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The Georgian Concert Society: Ensemble Odyssee – Concerto for a Small Flute

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Event Date(s): 5th Nov 2016

Location: St. Andrew's and St. George's West, Edinburgh

Event web link: [Click here](#)

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Reviewed on: 23rd Dec 2016

Edinburgh's main fireworks display celebrating Bonfire Night was cancelled due to high winds, but even it would not have compared to the musical fireworks of this performance.

Odyssee Ensemble gave their first UK performance in Edinburgh, led by recorder player Anna Steggerman. She was assisted on strings by Eva Saladin, Ivan Iliev, David Alonso Molina and Agnieszka Oszańca with harpsichord continuo by Andrea Friggi. Friggi performed on the 'Goermans-Taskin' harpsichord, which is part of Edinburgh's famous Russell Collection. Although Stegmann was only accompanied by five players, they had the presence of a full string orchestra.

Featuring tonight were the first four concertos of a new

scholarly edition of William Babell's *Six Concertos for sixth-flute and strings*, Opus. 3. Babell (1689/90 – 1723) composed these between 1711 and 1718, which highlights them as among the first English examples of solo concertos. This emerging genre had been imported to England by the well-travelled German composer George Frederick Handel, and demand quickly grew for operas and instrumental music in the Italian style. Babell regularly came in contact with Handel's output by arranging well-known opera arias for solo harpsichord. Emulating the popular Italian style would have proved a shrewd business move, although not entirely without artistic benefit either.

The concertos performed tonight from Babell's Opus. 3 set demonstrate virtuosic writing for the solo recorder, yet also show a tentative approach towards the composition process. The first violin shadows the soloist for much of their part, save some cadenza lines or held notes where the recorder seems to float over a pacing accompaniment in the strings. This could be a composer wary of experimentation in a new genre with such an exposed instrument, yet not wanting to completely disregard the quality of his craftsmanship. Doubling the part does give more body to the melodic line, and it might reflect the instability in recorder tone of this time. A follow-on reason for this might also be good business practice: the works could be easily recycled as trio sonatas or even violin concertos should they not prove successful as recorder concertos.

Also highlighted in tonight's programme was Babell's *Overture in A* (ca. 1718), where the harpsichord takes a prominent role in the final movement. This work is credited with introducing the keyboard concerto to the English musical scene. Research has dated this work as appearing before Handel's set of *Six Organ Concertos*, Op. 4, and furthermore, as pointed out by tonight's harpsichordist Andrea Friggi, there is a stark thematic similarity between the melodies of this particular movement and the first concerto of Handel's Op.4 set. The work was complemented by Handel's own *Trio Sonata in B-minor*, HWV 386. This was an interesting choice for strings and harpsichord only, but did demonstrate how Handel approached Italianate style.

Completing the programme were concertos by Italians Giuseppe Sammartini (1695 – 1750) and Antonio Vivaldi (1678 – 1741). Boasting a more embellished and independent solo line for the recorder, they demonstrated the authentic Italian style including brisk allegros, drawn-out largos in the style of Sicilianos and aspirational technical skill for all players. As works they proved considerably less constrained than Babel's works, which rarely deviate from the basic key relationships.

Ensemble Odyssee were a captivating ensemble to listen to. Even whilst tuning, they seemed to give musical shape to the act, improvising a short and rather chromatic musical work which captivated the audience's attention – a surprising colouring of one of the most rudimentary necessities of music performance. Throughout the concertos Anna Stegmann led with a bright tone, performed on a soprano recorder in D. This lifted the work out of the tonal realms we normally associate with the recorder, allowing it to explore more remote keys. Energy and spark abounded in her performances of the Sammartini and Vivaldi concertos, which proved a real highlight of the evening. The ensemble had a positive momentum to their performance tonight and they will hopefully performance many more concerts in the UK.

The second performance of the Georgian Concert Society season took place on 5th November at St. Andrew's and St. George's West, Edinburgh.