
15 Questions to Agnieszka Budzinska/ensemble Peregrina

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It seems to be common knowledge that we are living in highly specialised times, whether we're talking about the economy or the music industry. The latter has indeed bred an enormous multitude of genres over the last years and condemned its artists to easily marketable segments. And when watching those Superstar-shows on TV, we are made to believe that great artists always knew what they wanted right from the very beginning. Agnieszka's career, meanwhile, gives hope to those still willing to ask questions. When she graduated from College in 1992, everything looked as though she was going to turn into a professional pianist with a great future. Somehow her passion for singing and the middle ages took over and she started to re-orientate herself. Masterclasses with Evelyn Tubb and Emma Kirkby ensued, as did classes of medieval harp playing. Success quickly followed suit, showing that she had taken the right decision - to the present day she has recorded four CDs and is a sought-after live performer all over Europe. The release of "Mel et lac" marks an important step for her wonderful group, the "ensemble Peregrina": Colourful and shining medieval pieces full of entrhralling melodies offer an entire world of discovery. Again, not an album for specialists - but for those with an open mind and heart.



Hi! How are you? Where are you?

Doing well, thanks. Sitting in the Musicological Institute Basel trying to gather some material and ideas about our forthcoming projects, lots of preparation...

What's on your schedule right now?

Putting a couple of programmes together for Peregrina's forthcoming concerts (like the music of Clarissen cloisters from Central Europe) which means looking for texts and pieces, transcribing them, checking if they fit my group, trying to make a consistent programme out of it, etc.. My own singing includes Dvorak, Brahms and Italian Trecento music.

If you hadn't chosen for music, what do you think you would do right now?

I would have gone into a strictly academic career in musicology. Or, if that's excluded, I would have ended up in Iceland researching Old Norse and Edda poems. Well, I managed to do both of those to some extent anyway.

What or who was your biggest influence as an artist?

Undoubtedly Benjamin Bagby and Barbara Thornton from Sequentia. Thanks to their many years' work and personal support I was infected with a profound love and passion for medieval music. In one summer evening in 1992 I was captured by their performance of Boethius' poems, Oswald von Wolkenstein (whose music turned out to be the theme of my MA thesis) and Philip the Chancellor. And Ben's storytelling from Beowulf. And there was no return.

What's the hardest part about being a musician and what's the best?

Having to acknowledge that everything is to change constantly and to accept the unexpected turns of your life and career (which can be very exciting too). Having to be ready to give your best anytime of the day, month or the season. Having to be extremely disciplined in order to organise your work, otherwise one may easily fall into some kind of laziness. Keeping the spark of enthusiasm constantly burning – even if we all get weary at some point.

Great things:

- the energy exchange during the concert (with the public, with your fellow musicians),
- the sense of uniqueness through your art,
- the sense of power if you manage to touch people's souls,
- the great sense of freedom if you've advanced far enough not to accept weird concert offers and to work on your own projects
- remembering that becoming a performer was your own decision in spite of your family desperately wanting you to have a decent job..

What's your view on the classical music scene at present? Is there a crisis?

The early music scene is not the same as the classical music scene. It's a different public, different places, concerts, festivals, musicians... And all of those are growing in number, since people opened their ears and hearts for some new and exciting realms of poetry and music.

Some feel there is no need to record classical music any more, that it's all been done before. What do you tell them?

Indeed, I've asked myself many times already if the world was ready for the 17618th very average recording of Beethoven's Fifth... Truly, the market is full of unnecessary recordings of little value. It needs some knowledge and time to be able to differentiate between "great interpretations" and a crap recording of a village orchestra. But within the world of early music it is a marginal question anyway since almost every recording is a "world premiere recording" in some respect and even having the same piece on a cd (which happens rarely) very often brings out absolutely shocking differences. I appreciate very much really well thought out recordings which open new doors for some forgotten repertoires or show new ways of interpreting and understanding music.

What constitutes a good live performance in your opinion? What's your approach to performing on stage?

