

York Early Music International Young Artists Competition

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The York Early Music International Young Artists Competition was founded by the Early Music Network in 1985; it takes place in alternate years and is now organised by the the York Early Music Festival. The 14th competition took place between 14-16 July in St Margaret's Church, Walmgate. It is open to ensembles aged between 17 and 35 who perform repertory ranging from the middle ages to the 19th century "using appropriate historically informed playing techniques, instruments and stylistic conventions". Competitors are assessed on the following criteria: choice of a sustainable, interesting repertory for future performances; musicianship; interpretation; creativity of programme planning; technical ability; presentation, stage presence, rapport with audience, professionalism; quality of programme notes; overall contribution to the early music scene; eventual professional viability; and the professionalism of their dealings with the Festival office. The winner receives a cheque for £1,000 together with opportunities to work with BBC Radio 3, a concert as part of the 2012 York Early Music Festival, and a professionally produced CD by Linn Records. Each group presents an informal 20 minute concert in the two days before the final. In the past, these more relaxed concerts have had no judges present and are compered by an experienced musician who usually introduces the music and the groups to the audience, chats with the musicians, inviting them to talk more about themselves or the music, asking questions about their performance and the music, and offering constructive comments that might help the group – all with the aim of increasing their confidence and performance skills for the final. The final itself took place on Saturday 16 July, and was recorded by BBC Radio 3. This year ten finalists were selected from the recordings sent in by around 70 applicants. They appeared in the final in the following order.

Le Petit Concert Baroque are a two-harpsichord duet from France (sisters Chani and Nadja Lesaulnier). They studied in Barcelona and Basel and have already won a number of competitions. Their first CD, transcriptions of orchestral and vocal music by Handel (*Al piacere del Signore G. F. Haendel* – ORF SACD3056), was awarded a Diapason d'Or. They opened their first programme with the *Allegro Moderato* from WF Bach's Sonata in F for two harpsichords, showing an affinity and understanding of the sensibilities of the *Empfindsamer Stil*, and sensibly allowing the gentler moments their own space. They also played transcriptions of works by Muffat, Telemann and Vivaldi. They opened their final concert with the *Allegro* from Bach's Concerto in C minor, another genuine two-harpsichord work, demonstrating a lovely sense of rhetoric and the ebb and flow of the musical line. I wasn't

too sure if their version of "Der Ewigkeit saphirnes Haus" from Bach's *Trauerode* added much to the original version, and had similar feelings about their version of Handel's "Venti turbini" from *Rinaldo*, spectacular as it was. Unfortunately, the competition organisers supplied two very mismatched harpsichords, neither in particularly good condition and one being only single manual, leading to some tricky registration changes. Their colourful programme notes and spoken introductions had more than a sprinkling of fairy dust about them – dare I say that they were very French?

Quadro Melante are four musicians from Australia, Croatia, Iran and Malaysia who met in the UK (Georgia Browne *flute*, Bojan Čičić *violin*, Ibrahim Aziz *viola da gamba*, and Mahan Esfahani *harpsichord*). The group made its debut in Oxford last November. Both their concerts were based around Telemann's visit to Paris in the 1730s. In the concert they played the *Troisième quatuor* from his 'Paris' quartets and a Sonata from the 1743 *Conversation Galante* by Guillemain, one of the younger composers that were influenced by Telemann. In the final they contrasted another Paris Quartet with works by Leclair and Blavet. Georgia Browne was very effective in balancing the expected refined good taste with the clearly seductive nature of the Leclair piece, as suggested by its subtitle of 'insinuante'. Bojan Čičić demonstrated a commendably wide range of volume in Leclair's *Chaconne*, being particularly effective in the very quiet registers normally avoided by violinists. Ibrahim Aziz had a chance to show his virtuosic technique in the same piece, although I did wonder if he was rather too forthright when slipping back to continuo role. Mahan Esfahani's harpsichord continuo realisations were surprisingly restrained, with an emphasis on simple block chords rather than the more usual broken chords and flourishes. The latter are frequently overdone by continuo harpsichord players, so this emphasis on the opposite approach was refreshing. There were several moments in Telemann's *Deuxième quatuor* when the harpsichord dropped out altogether, very effectively focussing attention on the three solo instruments. Continued experience of playing together in this small-scale format will help these four experienced players realise the group's potential.

