A Prospectus for the New Season

In 2021 we have two major anniversaries to celebrate:

The Huelgas Ensemble turns 50 years old!

We are very much looking forward to marking this birthday milestone by celebrating with our audiences over many wonderful concerts.

At the same time we will, of course, be commemorating one of the greatest composers of polyphony, as 2021 heralds the 500th anniversary of the death of Josquin Desprez. We have put together a series of programmes packed with the master’s seminal, groundbreaking works.

But Huelgas won’t be stopping at 50 years! That is why our artistic director Paul Van Nevel has once more put together a variety of new programmes for the years ahead. These programmes uncover some real gems, revealing unknown compositions of the highest quality, all freshly picked and exclusively edited for the Huelgas Ensemble.

In addition, we would like to revisit some programmes in our repertoire that we feel deserve to be heard again and again. These “revivals” are somewhat cheaper than the new productions due to the shorter rehearsal times required.

All programmes can be booked at any time, i.e. dates do not need to be tied. Should you be interested in hosting a concert series then please contact us for possible dates.

It goes without saying that any specific programme requests or themes are also welcomed. Our artistic director Paul Van Nevel, with his extensive knowledge of the repertoire, is always happy to tailor programmes to specific concepts and needs.
“a cappella” programmes

The Unsung Orient

This programme is dedicated to the perception of the Orient in the Middle Ages. The Orient has forever stood for a fascination with exotic beauty and, at the same time, for the trepidation of the unfamiliar. Our programme captures this tension via two idioms. The first part focuses on the scenic description of the Three Kings from the New Testament. Composers of the Middle Ages took inspiration not only from the fairytale-like journey of the Magi, but also from the horrific reaction of Herod, setting music to texts concerned with the king's brutal murdering of infants.

In the second part our focus turns to the medieval trauma associated with the fall of the city of Jerusalem. Numerous laments about the loss of the holy city were set to music. Attempts to recapture this Catholic “capital” also influenced artistic endeavours, with the Crusades inspiring numerous works. Of course, the stops on the way to Jerusalem also played an important role in the Crusades. From the 12th century onwards, for example, Cyprus, as an important location, developed a unique cultural flowering, which can be heard in the impressive and highly developed Cypriot repertoire.

The programme contains exclusively anonymous compositions handed down from the 13th and 14th centuries from France, England, Spain and Cyprus.

The Uncharted Territories of the Franco-Flemish

Franco-Flemish compositions have been celebrated in modern day concert programmes for a long time now. Oddly, however, not more than a handful of composers from the period have seen the light of day in recent public performance. Most of the composers, who number well over 200, remain neglected, their works lying dormant, undiscovered in many a library. This is all the more regrettable as what we have here is a huge pool of works of the highest quality. This programme therefore focuses on the breathtaking works of today's virtually unknown Franco-Flemish composers.

We concentrate on works whose composers were highly regarded by their contemporaries in their day. In striking contrast to their present unfamiliarity these composers held highly important posts with their compositions widely disseminated through a multitude of manuscripts and prints.

This varied programme includes: a magnificent six-voice motet “Surgens Jesu” by Michael des Buissons, a native of Lille, who was employed as a singer and composer at the imperial court in Vienna in the second half of the 16th century; a Magnificat for three sopranos by Johannes de Billon; works by Nicolas de Wismes, Jacques Bultel, Nicolaes Craen, and last but not least the premiere of an eight-voice motet by Pierre de Manchicourt.

Polyphony at the periphery: high culture on the borders of Europe

In this programme, the listener is confronted with works that are far removed from traditional European music centres such as Rome, Paris, Cambrai, Munich or Venice. On this expedition through the “provinces” we discover some real lucky finds from Cyprus, Naples and Palermo, each of which as captivating as the next thanks to their high quality and autonomous creativity.

Cyprus was a French colony in the late Middle Ages, and the court of Nicosia developed a style of music that deviated strongly from the traditional forms of the mainland. A particular manuscript attests to this, containing more than 300 polyphonic compositions. Rest assured, the Huelgas Ensemble will present some of its more surprisingly potent works. The Renaissance courts of Naples and Palermo could also be referred to as colonies in a certain way, since they were conquered by the Aragonese court in 1442. Towards the end of the Renaissance, an “avant-garde” movement emerged in the musical circles here, creating, above all, madrigals of a highly idiosyncratic and expressive nature. Significantly, local composers such as Agostino Agresta, Giacomo Tropea, Scipione Lacorcia, Giovanni de Macque and Giuseppe Palazzotto described their compositions as “Stravagante Pensiero” and “Affinamento del gusto musicale” - not a single phrase in their works sounds “normal”.

