



# No holds barred

Armed with their eclectic repertoire and maverick attitude, directors Sarah Tenant-Flowers and Suzzie Vango talk to Harriet Clifford about Papagena, the female consort whose stripped-back approach cuts through the noise

At the Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2018, a leather-clad biker and a modestly robed nun settled down in their seats, one expecting a Guns N’ Roses tribute act, the other prepared for a moment of spiritual reflection. Instead, they were confronted with five female classically trained a cappella singers touring their 2017 album: *Nuns and Roses*. Thankfully, Papagena’s directors Sarah Tenant-Flowers and Suzzie Vango explain over coffee at the Royal Festival Hall, the biker was ‘entranced’ and the nun was complimentary, if a little surprised. Both went away having taken in repertoire spanning from Hildegard of Bingen to Katy Perry, a range which typifies Papagena’s output in their concerts and albums alike.

Their most recent venture, *Hush!*, which is released on SOMM this month, incorporates 11 different languages and features some of the group’s more contemporary comedic pieces, alongside ‘beautiful, poignant, emotive pieces’, such as Holst’s *The swallow leaves her nest*, which has not been recorded for decades. ‘I think that’s important for us when we do well-known composers – which we don’t do in the main – there’s still got to be something new and refreshing. We want to build the repertoire, not keep repeating it’, says Tenant-Flowers.

Papagena officially launched in 2015, with the shared *raison d’être* of creating a female consort to fill the gaps between the all-male groups, such as the Hilliard Ensemble and The King’s Singers, who seemed to be dominating the a cappella world. ‘We set ourselves up,’ Tenant-Flowers explains, ‘and then discovered that there actually wasn’t much repertoire.’ Faced with the reality that a lot of upper-voice choral music is composed with children in mind, the group has prioritised sourcing and commissioning works that are suitable for adult women to sing. Since being taken on by SOMM and working with Adrian Peacock on their second album, *The Darkest Midnight*, the group’s profile has continued to grow, with coverage on BBC Radio 3’s *In Tune* and Radio 4’s *Woman’s Hour*.

Yet, Vango admits, they’ve come up against resistance, with many people believing that they don’t want to sit through a whole programme of upper-voice work. She explains, ‘It’s like we’re trying to convert people. It’s a bit like anything to do with women and music at the moment: you have to convince people that the soundworld you create is as interesting as that of the male groups.’ Despite this, feedback from audience members has been positive, with the diversity within each performance surprising concertgoers. ‘We





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◀ Without boundaries: the a cappella consort Papagena comprises (l-r) Sarah Tenant-Flowers, Lizzie Drury, Suzzie Vango, Abbi Temple, and Suzi Purkis

us to sing it; it doesn't sound forced or like we're pretending. We don't want to be mime artists, pretending to be something we're not.'

Championing authenticity is at the heart of what the group does, choosing to sing without microphones, sound effects or any other 'gimmicks': 'We don't want to distort the human voice in any way. We want to explore the human voice, but we think that's interesting enough – you don't have to throw fancy effects at it,' explains Tenant-Flowers. They hope that the experience of listening to a Papagena album is the same as seeing them live; besides, Vango adds, it's nice to be able to say 'no' to the question, 'Do you need any amplification?' They believe that their decision to sing without microphones enhances the intimacy of the performance, which is a crucial factor for the group: 'We really care about the audience. We want to give them something special, rather than sing *at* them – their reaction is very important to us.'

Unlike at a traditional choral concert, the audience's reaction is a significant part of Papagena's performance, as some of their pieces are comedic, including Jim Clement's setting of Caitlin Moran's comedy poem *A Woman's IF*. Putting a unique spin on Rudyard Kipling's 'If' poem, the piece leaves the audience 'absolutely wailing with laughter', so much so that the group has had to adapt the length of the rest bars to allow the noise to simmer down. Whether or not it makes it onto *Hush!* depends on how it sounds without the laughter, they explain, emphasising their commitment to creating an authentic experience for the listener. 'A lot of choral humour is a bit naff and a tiny bit twee,' Tenant-Flowers adds; 'we like pieces that make the audience truly laugh, that are surprising.' 'Quirky,' offers Vango, neatly summarising Papagena's performance style, repertoire choice and sense of humour.