Sebastian Chamber Players was formed ten years ago. Its four members (Daniel S. Lee and Alexander Woods *violins*, Ezra Seltzer *cello* and Jeffrey Grossman *harpsichord*) studied historical performance at the Juilliard School and went on to become postgraduate fellows in early music at Yale. Their two concerts were *Venetian Variations*, with works by Castello, Merula and Vivaldi, and *Roman City*,

Roman Empire – Corelli contrasted with Couperin who, having managed to combine the French and Italian styles, then used both to depict the Hapsburg Holy Roman Empire in his *L'Impériale* from *Les Nations*. Their experience of working together was self evident, and they gave professionally polished performances. In their first concert, they could have done with a bit more stylistic differentiation between Castello and Merula and the much later Vivaldi, not least in their choice of instruments and bows, both of which were closer to Vivaldi than Castello. This was not an issue in the final where they demonstrated well-thought-out articulation and phrasing, notably in the Couperin. I liked they way they played the echo passages in the Castello, with the 2nd violin turning away and playing quieter – many violinists just turn away, not realising that this alone rarely makes much difference to the volume.

Borromini String Quartet (James Toll and Naomi Burrell violins, Sam Kennedy viola, Peggy Nolan cello) are a UK-based group formed in 2008. They gave their debut performance at the Haydn Chamber Music Festival at the Royal Northern College of Music in 2009 and have recently recorded the Boccherini quartets. They play instruments from the Becket Collection, set up in classical style. Their first concert reflected their love of Boccherini, with two of his attractive quartets (Op24/6 and 53/4). They gave the impression of being thoroughly at ease with each other and with the music, playing with a commendable sense of expressive style, personal involvement and balance, producing an impressive range of tone colours. Their second concert was *Fugues Great and Small*, starting with Mozart's arrangement of a Fugue from Bach's '48' before changing bows and moving on to Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*. This is a work that many established quartets spend half their life trying to perfect, so it was an extraordinary achievement for these young players to even attempt it, let alone at 11.30 on a rainy Saturday morning, the oppressive humidity inside the church wreaking havoc on their instruments. It is not just technically very scary, but is musically very difficult to project. Beethoven seems to have taken all four movements of a large scale symphony, jumbled them all up, and then reassembled the resulting pieces almost at random. I was impressed by their willingness, and ability, to play very quietly, notably in the response to the opening statement, and in the rather ghostly central section.

Profeti della Quinta was founded in 2002 in the Galilee region of Israel. The five singers (Doron Schleifer and David Feldman *countertenors*, Dino Lüthy and Dan Dunkelblum *tenors*, Elam Rotem *bass*) went on to study at the Schola Cantorum in Basel and are all now based in Switzerland. I heaped praise on their CD *Salomone Rossi: The Song of Solomon and instrumental music* (Pan Classics NEWP 10214) in the June 2010 issue of *EMR*. Their first programme, *Mia benigna fortuna* explored the development of the madrigal and secular song in the 16th century, with works by Josquin, Arcadelt, Rore and Rossi. Their

programme for the final was *Hashirim Ashér Lish'lomó – Songs of love and praise* with two contrasting madrigals by Cipriano de Rore and madrigals and Hebrew prayers by Salomone Rossi, the first composer to introduce polyphony into the Mantua synagogue, over the road from the Gonzaga court where he also worked. They finished with Rossi's "Hashkivénu 'adonái 'elohéinu leshalóm", a delightful example of a Jewish composer working in a Catholic Court writing homophony that Luther would have been proud of! They exhibited an outstanding consort blend, with beautifully pure vocal tone and intonation and with none of the interference with pitch, pulse and tuning that vibrato brings. They sang from part-books, requiring far more concentration on their fellow singers than with normal scores – I have a feeling this helped to give the group such a sense of vocal cohesion. They made excellent use of diminutions, weaving them into the overall fabric. Although all the singers were excellent, the two outer voices of countertenor Doron Schleifer and bass Elam Rotem made particularly significant contributions to the stunning sound of the group.

