

## **Ambleside 2006 – the twenty-fifth ‘Summer School of Renaissance Music’ – a personal view from a tenor participant**

This was my fifth year at Ambleside. How would the Summer School of 2006 compare with the previous four? My friends know how much I love the opportunity ‘to sing from morning to night in different combinations’; love ‘to be introduced to an enormous range of new but singable music’; love the friendly atmosphere; and, love the beautiful surroundings.

The Summer School of Renaissance Music has evolved over 25 years. Our tutors told us that the standard of music-making has improved, year on year.

Every day started with ‘Warm Ups’, shortly before 9. Deborah Catterall is an outstanding singing teacher and warmer-upper; we progressed from body balance to relaxation, Alexander-style; we graduated from deep to controlled breathing; we made sounds, then notes, then harmonies. After 15 minutes, we were superbly poised for the singing and playing to come.

The singers assembled in small matched choirs, the viol-players and wind players in matched consorts. In the course of an hour and a half, each choir had tried two or three motets or madrigals, all of the music new to us. The principles of singing together were emphasised, in different ways, by different tutors, on successive days. It helped that I was an experienced sight-reader, but this was not an essential.

After coffee, we singers were combined with instrumentalists, in consorts of 10 to 15. I was doubled with a flute, a recorder and a viol, on different days. A spirit of mutual support prevailed under these circumstances, probably reflecting the camaraderie of the musicians in a Spanish cathedral, where the music (of Morales, for example) was composed and originally played. The emphasis was on enjoying the experience of performing an unfamiliar piece of music, re-creating the atmosphere of the Renaissance.

A vast range of options opened up in the afternoons; one-to-a-part consorts, two-to-a-part consorts, try a consort for ‘terrified’ beginners, sing a lute song, try a lute, try a viol, try a recorder, try other winds, try verse anthems, try singing from facsimiles, try improvisations, try singing or playing with Renaissance viols (brought, one day, by Richard and Vivian Jones), vocal technique. . . not to mention the opportunity to buy a CD, a recorder, music or books about music. Here was a wonderful pot-pourri of choices, deftly arranged in suitable groups with tutors with suitable music. Or, the delights of Ambleside or the beautiful countryside, could be enjoyed.

After a cup of tea, we enjoyed the intellectual bit; ‘Music and Rhetoric’ one day, ‘Byrd, the Catholics and the Consort song’, (an illustrated lecture delivered by a PhD student from Lancaster University), another day. A ‘Grand Tour’ of Renaissance Italy featured each of our 8 tutors; for 10 minutes, each shared their knowledge and enthusiasm for a musical aspect of 8 different Italian cities. Striggio’s 40-part motet, ‘Ecce, beatam lucem’, was the after-tea delightful sing on the last day.

After dinner, there was something for all 83 of us. Often one or more polychoral pieces:-

a Mass in 12 parts by Phillippe Rogier,

Exultate iusti by Hieronymus Praetorius,

Venetian pieces – O ben felice a pieno and O passi sparsi by Striggio,

So ben mi c'ha ben tempo by Vecchi,

Maria stabat and Canticum di dio by A Gabrieli

and O magnum mysterium by G. Gabrieli.

On these occasions, all of us were assigned parts.

One night it was singing for all – two lovely motets by Hans Leo Hassler – O sacrum convivium and O altitudo divitiarum. Another night, we enjoyed dancing for all; a pavane and a bransles, newly devised for us by Elizabeth Dodd, provided a useful complementary activity to our music-making.

For me, a special part of each day starts at 10 pm, and 2006 did not disappoint. Those who still have enough energy and voice, assemble to sing informally through motets and masses. This session is ably facilitated by Roger Wilks, who provided a wonderful succession of new pieces, and one or two favourites on request. The quality and accuracy of sight reading, and thus the ability to experience such a range of new and exciting music, was thrilling. A high spot this year was to sing two verse anthems; Sing Joyfully by John Mundy, and When Jesus Sat at Meat by Richard Nicholson, with four of our tutors playing a quartet of viols.

The week ended with the traditional Musical Banquet, where musical items are interspersed between the courses of food, illustrating all the activities of the week. This was followed by the traditional informal singing of madrigals from the Oxford Book of English Madrigals – this year 19 of them – until we retired, exhausted but exhilarated.

For me, this week was just wonderful. The standard of music was higher than ever. The range of music we were introduced to, was amazing. Did I really manage to sing pieces by:-

Victoria - Ne timeas, Maria; Vidi speciosam; Ave, regina coelorum;

Lassus - Domine, Dominus noster; Da pacem, Domine; Heroum soboles, amor orbis; Jubilate Deo; Regina caeli laetare; various chansons; Peccavi; Mirabile mysterium; Fremuit spiritu Jesu;

Lechner - Missa Domine, Dominus noster;

Penalosa - Pater noster;

Guerrero – Surge, propera, amica mea; Ave virgo sanctissima; Maria Magdalene;

Clemens non Papa - Vox in Rama; Veni electa mea; Job, tonso capite; O Maria, verhans rosa;  
Ego flos campi;

Cipriano da Rore – Descendi in hortum meum; O Sonno;

Gombert – Magnificat primi toni;

Esquivel – Vox clamantis in deserto;

Vivanco – Ecce sacerdos magnus; Quis dabit capiti meo aquam;

Hassler – Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum; Beata es, Virgo Maria; Dixit Maria;

Gesualdo – O come e gran martire;

Verdelot – madrigals;

Crequillons – chansons;

Josquin – Scaramella va alla guerra;

Obrecht – Factor orbis

Morales – Tu es Petrus; Andreas Christi famulus;

as well as works by:-

John Hilton – Fair Oriana, Beauty's Queen;

Weelkes – Welcome sweet pleasure;

Byrd – Veni sancte Spiritus ut emitte;

Tomkins –The fauns and satyrs tripping.

Here was a wealth of music, new to me, that I could take home to try again with our one-to-a-part group, or in our small choir.

The tutors were all teaching and sharing their passions, in a friendly but scholarly way. The organisation of so many different groups and combinations was meticulous, and much appreciated. The friendliness was palpable; it was lovely to meet 60 or so veterans from previous courses, but also to welcome newcomers. I was not aware of any cliques, and showing off was minimal. Grumbles were rare. Informal conversations about all aspects of music, abounded. And the weather. . . gorgeous.

Despite this superb evolved programme, our tutors were keen for feedback and suggestions for improvement. They will start with a blank sheet to plan next year's course. I am already keen to sign up for 2007.

David Adshead