

Salad days for early music vocal ensemble at St Andrews festival



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For some people, we're the ones who hang upside down from chandeliers and arse around with Renaissance music." Robert Hollingworth is right to suggest that I Fagiolini, the crack vocal ensemble he founded back in 1986, has a certain reputation for – well, let's call it theatricality. After all, this is the man who cites Monteverdi and Monty Python as equal influences on his work. And the man who gave his group its "little beans" moniker because of the wholefood diet that early music enthusiasts were reputed to enjoy – only to discover that in Italian the name actually refers to a certain part of the male anatomy.

Flamboyance and spectacle are central to I Fagiolini's identity – and they'll be very much on show in the group's residency at the St Andrews Voices festival this coming weekend. "We open with a 'salad' of Renaissance secular music," Hollingworth explains, "which has a couple of staged pieces. One is a peal of bells from a Swiss clock tower, which we've staged as a sort of – well, remember those little men in Trumpton? Then there's a Spanish 'ensalada', literally a salad, with a mix of languages and music. But the piece is about an exorcism, about the fire of sin that burns in our hearts, and the Spanish Inquisition is called to

exorcise the audience's sins – so we may need to grab a couple of audience members to help with that..."

But despite all of I Fagiolini's fun and frolics – "I don't think we should be scared of the 'E' word – entertainment – as this music was certainly that at the time it was written," points out Hollingworth – it's fun with the backing of deep scholarship, and with a deeply serious intent. "I'm actually quite a hard-nosed authenticist," he continues. "We don't know anything about how these pieces would have been performed originally, other than that they were Christmas entertainments at the court of the Duke of Valencia in the 1530s. So it's about using your imagination to help a contemporary audience who don't want to have their heads buried in 12 pages of notes and translations to actually enjoy the music – and to understand it through enjoying it."

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With dozens of CDs and several BBC Proms and worldwide tours to their name, I Fagiolini are one of the most respected – and most individual – UK vocal groups. And they're deeply embedded within the St Andrews Voices festival, giving two concerts plus workshops for both amateurs and professionals. That broadness of reach has always been part of the festival's aim. Now in its fifth year, it's bigger and more ambitious than ever before in its celebrations of vocal music: other highlights include a gig from King Creosote, a stop-off for Scottish Opera's touring *Elixir of Love*,

a sing-along *Mary Poppins* and an intriguing reboot of *The Magic Flute* with a new narration from Scottish writer Janice Galloway.

I Fagiolini follow up their Renaissance extravagance with a very different concert the following evening, featuring suave, seductive French music. "It's long been a passion of mine, and French is the most delicious language to sing in," says Hollingworth.

He recently unearthed a rarity in Jean Françaix's witty *Ode to Gastronomy* – "It's kind of like written-down jazz, very easy to listen to, but very difficult to put together." And he pairs it with another typically unconventional offering: a choral arrangement of the heartbreaking slow movement from Ravel's Piano Concerto in G. "It's the most luscious piece, with an amazing, flowing melody that Ravel said nearly killed him."

Hollingworth's own links with St Andrews are set to continue, too. After directing the city's St Salvador's Chapel Choir in the festival's Sunday morning service, he brings The 24, the choral group he directs at the University of York, to collaborate with the St Andrews choir on some big choral pieces next summer. "Collaborations are good," he says, "and I like making connections, although – without getting too political – the recent Brexit vote hasn't helped with that. But given the strength of the choral traditions on our islands, there are plenty of reasons why we should work together. I'm really looking forward to that." ■

The St Andrews Voices festival runs from 20-23 October in various venues throughout St Andrews, www.standrewsvoces.com



Robert Hollingworth, centre, with fellow members of I Fagiolini