Interview with Paul Van Nevel, Director, Huelgas Ensemble

By Jeffrey Sandborg, Director of Choral Activities and Wade Professor of Music, Roanoke College

Belgian conductor Paul Van Nevel (b. 1946) is the artistic director of Huelgas Ensemble, which he founded in 1970. He and his ensemble specialise in the vocal music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Van Nevel studied at the Maastricht Conservatory and is currently a guest lecturer at the Musikhochschule (Conservatoire), Hanover, while also a guest conductor of the Danish Radio Choir and the Netherlands Chamber Choir.

Van Nevel is a recognised authority on cultural history, early music notation and performance practice. His extensive scholarly choral activity has led to the rediscovery of important composers such as Gombert and Ciconia, the latter being a representative of the *ars subtilior*, a repertoire of immense performance practice challenges which Van Nevel and Huelgas have brought to light.

Paul Van Nevel ©Luk Van Eeckhout

Huelgas derives its name from the Cistercian Monastery near Burgos, Spain (which houses the *Las Huelgas* Codex), where Van Nevel examined manuscripts during his student days. The core of the Huelgas Ensemble is made up of ten singers but the group may expand to accommodate the repertoire, as they do, for example, in performances of Thomas Tallis' forty-voice *Spem in Alium*.

Huelgas' acclaimed and award-winning discography of over fifty recordings spans the early Middle Ages and early Baroque period; the most recent recording is of the *Eton Choir Book.*

Web site: http://www.huelgas.be/

Jeffrey Sandborg: Is this your full-time job?

Paul Van Nevel: It is.

JS: How many concerts do you stage per year with the Huelgas Ensemble?

PVN: We do not do more than twenty five to thirty concerts

and we do one recording per year. My team works a year in advance of the season, organising and planning.

JS: Does Huelgas receive any assistance?

PVN: We receive 220,000 Euros from the Flemish government.

JS: Who are the singers in Huelgas? Are they all from Belgium?

PVN: They are all full-time singers but not all are from Belgium. For example, the countries represented in yesterday's concert were France, England, Holland, Italy, Germany, Spain, Austria and Belgium.

JS: How do you select your singers?

PVN: Every year, for the past thirty-five years, I have held auditions in order to find exactly the right voices for the music I am planning.

JS: What type of voice are you looking for, in general?

PVN: For the music we are performing, you need voices with perfect intonation, and a perfect feeling for the most complicated rhythms and the old pronunciations of Latin and French. I am not looking for singers in the spirit of the 19th-century chorus singer. We approach the music not as a chorister but as a soloist, in the same spirit as the composers of the music, all of whom were also singers. The goal is to blend together as well as possible so that there is unity in every part of the piece. Polyphony is the most egoistic of written music; every line has to be read on its

own with a shared understanding of accents and rhythms. So, I need singers who share these same ideas. For instance, in the harmonic music we sang yesterday (15th and 16th century polyphony), the singers have to make sure that they are singing the same thirds and the same fifths – that is the only way to sing this transparent music.

JS: How do you audition specifically for these qualities?

PVN: In Europe, the Huelgas auditions are famous. It is a twenty-minute audition, after which I know all that I need to know. I want to know if the performer can sing a hexachord without changing intonation, if they can sing Pythagorean leading tones and mean tone leading tones. If singers come in and ask, "Where is the piano?" they can leave immediately. I let them read a text from a Petrarch poem and then ask them to sing that text on each tone of a hexachord. At the end, it should be in tune but most will go sharp or flat. I accept that this can happen, they may have had a long trip, or they might be nervous, but it is important for them to know if they are high or low. If they do not know, then they do not have the combination of ear and voice that is needed. Most auditions do not uncover any singers who are able to do these things.

JS: What else do you evaluate?

PVN: What I have mentioned so far takes ten minutes. For the rest, I ask them to sing some very complicated rhythms from the *ars subtilior.* Then I ask them to sing something of their choice. The good ones sing plainsong.

JS: Do these singers gather for specific projects and then

return home?

PVN: Exactly.

JS: Do you use the same system of tuning for all repertoires or do you change it, depending on the style?

PVN: I change it. For instance, tomorrow night, in the medieval repertoire we use Pythagorean tuning for the Machaut, using very high leading tones; the same for Pérotin.

From approximately 1460 onwards, we have used mean tone tuning from the last works of Dufay. From the period of Josquin des Pres, we have used mean tone.

Huelgas Ensemble in concert ©Luk Van Eeckhout

JS: Why was this shift required?

PVN: Because you have fauxbourdon style with chains of sixths,

so it cannot be Pythagorean. In the music of that period, Pythagorean tuning would have been all dissonant. Composers would have heard this as mean tone in their own ears.

JS: How do you decide how many voices to use per part?

PVN: It depends on the kind of chapel for which the piece was written. For instance, if you have repertoire from Ockeghem or Josquin des Pres, we know that we are in Italy, in Milan, with the Sforzas, but also Mantua and surely in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. There were up to four singers per line. The negative thing about our interpretation ideas comes from the English early music groups which, for financial reasons, made every line a solo. However, this does not have anything to do with original distributions. So when I stage that repertoire, I use two singers per line, always. Only very rarely would I make it solo and then only if that particular repertoire requires it.

JS: How can you be sure about the original distributions you mention? Do you have sources?

