

CD REVIEW

A Imagem da Melancolia Recorder Consort
'The Bad Tempered Consort' -
Portuguese polyphony from the 17th Century
Challenge Classics CC72321

'The Bad Tempered Consort' is a fantastic CD of Portuguese polyphony music from the seventeenth century from *A Imagem da Melancolia*, a Portuguese recorder quintet specialising in Renaissance performance practice. The overall sound of the consort is breathtaking with brilliant tuning, articulation and phrasing. They are so in tune that they sound like an organ and perhaps this is the intention as the works were originally for organ. To add variety some of the pieces also include a canto female voice that weaves around the consort.

The CD booklet includes a fascinating discussion on the dilemma on the authenticity of the modern reproduction of Early Music as well as the reconstruction by Adrian Brown of the instruments of the Bassano family recorder consort for this recording. However, there is little information in the CD booklet or the consort's website about the specific pieces recorded. The Portuguese Renaissance repertoire is not as well known as other European countries, and more information on these lesser known works would have been useful to the listener. However, overall this is a really superb CD that displays an amazing ensemble who have researched and performed the repertoire really well.

Oliver Smith





A Imagem da Melancolia

*Francisco Rosado interviewed Pedro Sousa Silva,
leader of the Portuguese recorder consort, by email.*

A Imagem da Melancolia was founded in 2002, and our first performances were in 2003. The name comes from a Holborn *Pavan* and alludes to the semantic idea connected to the recorder during the Renaissance. The recorder was then a metaphor for both love and death, which is a melancholic and *atemporal* pairing. The sound of the recorder consort is quite magical but playing Renaissance polyphony especially makes it a gateway to a place where time ceases. I should make it clear that A Imagem da Melancolia is not a recorder consort *per se*. We are a Renaissance ensemble that performs on recorders, which is a bit different. Our goal is to perform Renaissance polyphony according to historical criteria. The recorders are therefore only the means to that end.

Looking back, we can distinguish three different stages to our development. The first two years were essentially about laying down the foundations for the healthy development of the ensemble. There was a lot of rehearsing and very few public presentations. At that time we were concerned with basic aspects such as tuning, togetherness and playing many different styles of compositions, in order to create stylistic references. During a second stage, the goal was to create performing habits in the ensemble and to give it public visibility. The culmination of this process was the recording of *Arte da Usurpação*

(2005) and which reflects our work until that point.

The third stage started with the arrival of our large set of instruments by Adrian Brown, which deploys a deeper interaction with many aspects of Renaissance performing practice. A large set brings greater resources, of course, but also many more questions on the protocols for polyphonic performance. Problems of transposition and combinations are just the tip of the iceberg. It's not commonly known that there is actually a lot of information in Renaissance sources concerning performance, but to understand and interpret this requires much research and experimentation. This last stage was also marked by the arrival of Magna in the ensemble. She plays an important role since she's the concretisation of the paradigm of Renaissance instrumentalism: *la voce humana*.

We have just released our second CD, *The Bad Tempered Consort*. It is devoted to Portuguese polyphonic music from the seventeenth century. All but two of the pieces come from an organ manuscript, *Braga 964*, which contains works from Manuel Rodrigues Coelho and Pedro de Araújo's generation. The two other pieces are from António Carreira, who is about half a century earlier than Coelho, but whose presence in the programme underlines the stylistic trend for this repertoire, still very much in Renaissance counterpoint models and a bit far from

the baroque. In addition to the five members of *Imagem da Melancolia* (Inês Moz Caldas, Marco Magalhães, Paulo Gonzalez, Pedro Castro and Pedro Sousa Silva), three more recorder players were used (Andrea Guttmann, Matthijs Lunenburg and Susanna Borsch) in order to play in two registers (4'+8') simultaneously. Magna Ferreira is our *vox humana* and Pedro Couto Soares joined the project at the last minute to replace Paulo, who had broken his foot almost at the end of the recording sessions.

Adrian Brown, the recorder maker, was a very important part of the project. He built all the instruments, was present during the recording sessions and the preceding tour to ensure they would always play at their best. But more importantly he was a partner to our reasoning and experimenting with many of the problems and solutions related to consort practices in the Renaissance. Even the title is his idea! Lastly I should mention two invisible members: Bruno Gouveia, our recording engineer since forever, who wonderfully captured the beautiful acoustic of the Igreja de S. João, and Hugo Sanches who had the thankless task of sitting in the control room supervising the recording.

We used two sets of recorders for the CD, copies of instruments marked *HIES/HIERS* and !! preserved in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum. Like the originals, and as all the sources up to and including Praetorius inform us, each set is comprised of instruments in fifths apart. However since these two sets are tuned a tone apart, by mixing them it's actually possible to obtain the fourth-fifth combination characteristic of the seventeenth century. We had a total of around twenty recorders available, a number slightly larger than really needed, but advisable to prevent the instruments from becoming tired during the long sessions of rehearsing, concerts and recordings.

