Wayward Authenticity

Paul Van Nevel, Musician and Expert in the Art of Living

Something is 'authentic' when it is genuine, unadulterated and truthful, from an historical point of view just like the original – if not the original itself. However, the stamp of 'authenticity' can also mean that something is original in a creative sense, with a distinct personal identity. In an area where creativity and historicity rub up against each other, as in early music, authenticity always contains this ambiguity. Since the 1970s the attempt to achieve an 'authentic way of performing' has prompted musicians to make choices on the basis of historical sources about music. And yet this practice does not detract from the other meaning of authenticity: the performer's personal input is still often as salutary as it is inevitable. And more than anyone the Flemish conductor and musician Paul Van Nevel finds himself caught between these two extremes. His career, which now spans almost forty years, is an exciting tight-rope dance between the faithful and the wayward, watched by many and regularly greeted with cries of astonishment and admiration.

Coming from a musical family in Belgian Limburg, Van Nevel (1946-) studied at the Maastricht Conservatory. Later he was a part-time assistant at the renowned Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, the Swiss academy for early music. It was there that he founded the Huelgas Ensemble that was to become his laboratory, life's work and pride and joy. Over the years it has been internationally acclaimed and showered with praise on countless occasion. It has made over fifty recordings on the Sony and Harmonia Mundi labels. Van Nevel is also active as a guest conductor with, among others, the Nederlands Kamerkoor and Ghent's Collegium Vocale.

On his return from Basle Van Nevel was given a scholarship by the Belgian government to undertake research in Spanish libraries and archives. This would be the beginning of a real journey of exploration through dusty manuscripts and printed texts all over Europe, the first steps in the rediscovery of countless gems from the rich repertoire of Renaissance polyphony. Van Nevel cherishes this cultural heritage and enjoys getting people to take unknown masters and their works to their hearts. For example, he devoted an entire CD to the likes of Matthaeus Pipilare, Jean Richafort or Jacobus de Kerle, names once familiar only to musicians, while Johannes Ciconia and Nicolas Gombert were the subject of publications aimed at a broad public.

Skilled in deciphering the old Renaissance notation, initially Van Nevel accesses the music through the surviving record of the notes. Direct contact with the 'old notes' is a first step towards authenticity, in the sense that the textual starting point of the music's performers is created from the original material. But Van Nevel's search of the archives goes beyond contact with the actual musical sources. He also knows the treatises on musical theory in which all sorts of aspects of polyphony were discussed. These manuscripts attest to the multiplicity of disciplines in which a Renaissance musician was proficient. Trained from childhood in cathedral schools, in addition to mastering their voices and musical notation singers would also know several languages and be familiar with theological and philosophical ideas, verse forms and the rules of rhetoric. When he auditions would-be singers Van Nevel too looks for skills other than the purely musical, such as the recitation of Latin or Old French texts. Such an approach provides him with a group of committed and involved performers.

Contrary to what must have been the historical practice, Van Nevel also uses female voices. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance much of polyphonic music, particularly church music, was an exclusively male affair. The high registers were covered by choirboys or even by the falsetto voices of male altos and sopranos. We have to remember here that in those days voices broke later and that (because of the 'lack' of vocal training as it has existed since the nineteenth century) the adult male voice remained more flexible than today.

Although he is an accomplished musicologist and a talented musician, there is more to Van Nevel than the seemingly happy combination of performing musician and academic researcher in the field of music. His approach is exceptional in that to a considerable extent it

brings the logic of a forgotten way of thinking to bear on present-day practice. That way of thinking is one of far-reaching associations and omnipresent symbolism. Scientific break-throughs, political and social upheavals and a waning sense of religiosity and spirituality separate the twenty-first century individual from the human world of ideas in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In that world art too could thrive as well as alchemy. As though in search of the magic fifth element, Van Nevel travelled to the Water Museum in Lisbon to record *La Quinta essentia*. Against the intriguing backdrop of basins, pipe systems and reservoirs, he began to search for a perfect mixture of three figures from the sixteenth century. To the familiar names of Orlandus Lassus and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina he added a secret ingredient: the little-known English-man Thomas Ashwell. These choices are not so much historically motivated, but the recording can still be called authentic, because like no other it breathes the atmosphere of an almost ethereal associative thought process in a way quite without parallel. And indeed, the musical result is equally heavenly.

