

Ambrose Field / John Potter: Being Dufay

John Potter: tenor; Ambrose Field: composer, live and studio electronics
Music based on vocal fragments by Guillaume Dufay (1397–1474)

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British tenor John Potter and his fellow countryman Ambrose Field, a multiple prize-winning composer of electronic/digital music, offer a most unusual juxtaposition of Renaissance composition and present-day technology: In seven interconnected pieces, vocal fragments from the songs and sacred works by Guillaume Dufay (1397–1474) soar beautifully above Ambrose Field's vast and multi-faceted soundscapes. "Then as now, music was not forever fixed but lived and breathed through the imaginations of former musicians and their listeners", writes Field in his liner notes for "Being Dufay".

John Potter, who was last heard on ECM alongside the musicians of his own "Dowland Project" on "Romaria" (2008), has long been committed to conceptual approaches to early music and, as a former blues and rock singer, has always had a strong interest in uncharted musical fields. His clear, almost boyish voice immerses itself with great ease in the allusively processed sounds. Field: "The fragments of original Dufay are always presented entirely unaltered, and serve as a reference point or cantus firmus within what is new. From that new perspective, I wanted to explore the limits of the electronic medium, produce a new set of musical colours and, perhaps above all, avoid the often mechanical aspects of working with technology."

"Being Dufay" started as a commission to Ambrose Field to write a piece for voice and electronics for a festival in the town of Vigevano, near Milan. Field: "After researching a little of the town's history, it became clear that like so many places in Italy this was a town where the present day and the past are both alive at the same time. I wondered about how this might work musically – I didn't want to make 'an adaptation' of the past, nor did I want to 'update it'. So, a project was born which brings together Dufay's music, which is centuries old, and some of today's newest digital techniques. After completing the festival performances with John in Italy, the BBC broadcast the work in the UK to great public response. At the time, only the festival version existed, together with sketches for another seven pieces. Over the next three years, I developed these into 'Being Dufay'."

John Potter, whose beautiful voice seems to dominate the album at least emotionally, contributes no more than some eight minutes of phrases by Dufay – which of course were selected by the two musicians after lengthy discussions and experiments. Everything else, including the "female" choir, generated from Potter's voice, is the result of editing, composition and computer processing. Field's approach to technology, as imaginative as it might be, is a strictly musical one, focussing on formal concepts rather than pure sonic invention.

"My working process starts with recorded sound itself, a sketch pad, and a piano – all very simple. I'll map out trajectories, lines and harmonies, whilst designing new sonic possibilities through technology. It doesn't matter to me if the technology is old or new: I use what I like the sound of. In terms of the new, I built a detailed digital model of John Potter's tenor voice:

this enables many musical possibilities which would be otherwise impossible to realise. These have included generating an entire female backing chorus, in which each synthesised singer still retains the character of the original solo voice. Whilst being important for my work, I have a general dislike of computers, preferring to find the right sounds first instead of undertaking extensive processing later. This can be a lengthy activity, but has the result that the electronics here highlight the contributions of humans, rather than machines.”

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Ambrose Field, electronic music composer and performer, uses recorded environmental sound sources and custom computer processes to generate a distinctive soundworld that is dense and uncompromisingly relentless. Winner of four international awards including two previous Ars Electronica Honorary Mentions, his music is available on Centaur Records (USA), the ORF (Austria), Mnemosyne Media (France) labels. Ambrose specialises in Surround Sound production, utilising formats ranging from 6.1 through to Ambisonics on installation, live music and film projects.

John Potter, for 17 years a singer with the Hilliard Ensemble and one of its prime conceptual thinkers, a vocalist of rare versatility and erudition, has written extensively on singing. His last ECM-album “Romaria”, which contained music from the Carmina Burana manuscript to Josquin Desprez, was released to great critical acclaim in 2008. Gramophone praised Potter’s “ethereal singing”, pointing out that “fresh ideas and ravishing music make this pilgrimage a fascinating journey.”

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