



FLANDERS TODAY

Phaedra anniversary concert

Leading lights



Anyone interested in classical music will at least have heard of Roland de Lassus, Johannes Ockeghem, Adrian Willaert and other Flemish polyphonists who reigned supreme over European music in the Renaissance. They'll probably also have heard of Tongeren-born contemporary composer Philippe Boesmans, whose operas are regularly performed at De Munt and elsewhere. But between these two, niets: there is a four-century interruption, as if the land of Rubens and Ensor had stopped producing any music whatsoever.

"That's absurd," says Luc Famaey. "You can't have a brilliant composer one day, another hundreds of years later, and nothing in between. There must be some link between the two, some continuing tradition, even if, for various reasons, we've forgotten about it."

It is to unearthing this tradition that the energetic former VRT employee has devoted the past 20 years of his life. Phaedra is his labour of love, a small label produced almost single-handedly from a couple of rooms in his house in Beveren. With 76 CDs to its name, it is now about to celebrate its 20th anniversary with a concert at deSingel featuring the Jeugd en Muziek Symphony Orchestra of Antwerp, conductor Ivo Venkov and the young soprano Liesbeth Devos (*pictured*).

Although Phaedra's catalogue includes music by Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann, it is most famous for its "In Flanders Fields" series, which focuses on previously unrecorded Flemish music. Starting in the 1820s, it reveals to the world pure gems by August De Boeck, Peter Benoit, Jef van Hoof, Lodewijk Mortelmans and many others. "Their music is to us what Smetana's is to the Czechs," says Famaey.

For love, not money

Phaedra receives no subsidies. "They're often more trouble than they're worth," Famaey sighs. "I haven't got time for all the red tape." The label relies on sales and often struggles to make ends meet. Famaey has made a virtue out of financial necessity by focusing on achingly beautiful songs and chamber works and forgoing much orchestral music that is beyond his means.

Still, with praise flowing in from as far afield as Japan and the US, his venture is a true artistic, if not commercial, success. And at a time when many labels are hugging the shore, preferring to record the umpteenth version of Brahms' symphonies rather than venture out into new territory, it also stands as a courageous oddity.

Famaey grew up in Mechelen where, he recalls, music was the air he breathed. "From the carillons to the conservatory, to the Lemmens Institute, which was based there before moving to Leuven, to the cathedral choir which sang local works on feast days – Flemish music was everywhere," he remembers. It's a different story today, when he has a hard time convincing his countrymen that their musical heritage is anything but mediocre, a misconception he ascribes to a general lack of pride. Several times, he's had to work with Czech and Hungarian orchestras when local ones proved uninterested.

Famaey named his series after the famous First World War poem by Canadian officer John McCrae. "The composers are like the soldiers in the poem, buried underground," he explains with a tremor in his voice. As for 'Phaedra', it means 'beautiful' in Greek, but also 'to shine the light on'. "My role," he says, "is just that: to reveal music that's lying in obscurity." As long as Flemish scores continue to gather dust on library shelves, he'll be in business.

Phaedra recordings can be ordered or downloaded from the website

www.phaedracd.com - www.desingel.be - 28 October, 17.00h – De Singel, Desguinlei, Antwerp Marie Dumont - (October 17, 2012)