Den Haag Piano Quintet are five Japanese musicians (Kae Ogawa *fortepiano*, Miki Takahashi *violin*, Sonoko Asabuki *viola*, Toru Yamamoto *cello*, Tomoki Sumiya *double bass*) who met at Royal Conservatory of The Hague. They made their debut at the Festival Oude Muziek Utrecht in August 2009. They focus on the relatively little-known repertoire of the piano quintet, playing examples by Jan Ladislav Dussek and Jan Nepomuk Hummel in their two concerts. Both works were written by virtuoso pianists who naturally kept the focus on the piano, here played with a superb combination of sensitivity and virtuosity by Kae Ogawa. In her entertaining introductory talk, Kae told us that Dussek was the first to position the piano sideways on, perhaps because he wanted the audience to see his apparently handsome face! His Quintet in F minor was the first to use this combination of instruments, later to be taken up by Schubert for his 'Trout' quintet. The work opens in fantasy style, with rapid changes of mood and a chorale-like section for the strings showered with piano figurations. The string players showed due deference to the key role of the piano, maintaining an excellent balance throughout, all recognising the moments when the piano figuration could fade into the background. They had a fine sense of rhetoric, without venturing into the romantic style which was yet to fully develop. The compere suggested that the violin and viola were too quiet, but I disagree – I thought they recognised the nature of the work well. She also criticised the fact that they tuned up on stage, suggesting that "you all have machines to tune to the temperament of the piano" in the green room. Again, I disagree: my notes recorded a compliment to them for their careful tuning on stage. The vastly different environments between the green room and (for the final) the unpleasantly humid church meant that it is essential for any musicians to check tuning before they start. Hummel's Quintet in E flat

minor was an equally impressive work. Alongside snatches of gypsy music, there were moments when he seemed to be the love-child of Mozart and Chopin. There are apparently more than 35 works for this combination of instruments, most completely unknown, and this group is making an important contribution to awakening interest in an important corner of the repertoire of that fascinating period on the cusp of the classical and romantic eras.

Habsburger Camerata (Matthew Lonson *violin*, Helen Roberts *cornett*, Nathaniel Wood *sackbut*, Caroline Ritchie *gamba*, John McKean *organ*), all sometime students in Basel, were originally established to explore the musical legacy of the Habsburg Empire, but have expanded into a more diverse repertoire, often preparing new editions and interpretations of unknown or rarely performed works. The first concert was *Con ogni sorte d'istromenti*, with early 17th-century Italian chamber music from Picchi, Cima, Rore and Rossi during the period when the violin was on its way to overtaking the cornett as the key solo instrument. One notable moment came with the group's own diminutions on Rore's *Anchor che col partire*, based on the published examples of the likes of Rognoni and Dalla Casa. For the final, they showed the influence of these Italian composers on later musicians working under Habsburg patronage in the 17th century with the programme *The Legacy of the Habsburgs*. They played sonatas by Antonio Bertali and David Pohle and an anonymous work from the Düben Collection. Both concerts gave all the players a chance to show their musicianship and reflected the wide range of tonal colour available with this unusual mix of instruments. As well as solo moments, the instruments combined in a wide variety of duos and trios, notably between the unlikely pairing of sackbut and viola da gamba.

