

Interview 2013 with Björn Schmelzer at Leipzig

Graindelavoix

Graindelavoix is known for challenging listeners and critics by being an alternative to the common ways of interpreting and also listening to Early Music. When forming graindelavoix, did you have the feeling that it was necessary to form such an ensemble? Has there perhaps been a particular moment or experience that led to the decision to create your own group?

It's always tricky to look for decisive moments so many years after the start(s) of an artistic project that formed its contours and characteristics also by a slow trial and error. It could be easily interpreted as a self-mystification to give clear answers to these questions. Of course some ten years ago I was convinced of the necessity to try something what must have been the start of graindelavoix. So it's maybe better to answer the questions with a description of the climate that almost forced me to create such a group as graindelavoix. First of all, I'm a self-made man and, except for some small participations in some Belgian vocal ensembles, I never did anything else than my own thing, and I could not imagine myself so easily as a musician in another constellation outside graindelavoix. I love to create auto-productive things together with brothers in arms who are involved in the total creation of something new. I don't care if people have a conservatory diploma or not. More and more I tend again to work with people that have multidisciplinary backgrounds. I'm always suspicious if singers tell me that they are trained 'in early music'. Early music became an institute, but even more than that, an all too predictable way of dealing with the historical legacy of music and aesthetics in general. If you ask me about a particular moment that triggered me to create graindelavoix? Yes, probably the shock of studying anthropology and even more concrete: the experience of a Sardinian confraternity singing four-voice polyphonic falsobordone in a procession during Holy Week. This particular moment is not only destroying all so called historical knowledge but also proving that historical experience is not a clear given past moment in time, but something that subsists in the present and reveals itself on actual decisive moments that go beyond the daily experience of reality and time.

In an interview on the "Cecus" album you once said that the Early Music scene isn't interesting to you and that it is without perspectives. What exactly bothers you concerning their methods of interpreting and dealing with the so-called Early Music?

I like 'early music' as a funny and surrealist movement, that developed in the 20th century parallel with and as an alternative to avant-garde music. If you look at the beginning of the 20th century: the important propagators (not only in Belgium but everywhere in Europe) of the performance of forgotten works from the middle ages or renaissance were at the same time the defenders of contemporary compositions and what you now could call 'world music'. If Schoenberg wanted to give up the hierarchy of tones in the tonal system, these musicologists gave up the hierarchy between repertoires in time, but also in space. A motet of the 14th century, an Indian raga or a piece by Stravinsky had all an intrinsic value that could not be evaluated from outside or judged on a hierarchical scale.

Now you feel that Early Music has given up to be an open field of discoveries and research and settled itself as a protector of good old values. Performing repertoires from the past means for me revealing sound-worlds not yet taken into account, expressing something that has been hidden between the folds of time, but also through a musical performance, articulating our own position

Your programme about Ockeghems "Missa Caput" was also your very first recording with graindelavoix. Why did you choose it to be your debut? What do you like about the mass and about Johannes Ockeghem in general?

That Ockeghems missa caput is our first recording is a mix of choice and coincidence. I found the work at that time quite fitting as test case for my ideas about phrasing, vocal timbre and ornamentation. Also the composition in itself and its enigmatic context triggered me at that time. Ockeghem put a Gallican plainchant melody (with a lot of fourth jumps) in the bass line, so the challenge for him was to compose the other three higher voices on this given bassline. What at first glance looks as a very rigid frame because of the dominating given bass line that dictates the sound of the total result, ends up as an amazing ecstatic listening experience, that never stops moving inside. You could say that Ockeghem's mass is a sort of spiritual but also affective contraposto to the popular dragon plays and rituals that were executed in his birthplace Saint-Ghislain, but also nearby in Mons and in much more Flemish and French cities of that time, in and outside the church. Whereas the dragon-plays were a sort of morality tableaux to bring the dragon, symbol of evil, down – interesting is that he was only crushed but never really killed – Ockeghem's mass prevents to fall back into easy dualisms of good and evil and results in a sort of complex polyphonic and affective map. You could say that the devilish bass part is at last dominated by the three other voices that sing also in a different mode, but at the same time they are also somehow produced by this low dragon cantus firmus. The ambiguity remains. That's what a great artist can produce I think.

