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**Ensemble Hesperi**

14-15 February 2025

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre, The Dance House Crewkerne

The 20th Season of Concert in the West was launched by the visit of Ensemble Hesperi with a programme of Baroque music featuring the composers Telemann and Handel and fascinating contributions by less well-known composers of the eighteenth century, James Oswald and Johann Gottlieb Graun.

The tantalising title to Hesperi’s programme, *A Gift for your Garden*, was not an attempt to give some sort of coherence to the selection of pieces but had its roots in the botany and horticultural interests of all the composers in the programme, particularly Telemann. At the time they were reflecting a fast-growing European interest by many, especially the educated elite, in the natural sciences and often more than just as a fanciful hobby.

One of the most revealing facets was the *Airs for the Spring* by James Oswald. Written in 1755 after he had moved to London from Scotland, each Air is named after a flower: The Anemone, The Tulip, The Hyacinth, The Ranunculus. Oswald’s Scottish roots shine through almost every phrase he wrote and most evident in the melodic ‘Scottish snaps’ and embellishments. These were played with relish and Celtic verve from the recorder playing of Mary-Jannet Leith and well-partnered by the energetic gut-strung baroque violin of Magdalena Loth-Hill.

Imaginative programming is always welcome by audiences and Ensemble Hesperi were more than equal to the expectation. For example, one solo piece was planted in the middle of each half. The effect was to offer the listener an opportunity to focus on the variegated colour of one instrument and to some adroit playing. The two movements chosen by Florence Petit from Telemann’s Sonata for solo cello provided the cellist the moment to contrast a short rather sublime and solemn Largo side by side with a vivacious and spirited Allegro. One of Telemann’s Fantasies for flute/recorder was the other solo piece played with ease and care by Mary-Jannet Leith, despite its technical demands.

Thomas Allery (harpsichord) performed extempore figured bass with apposite rapport throughout on his recently built copy of a 17th century French instrument. At times Thomas Allery’s role was akin to nourishing the several strands of melody uttered by the recorder and violin, and at other times, particularly in the Handel Trio Sonatas he gave the sense of playing a fully composed part. In both roles Thomas Allery was excellent.

The performances by Ensemble Hesperi to their large audience numbers, was the indelible impression of finesse, unity of thought and action, and elegance firmly growing out of thoughtfulness and careful preparation. This enabled them to present their programme with confidence and enjoyment, qualities they effectively relayed and shared with their listeners.

*A Gift for your Garden* is a newly released CD and chosen by Radio 3’s Ian Skelly as ‘CD of the Week’ for his daily show during the following week.

Andrew Maddocks 2025