



Oh Camelot, My Camelot

Part the First. Landing with my Wheels Spinning



Soundcheck for Ensemble Ausonia © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015

It's not often I am invited to a castle and when I am I don't have to think very long before accepting kindly. There was to be a performance of violin and harpsichord concerti at Castle Flawinne in Belgium; perhaps I would like to tag along and enjoy the music? Of *course* I would love to. No need to ask twice! Travel arrangements were made and a quick trip to the department store to ensure I had everything I would need, sorting out someone to care for my remarkable companion, my husky, and it was fixed. I was to be whisked away to Brussels and from there on to Namur whence I would be delivered to the castle. A feeling of excitement grew day by day as the date for my departure neared, with an anticipation of the unexpected, a profoundly unusual few days away from the madding crowds of Germany's new capital, Berlin. My mind pondered how the coming days would unfold. I planned to be at the castle for two days then off with the musicians to an abbey in France for the first day of their recording sessions and back to Brussels the same evening to overnight before my flight back to Berlin on the morning of the fourth day. At the time, four days seemed quite enough, more than enough. Wrong.

The morning of my intrepid journey started much as any other, albeit a good few hours earlier than I am of the habit or inclination! Still, espresso, shower, a handsome brisk walk with my dog and back home to pick up my carry-on and head out to the airport. Cordovan handmade shoes and Harris Tweed blazer set the irony of this poorer than poor church-mouse musician en route to the world of nobility. Berlin Schönefeld airport being really rather easy to navigate and their security checks even more so, I was climbing the stairs in



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no time to board my trusted steed, the flying griffon, which was to speed me away between its wings through the air to a distant wonderland, a land of castles, of formal gardens, of lords and ladies, of foreign foods and curious vernaculars. And strange it was to hear Flemish spoken, the language of Hans Ruckers the famous harpsichord builder, of Paul Peter Rubens, his neighbour and friend. After a thankfully uneventful flight—I do prefer my flights to be uneventful—I arrived at Brussels International Airport and made my way to the airport's viscera, the train station far, far below. I was in Belgium for the first time again in decades and for the first time as a guest rather than someone simply passing through en route to another distant place. But as strange as was everything I saw, the warm sound of French was familiar and comforting. I could still understand what was being said even so very many years since I last had cause to speak it. From the train windows looking into Belgian forests where, unlike Germany, no wolves roam; untamed woodland but missing one of its former noble occupants although perhaps not for much longer as our illusive woodland cousins gradually work their way back across Europe. Navigating train changes, arriving at Namur station and finding a cab seemed far more easy than it ought to have felt. Speaking French with the cabbie after 30 years with not a word of it passing across my lips, had an attractive air of conjuring to it. French, then, was to be my *Eldarin* for the next few days. So far, so good. This was a walk in the park! Finally, as the car turned off the main fare and started down an avenue lined with lime trees, I could see in the far distance directly ahead the yellow and white facade of Flawinne Castle, framed by the solid limestone-block edifices of the 17th century farm buildings which prelude it.

The harpsichordist, my dear friend Frédérick Haas, flustered almost, rushed across the courtyard to greet me and compensate my kind—if bewildered—driver. I wondered if this is how Emanuel Bach might have rushed to greet his visiting father at Potsdam; the fashionable court musician greeting the ageing organist after a long journey; a greeting of strong embraces and words of joy. Not as much flustered as rushed—he was in the middle of tuning the orchestra and about to start rehearsals. Quickly I am shown into the salon to greet the band briefly and then directly to the kitchen to meet our hostess, the delightful Dominique de Flawinne Vicomtesse de Spoelberch. A most engaging and cheerful lady, down to earth and welcoming of an interesting countenance and seeming lack of formality belying her status, almost *Candide* in a Voltaire sense. Swiftly I am sat down and offered some of what the musicians had just finished lunching upon. Dominique driving the coffee machine chatting jovially with me about the house, the gardens, my journey, Belgium, music... The view through the windows onto the gardens and lawns almost distracting in their elegance. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*