This is not exclusive, however. The group recently launched a successful Crowdfunder campaign, commissioning composer John Duggan to write a setting for female voices of the relatively unknown

haven't really set ourselves any boundaries. We don't exclude any kind of music that we are interested in exploring,' says Tenant-Flowers, although the singers acknowledge that their training places a 'kind of classical spin' on everything they do, so it still exists within the Papagena soundworld.

With only one change since launching, Papagena's line-up includes sopranos Vango, Abbi Temple and Lizzie Drury, and altos Tenant-Flowers and Suzie Purkis. Keeping the line-up stable has been

## 'We don't want to be mime artists, pretending to be something we're not' – Sarah Tenant-Flowers

a deliberate decision, says Tenant-Flowers: 'We've become very instinctive in how we work together and how we reach decisions together. It's quite difficult just to throw in a new person or to keep changing that, so we'd rather really explore the potential that the five of us have.' Knowing each voice thoroughly is crucial to the group's directors, as both also compose, with Vango's arrangement of *Sweet Child of Mine* encapsulating their style in its classic authenticity: 'She's written it in a particular way that really suits

*Stabat Mater Speciosa*. Having placed it at the heart of a future album based on polar opposites, the group hopes to record the work alongside a 16th-century setting, freshly edited for Papagena by academic Laurie Stras, of the more widely recognised *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, juxtaposing the image of Mary at the cradle with that of Mary at the cross. The singers approached Duggan because of his 'flair for writing beautiful lines and really lucid textures', as well as his understanding of the importance of the text, which is something that attracts ▶





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PAUL BATHO

- ▲ Not 'a feminist group': Papagena's authentic, varied approach has inspired the formation of other all-female consorts
- ▲ Recording *Hush!* at Challow Park Studios was a 'very enjoyable experience' thanks to careful planning

◁ Papagena to composers, regardless of whether they are male or female. The piece was written in collaboration with the group, Duggan attending rehearsals with some ideas which were then workshopped and explored.

As part of the process of conceptualising and recording their new album, *Hush!*, the group listed the top five pieces in their repertoire and noticed that an overriding concept of quiet could join them together. Whether this be in the form of an instruction or a sense of peace, the word 'Hush!' seemed to encapsulate the sentiment, with the exclamation mark adding 'a bit more attitude' and ensuring that people do not think the album – recorded during September 2019 at Challow Park Studios, Wantage – solely features lullabies. Planning the recording programme so that the more challenging repertoire came at certain times of the day 'made it a very enjoyable experience'. 'We were all as high as kites by the end of the weekend,' laughs Vango.

The challenge of singing in 11 different languages on the album was something the group took in their stride: 'Singers aren't frightened of singing in any language,

because for us it's just beautiful colours and sounds.' They took advantage of language coaches, whether in the form of a specialist, a friend, or the CEO of their record label SOMM, who helped them with the piece in Greek. Speaking about the group's relationship with their label, Tenant-Flowers says, 'We are totally thrilled that they've got the confidence. I don't know if they'll have heard a single piece on this disc, but they've still taken it on. There's a trust there now.'

What is Papagena's greatest achievement? 'Just surviving,' says Tenant-Flowers. 'We have done this entirely without any external funding. We've just gone out there and tried to sing to the best of our ability, the most fascinating programmes we can – I'm very proud of that.' As well as this, she explains that other female consorts have been set up after hearing Papagena: 'If we can just get more repertoire being created and more female groups thinking they can do this, then great, job done.' Having sung live on Radio 3 for the 2018 International Women's Day, their new album is deliberately being released in time for the 2020 event on 8 March.

With this pioneering attitude, one might be forgiven for thinking that these women would call themselves feminists. Instead, Tenant-Flowers says, 'I don't think we see ourselves as "a feminist group" in any way. We're just five women who want to explore the human voice.' In their performances, they take this one step further, moving beyond 'five people standing in a row', having collaborated with a movement director for their tour at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Before the conversation is drowned out by the amplified sound of musicians tuning up for a performance in the RFH café, Tenant-Flowers adds, 'That's our gimmick – we move.' ■

*Papagena's third album Hush! is released on SOMM in February 2020. papagena.co.uk*