



## Oh Camelot, My Camelot

Part the Second. Let the Rehearsal Go On



The side isle of the 12th century chancel of Saint Michel de Thiérach © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015

25 DEC 2015 by DOMINIC ECKERSLEY

Bach's E major harpsichord concerto, BWV 1053: I muse at how courageous, how trusting, for a harpsichordist to invite me, a colleague harpsichordist, to be here, to hear him with his ensemble, to hear him playing harpsichord concerti! These pieces are hard! Worse even: he knows I come with pen and page! Frédérick Haas has brought with him a harpsichord by Augustus Bonza of 1991, a copy of a remarkable harpsichord by Jean Henri Hemsch of 1751. Coincidentally Cologne born, Hemsch worked in Paris building harpsichords of the French school but which nevertheless were very inspired by German building traditions. The tone is clear and less fluffy than normal French instruments. It speaks through the ensemble in a more cohesive and confident way without being muddled by the sound of the string players. Not an often played concerto, the E major is again delightfully bright and cheerful, almost vivaldirien.

The key of E major has the wonderfully confounding effect on the ensemble which its curious tonality is bound to create: the dominant key of E major is B major, of course. Yet on the harpsichord there is no D-sharp, the major third of a B major chord! Harpsichordists must choose between certain flats and sharps for their black notes: they can't have both a flat and a sharp on the same key, they can't have their cake and eat it too—such are the delights and limitations of historical tuning systems. So, while the strings are wanting to play D-sharps the harpsichord is playing E-flats. But how easily the violins adjusted and



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keeping a piquant feeling managed to temper the typically tart key of the dans pastorale, of E major to a light citrus zest. And all the while Mira Glodeanu, the first violinist, directing bowing vowels with a “ta-da-dom, ta-da-dom, ta-da ta-da ta-da-dom... excellent!” The harpsichord lid fully open, fully vermilion, as if showing its gums in fury as Frédérick glides effortlessly through the last movement. From where I am sat his face, at  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile, astonishingly similar to that of the Rameau portraits I have grown up loving.

Supper in the rectangular dining room with all of us sat around a large oval table however or wherever we please in an informal and egalitarian way, regardless of who or what we are. The oval table of Castle Flawinne brings me to think back to the round table of Camelot, a table where all would sit and discuss as equals, king or commoner, a table of democratic and free discussion. How refreshing after so long in the more considered company of Germans to hear the lucid melody, the rhythmic *inégalité* of French!

Likewise, morning breakfast together, a newly formed family of friends and colleagues, sitting together and sharing together food and stories of lives and loves. Fresh breads, conserves, meats, cheeses, coffee... I could get used to this, the food and conversation—the sustenance for the coming day of music. A flacon souvenir finds one of its intended victim. Nine green bottles.

A clearly much rested, much less travel-weary ensemble, starts the first rehearsal of the day; “*ta-ba doh d’-dee... POM! deux trois, POM! deux trois*”. The normally equal semi-quavers of the solo harpsichord now polyrhythmically rendered—almost blues or jazz rhythms. Frédérick talks of *palmas* of the kind used in flamenco, a gently uneven stress of strong and weak clapped beats, so suited to this genre of music. This is contrasted by the middle movement of the E major violin concerto, BWV 1042 with violinists Tami Troman and Bénédicte Pernet creating an esoteric mist of rising morning dew, an almost secret cushion of pianissimo tuscan chords for the soloist Mira to gently hover above. Pure magic, so frail that a dropped pin would shatter it as if it were a thin film of freshly frozen ice on the surface of a lonely pond. This is not the Bach I know, this is a new Bach. This Bach is not the stour German parish organist, moody and defiant. This Bach is fresh, lightly humoured, witty even, delighting in irony and innuendo. This Bach is not the brooding troubled man of Beethovenian kind but a young baroque mind, a mind revelling in the charm of slight distortion, the juxtaposition of purity and imperfection, the charmingly deformed *barrueco* pearl of Portugal after which this whole era was subsequently named. Our knights of the oval table seem to be closing in on their holy grail of music.

