

In the footsteps of Villard de Honnecourt



Björn Schmelzer, who animates and sings in **Graindelavoix**, is not your typical director of an early music ensemble. Nor is the highly articulate sound world of **Graindelavoix**, now deployed on the newly-released *Ossuaires* album from Glossa, reminiscent of typical recordings of medieval music. Over the last decade or so, the Belgian group has created programmes which, whilst embracing the music of known musicians from the 12th century onwards (Johannes Ockeghem, Gilles Binchois and composers from the *Ars subtilior* period among them), seek new pathways for the comprehension of that art for today.

Nowhere is this more evident than on *Ossuaires*, the first of three ambitious recordings created around the travels and shadowy biography of a certain Villard de Honnecourt, a 13th century draughtsman, whose carnet or portfolio is still in existence. Villard, who contributed to designs found in churches and cathedrals dating from what we now call the Gothic era (his portfolio contains drawings of floor plans, building elements, mechanical tools, interiors and maps of churches, towers, statues of saints, rose windows, flagstone floors, as well as animals, insects and geometrical figures), appears to have travelled far and wide across Christian Europe (a Herculean activity in those times); he may even have also been involved in the trade of holy relics (ossuaries being receptacles for holy relics).

Graindelavoix's programme includes an Office for the 13th century St Elizabeth of Hungary, relics of whom were quickly scattered far and wide immediately after her death, creating a set of pathways or routes across Europe. Schmelzer's approach to medieval music here mirrors the working attitudes of an artist like Villard, embellishing and improvising, combining and recycling materials from a practical perspective.

A further new pathway across space and time is being created by the Antwerp-based Schmelzer when the performers of **Graindelavoix** bring their interpretation of Machaut's *Messe de Nostre Dame* to Cuenca for the *Semana de Música Religiosa* festival next March,

but fresh from singing and dancing in the *Cesena* programme in London's Sadler's Wells Theatre with Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Rosas, **Björn Schmelzer** sat down to talk about *Ossuaires* and his imaginative approach to medieval music in general.

With *Graindelavoix* you have developed a highly individual performing style. On what do you base your approach?

I'm trained as an anthropologist of music which means that I have always been interested in the function of music – its context, so to say – but also in the way singers in all sorts of traditions use different techniques to provoke an effect, be it emotional, rhetorical or affective. This is the way I look at repertories that were written down, for example, in a modal tradition. I simply ask myself which effect a piece or parts of a piece want to generate. Notation is just a little *aide-mémoire* and I believe that medieval singers did not really sing from books or manuscripts. I can easily imagine that they were even analphabetic and trained by ear.

It is more than possible to sing measured polyphony without knowledge of notation, and as people know, you can easily write in your head too. Ornamentation is the operator to create the lines: after years of working on these repertories, this became very clear to me. This is definitely not about the question of whether ornaments were added or not, or if this or that ornament was appropriate to the style. I think that the question of the nationalism of ornament is as old as the nationalism of states and that is why in the Baroque period ornamentation was often so carefully written down. Of course there were local styles, but they were all the time refreshed and contaminated by new singers from different places. So that's basically the idea I start with.

With *Graindelavoix*, how do you feel that you serve the repertories that you perform?

I have no idea how I serve them! I don't believe in repertories as beings in their own right, waiting for a musician to be performed. They are elastic, fluid constellations which offer possibilities to performers. If repertories have a life in themselves, I think they are treated well by me and my musicians, because we really try to bring them to the limit of their potentialities. That is what they call "being alive", no?

How does your approach to the subjects that you approach for programmes affect the way that *Graindelavoix* interprets medieval music?

I try to work in a broader field of interrelations and I'm aware of the transposition of musical materials in for example a concert context. My first concern is to inject the audience with the pathos, with the affects of these repertories. If they discover that all this is also complex, multilayered, virtuosic, and so on, than all the better!

Your recording of *Ossuaires* represents the first of a trilogy associated with Villard de Honnecourt. What led you originally to become interested in this project?



