

The marriage of music and dance in *Cesena* from Graindelavoix



In what is set to be a career-defining opportunity for **Graindelavoix**, Glossa's Antwerp-based ensemble, along with its director **Björn Schmelzer**, is joining forces with choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and her company Rosas for a new music and dance production *Cesena* which will have its world première performance at this year's Festival d'Avignon in France. On July 16 the medieval Cour d'honneur of the Palais des Papes – the meeting point of the Old and New Papal Palaces – will provide the setting at the time of 4.30am for an interpretation in sound and movement of the rhythmically and harmonically complex 14th century musical repertory known as the *Ars subtilior* (strongly associated with the Papal Court in Avignon). Three further performances in Avignon will follow.

The collaboration between Rosas and **Graindelavoix** will involve dancers singing and singers (Olalla Alemán, Marius Peterson, Yves Van Handenhove, Lieven Gouwy, Tomàs Maxé and Albert Riera) dancing. Anne de Keersmaecker's company has previously explored the marriage of the two art forms with a programme entitled *En Attendant*.

Cesena is a co-production between a number of leading festivals (and concert halls) as well as Avignon's: La Monnaie/De Munt (Brussels), Théâtre de la Ville (Paris), Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg, Festival Oude Muziek Utrecht, Guimarães 2012, Steirischer Herbst (Graz), deSingel (Antwerp) and the Concertgebouw Brugge. Dates for further performances – Utrecht follows in August – are already being scheduled through to 2014.

Graindelavoix, whose most recent album *Cecus* concerned itself with music associated with

blind players, memory and commemoration, will additionally be making a CD “soundtrack” recording of *Cesena* for release by Glossa in the Autumn of this year.



Whilst making preparations for the Avignon performances of *Cesena* Björn Schmelzer took the time to explain how this new production came about and what it entails. “I think it must be two years ago that Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker asked me if I would be interested in collaborating in a new production focusing on late medieval music, especially in *Ars subtilior* repertoire. She had become very much fascinated with this repertoire – after working many years with contemporary music and classical repertoire going back in history as far as Monteverdi – because of its almost abstract, mathematical structure, its complex and fascinating contrapuntal relations and the sinuous flow of its lines... I invited her to come to some of our rehearsals to see how we could collaborate and also to our recording sessions for *Cecus*. She and Ann Veronica Janssens (who is doing the scenography for *Cesena*), were moved by the way we combine voices and the very physical experience of performing early polyphony. I think it is this combination of dealing with written, often complex polyphonic music in a very physical and affective way that convinced her of starting this co-production. Maybe it was also the presence and concentration of my singers, physically and mentally.”

How does Schmelzer think the collaboration with Rosas might operate? “I knew, of course, that for Anne Teresa music is never just ‘musique d’ameublement’, background soundscape or a mere emotion-producer: in her way of working everything starts with the music, with the notes and the lines and their interrelations. So there was no fear that it would be just a sort of medieval soundscape on which dancers would perform some choreography. On the other hand, I was quite sure that the collaboration would offer us new insights in the music itself, and it would also be an opportunity to develop the possibilities of performing this repertoire. From the start it was clear that we wanted to go as far as possible in the meeting between

dance and voice: we would have singers who dance and dancers who sing. As you can imagine, having a three-voice chanson sung by three dancers or three singers moving while singing parts of a piece, allows you to experiment with an almost unseen fragility and to question the real territory and its elasticity of an artist's profession. To be invited to this place – and especially in collaboration with Anne Teresa and her incredible team of dancers – is for the ensemble and me a dream you maybe experience once or twice in a career. At the same time there is some fertile artistic 'resistance' in the most recent work of Anne Teresa and the way she is evolving to her own idea of 'poor theatre', you could say, bringing things on stage back to their essence.



How is Schmelzer anticipating the setting for the première performances of *Cesena* in Avignon? "Some people may interpret our performance in the Palais des Papes at 4.30am, experiencing night passing to daylight in mystical or even esoteric ways, but to my mind it is more a matter of 'resistance' and maximizing your expression by minimizing your resources. We don't need anything: no light – that will appear slowly in any case –, no props or decor. Anne Teresa's original idea was even to do away with the classical wooden stage and to perform on the original sand and stones, with all their gaps and holes, using the resistance of the surface. However, because the stage supports the tribune – something which is necessary in order to get all people inside – this unfortunately proved to be impossible."

