

musica Dei donum

Concert reviews

"Consort songs & Fantasias"

Marnix de Cat, *alto*^a

Hathor Consort

concert: Feb 1, 2013, Utrecht, Vredenburg Leeuwenbergh

anon: In Nomine; O death rock me asleep^a; O Lord of whom I do depend: In Nomine^a; *William BYRD* (c1540-1623): Care for thy soul; Fantasia a 4; In angel's weed; On Nomine a 4; My mistress had a little dog^a; O Lord, bown down thine heav'nly eyes^a; With lilies white; Ye sacred Muses^a; *William COBBOLD* (1560-1639): Ye mortal wights^a; *Richard FARRANT* (c1530-1580): Ah, alas, you salt sea gods^a; O Jove from stately throne^a; *Orlando GIBBONS* (1583-1625): 2 Fantasias a 4; *Robert PARSONS* (1535-1571/72): Ut re mi fa sol la; *Thomas TALLIS* (c1505-1585): In Nomine; *Robert WHITE* (c1530-1574): Fantasia

Romina Lischka, Thomas Baeté, Liam Fennely, Benoît Vanden Bemden, *viola da gamba*

English music of the 16th and early 17th century are a rich source, from which numerous programmes of all kinds can be put together. Many genres flowered at the time: sacred music on Latin and on English texts, keyboard music, music for lute and for viol consort, and secular vocal music of various kinds, such as the song for solo voice and lute, madrigals, part-songs and songs for voice and viol consort. The concert by Marnix De Cat and the Hathor Consort concentrated on two genres which are closely intertwined: music for viol consort and so-called *consort songs* in which the voice is supported by a consort of viols.

It is not completely clear how the consort song came into existence. In the programme-notes it was presented as having developed from theatrical plays with music performed by boys' voices in the mid-16th century. However, there are also other options, such as the part-song in which the upper voice was mostly dominating. It is quite possible that such songs were also performed by a solo voice with instruments. Just like most consort songs they were usually in five parts.

The concert started with some early specimens from the consort song repertoire, by Richard Farrant and William Cobbold. The association of Farrant with so-called *choirboy plays* is well documented. His songs may have been originally written for boys' voices. In such cases the songs have to be transposed, as Marnix De Cat explained. Many texts are rather gloomy and reflect the melancholy which would become even more a trademark of English music around 1600. One of the most important genres within the realm of consort music was the *In Nomine*, which is based upon the Sarum antiphon *Gloria tibi Trinitas*. More than 150 of such pieces were written from Tallis to Purcell. A special form was the anonymous setting in which the *In*

Nomine is combined with the text *O Lord of whom I do depend*. Also popular were pieces based upon a sequence of notes. The Hathor Consort played a superb specimen of this genre, *Ut re mi fa sol la* by Robert Parsons. It is a piece in two sections in which the upper part is confined to the six-note pattern which is played as a *cantus firmus* up and down. In the second section the other parts become increasingly virtuosic. It was brilliantly played by the ensemble.

The first part ended with William Byrd who was also the key figure in the second part of the concert. He was one of the most prolific composers of consort songs which seems to have been his favorite form for setting a secular text, rather than the madrigal or the lute song. His consort songs are strophic, which restricted the possibilities for word-painting. Even so there is certainly no lack of expression in his consort songs. The first part of the concert ended with Byrd's rather whitty song *My mistress had a little dog*. It was the only piece where Marnix De Cat seemed not to feel completely at home. His performance wasn't of the same standard as in the rest of the programme and the fast figures didn't come off that well. I also wonder whether such pieces with that typical English 'whit' - not coincidentally virtually impossible to translate - can be fully grasped by non-English performers and a non-English audience. The subtleties in the text are hard to understand anyway.

The more serious songs in the second part came off much better, for instance *In angel's weed*, an elegy for Mary Tudor who died in 1587. The text was written by Edward Paston who was the owner of Appleton Hall where the dog from Byrd's song just mentioned had found its end. Byrd also set a number of sacred texts in the form of consort songs. It is here that one can see a connection to the verse anthem which would play an important role in the early 17th century. We also heard further specimens of *In Nomine* settings as well as a *Fantasia a 4* by Gibbons with some contrasting sections, some playful, some more serious, but always reflecting the composer's contrapuntal skills which also came to the fore in the settings by Tallis and Byrd.

Marnix De Cat has a beautiful and smooth voice which blended perfectly with the viols. The combination of five fine artists and a programme of first-rate music resulted in a compelling concert. And what better way to bring it to a close than with Byrd's moving tribute to his teacher Tallis in his consort song *Ye sacred Muses*. It ends with the line: "Tallis is dead and music dies".

Fortunately Byrd was wrong...

Johan van Veen (© 2013)

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