A particular source of inspiration for Van Nevel is the landscape he comes across in what is now the borderland between Belgium and France, the region where many of his beloved polyphonists were raised. Influenced by the landscape philosophy of Ton Lemaire, he sees the threads of the multi-voiced tapestry of sounds reflected in the slopes of the fields. The most important element is a horizontal concept of polyphonic music: each voice follows an independent course that weaves it way through the trajectories of the other (individual) voices). It is not the vertical harmonies that are fundamental, but the linear unfolding of each separate part.

Anyone who has ever been to a Huelgas Ensemble concert, will certainly not have been disturbed by attempts to popularise the performance and attract the largest possible audience. On the contrary, the singers arrange themselves in a circle with their backs rather rudely turned towards the audience. The circular arrangement is the one that is musically the most effective: it provides optimal contact between the singers,

The Huelgas Ensemble.

something that is necessary for anyone seeking to achieve Van Nevel's perfection of rhythm and intonation. Yet the closed aspect of the circle also epitomises that his concerts are aimed primarily not at the audience, but at the music itself. Above all else Van Nevel wants to let quality be heard, not to offer pleasure. Such an attitude seems out of keeping with a cultural policy of democratisation and participation. Nevertheless, in Huelgas' case neither the sales figures for recordings nor the takings from the evening performances need suffer because of it. Listening to polyphonic music is not mere relaxation; it is a mental exercise.

Some of Van Nevel's projects make surprising cross-connections, too, with room for real cross-over, such as his co-operation with the saxophone quartet Bl!ndman. Moreover, the outstanding live recording *Tears of Lisbon* alternates early Portuguese music with fado, provided by two top-notch *fadistas*. Indeed, Van Nevel spoke explicitly of his passion for the melancholy of fado in the book *A Lisbon Addict for Thirty Years* (Dertig jaar verslaafd aan Lissabon, 2006). And finally, another memorable piece is the musical ode to the cigar that Van Nevel – himself a notorious cigar-smoker – once com-

posed using nineteenth-century texts and appropriate music. In a hall in the Palais des Beaux Arts (BOZAR) in Brussels, transformed for the occasion into a smoking parlour, Van Nevel may well have made one of his most wayward statements.

He loathes cigarettes, but is quite happy to let himself be photographed with a plump Havana. For Paul Van Nevel the difference lies in the tempo: the rushed, selfish satisfaction of nicotine addiction versus the timeless appreciation of a cigar. For him, slowness is what constitutes the art of living. In our own day, listening to polyphonic music is the task it is because the music is not of the moment alone but extremely enduring. The subtleties of the complex mass of voices reveal themselves little by little, if only a listener is able and willing to concentrate – something he must have been far more ready to do in an age without recordings, when, in other words, every performance was unique and could never be repeated. The ensemble takes its name from the Monasterio de las Huelgas, close to one of the country residences of the kings of Castile; maybe it is no accident that – '*huelga*' means not only 'cessation' but also 'tranquillity'.

According to his own account, after his first visit to his beloved Lisbon a young musician discovered in himself '*a Romantic who until then had been carefully concealed under a layer of Renaissance varnish*'. In his artistic creations this Romantic spirit is never very far away: searching for unexplored beauty, averse to conventions, acting from individual passions... However, the close contact with the music itself and an enduring search for context and meaning means that the authenticity of the enthusiasm does not get in the way of the authenticity of the cultural heritage. Far from it; the Renaissance varnish shines through all the more clearly.

Simon Van Damme
Translated by Sheila M. Dale

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