

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE AMARCORD ENSEMBLE

Talking with Yvonne Georgiadou



How did the five of you meet together?

There were initially six of us who first met at St. Thomas's Boys Choir Leipzig. We just wanted to keep singing after nine years in this choir. And we wanted to sing something else, apart from Bach. Even after some (rare) changes we are still an all-St. Thomas Group, with the three lower voices being the original members and serving as the right base or fundament for the higher voices.

There is a tremendous amount of vocal music which was written in the past, and male choruses were a popular form of entertainment but nowadays these works are scarcely known. Are you still amazed to discover old, previously neglected pieces?

This is in fact one of the great excitements in the job, being able to “premiere” pieces that have been lying around for decades or even centuries. Also, this becomes us and our adventurous minds. This feeling is only surpassed by the actual premiere of a living composer's piece specifically written for us.

The first part of your concert at The Shoe Factory is about music for male chorus written in the 19th century by Leipzig based composers. Schumann's Op.33 is surprisingly humorous... was it an indirect attack to Friedrich Wick with whom he had court cases open?

The “Song Year” you mentioned is the year 1840 when, after having lived in Leipzig for several years, Schumann was allowed to eventually marry Clara Wieck, despite her father Friedrich's opposition. Consequently, Schumann's Op. 33 is breathing the fresh air of love's delight, and you can hear birds sing, all nature celebrating a wedding... the overwhelming joy of a 30year old, going to marry his true love. Quite understandable...

On the other hand the Mendelssohn pieces are more direct, not so ground-breaking music wise, but always enjoyable. What issues, do you have to address when performing op.50 as opposed to op.120?

Most of them written in Leipzig, Op. 50 is the only set of male choruses that Mendelssohn published during his life-time. So there's much ground to speculate why, as a composer sceptic with music for male voices, Mendelssohn would have them printed, and why not the others. Anyway, ALL the pieces are great music and a joy to sing, and despite some inner “lightness” they MUST NOT be underestimated!

Both composers were allegedly intimidated working for male choruses. Schumann was remembered saying “Even when you have been making music all day, you cannot get to like the endless six-four chords of male singing style”...

At Schumann's and Mendelssohn's days in Leipzig, there was a guy named Heinrich August Marschner who wrote six-four chords pieces on end. This was the kind of musical standard set for male voice music then. So, the two great contemporaries had to put this aside, overcoming their own prejudices when thinking about male choruses, and bless this field of music with their genius, thus creating something that we are looking for in all music: vocal chamber music.

In your programme you will include many contemporaries of Schumann and Mendelssohn but hardly known to audiences today. Of particular interest is Carl Steinacker who was generally accepted as a major talent back in his time.

Steinacker died aged 30, on a wound he got during the wars against Napoleon. He certainly was a major talent coming from Leipzig but, having died too early like so many of the Romantic composers, poets and other artists, was forgotten too easily. There is this great cycle of

his, Op. 11 for male voices, that reflects a very own voice of this composer who could have grown to great renown.

Zöllner's Scherzo is hilarious... The text comprises a whole restaurant menu. Is it true that the composer wrote the piece in order to win a bet that "any text can be set to music"?

Yes, this is truly as the story goes. Apparently, a student of Zöllner's was challenging his master's claim that "any text can be set to music (by me)". So, once they all met in a traditional Leipzig restaurant called Zill's Tunnel, the student picked the menu and said: You can't put that to music. Well, Zöllner could and presented the piece to his students the following morning.

You have premiered on disc many of these pieces. Do you ever have any disagreements between you about new music you will explore / include in your CDs?

It would feel strange when all of us agreed right from the beginning. This group wants all opinions to be put on the table, no matter how diverse, so then we can have a discussion about it. As there is no musical director, we have to convince each other. The result, in our opinion, will be even better. And it will not be a mere compromise, but the result of conviction. But this is true not just for CD planning, but for interpretation, programming, and travel schedules as well.

You have also explored a lot of contemporary music. Don't you feel that contemporary composers sometimes stretch the human voice beyond its limits?

Despite the fact that this is quite a rhetorical question, I agree. And disagree, because it's by no means limited to contemporary composers. Händel was way beyond voice limits, but with singers in mind who could "handel" it. So were Pérotin, Ockeghem, Wagner, Berg ... They always came up a bunch of singers who could master the challenges of these guys, successfully stretching the voice limits, in terms of phrase length, sheer vocal power, stamina, intellectual content. But what helped these composers was a general knowledge of (or at least interest in) the human voice. If a composer is unaware or doesn't have an interest in singers' needs, I'm likewise uninterested in him and what he does.

You have pretty much sung every style. Obviously your basic vocal technique is the same throughout but what stylistic changes do you address in contrasting programmes?

Basically, this is right, the five of us are using the same technique in order to blend and create a unified sound. But to enhance the stylistic changes needed for a valid interpretations, we also implement different vocal techniques, according to style and genre, that again are used by all of us. This includes regulation of vibrato, vowel shaping and colouring, the amount of breath put on the tone, harshness of vocal onset, the amount of body tension, to name just a few. But we also have to be able to produce "white" tones or sing with "no technique" - which, if done right, is a technique of its own.

What do you sing when you want to go back to basics and maintain your vocal health?

We then tend to sing Romantic music that suits the group's sound and our individual ranges well. On an individual basis, we regularly return to our singing teacher called "the coach", who is putting things in order when needed.

As singers, having to carry your instrument with you at all times, you are susceptible to a number of environmental triggers. How do you overcome these issues without sacrificing the joy of living?

The solution is: don't sacrifice the joy of living! Thinking and worrying too much is just not helpful and will also bring down your immune system. Getting enough rest, sleep, fluid, and food are obvious basics, especially on tour through different time-zones. And if the virus strikes you there is of course some secret natural and pharmaceutical panacea at hand which we won't reveal here.

A message to those authorities controlling funding for the arts.

No human being is just a Homo oeconomicus. (In fact, none of my friends, colleagues, or acquaintances are.) Stop forcing artists into mode of self-justification and instead support the arts with all your might. As a signer of human creativity they are among the finest creations of mankind. They are what makes us – human.

A piece of advice to all young aspiring singers.

Passion for what you do. Patience with yourself and the growth of your art. A prospect of the future no matter how clear, and the power to detect the point when following the master needs to be replaced by becoming yourself, singing your own repertoire with your own voice.