

The abbreviation “QNG” doesn’t stand for an international organization, nor is it a typo! The letters stand for “Quartet New Generation”, and the music they make is just as original as the ensemble’s chosen name. The four musicians Heide Schwarz, Susanne Fröhlich, Petra Wurz and Inga Klaucke were invited by the Goethe Institute to come perform in Italy; after appearances in Palermo and Naples, they took the stage at the Institute’s Italian headquarters at the Via Savoia in Rome last Saturday evening.

They opened the recital with *Beata viscera*, an anonymous piece, perhaps written around the time when the recorder was first invented. This music was intended for the Catholic King and Queen of Spain: the style is Spanish-Sephardic, with an Arab touch. From the Renaissance we were “beamed” directly to the year 2000, with a *Clockwork Toccata* by Fulvio Caldini (b.1959): obsessive, contemporary, with traces of jazz and Andean folklore. The well-planned transition between these two pieces was elegantly mastered.

The quartet continued with George Frideric Handel’s Fugue No. 6 in C Minor, then with a brilliant short piece by Mary Ellen Childs (b.1957): *Parterre*, contrasted in turn with a marvelous, quite amusing work by György Ligeti (1923-2006): *Six Bagatelles*, which led into a thoroughly re-arranged Shostakovich fugue (Fugue No. 1 in C Major) in which one could even hear an organ! This all happened so rapidly that one needed to hear a few notes each time to make sure whether one was in the 17th or in the 20th century.

Now to introduce the evening’s true highlight: *Airlines* by Wojciech Blecharz (b.1981). The young flutist-composer wrote this piece especially for QNG. *Airlines* does not feature a score in the usual sense. Instead, Blecharz sent the ensemble members a series of videos where he explained how the piece should be played. The result is fantastic! Large recorders, small recorders, rectangular blocks, half-flutes, quarter-size flutes, flutes screwed the other way ‘round, “trumpet” flutes. The QNG players spoke inside them, blew on them, knocked on them, spoke alongside them, sang, even recited a poem: « empty spaces / around me / open sky / like a cure / always helps me / silence / she », all the while alternating and exchanging instruments at lightning speed. In barely nine minutes, each of the four performers must have changed instruments about fifteen times, or at least turned the recorder’s position around. This was all both exciting and thrilling. And Blecharz’s piece does not bear the title *Airlines* in vain: we hear the take-off announcement, the aircraft rolling on the runway, the plane in flight, turbulence (both light and heavy), probably what sounds like a short motor disfunction, a spoken announcement from the captain (the poem, perhaps?), return to calm, a lightning bolt, rain, destination approach and a happy landing. With this piece we were rewarded with all the worlds of sound, timbre, noise and imagery which had been announced at the beginning of the concert. The four female players really had fun with this piece, the audience probably even more. Time literally “flew” by.

To descend from such giddy heights, and as a further reward (as Susanne Fröhlich announced), we were allowed to hear another example by the great master of fugue – and of the flute: J. S. Bach’s *Concerto and Fugue in C Major*. Thus the performers concluded their concert by reminding us, once again, that their “magic flutes” are also capable of producing normal tones.

The recital stood under the motto “Fantasy n’Symmetry”, and for such an experiment the genre of fugue is truly ideal. A fugue is short, easy to grasp, variable, capable of evolving. A fugue knows no bounds, it can be constantly re-invented while remaining consistent – and such music is never boring.

QNG's performances continually leap from one century to the other, jumping from one sonority to the next. Each type of recorder makes a different kind of note, each instrument has its own special features, and it is admirable to see them mastering this balancing act. Thanks to harmonic dissonances that emerge when several recorders play together, one occasionally had the impression that a fifth, invisible instrument had joined them.

QNG is especially devoted to contemporary music: over the last decade, more than 30 works have been written for the quartet. And they know no fear. Neither do they apprehend the ca. 50 recorders featured in their performances – occasionally larger and heavier than themselves – nor do they show any qualms in their choice of repertoire. Their programs include just about every composer who ever wrote for recorder, and some who never did – starting with Renaissance music, via Bach and Handel, and going all the way to Ligeti, Shostakovich and the most recent artists such as Blecharz or Fulvio Caldini. With technical brilliance, the four players combine the old and the new with East and West, thus giving birth to a hitherto unimagined, exciting and innovative musical listening culture.

As an encore they chose to play a tango – and you could tell how much they would have liked to dance themselves! Bravi!

Allow me to close citing a passage from Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*. "Excepting the piano (entrusted to specialists), Leverkühn's uncle housed a collection holding everything that sounds and sings, twangs, hums, rattles and vibrates. [...] All of those instruments were spread out before Adrian's eyes, nesting in velvet: the traverse flute with its diverse systems and builds, in boxwood, granadilla or ebony, with ebony head joints or entirely made of silver, along with its shrill-sounding relative – the piccolo, capable of making itself heard over an orchestra tutti with its piercing sound, and of dancing in the midst of will-o'-the-wisps and magical circles of fire..."

*Christa Blenk*