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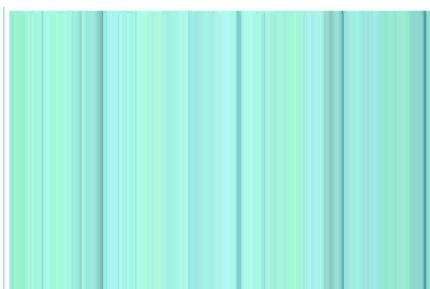
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Thursday, 30 October 2014

Camerata Alma Viva: from Handel to Hendrix

Labels: [by Hilary Glover, concert review](#)

Hendrix, Handel, Schoenberg, Reich; Camerata Alma Viva; St. Johns Smith Square

Reviewed by Hilary Glover on Oct 23 2014

Star rating: 3.0

A range of styles from young conductorless ensemble

Camerata Alma Viva is a group of young musicians who all met while playing quartets together at a [Gábor Takács-Nagy](#) school. Deciding that they wanted to keep the feel of a quartet, but play on a larger scale, they set up their ensemble which performs without a conductor.

Tonight's concert (Thursday 23 October) at St John Smiths Square showcased their talents across a range of styles, taking in Handel, Schoenberg, Reich and a new composition by [Nimrod Borenstein](#).

Their finale was a rousing version of 'Purple Haze' by [Jimi Hendrix](#) - this arrangement made good use of the extra instruments to provide the reverb and tortured feedback sounds instead of the usual post amplification modification.

George Frideric [Handel's](#) (1685-1759) 'Passacaglia from Suite in G minor HWV 432' was originally written sometime before 1720 for keyboard, but has been rewritten for numerous instrumental combinations over the years. Tonight's version was arranged by violinist [Eric Mouret](#), who also arranged the Handel/Hendrix finale. Starting towards the rear of the hall the musicians processed, while playing, to the stage. Each was performing as a soloist, moving in time with their own physical interpretation of their part – yet it all came together. Their combined sound was very simple and sweet – perfect for this period piece.

[Arnold Schoenberg's](#) (1874-1951) 'Verklärte Nacht' Op. 4 (1899) was preceded by an explanation and a reading of Richard Dehmel's poem, which was the inspiration of the work, by ensemble leader [Charlotte Maclet](#). Originally scored for two violins, two violas, and two cellos, Schoenberg himself rescored it for string ensemble in 1917 and again in 1947.

This is not an easy piece to do well. It is so well known and loved that every listener is bound to be hypercritical. The recording I favour of this work is heavy on the bass, providing darkness and a gothic edge to the tale. Camerata Alma Viva had only three cellos and a single double bass meaning that the ensemble's interpretation was much lighter and Romantic. But since it was originally scored for a sextet this is presumably closer to the sound Schoenberg envisaged. There were some charming solos and duets, and in one section the cellos produced a rumbling effect with their vibrato which impressed me greatly.

The uproar this piece engendered when it was first performed is almost unimaginable. To modern ears it has more in common with the Romantic lieder of Schubert or the picture painting of Richard Strauss than the Schoenberg who wrote *Pierrot Lunaire* and used twelve-tone serialism to such great effect.

Borenstein composed 'Symphony for Strings op.68' (a world premiere) for the ensemble. He explained that he wanted to make it difficult for the orchestra to play and, as he wrote it, it quickly became a short symphony. Split into three movements described as 'difficult', 'slow' and 'furious' Borenstein wanted to exploit the potential of contrasts available with a string orchestra.

Use of a walking bass gave a baroque feel – the double bass player deserves a special mention for her exceptional playing throughout the concert – yet there was plenty of *perpetuum mobile* and looping of elements to bring it up to date. The slow movement was more lyrical and featured the lead violin in solos, and had lots of different rhythms going on at once.

Similarly to the Schoenberg, 'Triple Quartet' (1998) by [Steve Reich](#) (1936-) started off life as being for a small ensemble, one quartet (written for the Kronos Quartet) and two pre-recorded tracks, but Reich later rescored it for string orchestra. Here the ensemble was held together by a determined cello section. The concentration needed to maintain the drive and forward movement of the work meant that it was a little featureless - but overall they did very well.

Before the applause had reached its natural conclusion the performers not involved in the Reich began the Handel/Hendrix vignette towards the back of the hall. This was taken up by other quartets as they moved into position – eventually congregating on the stage for the Hendrix portion and a lively and characterful ending.

This group is probably just on the limit of what can sensibly be achieved without a conductor. In a quartet each performer can hear and attune themselves the other. As the group get larger this becomes progressively more difficult. Outlying players cannot hear other performers at the opposite side of the stage and the more likely it is that the different personalities will not meld successfully and cause timings and tunings to drift. As an ensemble gets larger (and a conductor is employed to keep time and overrule stylistic issues) these differences in performance

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styles and interpretation become lost in the group, forming a cohesive sound once again.

But I think that the members of Camerata Alma Viva know their limits and in fact, for the Borenstein, they employed a conductor to help keep them on track. It would be nice to see them break out of their self imposed constraints and of their reliance on one or two soloists. That said the initial Handel and the final Hendrix were superb - showing just what they are capable of when they let their personalities shine.

Reviewed by Hilary Glover

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Posted by [Robert Hugill](#) at 10/30/2014 07:46:00 am



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