What you call a project is maybe the ultimate, definitive “framing” of a long process of research, travels, readings, musical experiments: a sort of long *Ars combinatoria* of all sorts of elements, at first sight not always connected to each other. But of course, it started with something very simple: the fascination for the drawings in a small portfolio in the Bibilothèque nationale in Paris.

In part, a good CD or a concert also involves sharing one’s very simple first direct sensation with the main theme or repertoire. Performing early repertoires doesn’t mean for me explaining them to the audience in the sense a guide in a museum might discourse on what lies in a Flemish Primitive painting. For me, this attitude is the same as destroying the work of art. And just like a visual work of art can in this sense be destroyed by the gaze of people looking at it, a lot of early repertoires are destroyed already before the audience can listen to them, because of the “all-too-much” explanatory way, the typical musical way of performing it – if the text is clear, the performance is good; that sort of thing.

What I am wanting to say here is that the images of Villard de Honnecourt are also surrounded by all sorts of crazy explanations which destroy the experience we could have with them. Therefore, you might consider the way that we make a musical programme around these images as a sort of artistic wrapping or packaging designed to protect these fragile images from explanations, whilst presenting them in what I would call a “field of resonance”. A field of resonance is the way in which all sorts of elements resonate with each other: drawings with the draughtsman, the places where he lived, where he worked and travelled, the traces and marks he left behind, the imaginative world which is created by his work, the operative function, and what the art historian Horst Bredekamp has called the “action” of images; how these drawings act in a broader field of relationships.

In this sense I see that there is an important job of work for the artist who is concerned with old art and music to set against that of the exegetes or academics: I want to be a nurse who bandages the works of art to protect them for their opinions, interpretations and explanations. And because the object is now protected with embellishments, and thus invisible, the fascination and sensation can do its work...

The musical programmes for the three parts of this trilogy constructed around the figure of Villard de Honnecourt are quite distinct from each other. What made you feel that they could be all connected into one unity?

This clear distinction between these three programmes is really the result of a lot of work of trying to see clearly and make segments in the chaos of historical flows and substrata. The “trinity” I have put together is a form of explanation of how people create society, how they create space (and the psycho-acoustic element here is crucial) and how they operate in these

created spaces.

The first space is the one of *Ossuaires*, a space connected with territoriality and the ground: with the heritage of the ancestors and how the most privileged of these – the saints – are still doing their job, as it were. Thus, how these saints “act” by mapping localities and connecting them with each other. In *Ossuaires* we focused on the body of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, but a clearer and more popular example would be that of Santiago de Compostela. His body was literally “disseminated” all over Europe, creating a road that connected places with each other. On this level, the territory, the body of the saint is defining the complex of social, religious and economical activities.

In the booklet for *Ossuaires*, as a kind of serious witticism, I called the Office of Saint Elizabeth as composed by Pierre de Cambrai, a kind of European “songlines”, analogous to how Bruce Chatwin described the way that the Australian aboriginals read, see and sing the landscape. Through thinking in this way the link between the territory, the soil as territory of the ancestors, and the operations of memory suddenly becomes clear.

The second programme will be called *Confréries* which, for me, expresses the creation of bonds between living people, *confrères* and the shift of relationships you get with this. With that next CD we will concentrate on the repertoires of the religious trouvère Jaque de Cambrai and on the power and danger of musical practices in brotherhoods.

The third CD accentuates the third level in which almost incorporeal “lines of flight” are created in a complex intertextual polyphonic repertoire in which sense also becomes ambiguous. For this CD we will perform all the motets from a codex held now in the Bibliothèque municipale in Cambrai.

As you can see, this trio of programmes – and CDs – represents more of a trinity than a trilogy!

Another reference in your booklet article for *Ossuaires* sees you alluding to Christopher Page’s views about the concept of “cathedralism“ (as discussed in his “Discarding images” essay from 1993), about the purpose of essence of medieval cathedrals. Do you share Page’s views, or do you feel that they are worth modifying?



No, I do not share his view about what he christened “cathedralism”, although some of his argumentation is valid: for example, the fact that a series of 20th century art historians held the view that cathedrals acted as big, intentionally-planned, unifying monuments. This view has often been transposed to music history and a number of eminent musicologists

employed, without any critical distance, this “cathedralistic interpretation”, in order to describe and understand the music of thirteenth-century Europe.

