

VOCAL ENSEMBLES

1. THE KING'S SINGERS.

It was a great pleasure to hear the current 6 voices in the National Concert Hall in 2012 their first visit for many years and then again in 2014. Like so many British professional male voices they came out of the choirstalls of Oxbridge Chapel Choirs and became hugely popular on TV for lighter material - their interpretation of the Beatles songs are classics. All the most respected contemporary composers have written music specially for their unique skills and in the last 10 years Signum records have issued a wonderful series of programmes of early music: Gesualdo, Victoria, William Byrd, Pachelbel - they have even recorded the Tallis 40 part motet - with a little technical help! And, would you believe, 2 lovely albums of Salvation Army hymns. Their DVDs are excellent too. Many of their early EMI recordings have been re-released on Virgin.

My CD choice - THE KING'S SINGERS - GREATEST HITS - EMI 514587-2

2. THE HILLIARD ENSEMBLE.

It was Paul Hillier who founded the group in 1973 and directed them until he moved to America in 1990. They specialised originally in early music and their recordings of the medieval and renaissance repertoire remain as good as any with the top voice of counter-tenor, David James, putting his unique stamp on the Ensemble's sound. In the 1990s they made a series of recordings of the music of Arvo Part on the renowned ECM record label whose supremo, Manfred Eicher, brought Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek into an imaginative - and hugely successful mix with the voices. They have recorded much early material with ECM and a series called Hilliard Live is now available on the Sixteen's record label, Coro. They have recently retired.

My CD choice - HILLIARD LIVE, VOLUME 1 - PEROTIN AND ARS ANTIQUA - CORO 16046.

3. NEW YORK POLYPHONY.

This is a comparatively new ensemble - like the Hilliards - of just 4 male voices, but their 3 recordings have been most impressive, first on Avie, then most recently on the Swedish label BIS, featuring both chant, early and contemporary works. They toured Ireland in 2008 to great acclaim.

My CD choice - I SING THE BIRTH - AVIE 2141, one of the loveliest Christmas albums I know.

4. ENSEMBLE ORGANUM.

The "performance" of a Mass in a concert setting is often unsatisfactory - so far removed from its original purpose. Even more so a Requiem Mass! However, Ensemble Organum singing Ockeghem's Requiem in the Examination Hall of Trinity College, Dublin in the Dublin Early Music Festival of 1992 was unforgettable. This wonderful music is so rarely heard live and the unique sound of these male voices - far removed from the blended smoothness of the English Cathedral sound - has shone light on chants of many rites and much early polyphony. Their dozens of recordings on Harmonia Mundi are frequent visitors to the start of Gloria - many have been re-released on their budget series, Musique d'Abord and HMGold.

My CD choice - MACHAUT - MESSE DE NOSTRE-DAME - HMGOLD 501590.

5. THE ORLANDO CONSORT.

Having began on the UK independent Metronome and Amon Ra labels this 4 male-voice group were signed up first by Deutsche Grammophon Archiv and then Harmonia Mundi and produced many fine recordings of early polyphony. They have produced Extempore, one of the few successful cross-overs with a jazz group Perfect Houseplants and they have issued a programme of chant with Indian musicians - its fascinating, but I welcome their most recent albums of the medieval repertoire on the Hyperion label.

My CD choice - THE ROSE, THE LILY AND THE WHORTLEBERRY - HARMONIA MUNDI HMU907398.

6. LA COMPAGNIA DEL MADRIGALE.

It is really only in the last 15 years that Italian musicians have been reclaiming their musical riches from Baroque and Renaissance times. Following the example of Rinaldo Alessandrini and his Concerto Italiano - (see Chamber Choirs) have come a number of fine ensembles specialising in madrigals - Delitiae Musicae on Naxos, La Dolce Maniera on Stradivarius - then the excellent La Venexiana on Glossa - and best of all La Compagnia del Madrigale - also on Glossa - at last this brilliant repertoire is sung by Italian singers without any vestige of Verdi!
My CD choice - Gesualdo - Glossa GCD922803

7. GOTHIC VOICES.

The 25 or so recordings made by Christopher Page's groundbreaking group for Hyperion beginning in 1981 with the earliest of the now hundreds of programmes of the music of Hildegard of Bingen "A Feather on the Breath of God" shone thrilling light onto the music of the Middle Ages. Page is a leading academic and Gothic Voices epitomise the co-operation between musicologists and performers which has now become the norm.
My CD choice - GOTHIC VOICES - AWARD WINNERS, 3 CD box HYPERION - CDS44251/3

8. LAS HUELGAS ENSEMBLE.

Paul van Nevel's achievement with his Belgian group can be heard on a sublime box called the Secret Labyrinth. On its 15 CDs are recordings of some of the most fascinating backwaters of Renaissance music beautifully sung - and played - his instrumentalists too are first class. From 13th century O Antiphons from the court of Nicosia in Cyprus, the music of Manchicourt, Gombert, Festa and Agricola to the passionate Lagrime di San Pietro, the swan song of the master Lassus.
My CD choice "The Secret Labyrinth" Sony Vivarte - 88697 478442.

9. THE CALMUS ENSEMBLE.

Some 10 years ago I came across a CD from these 5 young voices from Leipzig. How lucky were the 4 ex members of the renowned choir of the Thomaskirche to find such a wonderful soprano as *Anja* Lipfert Pöche to complete their ensemble. Their blend and intonation are startlingly beautiful and they have delighted Irish audiences on a number of visits. They are now recording for Carus - Germany's finest specialist choral publisher and record label and cover the entire repertoire with equal skill.
My CD choice - MYTHOS 116 - CARUS 83366

10. ANONYMOUS 4.

The 4 female voices of Anonymous 4 have recorded 20 wonderful albums of chant and early polyphony for Harmonia Mundi in the last 25 years. Irish singer Jacqueline Horner joined 3 American voices in 1998. Their sound is immediately recognisable and very beautiful, the repertoire is fascinating, especially from that rich source of Spanish early music - their most recent, from 2011, is called Secret Voices and they have also produced some programmes of early American music. The 2015/16 season will be their last.
My CD choice - ANONYMOUS 4 - A PORTRAIT HMX2907210.