Huelgas Ensemble
Rome vs. Naples

This programme subtly illuminates the profound musical changes that took place around 1600. It is especially in Italy that one finds a curious juxtaposition of preserving and continuing traditional polyphonic techniques with, at the same time, revolutionary innovations, all taking place pretty much side by side. Our focus here is on showcasing two grand cities divided by barely 250 km: Rome and Naples. We present composers whose names nobody will have heard of today, but who wrote musical history in the most headstrong manner, at the highest level. The Roman composer Francesco Soriano (1548 - 1621), a pupil of Palestrina, enfant terrible and yet highly esteemed, represents here the “prima prattica”. His elaborate “Missa ut re mi fa sol la” - undoubtedly a highlight of late Renaissance polyphony – forms the centrepiece of our programme. Between the mass movements we place works from Naples, where at the same time an extravagant avant-garde movement had established itself. From this significant set we have chosen three composers: Scipione Lacorcia (c. 1580 - after 1620), Giovanni de Macque (c. 1548 - 1624) and Gioseppe Palazzotto e Tagliavia (c. 1583 - after 1653). Their highly expressive madrigals break all the then established rules of harmony and open up completely new worlds of musical expression. A programme full of magnificent music that entices the audience with a fresh insight into (music) history.

This programme will be recorded live for CD release in spring 2021.

The Landscape of the Franco-Flemish

We have good news: in spring 2021 Paul Van Nevel’s book “Het landschap van de Polyfonisten - De wereld van de Franco-Flamands” will be published in a French translation!

In his book Van Nevel traces the hypothesis that the melancholic and imitative style of Franco-Flemish composers was shaped by the character of the landscapes, which they would have experienced in their childhood (stillness, a safe environment, melancholia). Together with the photographer Luk Van Eeckhout Paul Van Nevel spent over twenty years journeying through the Franco-Flemish scenery to produce a fascinating and substantial work with no fewer than 168 magnificent photos.

In this concert the audience is presented with this hypothesis head-on: for each of the thirteen works performed the landscapes of each composer’s childhood will be projected for all to see. Listeners will be swept away to another Franco-Flemish world by a total of twenty-five photographs of landscape and pictures of Franco-Flemish cathedrals, whilst the Huelgas Ensemble performs works by Antoine Busnois, Nicholas Gombert, Johannes Ockeghem, Josquin Desprez and Pierre Manchicourt, to name but a few. Audience members will experience the interplay between landscape and music in the most arrestingly intimate way.

In the Midst of Life we are in Death -
Simone de Bonefont: Missa pro mortuis cum quinque vocibus (1556)

Settings of the Requiem mass have always been unique compositions, the significance of these works magnified by them standing beyond a composer’s daily compositional remit. It is therefore astonishing that Simone de Bonefont’s monumental, seven-part Requiem setting for five voices has remained undiscovered for so long. A deeply moving work Bonefont’s “Mass for the Dead” opens in simple poignancy building in intensity throughout to the Sanctus, before closing with the most ethereal, trance-inducing Agnus Dei and Lux aeterna. Today a complete unknown the only piece of evidence that we have concerning our composer is that he worked at the cathedral of Clermont-Ferrand around 1550 - 1557. The mass was published in the form of a choir book in 1556 by the Parisian printer Nicolai du Chemin. Given the high quality of his impressively inspired polyphony (based largely on the contrapuntal aesthetic of the Franco-Flemish style) it is remarkable that there is no further information to shed light on the life of this French Renaissance composer.

Interspersed between the movements of the Requiem are settings of the Media vita text by the composers Arnold von Bruck, Jacobus de Kerle, Orlandus Lassus and Nicolas Gombert.

A live recording of this programme was released by the Cypres label in April 2020, and has garnered high praise from the international press.
Josquin’s magical polyphony - on the 500th anniversary of the death of Josquin Desprez (ca 1455 - 27 August 1521)

For Josquin Year 2021 the Huelgas Ensemble has put together three different sized programmes (with 8, 10 or 12 singers, and with the possibility of a special programme with 24 singers), each one presenting different aspects of Josquin’s oeuvre. The programmes differ in cost depending on the size of the cast, but are all equally varied and of the highest quality.