I look at the tapestry on the wall to my right, of Poseidon on the banks of a lake, surrounded by flying cherubs. To his right, two horses, one braying mildly, echoed in this middle movement of the E major violin concerto by the two quavers in the middle of each bar played by the continuo strings, this melodic delight being the show piece of the ever poised cello of Geneviève Koerver, slightly reminiscent of the viola hound, “*il cane che grida*” (the dog which growls), from the second movement of the Spring concerto from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, yet as gracious as only a magnificent stallion can be. How incredible in this castle to feel through my feet even, and hence my whole physical and emotional body, the astoundingly powerful and rich notes from the violone and cello travelling through the floor and my shoe soles.

The last movement with such tight and vivacious continuo playing almost exclusively built upon the foundation of James Munro’s violone virtuosity, without which the drive, the impetus and the structure would be lost to the wind outside, the wind that now turns into a gentle rain patter on the other side of the window panes. His phrasing and texture always vocal but always clear, decisive and always supportive.

With rehearsals all done and finished, the castle seems to empty. Musicians disappear to the

various corners they choose to hide in, to change clothes in, to escape from the world for a short moment, to collect themselves and prepare mentally for the physical and mental ordeal of delivering decades of training, their days of practicing and their hours of rehearsing these four troublesome but sublime concerti, to an educated audience of music lovers. I, on the other hand, have no reason to hide, no place to hide, no change of clothes to undergo. One more flacon is swifited away; eight green bottles... What better a time to explore the gardens?

And how remarkable they are. Reminiscent of the gardens of some of the greatest houses of Europe, of Blenheim in England, they combine delightfully formal and clear rectangulated hedge work interrupted with ornamental ponds, fountains and gravel footpaths. Occasional outcrops of white wrought iron garden furniture appear like surprised marigolds overlooking terraces and the distant valley of the town below. Hedge archways and mini lawns to the rear of the kitchen creating a feeling of cozy and private intimacy for a less public part of the grounds. A vegetable garden with all manner of fruits and vegetables from pears and strawberries to squashes, marrows, carrots and rhubarb serve to keep Dominique even more busy while delighting the rest of us at the various mealtimes! The gentle drizzle I so enjoy of this part of Europe starts to develop into what seems to be heading towards awkwardly inconvenient, and trumpets my retreat to the castle once more. Our sound recording technician, the young and studly Benoît Pelé, grabs me by the arm and draws me to the window in the Salon. "Look," he exclaims, "look!" and points to the most remarkable, most pungent full double rainbow. And then James asking if I had seen it also. We run out into the courtyard to get a better look as it already starts to fade into the night. What an omen for this evening's concert!

The entrance hall of the castle decked out with three large tables, countless white porcelain soup cups each with its own porcelain spoon, and upturned wine glasses in preparation for the guests who gradually, one by one, filter into the castle and mingle; some in the entrance hall, some in the lounge, others in the living room and one or two already taking their places for the concert ahead. Slowly, the salon starts to fill up with Benoît by the window where his sound equipment has been rigged up and his wife, Rozenn Quéré, poised a couple of meters closer to the stage with her camera, ready to start filming the action ahead. The crowd of middle-aged and calm audience spiced with sprinkles of younger almost amorous couples. I find a place in the isle. I always feel better in an isle seat. Perhaps it's my escape instinct kicking in, an instinct trained by years of horrendous concerts. I'm sure I won't have to make a run for it tonight. Where would I even run to?

Follows on the 25th of January 2016 with the Third Part: *The Concert*



## 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 © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
2. Die Fledermaus, The Bat © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
3. Eyes Right © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
4. The pitos, or "finger snapping", of flamenco © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
5. Viola with Louis XIV Organ © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015
6. Double Y-mics © Rozenn Quéré Brussels 2015

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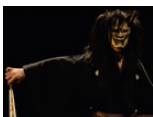
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