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Seen and Heard

Seen and Heard Concert Review

Monteverdi, Scarlatti, Frescobaldi, Marini, Castello: David Daniels; Le Point du Jour; Barbican Hall, 27.02. 2007 (SL)

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The line-up of the group around David Daniels reads like a who's who of period musicianship from both sides of the Atlantic: Elizabeth Blumenstock, violin, Sharman Plesner, violin, Nadine Davin, viola, Phoebe Carrai, cello, Elizabeth Kenny, lute, and – the only other man on stage – Jory Vinikour director on harpsichord and organ. It was Vinikour who stage-managed the tricky job of getting these world class players together, and his idea to call the band "Le Point du Jour" – not just because it refers to a collection of his beloved Couperin's pieces for harpsichord, but because "the name signifies daybreak or dawning, ideal for a group of old friends who together form something new."

The evening's first item was, perhaps surprisingly, a vocal one – the great monologue of frustration and jealousy that Ottone sings at the very start of Monteverdi's "Poppea": *E pur io torno qui, qual linea al centro...* (Yet still I return like a line to the centre). Immediately two things became clear. Firstly, there was a total meshing of voice and instruments, each leaning and entwining with the other without a second's doubt or imprecision. Secondly, Daniels needed to up the power as either he had under-estimated the acoustic or, as is more likely, he was working his voice into the acoustic and just hadn't got it to where it needed to be. It was with relief that those sitting higher up and further back in the hall heard him nurturing and rounding out his sound with every succeeding piece he sang, until by the end of the first half the voice was where it was meant to be: full, vibrant and velvety, capable of forte and piano within a syllable.

Before that interval, we heard Frescobaldi's "Cosi mi disprezzate". This composer isn't especially known for his vocal works, and although a charming account of the ubiquitous state of scorned *amor* so beloved by his contemporaries, and carefully sung by the countertenor who kept his score at hand, it wasn't really in the same class as the Scarlatti motet "Infirmata, vulnerata" which ended the first half. With this piece Daniels made the most of the expressive text, using his renowned legato to good effect.

Between these items, the players showed off not only their individual – and mighty – talents as soloists, but also gave an object lesson in making music together, as a true chamber group. Lightning-fast technique and superb bow control was taken for granted – there was still time to speak with the eyes and body, to share a moment of musical delight with their colleagues. A rarely-heard sonata by Castello (described as a shadowy figure working with Monteverdi in the Venice of the early sixteen hundreds) was a minor revelation, as was the *passacaglio* in G minor by another lesser-known Italian of the time, Biagio Marini, published in 1655. These superb players laid out this fine music as would a master-jeweller his stock for our perusal, each gem of a phrase carefully cut to show off its inner fire.

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No such careful introduction was needed for the start of the second half as Le Point du Jour gave us a *tour de force* of a reading of Scarlatti's *Concerto grosso* no.2 in C minor. Breathtaking in their virtuosity, thrilling in their execution – all magnificent yet Blumenstock and Carrai in particular seemed to be flying on another plane of music making. Stirring stuff.

The official end of the evening came as Daniels returned with the marathon cantata by the same composer, *Perchè tacete, regolati concerti?* which translates as "Why are you silent, you well-ordered harmonies?" offers an apt first recitative after the opening three-movement sinfonia. By now Daniels was in full flight and took us on an emotional roller-coaster of unrequited love, his superbly floated higher notes and gently spun legato phrasing turning the lullaby section into something truly beautiful.

His musicianship and rapport with his colleagues on stage was not unappreciated, and he was obliged to offer a full three encores: Caccini's *Amarilli mia bella* (what else?), the cheeky "*Pur dicesti*" of Cesti, and finally a return to his mainstream repertory which silenced the Hall: Handel's gentle masterpiece *Già l'ebro mio ciglio* from "Orlando".

Sue Loder

[Back to the Top](#) [Back to the Index Page](#)

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