I. The hidden treasures of Josquin
This programme focuses on lesser-known aspects of Josquin’s oeuvre. The repertoire ranges from his early experimental period (the Missa L’ami Baudichon is the first Mass he wrote), and from almost unknown two part motets up to the period when he was at the height of his powers, including a surprisingly innovative late six voice chanson. The programme includes sacred and secular works, chansons, motets and parts of the Mass. With this programme the Huelgas Ensemble presents a portrait of the composer that illustrates the immense diversity of his works.

Works include: Sanctus & Agnus Dei from the “Missa L’ami Baudichon”, “Per illud ave prolatum”, “Ut Phoebi radiis”, chanson “Bergerette savoyenne” à 4 and then the Sanctus from the Mass of the same name by his colleague Antoine Brumel.

Cast: 8 singers

II. From courtly chamber music to monumental architecture
This programme presents the immense versatility of Josquin’s oeuvre, spanning works from the most intimate two part textures to pieces of monumental complexity. Above all, music from the pinnacle of his achievements is chosen, works that evidently impressed his composer colleagues during his lifetime. In this way, the Huelgas Ensemble offers the audience a wonderful insight into the oeuvre of Josquin, with all its startling facets.

Works include: „Praeter rerum seriem”, „Exaudi Domine”, „Plus nulz regretz”, „En non saichant“, „Inviolata integra et casta es”, „Benedicta es”, parts of the “Missa Pange lingua”.

Cast: 12 singers or 24 singers

Should the cast be expanded to 24 singers then the programme will include two of Josquin’s most monumental works: Qui habitat and Inviolata.

III. A polyphonic testament: the late works of Josquin Desprez
After a somewhat eventful life with countless journeys Josquin withdrew for the last 17 years of his life to Condé-sur-l’Escaut, where in seclusion, far from European political turmoil, he was to compose works full of innovation, daring and marked contrapuntal expertise. This programme is largely dedicated to the masterpieces of this period. We also include a number of works dating from 1500 that start to reveal the ingenious traits of his final years.

Works include: „Ut Phoebi radiis”, composed in 1501 on the occasion of a meeting of the Order of the Golden Fleece; the enigmatic “Huc me sydereo”, which can be performed with both five and six voices; the monumental motets “Praeter rerum seriem” and “Benedicta es caelorum Regina”; some five and six part chansons (a novelty in Josquin’s time, in the face of conventional four part harmony), including the melancholic “Je me complains”; and finally some movements from his late masses.

Cast: 10 singers
**Programmes for voices and instruments**

**Counterpoint !**

This programme could also be called "The Musical Offering avant la lettre", as we present, in the most striking way possible, a broad spectrum of contrapuntal ideas and polyphonic techniques. The listener can marvel at the impressive virtuosity as the most seemingly unsolvable musical "problems" are revealed. At the same time, however, one can be intoxicated by the immense splendour of sound that the great polyphonists were forever reinventing despite tricky constructive challenges.

The programme contains examples of polyphonic composition based around the hexachord. This medieval scale of "ut re mi fa sol la" spawned an astonishingly rich seam of repertoire. We hear how the hexachord was used variously as a cantus firmus or as a melodic motif not only in ever-changing forms, but also in a surprisingly versatile and contrapuntally virtuose manner. In addition we explore the complex architectural structures built upon various Gregorian chant cantus firmi. To finish we present compositions in the so-called "floridus" style, in which all contrapuntal voices consist of ornamented melodies.

Our programme includes: movements from Antoine Brumel's Hexachord mass and Josquin Desprez's mass based on "Malheur me bat", six-part choral motets by Pierre de Manchicourt, and also secular and sacred works by Ludwig Daser, Michael des Buissons, Constanzo Porta, Robert de Févin, Johannes Ghiselin and anonymous composers. A programme full of gobsmacking creativity and unexpected twists!

**Between Luther and Lassus – Ludwig Daser and Adam Rener**

It took quite some time for a self-contained, polyphonic music culture to develop in the German-speaking world. It was not until the second half of the 15th century that its own, indigenous German forms and impulses emerged, which in turn led to its first great blossoming in the 16th century. Unfortunately, these early stages of Germany’s musical advances have so far been woefully neglected on the concert platform – a state of affairs which is downright criminal! In this programme we aim to help this culture regain its rightful place and present the audience with two composers, two true figureheads of polyphonic German musical art in the 16th century.

