

Exercise in counterpoint

Garry Humphreys enjoys an unusual Taverner happening

THE CLERKS are a vocal sextet that made its professional début in 1992, since when it has released more than two dozen recordings. It was first formed at Oxford University, and is directed by Edward Wickham, now Director of Music and Fellow of St Catherine's College, Cambridge, where he lectures on 15th- and 16th-century music, central to The Clerks' repertoire.

There are many groups that do this, of course. What is special about The Clerks is that they often present their programmes at unconventional venues — a swimming pool, a sewage pumping station, and a waterworks, although admittedly examples of particular architectural interest, such as Manchester's Victoria Baths and Crossness Pumping Station (by Sir Joseph Bazalgette) — and in unconventional yet sometimes stunningly effective formats.

Such was a recent project at St Ethelburga's, Bishopsgate, in the City of London, bombed by terrorists in 1993, and now a Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. Called "The Hours", it is described as "a sound installation" — "a collage of sound and live performance". Although designed to last for 24 hours, only 12 hours were used at St Ethelburga's, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on a sunny spring Saturday. It is the third in a series, Raising Voices, developed as part of a new residency for The Clerks at St Ethelburga's, and supported by Arts Council England.

As well as exploring the interaction between the live and pre-recorded elements, diverse faith traditions and rituals are reflected; and the ways in which people — listeners and participants — experience music: horizontally, vertically, or both; and, in recalling music we have heard, probably not as a whole, but perhaps in fragments, or with an overall perception of the experience.

It also illustrates (very strikingly) that prayer and praise is offered in all countries of the world, in different ways and at different times, 24 hours a day, by all manner of folks. The cycle never ends.

Dr Wickham's co-creator, Jonathan Green, has prepared a mind-bogglingly complex collage of sounds, which he manipulated by way of a sound desk and six loudspeakers, through which phrases, words, syllables, and even parts of syllables (Dadaism is not dead!) flew around the church, so realistically that the listeners might easily imagine themselves to be part of this crowd.

As well as this, as Dr Wickham explains, "The Hours" attempts to create an analogy — rather than a representation — of the multifarious ways we experience a great work of polyphony, the work on this occasion being the *Missa Gloria tibi Trinitas* by the early-16th-century English composer John Taverner.

This was performed in full as the culmination of the installation, but only after some "recompositions" of the music (more Taverner than Taverner) involving the singers' live and pre-recorded voices working together. The movements of the Mass itself were interspersed with more recorded readings and utterances.

Particularly memorable were a reading of Psalm 46, very simply but effectively; and the self-confident woman's voice with an American accent declaring "God is my

shepherd: I don't *need* anything!" A large number of people, from all walks of life — including children from the educational projects undertaken by The Clerks in London and further afield — were involved in a complete recorded reading of the Psalms during hours 5-10 of the 12-hour sequence, which had begun with lauds, sung by the Renaissance Singers.

The Clerks made a fine sound in the intimate spaces of St Ethelburga's: the men were particularly good, despite their rather dishevelled appearance (five-o'clock shadow and suits from Oxfam?), and some wonderful real bass singing from Jimmy Holliday was particularly enjoyable.

The full 24-hour sequence will be given at the ecumenical Church of Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes, on Friday-Saturday 18-19 June, free except for the concert at 7 p.m. on the Saturday. It is a moving and uplifting experience not to be missed.

Dr Wickham says: "Those of us who have had the luck and privilege to enjoy good musical educations sometimes content ourselves with thinking all we need to do to fulfil our role as musicians is to turn up and perform as best we can. But by working with the audiences of today (and, we hope, of tomorrow) we get the opportunity to inspire and surprise — ourselves as much as others."

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