However, Page – in my opinion – threw the baby out with the bathwater! Strangely enough, whilst criticizing, for example, the (Erwin) Panofsky views regarding “Gothic art and Scholastics”, Page totally embraced the line of the Panofsky in connection with the iconological works. The problem here is that Page criticizes comparisons between objects (visual with musical), symbols, meaning, i.e. the level of outer representations of culture. Our approach, with **Graindelavoix**, is to try to be comparatist on the molecular level, or to put it another way, on the level of practices and operative knowledge. A little bit like the way that Mary Carruthers has described in her fascinating books on memory. Saying that a cathedral has nothing to do with music and thinking on the operative level is denying the crucial operators of the Middle Ages. And what is then left is a very poor and reduced image, one that a lot of academics call “scientific” in the sense of being related to some historical truth, just because they reduce reality to a composition of mere objects. The moment you start to work on the climate, on psycho-acoustics, on what I above called fields of resonance or what the French art historian Henri Focillon called a *système de force*, you open up a very rich and more complex space of historical virtualities.

Ossuaires appears to give significance to the role of the individual and his/her movements within certain geographical and temporal limits. Does your thinking reflect ideas about psychogeography (from Guy Debord, or more recently from writers such as Iain Sinclair or Will Self), as well as those ideas of Bruce Chatwin and the “songlines”.

In the booklet article for *Ossuaires* I didn’t quote Guy Debord, but I like the fact that you are mentioning him here. Did you know, for example, that Guy Debord was a passionate reader of Johan Huizinga, not only of his *Homo Ludens*, but also his famous medieval study *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, a book which Debord even referred to in some of his texts? Debord was an avant-garde artist and perhaps an “enfant terrible”, but I like him in the sense of a walker. And that is what he did most of the time. In this sense, Debord is probably the only legitimate son of Villard de Honnecourt.

Debord was wanting to destroy the old art of Europe (including burning down the cathedrals), whilst at the same time he was in tears about the demolition of the old Les Halles quarter in Paris. I totally understand this. It is always culture that destroys culture... Of course there are a lot of links between what Debord called the *dérive* (the random walking without an aim, or the walking in London with a map of Paris) and music. The comparison with practice involved in music from this time, especially with the Gothic line is one easily made: the infinite meanderings of lines, intertwining and resulting in complex assemblages and ornaments. At the same time you feel that Gothic art is made for the walking eye, constantly affected by new and unexpected visual but also auditory events. Another link is of course the idea of *compagnonnage* or companionship, creating networks on which an international web of artists could meet and exchange ideas, experiment and bring them into practice, in the same way as carried out by Debord and the Internationale Situationniste. I thought it was important to mention the songlines of Bruce Chatwin because we can easily see and analyze ways of dealing with space and territory in another culture, but don’t see that we do it somehow in the same way.

As well as a strong spatial sense to this recording project it has a very visual feel to it. Was this intentional on your part?



Do you mean that the music itself evokes images? I see this as a compliment, of course. Probably this has to do with our specific approach to repertoires and traditions. I see them as part of a larger context and also often as symptoms of cultural or artistic movements. At the same time I believe that it is important to offer the audience sonorous images, and in this sense I am aware of the visual power of our performance. Sound-images are still not sclerotized into actual representations, like visual images, but they really have the force of a vibrating, floating image. I think that's what a music performance can do. It proves the reality of complex climates of affective experience. The fact that historical repertoires still have a meaning that goes beyond their actual performance makes it even more interesting and thrilling. At the same time the recording of *Ossuaires* starts from a visual, tactile experience which are the drawings of Villard.

You are in the process of making a film around the subject of *Ossuaires*. What are you setting out to achieve with the film?