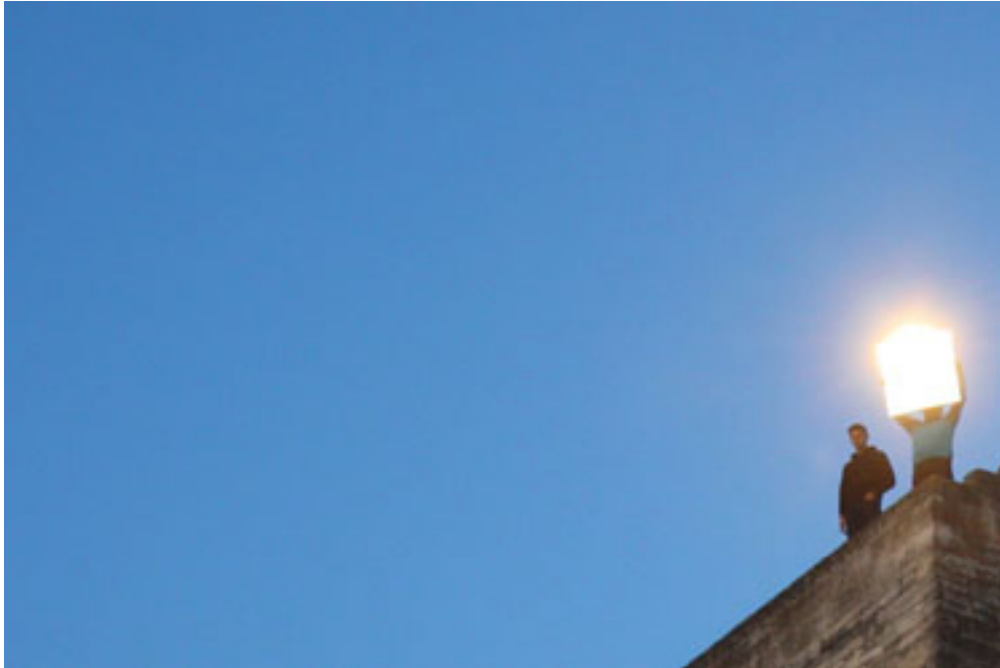
What else will the time set for the commencement of the performance of *Cesena* in Avignon imply? "Experiencing Avignon at that time of the night, is also the only moment when the city is really getting into silence, a sort of *conditio sine qua non* for the *a capella Ars subtilior* songs which will be performed. But it brings experience itself also to a sort of 'degree zero', almost a paradox in the hyper 'spectacular' climate of the festival in Avignon. So it is a question of hearing and seeing what is really there. As Anne Teresa says in a way which to me is so incredibly to the point, 'what appears in the dark and what disappears in the light'. This kind of going back to basics is also for me something that is really crucial. The actuality of the performance is not visible in what is represented, sung or said, but in the way it is done: for me there lies the real politics of a Rosas performance and I'm happy to join Anne Teresa in this idea. Especially given the place in which we are performing and the times in which we are living, this seems to me the best artistic answer anyway. On the other hand, working with de Keersmaecker and her dancers is a very generous activity in itself: we are the entire time active on both sides, music and dance and however different the disciplines are, they are treated with total equality."



Do these performing conditions represent a concert approach for Schmelzer? “Another beautiful thing is that we are able to show something of this musical repertoire in a totally a-historical or non-historicist context and there is no question of re-enactment or even symbolism. At the same time, this will not be a concert. Rather, there is happening something before your eyes, which is incredibly and intimately connected with what you hear: it is something you have never seen, but almost experienced as being under the surface of the music... a strange experience, at least for me. After Avignon, we perform *Cesena* almost immediately at the important Festival Oude Muziek of Utrecht. It will be very curious to see how differently the public there may join in the experience...”

Within this collaboration between **Graindelavoix** and Rosas does Schmelzer attach any particular significance to the name *Cesena* that is being used as the title? “A title can act as a trigger point and often it may not be chosen for only one particular reason or for definite reasons at all. *Cesena* is only a good title if it functions in all different directions at once. At the same time it is, of course, intimately connected with the performance and its dramaturgy. From the beginning Anne Teresa wanted to create a piece for the Palais des Papes which is directly linked with its history. The first piece to be sung in *Cesena*, for example, will be the anonymous motet *Pictagore per dogmata* from the Codex Chantilly, which attempted to legitimize the move of Pope Gregory XI from Avignon to Rome in 1377. Metaphorically, the text avers that it is written in the stars that Gregory’s real place has to be in Rome (in reality this amounted to recapturing and empowering the Papal territories in Italy). ‘Avignon/Rome: the start of the Western Schism’. This is the context we are using as one of the starting points of the performance. (One could also ask the question, What was the real start of the Western Schism?) I like the idea of histories of this subject mentioning only two cities – Avignon and Rome –, the cities of representational power, forgetting the unimportant, almost invisible cities, which nevertheless paid the real price... For me the city of Cesena is the ‘Passendale’ of

the 14th century – the list of these kind of places is of course infinite –, the voice of the unknown victims, politically totally subaltern but at the same time representing the physical event, the wound, the real symptom of history and memory...”



What other ways are the performers considering this stimulating meeting of artistic minds? “For the performance of *Cesena* Anne Teresa wanted to work on the balance/relation of these two axes: the horizontal one signifying the territory, but also the 40 metre stage of the Cour d’honneur in Avignon; and the vertical one, denoting ‘going up’, intensity, the light which appears gradually, the late Gothic line, that which resists against gravity, against territory, or the passage, metamorphosis of one line to the other... My explanation of the title above is only one, very limited way to read the performance: why not open another page of history where one finds out that in the 14th century there was a very important Franciscan, Michael of Cesena who fought for a church in poverty against all the decadence of power, who wanted to liberate power from glory. Why not, then, see this performance as an homage to him? The performance is not an answer to (historical) questions; it’s more a state or even statement of things happening on the moment itself...”

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