Ludwig Daser (c. 1525 - 1589), Lassus’ predecessor at the Munich Hofkapelle, was a gifted and highly praised composer, many of whose works have been passed down to us thanks to the comprehensive choirbooks of the Bavarian chapel. Our programme includes his monumental six-part Missa "Praeter rerum seriem" on the motet of the same name by Josquin. Whether a coincidence or not, Cipriano de Rore visited the Munich Hofkapelle during Daser’s time there - and also wrote a mass on this motet.

The second work in the programme is "De Sancta Cruce Officium Misse", a seven-part work that bears rich testimony to the contrapuntal virtuosity of Adam Rener (c. 1485 - 1520). Rener came from Liège and, together with Heinrich Isaac, introduced the Franco-Flemish style to Germany. He spent almost his entire life in Torgau. The work in question is preserved in one of the more than 20 (!) choirbooks of the period, housed today in the library of the University of Jena. The instrumentation here is particularly appealing, the piece being performed with 8 singers and a consort of 3 dulcians.

**Guillaume Dufay: A Composer for all Seasons**

There are composers that simply cannot be overestimated, with Guillaume Dufay (c. 1400 - 1474) being a prime example. His breath-taking isorhythmic motets, for example, formed a bridge between the constructivism of the Late Middle Ages and the sophisticated counterpoint on which future generations would build. Crafted during a busily itinerant life Dufay’s output unequivocally surpasses that of his contemporaries in both quantity and quality. Not one genre of polyphonic music escaped his innovations and inimitable form of style, even making him renowned across Europe in his own lifetime. It was not only in his sacred compositions but also in his ceremonial commissioned works, and his Italian and French secular pieces that he was able to demonstrate his unrelenting creativity and originality.

Added to this Dufay acted as an ambassador, either serving or accompanying the foremost ecclesiastical (Rom, Kamerijk/Cambrai, Bruges) and secular (Malatesta, Savoy, Florence) establishments, bringing Franco-Flemish art to the most far-flung corners of Europe.

This programme displays every facet of Dufay’s art – both vocally and instrumentally.
Repertoire

The following selection presents a small but representative range of repertoire that the Huelgas Ensemble has been building up since 1971.

Alpha & Omega – Polyphony of the Middle Ages
An “a cappella” programme that runs the gamut of medieval music

Francesca Caccini (1587 - 1640): La Liberazione di Ruggiero - balletto con prologo e tre scene
A concert performance of the first opera composed by a woman (CD Sony, 2018)

The Mirror of Claudio Monteverdi (1567 - 1643):
Missa da Capella a sei voci fatta sopra il motetto in illo tempore del Gomberti
Monteverdi’s epic work in the “prima prattica” style sharply contrasted with progressive madrigals of his predecessors (CD Sony, 2016)

The Eton Choirbook (c. 1480 - 1505)
The choirbook from Eton College, Windsor: the sublime sounds of the Tudor period (CD Sony, 2012)

The Art of the Cigar
A tongue-in-cheek program all about cigar smoking. Music from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century. (CD Sony, 2011)

For doubled-up vocal quartet, and string quartet: Huelgas Ensemble & Minguet Quartett (CD ECM, 2015)

The cycle: The Ear of…
In this series of programmes the Huelgas Ensemble ask the question: what would certain figures or groups of people have heard musically…
These programmes can be performed separately, and there is also the possibility of a combined “Ear Programme” as one cycle.

The Ear of Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400 - 1464)
The Ear of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472 - 1553)
The Ear of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598 - 1664) (CD Cypres, 2014)
The Ear of Pieter Paul Rubens (1577 - 1640)
The Ear of the Huguenots (CD Sony, 2017)
The Ear of Theodoor Van Loon (c.1490 - 1541)
The Ear of Christopher Columbus Kolumbus (before 1451 - 1506) (CD Sony, 2019)

Monographs
- Nicolas Gombert (ca. 1495 - ca. 1560)
- Cipriano de Rore (1515 - 1565)
- Jean Richafort (ca. 1480 - ca. 1547)
- Pierre de Manchicourt (ca. 1510 - 1564)
- Michelangelo Rossi (ca. 1601 - 1656)
- Jacobus De Kerle (1531/1532 - 1591)
- Jacob Clement (ca. 1510/15 - 1555/56) alias Clemens non Papa
- Alexander Agricola (1446 - 1506)
- Robert White (ca. 1538 - 1574)
- Firminus Caron (ca. 1440 9 - ca. 1495)
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