Encantar are a group of four female singers from Belgium (Sarah Abrams, Wannah Organe, Kerlijne van Nevel, Soethin Baptist) who specialise in the polyphonic repertoire from the 14th to the 16th century. They were founded in 2006 and have since won the Klara Tandemtrofee along with the public prize and the Radio Klara prize. Since September 2010 they have been ensemble-in-residence at KU Leuven. They have already made two recordings, of Christmas music and music from the songbook of Marguerite of Austria *La déclinaison de la femme* (Phaedra 92069). Their first concert was *Voces silentio* with sacred music from 16th-century Italy, Flanders, Wallonia and Slovenia by Festa, Pisano, Gallus, Vento, Compère and Agricola. This was followed by *Dolci lagrime* with works by Palestrina, Festa, Bivi, Arcadelt, Sayve, Victoria and Guerrero. In both concerts they demonstrated a superb consistency and blend of tone over a wide range of volume and pitch, with excellent enunciation and an instinctive togetherness, their pure and unaffected voices having a delightful natural resonance but not a trace of vibrato. They made very effective use of different positions including, at the end of their first concert, facing away

from the audience towards an imaginary cross as they sang *O crux ave* by Agricola. This would have been better visually if they had been at the sharp end of a Catholic church, rather than facing the side wall of a stripped ex-Anglican one gazing at a window blind and a collection of keyboard instruments, but it was acoustically very effective. One of the attractive features of this group is the choice of voices, with one soprano, two mezzos and an alto. It might be invidious to single out any one singer, but the vocal and intonational stability of Soethin Baptist's alto, forming the bass line, made a particularly strong contribution.

Les Ombres (Sylvain Sartre *flute*, Varoujan Doneyan *violin*, Margaux Blanchard *viola da gamba*, Jonatan Pesek *cello*, and Nadja Lesaulnier *harpsichord*) are from France. The group was founded in 2006 by musicians trained at the Schola Cantorum in Basel and aims to link musicological research with historically informed interpretation. They won second prize at the À Tre International Early Music Competition in Trossingen and will be in residence at the Opera Theatre in Saint-Etienne, France for the next 3 years. They have made a CD, *François Couperin – Colin de Blamont: Concert chez la Reine*, published by Ambronay Editions. Their two linked concerts were both based on Telemann at the Concert Spirituel, and contrasted him first with Couperin (*La Française* from *Les nations*) and then with Jean-Marie Leclair (*Deuxième concert*). They took time to tune carefully before both concerts, something that should no longer be a surprise to 'early music' audiences and is to be commended. Their chosen repertoire of French music seems to be in their blood, and they played with a natural flair and the expected *bon goût*. They had regard for period conventions of ornamentation and articulation, and produced some excellent cadences. As well as the overall consort of the group, I was also particularly impressed with the sensitive viola da gamba playing of Margaux Blanchard (who also contributed friendly introductions to the music) and Sylvain Sartre's delicate tone on the flute.

L'Istante is the group name of two Swiss musicians (Anaïs Chen *violin* and Johannes Keller *harpsichord*) who met in 2008 at the Schola Cantorum in Basel. In 2010 the duo was selected as an "International Young Artists Presentation Selected Promising Ensemble" at the Flanders Festival, Antwerp. Their first concert was *Il Violino Amoroso e Guerriero* where they both relished the technical and musical complexities of a Suite in E minor from Matteis' *Ayres for the Violin* and Biber's 1681 Sonata 3 in F. I particularly liked Johannes Keller's harpsichord continuo in the large scale chaconne that ends the Biber, his solid chords emphasising the slow build up of tension – unfortunately the harpsichord he was provided with was badly out of tune. They played with admirable attention to detail, producing a beautifully blended and coherent sound. Their final concert, *Vocalità e Fioriture del Violino*, reflected the link between the sound of the violin and the voice and featured works with vocal origins by Luzzaschi

and Rognoni, and a trio sonata by Corelli. Again the continuo was excellent, although it must have been embarrassing for the competition organisers that Johannes Keller had to spend so much time tuning the harpsichord himself before they started. But the star of the duo was undoubtedly the extraordinary playing of violinist Anaïs Chen. She played with exquisite ease and grace, her finger-work remaining deliciously delicate despite some breakneck speeds. She also displayed an outstanding sense of melodic line, notably in the opening Largo of Corelli's Op. 5/9. In the diminutions in the works by Luzzaschi and Rognoni she weaved the elaborations and ornaments into the texture of the underlying vocal work, creating a unified thread.