It involves a huge amount of physical and mental energy and being fully present all the time. It means trusting your own capacity to keep the public's attention, valid for both singers and instrumentalists, and to give a great intensity without which it doesn't make sense at all. It is being honest towards pieces chosen for the performance and towards the public - there are many who foolishly underestimate their listeners. And also being able to admit your artistic vulnerability and combat your ego trying to serve the music first.

What does the word "interpretation" mean to you?

It means to research as much as possible a certain piece, style, repertoire, to try to come as close as possible to its core, its message. It is to internalise it so well that you don't have to think about it anymore and only then to perform it. It means to go through this whole long, painful and complicated, but also rewarding process of becoming your own song.

True or false: It is the duty of an artist to put his personal emotions into the music he plays.

I think an artist is supposed to have access to the "collective pool" of feelings, emotions and reactions and all this might get reflected in his work. I don't have to grieve my own lost love in a love-lament I'm singing, but I will certainly refer to any example of such a thing known to me or having ever influenced me, even indirectly. But of course the most moving performances stem from our deeper self and those are unforgettable.

True or false: "Music is my first love"

Never thought of it this way.

True or false: People need to be educated about classical music, before they can really appreciate it.

There are just so many different levels of appreciation, all of them perfectly ok. But this becomes a real problem when you're performing something as unknown or demanding as medieval music. And its great strength. The public in my own concerts always stems from all walks of life, often much more colourful than in "normal" classical concerts - I see musicologists and farmers, linguists and pilots, chemists and housewives, bishops and atheists, politicians and New Age fans. They all come for different reasons: to be taken into the past and to imagine the adventures of Robin Hood, to get soaked in the sonority of early polyphony, to hear the sound of langue d'oc or Anglo-Saxon and justly associate the latter with the Lord of the Rings, to see the medieval instruments and the costumes although I'm not wearing any, to meditate, to imagine cloisters, etc. And those people always go away with the feeling of having learnt or discovered something (apart from those hoping for the costumes, whom I must have disappointed terribly). Of course, very often there are things completely opposite to my intentions, but whatever they gain from my concerts is very precious to me. But certainly, the more they know about the music themselves, the better they can understand structures, forgotten old languages, concepts and ideas and only then fully enjoy and appreciate it. But this is such a vast area and it takes a lifetime to get to know more about it, so it already makes me happy if people read my concert notes and have a look at the texts and translations which I'm always trying to provide.

You are given the position of artistic director of a concert hall. What would be on your program for this season?

The concert hall would have to be early music friendly.. ☺ :-)

I'd certainly invite some leading and serious ensembles for early music (Sequentia, Dialogos, Ensemble Organum, Diabolus in musica, to mention only a few from the medieval scene). I'd run some Baroque music series with lesser known repertoires still to be discovered. And from the mainstream classical area I'd love to have some more R. Vaughan Williams, B. Bartok, Z. Kodaly, S. Prokofiew and K. Szymanowski

What's your favourite classical CD at the moment?

Since I sing and conduct so much myself, I need some rest from the world of sound and I actually rarely listen to music. If I do, then it's usually traditional, jazz or film music. But a CD recently played quite often in my place is a juicy recording of Codex Calixtinus with Ensemble Organum and Marcel Peres (2004), recordings of Orthodox music I'm beginning to get to know and, surprisingly enough, R. Strauss' Vier letzte Lieder with Jessye Norman from 1982...

Have you ever tried playing a different instrument? If yes, how good were you at it?

I'm still trying... Gothic and Romanesque harp to accompany singing. And, from time to time, the organ – as a heritage of my earlier piano training. If I play a chaconne, I may even use the pedals... ☺ :-)

Discography:

Medieval music in Poland - Krasieński manuscript, 15th century (Ars Nova) 2001

Musique Russe Baroque 2002

Mel et lac (Raumklang) 2005

Musica Restituta: Benedykt Cichoszewski 2006