

The Zero Gravity Band
Greenwich Early Music Festival
14 November 2015

Barbara Law, Charlotte Barbour-Condini, Evelyn Nallen, Sophie Westbrooke recorder
Chiara Vinci soprano David Gordon harpsichord
Malcolm Creese double bass Jez Wiles percussion
Zero Gravity recorders

When surveying this year's offering of concert performances as part of the Royal Greenwich International Early Music Festival and Exhibiton, a performance by Cambridge's recorder band, Zero Gravity - with young soloists Charlotte Barbour-Condini and Sophie Westbrooke - certainly stood out as a 'must see'. The concert did not disappoint! It was surely with much modesty that the names of the evening's other two solo performers, Evelyn Nallen and Barbara Law, had not appeared on the fliers and tickets, for the lucky audience was treated to a quartet of absolutely top-quality recorder soloists.

The scene was set perfectly with a performance of Purcell's *Music for a While*, with the clear-voiced soprano soloist, Chiara Vinci, accompanied by the tight yet expressive ensemble playing of Zero Gravity, which boasted three contrabass and three great bass instruments among their ranks, giving the accompaniment a real richness and depth.

After further pieces by Purcell and Arne came two pieces by Telemann which were certainly the highlights of the concert for this reviewer. The first, *Concerto IV*, is a quartet of equal voices - played here on four treble recorders - by the four recorder soloists, which demonstrated enviable technique and very admirable ensemble playing. Themes were passed and caught seamlessly between players in the *Presto* and *Allegro* and there was a beautiful matching of instrumental tone colour and intonation throughout: indeed, at times it was as though the audience were watching one performer instead of four. Following this, a further piece by Telemann, a trio sonata in C major, was very cleverly transformed from a small-scale chamber work into a full orchestral suite. It worked superbly well. Members of Zero Gravity joined the two young soloists in playing the solo lines of the sonata, while the rest of the band became a giant continuo, supported brilliantly by the harpsichord playing of David Gordon and the richness of Malcolm Creese's double bass. It was no mean feat to play the intricate and technically demanding solo lines 'en masse', but the players achieved this with great success. The icing on the proverbial cake came in the form of very refined dance choreography from the multi-talented Chiara Vinci, who swapped the role of soprano for that of dancer, having reconstructed the choreography for this performance from the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation of c.1710.

All the works in the evening's concert had been arranged by Evelyn Nallen, who shows an understanding of the recorder and its possibilities few can match. Some arrangements required substantially larger forces than the original writing and Nallen demonstrated mastery of a wide range of tone colours and effects, opening

up a world of sonic possibility, yet always with great taste and respect for the original music. One very interesting case in point was Handel's well-known F major sonata, which was transformed into a concerto for harpsichord: here, Zero Gravity took the role of string orchestra to Gordon's solo harpsichord, and the audience was delighted to see the recorder soloists 'sneak' on during the Alla Siciliana to add their own colours to this pastoral movement, before retreating for the flourishes of the soloist's Presto.

As the rain lashed down that dark November evening, we were transported to the sunny shores of eighteenth-century Spain for the final piece in the programme: Soler's Fandango. It was here that the percussionist Jez Wiles, who had provided a notable new dimension to several accompaniments throughout the evening, really demonstrated his unique position in the ensemble by evoking the unmistakable, percussive rhythms of much Spanish dance music. Zero Gravity also came into their own: having spent much of the concert in a continuo role, it was great to see them in full 'orchestra' mode and it made a fantastic conclusion to a remarkable concert.

One very interesting feature of this concert was the presence of the recorder soloists throughout. Not only did Charlotte, Sophie and Barbara provide wonderful, virtuosic solos in several pieces, they also demonstrated their adaptability and sensitive ensemble skills by joining the ranks of Zero Gravity for other items, while, for example, the soprano soloist took centre stage. This adaptability was also evident in Evelyn Nallen's remarkable ability to shift from the role of conductor to performer (and back again) with great poise.

The memorable performances and superb arrangements from this evening left me feeling inspired. Far from leaving the concert preoccupied with my own inadequacies as a player (always a danger when in the presence of such top soloists!), I was keen to get home to practise and to approach familiar repertoire with new eyes. A massive thank you to Zero Gravity and friends for such wonderful entertainment. I will certainly keep a lookout for their future performances and thoroughly recommend that anyone with an interest in the recorder and its possibilities does the same.

Ben Westley