

Bachtrack.com - 8 september 2014

Door Rosemary Carlton-Willis

Flawed and thrilling: graindelavoix at the Festival Oude Muziek Utrecht

Belgian vocal ensemble graindelavoix took an experimental trip into 16th century Germany with a programme of polyphony inspired by the violent life and unhappy marriage of Duke Ulrich of Württemberg. graindelavoix consistently offer vocal performances of courage, imagination and peerless musical integrity. With the direction of Björn Schmelzer, the singers produced a rich and uncompromising ensemble sound, with terrific ornamentation from individual singers and deep feeling for the music. This concert's utterly superb singing was both augmented and undermined by an abstract staging, in which simple props, movement and the images created by objects and bodies on the stage conveyed impressions of Ulrich's stark and frightening world, while the songs texts provided an indirect commentary from different emotional perspectives.

A sense of temporal uncertainty disrupted the audience's experience of an order of events. Some images were explained in texts sung or spoken later; in other cases the text came before the associated image. One of the most powerful images of the night was when a heavy length of white fabric, dragged slowly onto the stage by the excellent child performer Hanna Lambrix, ended up in the shape of an angel, or a penitent lying cruciform before the altar. At the head of this white cruciform figure was a tall ladder, suggesting a spire; at the foot, the little girl curled up unobtrusively on the figure's skirts. It was a heart-rending image: in this case the emotional distance between the image shown and the indirect and allusive commentary provided in the song texts worked superbly, offering the audience a space for deep emotional response.

The spoken text of the vision of Albrecht Dürer gave sense to earlier sounds and images in the performance: a man poured water onto a bucket of dry ice, flooding the stage with mist that flowed eerily over the performers' feet while running water sounded in the background. In one of the more effective temporal disruptions of the evening, Dürer's night-vision of a great flood offered an interpretation of this image at quite a different moment in the programme. Because of this multi-layered, disrupted narrative approach, the audience were also free to make other connections: the ones I make here can hardly be definitively "correct" - a space for the meeting of

engaged subjectivities was the mode of communication here, not a linear narrative conveyed directly from speaker to listener.

The production as a whole was daring and yet not daring enough: it felt incomplete. I badly wanted to see the staging and the music more integrated. All stage "business" - carrying props on and off etc - was visible, and this provided some inelegant moments which undermined the strength of the images created on stage. Sometimes the use of spatial elements - the positioning of the singers in relation to the action on stage - had shape and import, at other times it seemed frustratingly loose and random. Clearly the ensemble wanted to let the ambiguity of the images onstage stimulate the imaginations of the audience - to play with our temporal and spatial perceptions, suggest possible lines of narrative without imposing them. I appreciate the respect for the audience implicit in such an approach, but gauging the most fruitful degree of narrative ambiguity is a tricky process, and the results were uneven.

I also felt that the extra-musical sonic elements were insufficiently integrated - external sounds such as running water came and went, but there was no coherent soundscape throughout, and consequently such sonic interpolations arose in awkward isolation. Where one of the physical performers dug his spade loudly into bags of earth, the resulting clangour of the blade hitting the stage interfered with the music. This was one of several instances where a moment of potential individual power was let down by a wider lack of integration. The man digging with the ensemble singing apparently obliviously in a circle some feet away evoked in my mind powerful images of singing in church with graves being dug outside - if the extra-musical interpolations had been woven more consistently into the fabric of the performance throughout, this disturbing sonic contrast could have worked better.

To my mind, this ensemble is one of the most genuinely exciting early music outfits in Europe, and one to watch very closely. It is inevitable that when an ensemble takes big risks in performance there will be hits and misses: for me this was a daring and admirable miss. It also sharply divided the audience, with a number of walkouts during the concert but a roar of ecstatic "bravos" and "encores" at the end. When audience opinion is so passionately divided, you know that at the very least interesting art is being made or attempted. It is almost impossible to come to a single judgement about a performance such as this - and would we necessarily want to? The singing was absolutely outstanding; the musical, historical and theoretical scholarship substantial; the

concept perceptive and generous; the execution flawed and extremely problematic. I happily anticipate continued theatrical daring and refinement of ideas from this ensemble, as they chart their thrilling course through musical history.