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Collegium Vocale Gent, Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh – review

By Andrew Clark

The ‘tears of St Peter’ resonated powerfully with the austere surroundings of Greyfriars Kirk



Collegium Vocale Gent

Which is worse – physical torture or psychological/spiritual agony? It’s one of those daft either/or questions that none of us should have to answer, least of all in the context of an arts celebration as enthusing as the Edinburgh International Festival. But it lies at the heart of Orlando de Lassus’s career-crowning work, *Lagrimae di San Pietro*.

This cycle of seven-voice spiritual madrigals, completed in 1594 and now regarded as one of the peaks of Renaissance culture, spends the best part of an hour going over and over the same guilt trip: it compares the physical blows of Christ being pinned to the cross with the evidently more wounding and longer-lasting blows of Saint Peter’s denial. And it does so in music of exalted contemplation, as unvarying in expressive tone as the litany of shame and self-disgust articulated by its text.

In the austere Presbyterian surroundings of Greyfriars Kirk, these “tears of Saint Peter” found a near-ideal resonance, thanks not just to the 17th-century church’s magnificent acoustic and peaceful aura, but also to the blend and balance of voices instilled in Collegium Vocale Gent by its founder and conductor, Philippe Herreweghe. This was a true festival event – a marriage of location and concentration that, after a short period of necessary adjustment, drew the listener under its spell.

Only towards the end of the work’s 21 movements did it become clear how concise Lassus’s language really is, and how hypnotic its pace and timbre. Thanks to Collegium’s stylistic coherence and Herreweghe’s deceptively discreet direction, such an experience starts to resemble a retreat from the world – an opportunity not so much to sit admiring its musical purism as to pursue something deeper and more nourishing than daily human intercourse. When the music stops, applause may be inevitable, but it’s superfluous.

Among the many distinguishing elements of this performance was the brisk sense of continuity instilled by Herreweghe – no pregnant pauses – and the natural-sounding diction of his singers. This is music that speaks for itself, and Herreweghe’s seven musical disciples had the discipline to let it do so.

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