

The Diary of One Who Did Not Disappear (No. 3)

Veronika Paroulková, *Divadelní noviny*, 19 October 2017

Noble harmonies, the finest modulations and dynamics, and unbelievable humility – all this is embodied in the Belgian vocal group the Huelgas Ensemble - twelve singers and their artistic leader Paul van Nevel. On Tuesday 10 October they gave a performance at the Church of St. Simon and St. Jude as part of the Early Music series run by the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK, now in its 83rd season. ([info here](#))

The church resounded first with their luminous and sublime rendition of the traditionally conceived *Messa da Cappella*, Claudio Monteverdi's master piece; in the second half we heard the works of several of his promising predecessors: Philippe De Monte, Nicola Vincentino, Cesare Tudino D'Atri, Giaches De Wert and Luca Marenzio. This programming offered a chance to appraise the contrast of two amazing compositional worlds.

Already the entrance of the Belgian ensemble's members was carried out in an almost symbolic way. A dignified, quiet procession of twelve figures, like twelve disciples, young people accompanied by an older greyish-haired man with fine but decisive gestures. Interestingly, Paul van Nevel conducted very sparingly, holding in his hand his folded glasses instead of a baton.

In a short welcoming speech he explained the unusual seating arrangement of the audience. The ensemble was placed in the middle of the church with the rows of seats facing them, and also in the remaining part of the auditorium and the altar area. From the first tones it was clear that it had been the right decision. The ensemble's sound penetrated equally to all of the church's nooks and crannies and everybody could enjoy the sound of the same quality and volume. At the same time, the conductor asked the audience not to applaud between individual pieces. It is always a problematic issue, but this way the audience was guaranteed an undisturbed experience. (Radek Baborák did the same at this year's Smetana's Litomyšl).

The music itself was ethereal; everything the scores offered, the Huelgas Ensemble delivered with excellence: clearly, sensitively, and movingly. Like bridges to the soul. I watched the people around me, and it was obvious that they were absorb by the music, the ensemble's execution and expression.

Claudio Zuan Antonio Monteverdi was born in Cremona, Italy in 1567 and died in Venice in 1643. He contributed to the history of music as a composer, singer, viola player and a *maestro di capella* who consummated the madrigal form; he was one of the founders of opera and an innovator who played a significant role in the transition towards the Baroque style of music. Among his instrumental novelties were for example tremolo and pizzicato! He spent his professional life in two important places, first in the service of the court of Mantua and later as *maestro di capella* at the San Marco Basilica in Venice, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Most of the other composers on the programme were one generation older than Monteverdi, of Italian or Flemish descent and wrote in a style that belonged to the Renaissance era. Their compositions interpreted by the Belgians sounded fresh, rich, and despite coming from roughly the same time span, were contrasting. The second half of the concert was diverse enough to dispel any concerns about monotony.

The internationally acclaimed Huelgas Ensemble specialises in mediaeval and Renaissance music; their return to Prague, at the Prague Symphony Orchestra's FOK invitation, came after a ten year gap. Do not miss their concert, if there is another opportunity in the future. If at all possible, I'll be there myself.