

THOROUGHLY GOOD CLASSICAL MUSIC



**IMMERSED IN
BAROQUE: FOUR
ENCHANTING
DAYS AT
ITINÉRAIRE**



MUSIC SPANNING 400 YEARS FROM SOME OF THE LEADING EXPONENTS OF THE GENRE, PERFORMED IN VENUES ROOTED IN THE DORDOGNE'S BUCOLIC IDYLL

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Nestled in the remote, bucolic beauty of the Dordogne, the Itinéraire Baroque Festival is an enchanting step back in time. Now in its 23rd year with artistic director Ton Koopman at the helm, the festival remains true to original vision, performing a wide range of

baroque music in architectural gems across the Perigord region of the Dordogne.

It seems remarkable to think that its originating innovation – a day of multiple short concerts dotted across the countryside – was started back in 2001 and continues to this day. This marathon concert day forms the centrepiece of the Festival, this year attracting a 300 strong audience who packed out the various churches the events were staged in. Varied programmes interspersed with gentle drives across rolling countryside with mostly blooming sunflowers makes the destination a glorious escape and the eclectic musical survey a valuable primer for those unfamiliar with the genre.

Sizzling musical highlights included solo and trio sonatas by Dietrich Buxtehude from Ensemble Fantasticus, exhilarating Telemann and Vivaldi from Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra (including a touching performance of Stolzel's Bist du bei mir from bass baritone Klaus Mertens), and rarely heard Suites by the renowned 17th century French viol player and composer Marin Marais.

The festival concluded with a moving interpretation of JS Bach's St John Passion with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and chorus conducted by Ton Koopman.

BAMBERG SYMPHONY , ELIZABETH LLEWELLYN AND SIMON LEPPERAT EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL 2024

9TH AUGUST
2024





Robert Smith and Mike Fentross performing music by Marin Marais

In terms of material, what seems to link this period of music is the use of contrasts – fast and slow, introspective followed by dance – with the democratic sharing of material between players. Buxtehude's sonatas are a good starting point. It's far from demure or light. There is urgency, passion, thrills and drama, all of it miraculously created by just a handful of individuals, big smiles on their faces as they're doing it.

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IMMERSED IN BAROQUE: FOUR ENCHANTING DAYS AT ITINÉRAIRE BAROQUE

6TH AUGUST
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Throughout the festival a growing appreciation comes into focus: Telemann as a starting point for musical development that often gets bracketed as niche. Yet observe the development of harmonic progression over an entire work to construct a musical argument, and ponder what these developments must have sounded like to the listener when they were first performed. What was its initial impact on people who were hearing it for the first time?

MUSIC THAT BUILDS COMMUNITY

Itinéraire Baroque draws a devoted crowd, not only the local French inhabitants, but a slew of British ex-pats and, this year, a bus load of Dutch fans too. Less musos and more culture lovers, the community is close-knit, concert-goers quickly becoming familiar faces with a nonchalant nod of the head.

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Start times are fluid, intervals an unnecessary interruption. There are no airs and graces. No one is on parade. We are here for culture, the countryside, good food and, if there's any going spare, a glass of something.

This camaraderie plays an important role in the Itinéraire Baroque experience, especially on the 'marathon' concert day. Proceedings begin at 9.30am – the second earliest concert I've attended – with music by Marian performed by viola de gamba player Robert Smith, continuo Mike Fentross, with a cameo appearance from Ton Koopman on drum met with rapturous applause. The 40 minute concert is followed by a quick explanation about how the four 50-strong audience groups are split up. Suitably brief, we stroll to our vehicles and set off.

MARATHON TOUR

The Yellow Tour begins with 40 minutes of Purcell bursting with urgency and articulacy from counter-tenor Pieter De Praetere who combines theatricality with a cut-glass tone without being overly flamboyant. His considerable energy worked well with oboist and recorder player Nele Vertommen's jaunty musicianship. What worked especially well in this concert was the way the programme of

multiple Purcell extracts acted like a playlist taking the audience through Purcell's Oedipus, The Fairy Queen, and The Old Bachelor.



