

The Flanders Recorder Quartet **Ambassadors of a Forgotten Instrument**

We are in London, at the court of Henry VIII, in the year 1539. The King has had the five Bassano brothers from the Venice area brought over to work for him. Their task? To play the recorder for the King every day, as well as making instruments and giving him music lessons. It is widely known that, in addition to his penchant for feminine beauty, Henry VIII also had a passion for music, played music himself and wrote several compositions, too. However, his interest in instrumental music was uncharacteristic of his era, especially in England.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europe's musical centre of gravity was Italy, where such renowned composers as Monteverdi and Caccini were engaged in the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque. Whereas the Renaissance was predominantly a period of vocal music (sometimes accompanied by instruments), from the time of the Baroque there was

increasing interest in purely instrumental music. One of the instruments that gained a greater degree of independence was the recorder. It had been played by professional musicians since the 1500s and groups of several recorder-players were formed, which came to be known as consorts. It was a fact, however, that many recorder players played violin or oboe first, and took up the recorder as their second instrument. The importance of the recorder declined towards the end of the 17th century in favour of the flute.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the recorder actually disappeared altogether until interest in it was renewed in the 20th century. On the one hand there was the Early Music movement, which viewed music from the Renaissance and the Baroque with a revived interest

*The Flanders Recorder Quartet.
From left to right:
Joris Van Goethem, Tom Beets,
Paul Van Loey and Bart Spanhove.*



in historical playing techniques. The use of original instruments or historically correct copies played a major part. On the other hand, a lot of modern composers have rediscovered the potential of the recorder in all its forms, from soprano to contrabass, and have even expanded this potential.

The Flanders Recorder Quartet, known in Dutch as *Vier op 'n Rij* (Four in a Row), is considered internationally as the very best in both aspects of recorder music. Its four members are Bart Spanhove, Tom Beets, Paul Van Loey and Joris Van Goethem. Their performances of Early Music are renowned for their spontaneity and the apparent naturalness with which a centuries-old score comes to life. The quartet aims to make the dead notes sound as if they were devised on the spur of the moment. They try to find the perfect instrument, or perfect combination of instruments, for every concert programme, based on the historical background to the music. Together, these four musicians have a range of instruments of which even Henry VIII would have been envious. But the Flanders Recorder Quartet is not only an Early Music ensemble, since plenty of contemporary composers also write music for them. To keep right up to date, they have conceived one of their most recent concert programmes as a jukebox, with a choice of 80 numbers (old and new) to which the audience can zap at will using voice computers. The success of the Flanders Recorder Quartet is undoubtedly due to the combination of a broad range of musical interests, boundless commitment to each project and the close ties between the four members. The quartet also regularly shares the concert platform with other leading musicians.

The Flanders Recorder Quartet is probably one of Belgium's best cultural exports. They have appeared on concert platforms at home and abroad more than 1500 times. From Belgium to Seoul, from the United States to South Africa, the sound of their recorders has been heard all over the world. They have also recorded about 20 CDs for several well-known record companies including *Deutsche Grammophon* and *Harmonia Mundi*. But their impact extends further still. Bart Spanhove has written a book on ensemble playing (*The Finishing Touch of Ensemble Playing*¹¹), which in the meantime

has been translated into German and even Chinese. Since the quartet plays so much unfamiliar music, the German publisher *Heinrichshofen* has brought out a series of scores of new and unknown works for the recorder repertoire: *The Flanders Recorder Quartet Series*.

To conclude, this bold assertion: although the Flanders Recorder Quartet does not work by order of any royal court, its efforts on behalf of recorder music may have just as significant an impact on the future of the instrument as the work of the Bassano brothers in the 16th century.

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www.flanders-recorder-quartet.be

NOTE

1. Published by Alamire, Peer (Belgium), ISBN 90 6853 144 1.