I decided now to give a new reading to our first programme: it's a complete revision that the singers will also perform totally by heart. I'm more and more convinced that all polyphony was performed without scores, just by heart. The listening effect for the public is incredibly different and much more amazing when singers do this polyphony all by heart. The score blocks the direct sharing of the composition with the public. This will now change totally. It's now a work of memory and you get almost the idea to listen to music made on the spot. I think this work deserves it.

Your programmes cover a wide geographical and temporal range of music with often lesser known or almost forgotten material. What are the most precious gems in your existing and in your future repertoire that you want the public to discover?

I cannot answer this really. I think an artist makes something to be discovered sooner or later by someone affected by it. This moment of capture, it could be like a Schock Erlebnis, is for everybody different and is often determined by the special occasion you discover something. It's like walking between the bookshelves of a library or bookshop and suddenly a book appears to you, something you were always looking for...I think our programmes and cd's are not depending of a vogue or fashion, they remain to be discovered any time, although they will gradually be marked by the moment of performing or recording. I like this layers of time, enveloped in a musical experience.

Is there something like a certain goal that you pursue at your concerts?

No, not at all. And I like it when people afterwards tell me something of their experience which I never would expect. I can answer the question only in a negative way: it's never the goal to illustrate an ancient period, or to give a representation of medieval times. I try to be as far as possible from pedagogical, museal or patrimonial goals. Sometimes our concerts are long and people go to different states of experience, from fascination to maybe even boredom, I don't know. I think that's all right. It's again like reading a book: the experience is a flow of concentration, dream, unconscious experience, automatism, trance. That's how a concert must be too I think. Not all the time comprehensible and very interesting. Singing or listening polyphony is dealing with an art of time: it's the experience of a little bit of pure time, as Proust would say.

Is there some kind of ritual before going on stage, which is indispensable for your ensemble?

No not really. Except maybe of making some jokes, but that's nothing fixed. Better to keep the ritual to the concert I think, and not to the moment before...

Ockeghem and Bach are arguably the greatest contrapuntal polyphonists of all times. What do you expect from singing Ockeghem at Bach's grave? And besides that, what do you associate with Leipzig and what do you expect from the Festival of Vocal Music A CAPPELLA?

You always hope a composer is not turning his back in his grave of course. What can I say more than that I'm honoured to sing in Leipzig and that I like the idea to sing Ockeghem on Bach's workspace. And It's true: there is no doubt that they are family, Ockeghem and Bach, in a musical way, but also in a spiritual, if not mystical, for sure philosophical way. Ockeghem and the 15th century philosopher Cusanus mirror somehow Bach and Leibniz who was also born in Leipzig, don't you think?

I'm very curious how our vocal style and interpretation of this ancient polyphony will be accepted here, and I hope we can really add something unheard to the long and impressive palmares of the Festival.

Let's assume, you would stay in Leipzig for the whole time of the festival – which group or which concert from the programme would you attend and why? (Or what else would you like to do in the city?)

Maybe I would go to see the choir of the Thomaskirche. I'm quite curious how it sounds, I never heard them singing...I have been a singer in the cathedral of Antwerp as a boy. It's a strange tradition that is almost finished, and it's an experience that makes you a person of another age compared to your contemporaries....

When your ensemble prepares a (maybe characteristic Belgian) meal together, what will there be as food and drinks? Could you perhaps tell us the recipe?

If we would prepare a meal together maybe it would taste as grandelavoix sounds: lot of garlic and probably also quite sharp. Maybe we have to prepare 'Moules frites' (for its Belgian surrealist connotations) or Brussels' 'stoemp' because our cast for this programme resembles the heterogeneity of people in the city of Brussels: singers come from Estonia, Romania, France, Germany, Spain, the US and yes, Belgium.

Please try and name three things a vocal group absolutely needs.

Aiai, this questionnaire-answers always fail: let's say: timing, timbre and a nice acoustics...!