Eglise de Saint Front sur Nizonne where Spanish vocal quartet Cantoria performed

To follow a few kilometres away, a short programme of 15th and 16th-century Spanish polyphony evoked cosy evenings imagining exotic far-away lands. Their close harmony and spirited communication brings about an infectious sense of occasion that warms the soul in a programme including music by Mateo Flecha, Francisco Guerrero, Alonso Mudarra and Francisco Guerrero. No, I hadn't heard of any of them either.

Following a little musicology show-and-tell featuring medieval music from Catalina Vicens' reconstructed 16th century 'portative organ' resting on her thigh, on to Chateau de

Connezac to absorb a seductive mix of Baroque and Arabic music – taxing on the ears for the members of the 250+ crowd sat at the back, but for those closer to the action perfectly matched to the setting of the sun.

THE ANTICIPATION OF BACH

Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra's performance of St John Passion was much-anticipated – an opportunity for musical reflection amid a weekend steeped in introspection.

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The five-day festival concluded with an much-anticipated performance of Bach's St John Passion. Klaus Mertens, as Jesus, combined characteristic humility with a penetrating stare that shaped a profoundly moving experience. Tenor Timon Lichdi as the Evangelist, brought enthusiasm, razor sharp diction but occasionally struggled with

pitch. Last minute substitution Amelia Berridge pierced the atmosphere with sunshine and joy throughout. Sophia Faltas was overpowered by the orchestra in her first aria *Von den Strikken*, but we the pared down accompaniment in *Es ist Vollbracht!* meant we got to hear the beauty in her phrasing later on.



Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and Chorus with Ton Koopman and soloists who performed Bach's St John Passion at Eglise de Saint-Astier

This profoundly moving performance had at its heart the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra Chorus, the sound produced by it seemingly four times greater than the seventeen individuals gathered on stage. This remarkable group of singers summoned fury, turmoil, and consolation when called for in the score. Warm smiles and swiftly exchanged glances underlined their

commitment throughout, something enthusiastic appreciated by the audience when Koopman signalled to them to stand for applause.

CONNECTION AND DISCOVERY

IB fits the bill in Thoroughly Good terms. There's no hand-wringing deference here. Instead, musicians eager to play the music they love to people who love detail even if they don't know the detail. The audiences are small meaning proximity to the action is (by and large) guaranteed. Watching the nuance in cellist Konstance Waidosch's bow technique accompanying Ton Koopman illuminated the role of the continuo bass in providing shape and character. Being close to the source of both Klaus Martens and Pietre De Praetere's voices made their contribution both immediate and unequivocal. Being able to make observations about the use of harmonic progressions in a musical argument by a variety of different composers of the time helped deepen my understanding of the genre.

In this way, baroque is one of a handful of genres that can provide both variety and insight. The forces are smaller, the pieces shorter. It wouldn't be possible to achieve the

same immersive learning experience with large-scale orchestral music from the romantic era for example. Compact works for small ensembles are the most efficient medium for highlighting the miracle of the musical argument.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Everywhere you turn the views in Perigord are a sight for sore eyes.

If you're thinking you don't know enough Baroque bar the usual predictable playouts on radio, Itinéraire Baroque is the place for you. Trade a slower pace with a curious mind and in return you'll get a broad survey of 300 years of music, with the physiological benefits of a few days off-grid struggling with rudimentary French. But you'll need to book early, hire a car and, when you get here, not be in a hurry.

The Airbnbs are surprisingly good value for

money, but the connection times of 90 minutes from Bordeaux and an hour for Bergerac make this remote location difficult to get to. The payoff is the slower heart rate and the way curiosity is rewarded with connection.

LISTEN TO ITINERAIRE BAROQUE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR TALKING TO THE THOROUGHLY GOOD CLASSICAL MUSIC PODCAST

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