The relation between the original clefs and the recorder combinations was one of the areas of experimentation for this project. We use three combinations (the 'standard' Fccg, the 'Cardanus' Fcgd' and 'Praetorius' Fcfc') and three registers (8', 4' and 6', to use a terminology from the organ world). Additionally, inspired by Mersenne's statement that the Grand Jeu (8') and Petit Jeu (4') could be combined like organ registers, we mix 8' and 4' in order to get a fuller colour, even when (due to the tuning in fifths) the interval between these two registers is a ninth, rather than an octave. This last combination is perhaps the most peculiar since, to my knowledge, no one has tried it before. Although all the recorders used in the last recording are by Adrian Brown we also own a Rafi Fccg set by Luca de Paolis, and several other Renaissance instruments by Monika Musch, Peter van der Poel, Adriana Breuking and Tom Prescott.

Francisco asked about the most relevant moments in the ensemble's development.

Honestly, every time we get together, whether to rehearse, make a concert or a recording, is enormously relevant. Every moment is crucial, since one must always make the best of all experiences. Concerts and recordings are mere checkpoints on a very long path. Of course they are extremely important; a significant part of the artistic progress for any musician or ensemble passes by the confrontation with an auditory. Playing concerts is also what provides us with the financial reward that allows us to be together, since music is what pays our bills. From the public perspective, it might seem more or less important to play in this or that venue, in festival a or b. But artistically it makes little difference, all that matters is that one devotes all of oneself to doing it, at every moment.

When designing a concert it's actually the repertoire that defines the programme and not the other way around. The difficult task is to elaborate a format; to select the pieces is very easy since there is so much excellent music from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A programme, concert or CD, is a journey. It's important that the audience doesn't get lost in a simple succession of pieces. This is especially important in Renaissance music, since playing it today means putting it in contexts that are very different from the 'originals'. We don't believe that this music needs the original social context in order to be understood; for instance a consequence of that thinking would be to recreate the religious rites associated with sacred repertoire. Performers should however provide a frame that guides the listener. Let me give you an example. Let's take *Susanne un Jour*, one of the most famous chansons in the sixteenth century, judging by the amount of sources and pieces written with that theme. A listener today can never reach the same degree of familiarity with that piece as the Renaissance listener: he lacks all the 'original' empiric factors that would give a unique temporal-social-political-geographical-emotional-logical-etc. context to the experience. In *The Bad Tempered Consort*, we have a 'Susanne' piece. However, most listeners probably won't recognise it, some may think 'this sounds familiar', but only a few will say 'Hey, that's a Portuguese Susanne!' So, it's an illusion to think that we can today recreate the 'original' experience, whatever that might be. The performer's task is therefore to aim for an equally deep experience, but in the frame of our actual context. The programme sequence and organization is perhaps one key factor to this.

Francisco asked the Ensemble how easy it is to rehearse regularly.

Someone said that 'music is the art of combining schedules', and there is much of truth in this. However when one decides to do something, there is no easy or difficult. There is only what one must do, 'es muss sein' as Beethoven puts in his quartet, and what one cannot do. Musicians have to practise and rehearse, that's unavoidable; the amount and regularity always depends on the difficult balance between the desirable and the possible. In our case, we now almost only rehearse when we have concerts. Occasionally we get together to read through some new repertoire or make experiments. But in the beginning we spent two years rehearsing for four hours every Monday afternoon.

Pedro Sousa Silva commented on the poor state of recorder consorts in Portugal.

We are the only professional ensemble of this kind. Academically, there is only one consort with regular activity, and that does outstanding work: the Ensemble de Flautas do Centro de Expressão Artística do Município de Loulé. I had the pleasure of producing a CD for this ensemble last year and I was really astonished by the quality of such young players. Some other schools, college or pre-college, have consort projects but those are punctual and their activity is not structured. There are several factors that contribute to this lack. Firstly the teaching in Portugal (and I think it's the same everywhere) is mainly focused on building soloists. Renaissance repertoire, which is about 90% of the repertoire for recorder consort, appears simple, so people tend to overlook it because they consider it to be 'too easy'. This soloistic approach also has an implication when it comes to obtaining the instruments. If you ask recorder players if they would like to participate in a consort experience, the vast majority would surely say yes. But tell them that they should make an investment on the instruments and they'll have second thoughts about it: 'Why spend money in instruments that I cannot use for solo playing?' By the way, we must review our idea that there are 'solo' and 'consort' instruments in the sixteenth century, all the evidence points to the opposite, but that's another story. Secondly, a good recorder consort costs as much as a good violin or a good piano, therefore schools don't really understand that such a 'low rank' instrument is worth the investment. And lastly, unless you are a player with lots of experience in consort playing, a lot of hard work awaits you if you want to set up an ensemble of this kind. And not all have the patience for it.



Pedro was asked to advise young people about playing in recorder consorts.

So many things could be said... The most fundamental aspect is never to forget that making music should be always a pleasure. Work regularly, always be committed and methodical. Be very patient, some aspects will only be improved on the long run. Find a good tutor, it can make a very big difference to be guided by someone with experience in consort playing. Read the excellent book by Bart Spanhove called *The finishing touch of ensemble playing* but that should really be called 'The ABC of ensemble playing' (I hope Bart will forgive me for saying this) since it deals with very fundamental and important issues that should be always present at any 'level.

The ensemble has clear ideas about future projects and is already preparing a CD to be recorded later this year. Although they have never performed in England they say they would be happy to be invited! A Imagem da Melancolia has a website at www.aimagemdamelancolia.net where there are links to their blog, facebook and youtube addresses. They welcome your contact.