We are making it with almost no budget, no support and most of the crew have never made a real feature film (and that includes me). But I have now a production house that really believes in this project and wants to present it to international festivals. I must say that I have been wanting to do this for a very long time, and if you want something you not only go for it but also you prepare in secret! For me, making a film is like making music. It's very tactile and improvisatory, and at the same time the most fragile *Gesamtkunst* that is doomed to fail on one level or another. Who can say that a film is totally convincing or pleasing? There is always some alternative view, but really this is part of the beauty of it. The film is a work of fiction and the result of a brainstorming session on how to present the musical repertoires around Villard de Honnecourt. I didn't want to project the images as such during a concert, I wanted to integrate them in the complexity of time layers. We did already one ciné-concert and plan more next year but the film will also be released as an independent movie and the soundtrack will be that of **Graindelavoix** of course. After this experience I know now that I want to continue making films too...

As an example of your approach to recording in general, how is your vocal style for *Ossuaires* connected to the specific acoustics of the church where this took place?

Tempo, phrasing and ornamentation are of course very strongly dependant on the acoustics of a church. That is why the search for an appropriate space for this programme became an important issue. After an intensive survey of almost all Gothic churches in the region of Villard de Honnecourt (possibly he was born in Picardy) we decided to make the recording in the church of Saint-Yved-en-Braine, not far from Soissons. This is a church that art historians call the "Braine prototype" and they see it as the example for churches like the cathedral of

Cambrai, the Elizabeth church of Marburg and many other churches that developed a new vogue against the more conservative Chartres-style, not only in the construction, the spatial appreciation but also in the sculpture and ornamentation. It is strongly associated with the drawings of Villard de Honnecourt and has one of the best acoustics I have ever experienced.

With your *Cesena* programme you are currently involved in a major touring project with Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. What do you believe is being created from this combination of music from the *Ars subtilior* and dance?



For me, *Cesena* is like a series of *pathosformeln* as the German cultural historian Aby M Warburg would put it. It is the cry of a period that we are trying to evoke. It is a demonic piece, I think, and moreover it is about what comes up from subterranean depths if you knock too hard on the ground... It is a dangerous matter; what is unthinkable and unspeakable about history, about past periods, for example the late fourteenth century. There is hardly a coincidence in the fact that the title refers to a sort of historical trauma, the massacre of Cesena in 1377, as a historical fact forgotten, lost in the folds of time and barely even mentioned at all in history books... For me, this concept of *Cesena* is also very emotional because it evokes impossibly complex images from the late fourteenth century projected into an instant today. This relates not so much to the facts or realities of that time, but rather, one could say, to its virtualities: a combination of gestures, sounds, movements, ensembles, light and darkness, etc., both simple and baroque at the same time, “configurations” as Nicole Oresme – the fourteenth-century French philosopher – would call the diagrams of the intertwining of infinite bodies.

You are planning to perform the Machaut *Messe de Nostre Dame* in Cuenca next year. How does a work like this fit into your conception of music from the fourteenth century? What other music do you feel that such a work can be performed with?

In fact, Machaut’s Mass does not, as a concept, seem to me to be medieval at all. It’s not a patchwork but a real compilation by one composer that tries to work with unifying principles – in the same way that Machaut approached his literary works! He was very much occupied with the question of his afterlife and that of his oeuvre, bringing this together in big manuscripts presenting his magnum opus....This is something that you feel also in the music itself, certainly when you compare the *Messe de Nostre Dame* with other so-called “unified” masses, such as the *Messe de Tournai* or the *Messe de Barcelona*, which are more really daily repertoire. In every piece Machaut tries things out, he tries to affect with all sorts of techniques, some very complex, others very rhetorical. The real reason why I do this work now is not only because I think I have found the perfect line-up to perform this work in an unheard way, but also because both Carlos Céster and María Díaz at Glossa had asked me to

perform and record it some years back. They are both very curious how this *monstre sacré* of medieval music will be tackled by me and my singers, so our performance in Cuenca will definitely be dedicated to them and to their support for **Graindelavoix** from the very outset.

Our approach to the Machaut Mass, with its male configuration with sharp high tenors in the high parts and very low basses beneath, also represents, in a certain way, of going back to the beginning of the ensemble, as if we were almost quoting the **Graindelavoix** of early 2000, looking back with a lot of nostalgia... With the singers I will be endeavouring to make our debut at Cuenca a real ecstatic experience for the public.

MARK WIGGINS © 2012 Diverdi / Glossa Music photos © Koen Broos