PVN: Exactly. Archives, where we can see how many singers were paid and when, who went away, who replaced whom, who died, who came back, and so on. A fixed ensemble never existed at that time. We must not think of it as a paradise. The Vatican choir changed every three weeks. Now, I am speaking of sacred music; the madrigal and the chanson are strictly solo.

JS: What about medieval repertoire? Pérotin, for example?

PVN: We know that in approximately 1200, there were sixteen male singers in the chapel of Notre Dame, Paris, and there

were eight choir boys.

The space in which organa were sung, *Viderunt Omnes* for example, has nothing to do with the space we see today. The choir stood behind a huge wall, separated from the space where the people were, so the musicians could be heard but not seen. The space in which the music was sung was actually small compared to the rest of the cathedral.

Organa such as *Viderunt Omnes* were always sung during feasts, not during normal days of the week. During feasts, the wall against which the choir sang was covered with tapestries and that made the acoustic much drier. The echo in Notre Dame takes nine seconds but the *Viderunt Omnes* would have been sung with something closer to a three- or four-second echo. That tells us a lot about the tempo. Many think you cannot sing it quickly because of the acoustics we hear today, but these acoustics are not what Pérotin was working with.

JS: I know that you have made interesting comments about how music says important things about the people who made it, and gives deep insights into life as it was centuries ago. Can you expand on some of these ideas?

PVN: In the history of painting, we find that the cubism of Picasso could not have been done by Memling or Rubens. In the development of style, what a painting says about somebody or about life is very clear for us. In music, it is perhaps less well known or thought about, but the same idea is still there. For instance, the feeling for perfect tuning and perfect rhythm, a mathematically perfect rhythm, was much easier at that time than now. I see this in my auditions. Young singers have more and more difficulty singing exactly, mathematically, what is written. A dotted note with two double crotchets (dotted eighth, two sixteenths) sounds like a triplet. And so with the famous canon of Josquin des Pres in *Qui habitat,* if

the singers do not have the feeling of singing perfectly on the tactus, the architecture of the building begins to move. The clarity and perfection is the same as we might see in a Japanese ink drawing. It is so perfect. Beauty was congruent with perfection. Said another way, perfection was seen as beauty. With Josquin des Pres, if you cannot sing it rhythmically perfect, it becomes something anyone can do and is not in the spirit of the composers of this style. Even with no watches or computers, these musicians were deeply sensitive to all aspects of time. Believe me, Josquin des Pres knew exactly when it was 8:15 and not 8:20. And this feeling for time was much more sensual and bound to life than it is now.

For instance, in the 15th century, the hours were not the same in winter as in summer. In winter, day and night were equal but an hour at night was much longer than sixty minutes in their minds, and so time had a certain flexibility which could be felt in the sensitivity to time in music. Today everyone, from the time they are born to the time they die, is accompanied by a beat. Our children live their whole lives with a battery, with rock music: beat, beat, beat. But they have lost their own feeling of what a second is. The beat of a computer or a watch is external and so there is no independent thinking.

JS: It has been my understanding that ‘the beat’ of this music is derived from the human pulse.

PVN: Yes, but do not forget that the pulse is not the same as it was in the sixteenth century. It is faster now.

JS: Because of increasing blood pressure?

PVN: Yes. And urban life probably plays its part too, as is the case here in New York. The whole environment has affected

our body. I will give you an example. In the time of Lassus, Josquin des Pres and Dufay, a boy's voice broke at eighteen years of age. Now, in Europe, it happens at age eleven or twelve – at least five years earlier than in the 15th and 16th centuries. There are actually studies on this. It has to do with food and preservatives which have all influenced our hormonal life. Then there was a certain quietness to life, less stress and the same schedule every day and so the body did not have to adapt. Here is another example of this physical change. A few months ago we recorded the *Eton Choir Book*. This is considered to be the most rhythmically complicated polyphony that exists. The top lines are incredibly difficult; you cannot do them with children today. Eleven- and twelve-year-old children cannot do it, but at that time they had already had eight years of education and they could sing it.

Another thing to understand is how they used memory. We can see this by how they put music together. Composing was additive. Brumel never saw the score we sang last night. Only in the 16th century did musicians feel it necessary to write the parts out together, vertically. Singers had only their part which made them absolutely focused on intonation. They were forced to listen. When we began using part books in Huelgas, the singers said, "Paul, you're making life difficult for us". After three rehearsals they realised that we were spending much less time focusing on intonation. The singers were listening more carefully, just as they would have in the 15th century. Music was in the air and it was controlled by the ears.

JS: How do you organise your rehearsals and prepare the score?

PVN: I talk a lot at first, having already made choices about underlay and ficta, for example, but after we have begun it is

better for the singers to find themselves and there is always discussion. I do prepare the score, but not as a final copy, as a working vehicle.

JS: I almost forgot to ask you about your musical training.

PVN: From the ages of twelve to eighteen, I sang two hours a day in the bishop's college choir in Hasselt. Afterwards, I went to the conservatory to learn technique.

JS: Vocal technique?

PVN: I learnt the recorder and the 'dulcian' (baroque bassoon). I have never had a voice lesson. I was the first singer in Huelgas, but the critics were not impressed. (Laughter.)

Edited by Hayley Smith, UK