

The Dowland Project ROMARIA

John Potter

John Potter, tenor; **John Surman**, bass clarinet, tenor and bass recorders; **Miloš Valent**, violin and viola; **Stephen Stubbs**, baroque guitar and vihuela

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What does an ensemble of four musicians from completely different societal backgrounds do with a 13th-century song that survives only as a skeletal vocal line? The answer is: they listen, they improvise and they give free rein to their musical associations, knowing that the result will be something entirely new. For John Potter, the longstanding tenor of the Hilliard Ensemble and a teacher at York University, music exists by definition only in the present. So far, so good, one might think. But the consequences are far-reaching, as was already evident in the Dowland Project's two earlier albums, 'In Darkness let me dwell' (1999) and 'Care-charming Sleep' (2003).

It goes without saying that a firm grasp of historical styles is essential. But otherwise nothing more is needed: 'If we take the opportunity to ignore historical detail where it doesn't serve our interests in the present, we can bypass the musicological thought police and negotiate directly with the dead composers.' Thus Potter writes in his article for the book 'Horizons Touched - The Music of ECM', published by Granta, London, in 2007.

Now the Dowland Project is expanding its repertoire and delving into songs from the 12th century to the present day. These richly atmospheric pieces exist only in the interaction of the musicians involved. John Surman, one of the great saxophonists of European jazz and a marvellous player of the tenor and bass recorders, is again part of the group. Then there is Steven Stubbs, a baroque lutenist (and conductor) who seems to have free improvisation in his blood. Another is Miloš Valent, the vibrant violinist and violist from Slovakia who is equally at home in early music and in the gypsy and folk musics of eastern Europe. Fittingly, the instruments they employ come from completely different eras. Chronology has been suspended: listeners of this tightly focused music plunge deep into the past while remaining wholly in the present.

'Originally we planned to arrange the programme around the movements of a Mass Ordinary', Potter recalls, 'but it didn't work out for musical reasons, as became clear in the St Gerold recording session. Contrapuntal pieces are almost always linked with an identifiable composer, so we tend to be warier of them than with monophonic songs, which are most likely anonymous and no one can really know how they sounded. Roughly up to the age of Wagner the composer always had to subordinate his will to that of the performer. Viewed in this light, there are actually no theoretical or intellectual limits to dealing freely with the material. At most the limits are artistic and musical. We can make a structure more complex by adding lines or simplify it by leaving things out. Or we can slice a piece into sections and interpolate improvisations into it. We applied all these procedures, but only when we came to play could we see how it really functioned.'

What does 'Romaria' mean? The title was chosen for its many associations, beginning with the word 'aria'. It refers to Christian pilgrimages and processions in Portugal and Brazil and thus points to a geographical destination for our musical journey, which begins in the Alpine regions of Upper Bavaria ('Carmina burana') and South Tyrol (Oswald von Wolkenstein). In a metaphorical sense 'Romaria' also alludes to the processual character of the Dowland Project itself, for in reality this third album is already the ensemble's fourth.

After finishing recording 'Care-charming Sleep' in September 2001 and dining in St Gerold Provostry in the Vorarlberg region of Austria, Manfred Eicher suggested going back to the church at midnight and playing some more music. 'I didn't have any more material in my luggage', Potter recalls. 'All I could offer was two collections of medieval poetry, one in Latin and another in English. I read the texts or described their contents to my colleagues, then off we went.' Potter, as he informs us in 'Horizons Touched', considers the completely free and uninhibited improvisations that followed to be among the most extraordinary musical experiences of his life. The live recording of the session has now been mixed and is scheduled for release by ECM.

Thus, together with Manfred Eicher, there arose the idea of a sort of ex post facto transition from the renaissance songs and madrigals on 'Care-charming Sleep' to the group's completely free music-making set aside for the next album. As Potter explains, 'When we met again in St. Gerold last January we could draw directly on the audacity we gained on that evening six years ago.' The partial recasting of the ensemble had purely practical reasons: Maya Homburger and Barry Guy, the violinist and the bassist on the two earlier recordings, were unavailable owing to their many other commitments. Steven Stubbs and Manfred Eicher quickly settled on Miloš Valent, who had already taken part in Stubbs's 'Teatro Lirico' (ECM 1893) and who adds his own distinctive colour to the group.

John Potter is a singer and musicologist who was trained in the English choral tradition and founded his own rhythm-and-blues band as a teenager. Even then he was fascinated by many different forms of singing, which later found expression in his highly regarded book 'Vocal Authority' (Cambridge University Press, 1998). A founding member of the Electric Phoenix Ensemble, he sang in the Hilliard Ensemble from 1984 to 2001. He has a special liking for contemporary music and has given the premières of works by Gavin Bryars, Bill Brooks and others. He is also the producer of three ECM albums with the Scandinavian Trio Mediaeval.

John Surman, according to the Virgin Encyclopedia of Jazz, has been 'one of the key figures in contemporary jazz over the past three decades' and 'a powerful and resourceful improviser who leaves out more than he put in'. He has been recording with ECM since 1976. Besides 16 albums as a leader, he has also taken part in many other projects. His most recent release, 'The Spaces in Between', was an 'editor's choice' in Jazz Review. Further albums are currently in preparation.

Miloš Valent grew up in a family of folk musicians in Slovakia. His training covers both the classical repertoire and folk music. After serving as a member and concertmaster of several orchestras he founded his own baroque orchestra, Solamente Naturali, in Bratislava. He can be heard on Stubbs's 'Teatro Lirico' and appears as a soloist on Vladimír Godár's 'Mater' (ECM 1985).

Stephen Stubbs was born in Seattle and studied harpsichord and composition at the University of Washington, where he took up the lute. After continuing his studies in England and Holland he gave his début as a lutenist in London's Wigmore Hall in 1976. From 1981 on he taught at the Musikhochschule in Bremen. In 2006 he returned to the United States, where he founded the Seattle Academy of Baroque Opera. His ECM début under his own name, 'Teatro Lirico', was praised in the New York Times as a 'risky but irresistible project'.