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Ensemble Molière

21-23 April 2023

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne, Church of St Roch, Pendomer

Ensemble Molière brought a programme of rarely heard music by French composers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to four venues. The ensemble consisting of Flavia Hirte (flute), Alice Earll (violin), Catriona McDermid (bassoon), Kate Conway (viola da gamba) and Satoko Doi-Luck (harpsichord) is currently BBC Radio 3’s New Generation Baroque Ensemble.

The programme consisted of music composed for the courts of the French nobility at the time of Kings Louise the XIV and XV. Largely music written for theatrical productions, especially the dance episodes beloved by French audiences, but also music for the religious services in chapels of the aristocracy.

The venues of this tour provided very different acoustic spaces and affected the resulting sound and balance between the instruments. One of the venues gave the sound space but worked against the harpsichord; another resulted in a more unfocussed sound, while a third gave a livelier resonance to the instruments.

*Tancrède,* written in 1702 as a five-act operatic form unique to the French baroque by André Campra. Ensemble Molière used the Ouverture as the opening item that proved ideal for engaging our attention with its slow introduction preceding a lively fugal section. This was followed by *Entrée de Polymnie* from Jean-Philippe Rameau’s music for the *tragédie, Les Boréades*, composed in 1763. The ensemble made the most of Rameau’s gorgeous melody and harmonic writing, although the balance between the two wind instruments was an issue for this reviewer.

In his *Huitième Concert, dans le Goût théâtral,* François Couperin set out a suite of pieces aimed at achieving a synthesis of various French and Italian musical styles of the period. In the sequence there were movements that paired instruments in duets. The viol and harpsichord pairing gave us exquisite music performed with poise and elegance by Kate Conway and Satoko Doi-Luck. Alluring charm was the central feature of the viol and bassoon (Catriona McDermid) duet. The more vigorous *tutti* sections and the other duet-trio pairings were the instrumental arrangements of Satoko Doi-Luck, the ensemble’s harpsichordist. Indeed, the arrangements of the entire programme were the successful application of her expertise and scholarship.

No programme of French Baroque instrumental music could be complete without the music of Jean-Baptiste Lully, much favoured by King Louis XIV. So, we were treated to extracts from Molière and Lully’s collaboration in the *comédie-ballet, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.* Much of French theatrical drama of the period was dance centred, especially when performing to the ‘Sun King’. Ensemble Molière was suitably inspired by the range of dance styles to move dance-like as they played. Indeed, their presentation and verbal introductions were a key element to successfully engaging with their audiences.

At the Church of St Roch, the ensemble included sacred music by Marc-Antoine Charpentier. This more reverential aspect of French music was a counterpoint to the plethora of dance music in the musical mix. Extracts from Rameau’s music for the *tragédie, Dardanus* (1739) also provided more reflective and darker sounds. However, it was *Les Caractères de la Danse* (Jean-Féry Rebel) with its 14 episodic dances, virtuosic violin writing (vigorously played by Alice Earll) and folk hurdy-gurdy moments, along with the *Tambourine* capers (Blavet and encore), that set the audiences foot-tapping to the rhythms and sounds of three-hundred-year-old music.

Andrew Maddocks 2023