In my regular reviews of this competition, I normally add a concluding paragraph pointing out some of the issues that crop up with most young groups but that could not fairly be pinned on any one group. However, this year, the standard of performance and professionalism from the performers was so high that there is really very little to say. The only point I would mention (and it applies to many experienced professional groups as well) is that more thought needs to be given as to how to respond to the audience when arriving, leaving and acknowledging applause. Some players seemed too eager to sort out their music for the next piece, or were in a rush to escape from the stage at the end. And however well groups might play together, some of their collective bowing (as in bending over, not playing stringed instruments) could be tidied up. These aspects need to be agreed and rehearsed beforehand.

Having little to add about the professionalism of the impressive young performers, I do have something to say about the professionalism of the competition organisation. Considering the inclusion this year of the criteria that performers will be judged on the "professionalism of their dealings with the Festival office", it is only fair to mention a number of aspects where the competition organisers failed to show professionalism towards the young performers. For example, two of the groups were introduced to the audience by incorrect names. One group was announced when they were clearly not ready to go on, only for them to arrive to find their chairs and music desks (and the BBC microphones) in the wrong place. This incorrect placement of chairs, desks and microphones happened to a number of groups. As would be expected in any professional gig, players should be given the chance to check their chairs and music desks and to lay out their music before they enter to play. Players are expected to walk to the performing area through a narrow gap between a central pillar and audience seats, to be then confronted by a mass of BBC microphone stands and loose floor cables. This could be avoided if competitors were asked to approach the performing area from one of the side aisles. I have mentioned this in previous reviews, but clearly to no effect. Players should also be encouraged to leave their music (and, perhaps, instruments) where they are for somebody else to collect,

allowing them to leave the stage and return for a curtain call without having the awkwardness of having to gather up all their belongings – one unfortunate player ended up dropping his music on the floor as he left. The quality of the harpsichords and their tuning was also particularly poor in comparison to earlier years.

I thought that all the groups have real potential, and all deserved to be in the final. Sadly, a few groups performed better in the preliminary concerts than in the finals, but I thought that at least half of the ten groups had the potential to win. The choice was down to the seven judges: Philip Hobbs, Elizabeth Kenny, Vivien Ellis, Neal Peres Da Costa, Xavier Vandamme and Christophe Mangé. There is only one prize, which they awarded to Profeti della Quinta. The Friends of the York Festival were clearly enchanted by Encantar, and awarded them their own prize. Further information on the groups, and links to their own websites, can be found at

<http://www.ncem.co.uk/?idno=904>.

Extracts from the final should be broadcast on Radio 3's Early Music Show on 25 September.

EARLY MUSIC PRIZE at the RAM

The final of the Royal Academy of Music's annual Early Music Prize (for "historically-informed performances of pre-1800 chamber music") took place in the Duke's Hall (6 May). This year, the four groups had been discouraged from having individual names, so just the names of their members was given in the programme. The first group played music by Couperin and Rameau, both with prominent roles for the harpsichord, showing considerable style and panache by Nathaniel Mander. Davina Clarke also impressed me with her graceful ornaments in the languid solo in the first section of Couperin's *Premier Concert*, as did Emily Smith, gamba, notably for the sureness of her intonation in the danger zone above the frets. The second group explored the *stylus phantasticus* with pieces by Becker and Buxtehude. Violinist Claudia Norz demonstrated a fine feel for the musical line, although the other violin suffered some intonation problems and the cello was rather too forceful. The third group played the Sonata from *The Musical Offering*. Although they were very competent players, notably cellist Kate Conway with her fine use of articulation, they sounded rather detached from the music, resulting in a performance that was rather more methodical than musical. Judging from their walk-on, stage nerves might have played a part. The final group played Handel and Telemann with a very professional stage presence and a spirited and involved performing style, with excellent performances by Leo Duarte and Naomi Burrell on oboe and violin. They were not afraid to take risks in their playing, and came up with some particularly effective cadences. The adjudicators were Catherine Mackintosh and James Johnstone and they awarded the prize to the group that played *The Musical Offering*.