches without thread), or in *Ista est speciosa*, by Mathieu Gascongne, an enigmatic canon for twelve voices of which only one is written and which can be resolved in two ways, according to its indication in Latin ("To the upper second, resting two briefs, or the opposite"): beginning to add voices upwards from that voice, or descendently from its inversion. It was the end of the second concert, in which the least important thing was to guess or not the authorship of each piece. The important thing was to see how past and present coexisted with a group that, founded more than half a century ago, is living history of the modern interpretation of ancient music. We have grown up with their singers, we have seen them age (there are still the soprano Sabine Lutzenberger, the tenor Tom Phillips or the baritone Frederik Sjollema, for example), but we have also witnessed their constant renewal, always with Paul van Nevel, already on his way to being octogenarian, as a great master of ceremonies and authoritatively marking the tempo with a tiny tuning fork. The same happens with the festival's own audience: we all recognize each other's faces, one year older each time, but we also discover new faces called to succeed us.

The first weekend of the festival has brought much, much more. Paul van Nevel returned to the cathedral on Sunday afternoon to continue pulling another of the threads of this edition: the Renaissance masses based on the melody of *L'homme armé*, on which Avery Gosfield spoke on Saturday morning. The Belgian chose the little-known – and very original, full of perfectly audible *canti fermi* – by Firminus Caron, followed by the grandiose *Missa Et ecce terrae motus*, by Antoine Brumel, an imposing contrapuntal framework for twelve voices that also sounds, in many moments, radically contemporary. The Huelgas Ensemble once again worked constant vocal wonders.

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