

Summer School Ambleside 2002

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I arrived at Ambleside for this years Summer School of Renaissance Music with only one aim in mind, and this was to immerse myself in as much music as possible. In actual fact I ended up taking away much more than an increased knowledge of the repertoire, and in this report I will try and relate what for me, at least, were the most rewarding aspects of the course, and above all why I want to return next year.

Whilst the most attractive feature of the week is the opportunity to engage in new musical experiences, everyone on the course has their own skill as singer or instrumentalist that they wish to develop throughout the week. This was catered for by the first session of each day, which grouped musicians into like consorts and the choir, and stayed the same each day. As a singer myself, it was evident that something special was taking place in the choir even as we began our first piece, Byrd's Memento Homo. The sound of experienced sight readers with a real enthusiasm and skill for singing Renaissance polyphony is something to be treasured, and for me personally this set the tone for the rest of the week. Added to this was the fact that the sound was given direction and purpose by a tutor, Roger Wilkes, who has the ability not only to interpret music imaginatively, but also to convey this to the choir. It was a revelation, for example, that with one of our main pieces for the week, Morley's Laboravi in gemitu meo, rehearsal really did focus on the meaning of the text, a point that is often made in connection with Renaissance choral music, but less often realised in practice.

Alongside the main ensembles, then, the course offers the opportunity to get involved in smaller groups, tackling more specialist repertoire with a tutor. The sessions of dance I attended, led by Elizabeth Dodd, were fascinating on one level because of the movements themselves and the teamwork involved in practising them. This was made all the more worthwhile, however, because of the insight gained into the social context of instrumental music, particularly rhythmical and metrical nuances, which became real when we presented the work accompanied by a mixed consort of instruments.

In another session a small group of us were taken through Josquin's Pater Noster by Peter Syrus, and in another Jonathan Morgan introduced us to Claude le Jeune's May fait les Bois and Giovanni Gabrieli's Deus Qui Beatum Marcum. Although inevitably these sessions tended to end just at the point when you thought things were getting interesting, they worked really well as a way of bringing alive music that you might not encounter all too often, even as an early music enthusiast.

The biggest revelation to me in this smaller context was the music of Palestrina, of which the motets Pulchra es and Tu es Petrus seemed uncomplicatedly beautiful when we sang them one

afternoon. Until that moment Palestrina to me had always conjured up images of textbook examples of contrapuntal technique, and although this was simply the product of my experience, I am grateful that I have now had the opportunity to redress this. It is easy to admire the technique of Palestrina, Byrd and Lassus, but I believe that what the Summer School confirmed for me is that the only way to really understand the music is by experiencing it in practice.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of my week at Ambleside was simply how much was packed into each day: indeed, as a singer it is not impossible to find yourself singing continuously from after breakfast until the end of the 'after hours' session at 11.00p.m! For the fact that my voice had not packed in by Monday night I must thank Deborah Catterall, the vocal tutor, who coaxed our voices into action each morning with an imaginative warm up that prepared us nicely for the day ahead. As well as this, the lesson I had with Deborah was valuable in that she was actually able to explain to me how I should approach supporting my voice; something that sounds simple but as many will know is far from being easy.

After dinner each evening was the chance for all the course participants to get involved in some larger scale pieces. Working through the music from one of the Florentine Intermedi was both informative and fun, as was the twenty-one part Praetorius motet, both reminders that the idea of Renaissance music as being typically small-scale is sometimes misleading. In both cases, along with Dancing and Singing For All sessions, the fact that you were alongside sixty other people who shared your enthusiasm was deeply satisfying, and I suspect that it is here, in shared music making, that the real attraction of the week lies.

Other highlights of the week which I must mention include the walk to Rydal Cave, where the sounds of Victoria and Lassus reverberated around the cavern walls, much to the amazement of passing walkers who were treated to a free concert! Clive Walkley's interactive Thomas Morley lecture was still interesting even if it was the second time this year I've been treated to it: I think the idea of focusing the week around one or two composers adds good historical value to the practical nature of the course. Although there was little I didn't manage to get involved in, the presentation of solo lute songs with Hugh Cherry on the final day was so enthralling that I have made that a target for the future.

Are there any criticisms? Well not with the course itself, but I do feel that the lack of young people at the Summer School is partly indicative of the situation of music education in Britain today, in that Renaissance music does not enjoy the exposure it should do at all levels of the education system. My enjoyment of the week was partly tempered by the knowledge that this wonderful resource could make a big contribution to the development of many more students of Renaissance Music, and next year I hope to try and do something about this.

As is traditional, the final night of the course was taken up by a splendid musical banquet, where dinner was interspersed with musical offerings from various small ensembles. The common

theme was to give thanks for all the hard work of Clive Walkley, who this year stood down as Director of the Summer School. As it was Clive who suggested to me earlier this year that I would find the course 'useful and interesting' (and how right he was!) I owe him a particular debt of thanks. During the week it was not hard to see the respect with which Clive is held for his part in making the course what it is now, and it seems appropriate to repeat the thanks of all course members to Clive for establishing a very special week in the year.

Philip Taylor