**The Breakthrough of the Baroque**

*Daniel Hope in conversation with Roger Willemsen*

*Daniel, what is an air?*

*(laughing)* An air has a vocal quality to it, akin to a lullaby or other unaccompanied song. I don’t mean its musical structure but its way of singing – in this case on the violin. For me, the violin is the instrument that comes closest to the human voice. It is this songlike element that runs like a thread through the album as a whole.

*And the Air is its essence?*

It gives you a glimpse into Bach’s heart. There’s hardly anyone who doesn’t react powerfully to this piece – it strikes you directly.

*Is that because it’s simply such wonderful music?*

Not just that, but also because this melancholic quality appears within the arching lines which characterize Bach. It is precisely because of this that the piece reflects the Age of the Baroque as a whole.

*So you’re concerned not with the genre but with the spirit of* *the* *Air?*

Absolutely. What matters is the feeling that the Air conveys. There is also a sensual element that I’m trying to put across.

*Some of the happiest moments in music are those when the noise of the world around us is stifled. This is just such a piece. What frame of mind do you have to be in to play it?*

There must be absolute calm, even intimacy. With pieces of this kind, their simplicity is what impresses most. I regard it as sacrosanct, which is why I have to empty my mind, in a sense to extricate myself from the equation. If I were to think of my own personality for even a moment, I’d be lost in a second.

*You wouldn’t have played it like this ten years ago?*

No, I’d have kept trying to make something of it, instead of just accepting it for what it is. One’s own musical personality only emerges by passing through this simplicity, this transparency.

*Hence the “air” in* *the Air?*

Yes, the air is in the sound, for example. I play the piece in a very airy way, with a lot of bow but very little pressure. This suits it perfectly.

*Did you record it in a single take?*

Yes. That’s the only way to do it – or rather, one could do it differently, but I wouldn’t. It’s chamber music of the finest kind, the essence of music.

*The individual pieces that make up the album also belong together because they inhabit a certain atmosphere and because of the way you interpret Baroque music. What is it that makes this music so fresh for you?*

I’m fascinated by the radical change that took place at this time in history: you can feel the breakthrough after the Renaissance. Suddenly real individuals emerge, itinerant musicians, like Matteis, for example, who travelled around Europe, bringing completely different music with them. It was a time of movement. This music has variety, wit and vitality, and much of it was written to create an effect. Musicians wanted to please their audiences and to receive new commissions.

*Take Falconieri, who appeared at several European courts and travelled to Portugal and Spain – today we’d describe what he was performing as “world music”, don’t you think?*

Of course. Those were the great pioneers of crossover, performers who looked beyond their immediate horizons, gathering ideas wherever they went and blending them together to create a style of their own. These people understood the true meaning of crossover long before the word existed.

*Was it music, then, from a time of new departures?*

Indeed! And how wonderful! Just listen to the pieces by Falconieri. They have rhythm to them, they have a groove, they have this great improvisatory quality and, dare I say it, they’re funky! In those days it wasn’t just desirable to be able to improvise, it was a law, exactly as it is with jazz musicians today.

*So the Baroque continuo and Keith Jarrett’s left hand are related?*

Absolutely. We recorded this album with Baroque percussion, bass drum, tambourine and so on. This music is three or four hundred years old but its groove couldn’t be more modern. I have the feeling that people were willing to take more risks in the Baroque era than in the Renaissance. The spontaneity, which is part of what makes this period so individual, became even freer and more powerful at that time. I studied a lot of music for this album, listening to and reading a large number of works, and everywhere I encountered real individuals.

*When I look at the performing practice of that period, I’m tempted to ask whether you’re taking this music more seriously than it took itself?*

*(laughing)* That’s hard to say, but we can speculate. Many itinerant musicians saw music as their daily bread, as their livelihood. They weren’t idolized as Mozart and Beethoven were at a later date but saw themselves serving the king or the aristocracy, above all with their dance music.

*Music that was intended to entertain and that was played at mealtimes and celebrations…*

…and at bedtime or for people who couldn’t sleep. In other words, they always had an eye on the music’s side effects – the very thing that I really don’t like, background music.

*Your research is never-ending, isn’t it?*

I’ve no choice. Most of all I love reading contemporary letters, eyewitness accounts.

*And even the music itself proves to be like buried treasure?*

Absolutely. I love digging in the past and going back to the roots.

*So you’re drawing on unlimited resources. How did you set about making your choices for* Air*?*

All the pieces have immediately to make me feel that I want to perform them – the selection was difficult, as there are so many which fit the bill. I’m always looking out for music that grips me from the outset.

*When conventionally played, the tempi are often solemn and move at a walking pace.*

In earlier times, yes. But meanwhile many interpreters have started to perform these works frenetically, almost hysterically. I’m not convinced by that approach either. The music has to speak, you have to give it room to breathe.

*Marini and Matteis were both virtuosos in their day. Do you hear that in their music?*

Yes. It’s particularly striking with Matteis. He uses technique in a way that is very jaunty, even cheeky. Marini’s is not a virtuoso piece but more of a *lamento*, a moving lament with strings that sound like an organ.

*Valente was supposedly blind and was in fact an organist – a long route to the violin.*

The *Gallarda* is a transcription that I recorded because in this period it was completely natural to transcribe popular pieces for other instruments. Handel’s *Sarabande* is another transcription. The spirit of the Baroque was “anything goes”.

*It is said that Westhoff of Dresden perfected double-stopping.*

For me, Westhoff is one of the greatest discoveries. I’ve chosen three of his pieces. His *Imitazione delle campane* is an altogether magical movement that demonstrates a magisterial handling of *bariolage*, a technique that requires you to play all four strings at once. Vivaldi was completely fascinated by this *Imitazione*, and so am I, for Westhoff was far in advance of his time in the way he used the violin. No one had previously done anything like it.

*Who was Geminiani?*

The most important violinist of his day, a pupil of Corelli and the author of the standard contemporary treatise on the instrument, *The Art of Playing on the Violin*. Here you can hear Corelli’s Sonata through the medium of Geminiani, in other words, a transcription. In this way I was able to record Corelli without his being present, and at the same time I was able to include this incredible, largely forgotten composer Geminiani.

*Telemann, Bach and Handel are the consummate composers on this album.*

Yes, the others are milestones on the way. We can now see how great the contrasts were and appreciate what it took to reach the point represented by these masters.

*There is an anti-conventional, revolutionary spirit to all this.*

I find it wonderful that the very first violin sonata ever to be written was composed by Giovanni Paolo Cima at the same time that Galileo was making his pioneering discoveries and revolutionizing our picture of the world. In the years around 1600 there were groups of musicians who came together with the intention of breaking conventions. Time and again all sense of order was overturned. That’s something I like very much.

*Your album really has a lot of colours to it…*

… as many colours as the Baroque has for me. Those wigs are deceptive!