

# Taking a chance on French baroque

*As financial pressures on the arts mount, the appeal of sticking to what sells grows ever more tempting. Tom Rhodes talks to Ex Cathedra about their new French baroque project, which definitely isn't playing it safe ...*

**A**s the purse-strings tighten further, orchestras, ensembles and choirs are tempted to plump for repertoire they know will ensure bums on seats.

Others though, prefer to keep the courage of their convictions and remain committed to commissioning new works and research that keeps them ahead of the curve. In May, Ex Cathedra showcased the culmination of years of research in a celebration of the life and influence of eighteenth-century French soprano Marie Fel at Birmingham's Town Hall.

## Ex Cathedra keeps research at the heart of its output

The audience was treated to a selection of sacred and secular music by Lalande, Mondonville and Rameau, in honour of the enlightenment heroine Marie Fel and with Carolyn Sampson starring in the title role.

Jeffrey Skidmore, Ex Cathedra's director, has returned to French baroque music after some years on the backburner. 'It seems that Marie Fel has been part of my research into French baroque music almost from the start,' says Skidmore, 'so the fact that 2013 is the 300th anniversary of her birth seemed like an excellent opportunity to celebrate not only her extraordinary voice and lifestyle, but this wonderful repertoire.'

French baroque music remains seldom performed, losing out on top billing to its Italian, German and even English counterparts. Skidmore believes it's a matter of style: 'One of the reasons this

repertoire is difficult and not very well known is that it has to be performed stylistically and accurately'.

'Vocally, French baroque music is interesting and challenging,' adds Carolyn Sampson. 'As singers, we spend much of our time working on vocal technique and trying to sing in the healthiest way possible. Techniques like vibrato are useful because it essentially relaxes the vocal chords, but when you want to sing without it, the challenge is in doing this without sacrificing your vocal technique.' She adds: 'Jeffrey is a real authority on French baroque music and how to perform it, which is partly why I was so excited about being involved with the Marie Fel project.'

It's testament to Skidmore that the group has successfully managed to stay true to its founding principles and keep research at the heart of its output, as well as bringing to life a host of educational programmes that seek to encourage singing in young children and harness the benefits that it offers.

With arts funding taking another battering in this year's budget, it's heartening that the group can even afford to keep such schemes alive. 'Growing up in Birmingham myself, and not into a musical family, school was where I first discovered music,' explains Skidmore.

'If children don't have access to music at home, or at school, where will they get it? Music education is essential, not just for its own enjoyment, but as a tool to help development and to improve social and life skills. That's why good music education, and singing particularly, is so powerful for children and why we remain committed to it.'

The distinctive strengths and values of

Ex Cathedra's work come from Skidmore's own artistic vision, which is supported by a community of gifted and dedicated musicians committed to the variety of the company's work which spans performance, research, commissioning, training, education and community engagement.

Following the French baroque showcase, Skidmore will once again focus his efforts on the next stage of the group's exploration of eighteenth-century Latin American music. Having produced a series of highly successful recordings of baroque music from Mexico and Bolivia for Hyperion, Skidmore is now researching music from eighteenth-century Brazil. While this music will be marginally more familiar to audiences, it may still be judged a gamble to return to the repertoire in the face of a looming further reduction in funds at council level in 2014.

This potential predicament is unlikely to dampen spirits: having survived recessions since 1969, progressing from a regional, small-scale amateur choir to a professional, internationally respected organisation proves that Skidmore's founding principles were built on solid foundations.

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