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Baroque Inquisition: Geneva Camerata

As part of Baroque Month, Bachtrack has been quizzing leading Baroque ensembles around the globe about the challenges of running a period instrument ensemble and how to build new audiences for their work. We also ask for some Baroque recommendations to introduce new listeners and which lesser-known composer they think deserves greater notice.

Composed of versatile musicians of the young generation, Geneva Camerata specialises in the Baroque/classical repertoire, as well as in modern and avant-garde music. Music director David Greilsammer took time out of the orchestra's busy tour to face our Baroque Inquisition.



Geneva Camerata, David Greilsammer and Avi Avital; London November 2013

1. What is one of the main challenges of running a period ensemble today?

The biggest challenge is how to offer the highest quality performances while being innovative and bold. Many period ensembles have been focused solely on the past, and not enough on the future... At the Geneva Camerata, we play on both period and modern instruments and we try to present a contemporary approach to playing Baroque music. We consider ourselves at the same time a Baroque ensemble and a contemporary ensemble – our repertoire ranges from medieval repertoire and all the way to newly commissioned works of today's young composers. We try to embrace past, present, and future with the same passion and dedication.

2. How do you bring in new audiences?

For us, bringing new audiences has a lot to do with the kind of projects we create and the type of repertoire that we offer. Performing the same kind of repertoire over and over again or presenting programmes that are not challenging or unique, cannot stimulate new audiences to come to the concert halls. We must be aware that the world has changed in the last 15 years, thanks to technology and innovation, and we must evolve with it at the same time. Therefore, even if we perform Baroque works on period instruments, we must present them in a modern and fresh light, so that audiences can feel that it relates to real life of today.

3. What piece would you recommend to introduce listeners to Baroque music?

At the Geneva Camerata we love surprising our audience with exciting Baroque works that are rarely heard in concert halls. For instance, we recently performed in various European cities a program called "Bach & his Family" that offered some very unusual pieces composed by little-known members of the Bach family... A good example from this programme would be the extraordinary Orchestral Suite in G minor by Johann Sebastian Bach's second cousin, Johann Bernhard. We also play a lot of French Baroque – this music is always so colourful and "jazzy"! The operas of Rameau and Lully are especially captivating- there would be so many excerpts to recommend: for instance, the celebrated "Passacaille" from Lully's *Armide* or the "Marche pour la cérémonie des turcs" from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. Rameau's overture to *Platée* or his "Air des sauvages" from *Les Indes Galantes* are absolutely sublime. Italian early Baroque is also very special, and Monteverdi's operas are the best example of it: *L'Orfeo* is one of the greatest masterpieces ever written - the opening "Toccatà" is simply mind-blowing!

4. Which lesser-known Baroque composer would you like to hear performed more often and why?

In the French repertoire, I would certainly like to see more musicians and ensembles play works by Marin Marais, one of the finest composers of the Baroque and the greatest viola da gamba virtuoso of his time. In the German Baroque, Buxtehude would be a great example of a composer who deserves to be performed more often. The young Bach walked 250 miles, for several weeks, in order to meet this great master whom he admired and revered!



Geneva Camerata, David Greilsammer and Andreas Scholl; Geneva, April 2014

5. What is your musical guilty pleasure? (For example, “when I’m not performing/listening to Heinrich Biber, I’m actually listening to Justin Bieber...”)

Mixing Baroque with jazz, blues, folk or rock music is one of the most extraordinary and challenging things a musician can do. At the Geneva Camerata, we have created various shows that bring together Baroque with other styles of music, and it has always been a thrilling experience, both for the musicians and the audience. In a recent concert, we mixed music from Purcell’s Fairy Queen with jazz improvisation and... Turkish folk!

6. Which section of the ensemble is first to the bar?

I would say the bass section - cello, double bass, bassoon and harpsichord. I actually think that the most important section when performing Baroque - or any kind of music actually, even rock/pop – is the bass and “continuo” section. Truth is, if you have a great bass section in the orchestra, you can really do anything you want...

7. What are your top five Baroque works?

1. Bach's Mass in B minor
2. Rameau's Platée
3. Monteverdi – the Toccata from L'Orfeo
4. Purcell – The Fairy Queen
5. Bach - The Well Tempered Clavier Book I

The Geneva Camerata (GECA) is an atypical ensemble dedicated to presenting eclectic and adventurous programs, both on period and modern instruments. Composed of versatile musicians of the young generation, GECA specialises in the Baroque/classical repertoire, as well as in modern and avant-garde music. Presenting more than 35 concerts per season, the orchestra and its music director David Greilsammer also feature a variety of shows mixing music, dance, theatre, and visual arts, both in traditional concert halls and unusual venues. In the past few months, the Geneva Camerata has embarked on a European tour with mandolin virtuoso Avi Avital, and has collaborated with Andreas Scholl, Emmanuel Pahud, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Daniel Hope, and Steven Isserlis.