

# Andrew Benson-Wilson : Early Music Reviews +

## Leuven: 'Voices of Passion'

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**Alamire Foundation**

*Passie van de Stemmen* (Voices of Passion)

**Huelgas Ensemble & Park Collegium**

**Park Abbey, Leuven. 22/23 April 2017**

Musically, Leuven, the historic city about 15 miles east of Brussels (and the capital of the Flemish Brabant province), has been rather overlooked by their fellow Belgian cities of Antwerp, Bruges and Brussels. But as the medieval seat of the Dukes of Brabant, it was central to the geographical area that saw one of the most important developments in Renaissance choral music, variably referred to as Burgundian, Brabant, Franco-Flemish. Nowadays this approximates to the Low Country regions of northern France, Belgium, and the



south Netherlands. It is therefore entirely appropriate that since 1991 it has been the home of the **Alamire Foundation** (<http://www.alamirefoundation.org/en/organisation>), the International Center for the Study of Music in the Low Countries, founded in conjunction with the Catholic University of Leuven and *Musica, Impulscentrum voor muziek*, Neerpelt. It is resident in the *Huis van de Polyfonie*

([http://www.alamirefoundation.org/en/huis-van-de-](http://www.alamirefoundation.org/en/huis-van-de-polyfonie)

*polyfonie*) (House of Polyphony, pictured), one of the gatehouses to Leuven's historic Park Abbey. The Foundation was named after **Petrus Alamire** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Alamire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Alamire)) (c1470-1536) whose pseudonym Alamire (the letters *A la mi re* derive from the musical scale) reflects his career producing the most important 16th century music calligraphs and choir books, helping to spread Low Countries polyphony across Western Europe. He lived in Antwerp and Mechelen. The 2015 Laus Polyphoniae festival in Antwerp (reviewed [here](https://andrewbensonwilson.org/2015/09/18/laus-polyphoniae-2015-antwerp/) (<https://andrewbensonwilson.org/2015/09/18/laus-polyphoniae-2015-antwerp/>)) celebrated his work, and included a sumptuous exhibition in Antwerp Cathedral, showing many Alamire manuscripts.

**Park Abbey** (<http://www.museumparkabdij.be/index-en.html>) is a Premonstratensian (Norbertine) Abbey and monastery founded in 1129. It is situated on the edge the city of Leuven. The complete Abbey complex of the 1228 Romanesque church and later monastic buildings, farm, water-mill, tithe barn, and fishing ponds has survived virtually untouched since the final building phase in the seventeenth century. Nowadays, very few canons still live there, and the whole complex is undergoing a major restoration with a view to opening several sections of the hitherto closed abbey to the public. Under the name of *Museum Parcum* (<http://museumparkabdij.be/index-en.html#exhibition>) for Religion, Culture and Art, a section of the restored buildings will open between October 2017 and February 2018 for the temporary exhibition *Seclusion and Liberation* before closing again for the completion of the restoration.

For some years now, amongst their many other musical activities, the Alamire Foundation have been curating a short annual festival, *Passie van de Stemmen* (Voices of Passion). The 2017 incarnation include five concerts, opening with The Sixteen. The first of the following two concerts was given in Park Abbey by one of Belgium's best known vocal consorts, the **Huelgas Ensemble**, directed by their founder, Paul Van



Nevel. They were founded in 1970, and are based in Leuven's Groot Begijnhof. Their concert focussed on the music of Jean Richafort, a pupil and musical disciple of Josquin des Pres. Richafort's *Salve Regina* à 5 is found in one of Alamire's most colourful manuscripts, now in Munich. It is one of Richafort's most impressive works. The interplay between two sets of voices was particularly evident in the opening sequence, where a rapid rising motif moves through the voices. The clarity of the upper voices was noticeable in the soaring lines of *Ad te suspiramus*, as was the control of sibilants by the whole choir in the earlier *et spes nostra* section.



The *Salve* was followed by the four-part motet *Sufficiebat nobis paupertas*, performed with two of the singers standing in the high pulpit above the other singers, a not entirely successful arrangement in terms of the integration of the polyphony or vocal texture. It ends with an interesting cadence, which arrives almost unexpectedly as the voices creep towards it. The highlight came

with Richafort's finest work, the six-part *Requiem in memoriam Josquin Desprez*, probably written in 1521 just after Josquin's death. Richafort quotes from Josquin, and interweaves into the polyphony the Gregorian chant *Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis*, often used by Josquin, and here sung in canon by the two tenor voices. The rather lugubrious polyphony of the opening *Introitus* is enlivened somewhat in the *Kyrie*, but returns in the *Graduale*, the high soprano voice floating gently over the other voices. The *Offertorium* includes some wonderful harmonic clashes. Van Nevel shades the texture by subtle and well controlled changes in volume, keeping the broad structure and sweep of the music.

The concert opened with the *Sanctus* from the 1556 *Missa pro mortuis cum quinque vocibus* by Simon de Bonnefond, a taster for next year's festival (21-22 & 26-28 April 2018) when the whole mass will be performed by the Huelgas Ensemble. The 13 singers sang in their distinctive circular formation in the centre of the audience, rotating 360° through the four cardinal points during the concert, with Van Nevel conducting, as usual, with the blunt end of a tuning fork.

The following afternoon (23 April, and a Heritage Open Day at Park Abbey), **Park Collegium**, the house ensemble of the Alamire Foundation, presented a lecture-performance in the Abbey church on the music of Nicolas Gombert led by their director Stratton Bull. Gombert was born around 15 years after Richafort and was also a pupil of Josquin. He was connected to the court of the Emperor Charles V as a singer and later as



'master of the children'. He also became a priest. His career had an abrupt hiatus when he was sentenced to hard labour for sexually molesting one of the boys in his charge. The eight singers of Park Collegium sang extracts from the 1557 *Missa Je suis desheritée*, one of the eight *Magnificats* (possibly written as a way of seeking a pardon), two motets, and the chanson *Ung jour viendra*. Stratton Bull explored and demonstrated many aspects of polyphonic composition and issues of present

day performance including speed, word layout, ficta, alternatum, and singing from choir books in original notation. At one point during the Mass extracts, the singers moved into the chancel to give a better idea of how the singers of the time would have performed, and how it would have sounded from the nave of the Abbey church.

The choir was very impressive in what must have been a complicated programme of demonstration snippets of music, often in different styles. I was particularly impressed with the clear and stable voice of soprano Patrizia Hardt.



My visit to Leuven also include a tour around many of the as yet unopened parts of Park Abbey. This was a high status Abbey, and there are some very impressive rooms, including a library and a dining room with a spectacular plaster ceiling, including the scene pictured. The stained glass from the cloister windows, which had earlier been sold off, is being slowly regained and restored. It will be well worth seeing when the restoration is complete. More information about the city of Leuven can be found [here](http://www.visitleuven.be/en) (<http://www.visitleuven.be/en>).

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