



## Oh Camelot, My Camelot

Part the Fourth. The After Concert and the Abby Yonder



Chateau de Flawinne, Photo Fenouil

25 FEB 2016 by DOMINIC ECKERSLEY

What better to follow a concert than a delicious home made fish soup, white wine, cream eclairs and a lot of people talking at the same time? The entrance hall; musicians now fulfilling their obligations to talk with the public I drift between being a member of the public, a friend, one of the knights of the oval table perhaps... It's nice though to congratulate the players and actually mean what you say! A long day ends finally with me, Geneviève and Benjamin, full of stories of hiccups and mistakes, train-wrecks and of those incredible moments when it all worked better than expected: the usual concert *post mortem*. It's odd to be part of it and not. Breakfast tomorrow at 11 o'clock sharp!

### Day Three

Shortly after the last meeting of the oval table, the harpsichord is packed up into the van and off we motor to northern France, to the abby Saint Michel de Thiérach, a 12th century abby of a religious community first formed in the late 7th century. I jump in the back of the van with the harpsichord and off we go, Frédéric driving. Finally, time to spend alone and in peace with Frédéric to talk about us, about harpsichord things, a time to increase bonds, and substantiate friendship, to catch up and just to hang.

After setting up the harpsichord at the abby, Geneviève decides she is enchanted by the acoustic and wants to try out her cello in this huge space. What better than some nice solo sonatas for cello and continuo? I will happily provide the harpsichord playing... What a delightful treat to play in that space, on that wonderful harpsichord, and with Geneviève's



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incredible vocation! Finally, after three days not playing at all, which is rare even when I am at home, I get to move my fingers again as they are supposed to move—at least until Frédéric announces he has the key—at last—for the Louis XIV organ stashed up in the gallery! Off he and I run, like school boys after a model train locomotive, and up precarious ladders, in a vain search for the electric blower switch. We will simply have to blow it by hand! Alternating between breathlessness from pumping with running to switch positions and breathlessness with awe from the fantastic reeds, the unimaginable *grand plein jeu*. The whole tonal assemblage of the organ transforms or rather confirms everything I ever thought about early French organ repertoire but never could find an instrument to match. This is right, this is the sound I had pictured. It did exist! How little time we have to play it, running back and forth, he and I like the little kids this huge toy had instantly turned us both into. Work has to be done, a CD has to be recorded. More rehearsals, sound checks, food... Another flacon has found its host, seven green bottles... As the violone starts to tune to the harpsichord a poor hapless bat is woken from its slumber and darts off down the 12th century chancel, it heads back up to us in the cross of the church and victory circles a couple of times above our heads before disappearing back into the darkness whence it came. Tuning in this room seems easy for the strings who appear to no longer just play outwards but hear too, as the sound comes back at them instead of flying from them much as had the bat. The film and sound team, Benoît and Rozenn, still buzzing about—between—around—inside the band like a John Donne elegy:

“Licence my roving hands, and let them go,  
Before, behind, between, above, below.  
O my America! my new-found-land,”

They film sometimes frighteningly close up to the musicians in action, one of the constants of the past days, their unending diligence and concentration, calm activity and curiosity. But, alas, Brussels lies a long way off and the film duo and I have to get there somehow before it gets too late. Two hours driving after a long day is something we don't want to put off for too long either.

I arrive at Brussels and am driven past the *Manneken Pis* my father told me about so often. It really does exist... I saw it! I am to stay at Frédéric's flat, albeit that I left him behind in France. His partner, Emmanuelle, receives me. I had met her only very briefly around the oval table once; her chestnut hair had been drawn taughtly back and held with a narrow head band such that I couldn't help but think of Da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine*. The resemblance was uncanny. She lets me in and we sit sipping chilled Belgian beer, chatting and chatting... She asks if she might introduce me to Henri. I already know what awaits. Frédéric had forewarned me. But to see Henri first hand is another matter altogether. She leads me across the room to where Henri is, Henri Hensch, a harpsichord built in 1751 by one of the finest German born instrument builders and the original from which the Bonza instrument I had been listening to—and playing—during the past couple of days, was made. It isn't really possible to describe in a few words how incredible the touch and tone, the evenness of registers and choirs, how pure each and every note is. Henri makes almost every harpsichord I have played, originals and copies, pale. Like a sword once turgid in a stone and then freed, this harpsichord was restored from silence back to playing music. Henri is—without doubt—the Excalibur of harpsichords.

But stood next to me is the delightful Emmanuelle, whose company is so enchanting, whose profound musical intelligence so captivating, that I am caught between two poles, the Excalibur of Henri, and the Guinevere of Emmanuelle. I can come to visit Excalibur another time, but these few moments with Guinevere are too precious to squander. We wander back to the table and the beers, talking into the night of tears and oboes, of quills and students, my mind slowly pickling on the gentle tang of the beer, the hard work of the alcohol, the exhaustion of so much thinking, seeing, doing—organ pumping, and finally, on the douceur of Guinevere's conversation.

Arising at an hour so indecent to me, I rush through coffee, accompanied by the still

half-sleeping Emmanuelle, and rush to the station, then onto the delayed train, through Brussels airport to the closed gate of my flight which is kindly opened quickly to let me through and onto the tarmac to my waiting griffon once more. And as I sit in my seat aboard, recovering from my rushing, I feel tears gently welling up in my eyes. This little Camelot, my Chateau Flawinne, with its knights of that oval table, the 12th century abby, Louis XIV organ, with Excalibur and Guinevere, had stolen a small part of my heart. I was not sure I wanted to leave this Ausonia, this Avalon, and to return to my own reality so soon.



## Dominic Eckersley

Music is the language of joy and pain which I try to use to express joy and distress with the human condition hoping it brings happiness and comfort to others.

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### Captions

1. Violone Powerhouse. Photo: © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
2. The side isle of the 12th century chancel of Saint Michel de Thiérach. Photo: © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
3. Ensemble Ausonia. Photo: © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
4. The pitos, or "finger snapping", of flamenco. Photo: © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
5. Viola with Louis XIV Organ. Photo: © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
6. Double Y-mics. Photo: © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015

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