

## In Assisi with St Francis and the birds and bees

Was it a holiday? Was it a music course? Or was it a master class in metaphor? The technical and academic expertise of maestro David Allinson was a given, but who knew that he'd transmit it to fifty-five assorted singers with such creativity? As a writer, I have the greatest respect for a decent bit of imagery, so like a sniffer dog I immediately homed in on his penchant for teasing the desired effect from us by means of a well-chosen comparison. These were graphic, often surprising but always memorable. Perhaps in the territory of St Francis, given his legendary rapport with living creatures, it was no coincidence that many of David's similes tended to follow a zoological theme.

For accelerated passages we had to picture a terrier lying in wait to sink his teeth into the postman, then when we were in danger of dragging he put in an appearance again, pushing the music along as though chasing a ball on the beach. Bar lines became cats' eyes, scudding past as the music flowed, and virtual cats were swung to demonstrate phrases revolving mesmerically around a single note or motif. In our mind's eye, butterflies danced around each other as we were encouraged to appreciate how the various voice lines worked together in this glorious early music.

Just as most of us had migrated south for the summer school, all the week's composers had been foreigners who moved to Italy to work for the church in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, creating an unprecedented international sound, rather like a complex wine. But back to the wildlife, which included *homo sapiens*: locals and tourists alike who would look in on us through our rehearsal room's twin aspect open doors, as David taught us not just about pitch – "let's have a presentation C every time, please" – and breath control featuring imaginary hot potatoes and electric shocks, but also about "presence" as an ensemble performer. We were to beware the parrots on both shoulders, each an imposter – polly-phoney? The one would convince us to dominate the sound through over-confidence whereas the other would make us hold back in deference to stronger singers. Balance and listening were key. This music was certainly challenging stuff, but through occasionally dislodging us from our sectional comfort zones and mixing up the voices, David gradually built up our self-belief, not to mention giving us a greater sense of the all-round sound.

Now and then we had to contend with extraneous noise – bells marking the Feast of the Assumption rang out in celebration; a car with centimetres to spare trundling past on the cobblestones; or that ubiquitous Italian symbol, the waspish Vespa or its 3-wheeler pick-up truck cousin, the worker-bee Ape, buzzed by. Around the town, peaceful corners abounded, the Franciscan greeting *Pax et Bonum* decorating stonework and tiled plaques, complete with doves.

Performing in St Francis' Basilica will be remembered not just for the melting temperatures but for the magnetism and magic of the music. As the exquisite chords of Guerrero, Willaert, L'Heritier and Josquin hung above the ancient frescoes, I'm fairly sure I was grinning like a Cheshire Cat. One thing puzzles me though: what was David's "hypnotised chicken syndrome" allusion all about? Answers on a carrier pigeon please.