After some minutes of gentle but informative exchange, and of course the amazing salads and meats, cheeses and breads, coffee and apple juice *du jardin*, it is time to get down to business—the reason for my visit—listening to music making. Dominique brings me a comfortable antique chair from the lounge and sits me in the salon to quietly listen, absorb, learn, remember, enjoy. The rehearsal has started already with Bach's violin concerto in A minor, BWV 1041. Mira Glodeanu as soloist bouncing gently upon a large grey inflated spherical object I had to assume was a seat of some sort. Bach was filling the salon and my ears as I looked out onto the formal box-hedged gardens and long rectangular ponds, fountain in the midst and flanked by tall square-cropped privets. It was hard not to let the mind wander back to a time when these pieces were written, a time when this building was built, a time when this all tallied up to form a normality. It all seemed normal now, even close to 300 years later. The trees in the gardens moving gently in a silent and independently choreographed ballet while the clouds hung motionless in the pastel blue sky. The ornate chandeliers with electric bulbs and the grey inflated sphere being the only things to jolt me back to the 21st century. But yet, as German as we think of Bach to be, there was an Italian feeling to the music I had not noticed before, despite decades of listening to—and

playing—Bach concerti. Was it the mix of a group of francophone musicians with German music which incidentally resulted in an Italian air to the music? Were these the secret ingredients which the French-court influenced German composer brought to bear on his music to make it more Italian even than Italian? Or was it simply a concentrated conglomeration of highly informed and talented musicians thinking as one entity and allowing the genius of Bach to whisper through their bows, to sing through their strings?

At a convenient moment I interrupted the rehearsal. I had brought with me something for the musicians, ten green bottles, miniature liquid-filled flacons, containing a liquid my grandmother from Düsseldorf had had with her always when she came to visit in England. It was something which always made me think of travel, of distance, of far-away places. Born in Italy in the same year as Bach, in 1685, a certain Johann Maria Farina took over in 1714 the business his brother had started back in 1704 in Cologne, a business manufacturing an elixir, a medicinal infusion of bergamot, orange, grapefruit and lemon oils, extracts of lavender and bergamot blossom, suspended in alcohol and water. Intended initially for internal and external use, it became the most popular fragrance worn in the courts of 18th century Europe. Named by Farina in 1742 as “eau de cologne” after the town in which he lived, and renamed 4711 after the house number Napoleon’s soldiers subsequently painted on the wall of his place of business, the humble elixir’s secret formula has remained unchanged—and secret—to the present day. This then was the very same scent which had filled the salons of this and other castles all across Europe. Had Bach even smelled this same bright and buoyant perfume? How fitting that Farina had created it as a reminder of the morning air coming up from the valleys in his native Italy, his childhood home. How fitting now to be hearing Italian 18th century music with the 18th century fragrance of Italy, both created in Bach’s homeland of Germany.

And back to Bach, to the remarkable throwing upwards into the air of phrases which momentarily are suspended like tennis balls at the apex of their travel as the listener is held in awe, is moved with the upward momentum of the notes. How delightful our violist, Benjamin Lescoat, who, likewise, rises in his feet with these upward motions. His head so free of his viola, his viola so free in his grasp that I almost feel the bergamot oil again in my nostrils, opening and freeing them like the fresh chill of a morning mist. Yet his tone reminds of a subtle, exotic, deluxe Ecuadorian chocolate; smooth, light, rich but never pungent. The equal tension strings on what looks to be an Amati inspired instrument, with its decorated back, marquetry highlighted finger-board and tail-piece, carved head scroll, blending perfectly with the tone of the other strings—as virtuoso—as fluid—as any other of them. Bach himself loved to play the viola in his orchestras. It afforded him—as it does Benjamin—the ideal position geographically and musically to hear, absorb, respond and balance the other string players to each other. This band has an amazing viola!

Follows on the 25th of December with the Second Part:*The Rehearsal Goes On*



Dominic Eckersley

25 November, 2015

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Captions

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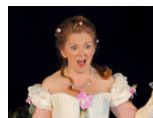
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