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Insula Orchestra, Barbican, London — review

Hannah Nepil

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Lithe playing of neglected works added up to an impressive London debut from the Paris ensemble



Laurence Equilbey conducts the Insula Orchestra

Perhaps we are getting blasé about historically informed performance. Perhaps the repertoire was too obscure for some. Perhaps Zelenka, Mozart and CPE Bach on a drizzly Monday night is not everybody's idea of fun. Whatever the reason, the Insula Orchestra's London debut at the Barbican was met with far too many empty seats. It deserved better.

Laurence Equilbey's three-year-old ensemble, hailing from Paris, showcases the best in period-instrument performance: lithe playing that forces us to sit up and pay attention to long-neglected, occasionally justly neglected, works.

It certainly made a strong case for Jan Dismas Zelenka's *Miserere in C Minor*, ZWV57, an innovative choice with which to open the concert. Far from opting for understatement, the players exaggerated the qualities — the pounding heartbeat, the bold harmonies — that make this 1738 piece so compelling. With the tireless help of the Accentus choir, the result sat somewhere between Baroque and heavy metal. And it drove home the message of the text, in particular the sense of terror at the prospect of the afterlife.

From here it was quite a leap to Mozart's Solemn Vespers, K339, a piece that does a good job of belying its title. This is a remarkably jolly take on solemnity, and one enjoyed by the performers, who threw themselves with gusto into the opening "Dixit Dominus". But it was the liquid grace of "Laudate Dominum", flaunting Judith van Wanroij's honeyed soprano, that left the most lasting impression.

It was a bit of an anti-climax, then, to finish with CPE Bach's Magnificat, Wq 215, which lacks the imagination of the Mozart and Zelenka. In fact, it sounds like a pale copy of both, with more than a whiff of Daddy Bach's own 1723 Magnificat. Still, it's packed with different styles, enabling the performers to demonstrate what they can do. Bass-baritone Andreas Wolf coped admirably with the muscularity of "Fecit potentiam". Contralto Wiebke Lehmkuhl and tenor Reinoud Van Mechelen relished the elegance of "Depositum", even if the latter sounded somewhat strained. Meanwhile the orchestra, under Equilbey's supervision, never seemed in any danger of running out of puff.



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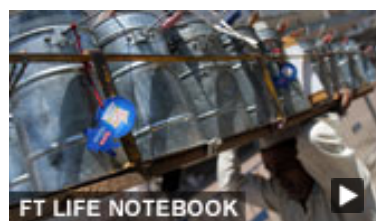
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