



← SOLOISTS, Les éléments and Les Passions perform Gilles's Requiem at the Dom Church in Utrecht as part of the city's 2010 early music festival

• Founder directors Joel Suhubiette (l) and Jean-Marc Andrieu are longstanding and frequent collaborators

Andrieu's orchestra. It's a partnership rooted in scholarly research, a shared sense of artistic discovery and a decades-long friendship between the two conductors. 'Jean-Marc was two years above me at the Conservatoire National de Région de Toulouse,' explains Suhubiette, whose accent – like Andrieu's – hints at their southern French connections. 'We were in the first early music department at the conservatoire and Jean-Marc was winning prizes as a recorder player, chamber musician and conductor. We sang together in the university choir; we were both tenors so we got to know each other well and worked together a lot. Although I began life as a pianist, through singing with some of the best amateur choirs in France, I decided I would be a vocalist and then, gradually, a conductor. We've tracked one another's careers closely ever since.'

The men's first combined effort was for a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*. 'By that stage we both had our own well-established musical groups in the Toulouse area,' recalls Andrieu. 'I set up Les Passions in 1986 and Joel had created Les éléments in 1997 as a flexible ensemble of between 20 and 40 singers. It was inevitable that we should collaborate.' 'We've known one another a long time,' adds Suhubiette, 'but there are a number of reasons the collaboration works. There's a complete lack of jealousy and there's a mutual respect. We understand

one another, and we trust one another's judgement.'

In fact, when it comes to performances requiring both choir and orchestra, it is Andrieu who generally acts as director, as on each of the planned three Gilles recordings (2009's *Lamentations* and a planned 2011 CD of his unknown *Te Deum*). That is as much a reflection of how the two devise their projects, as Andrieu explains: 'We tend to develop our projects separately. It's actually a pretty simple process – one of us decides on a programme and calls on the other one's forces to help. There's only ever one conductor throughout the process, but that's fine because we believe in one another.'

The two are also united in their enthusiasm for musical detective work and their commitment to research. 'When you're a conductor of baroque music you should try to make some discoveries,' says Andrieu. 'It's important to have an awareness of alternative composers – it's more interesting and it's great to unearth music of real merit.' There is real intellectual rigour in their performing editions, which are compiled after consulting as many extant manuscript sources as possible. In this the musicians are well served by France's outstanding archive and research centres, such as the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris and, in the Loire Valley, the Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance at Tours University. 'It has the best library for renaissance music in

LES ÉLÉMENTS

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Jean-Marc Andrieu features as conductor on the joint recordings by Les éléments and Les Passions

France,' Suhubiette says, 'and musicologists from all over the world go there to research. They'll often come to our concerts and we'll speak casually to them about their current research – and that's how we'll often find out about some interesting discovery or forgotten composer they're working on.'

Andrieu himself has unearthed a mass by Gilles, but all that survives are some of the continuo parts. He was luckier with the *Lamentations*. The only contemporary reference is found in the departmental archives of the Bouches-du-Rhône, where the records of the chapter house of Aix-en-Provence's cathedral are conserved. It was there that Gilles had served as a choirboy and chorister, and the records note that he was rewarded for taking 'great care and considerable effort with regards to the Office of the Tenebrae'.

Andrieu's musical hunch led him to the Mejanès library of the chapter of Saint-Sauveur in Aix, where an 18th-century copy of the *Lamentations* manuscript was preserved in a collection of motets. As the conductor points out in his informative notes to the *Lamentations* recording, 'one can only be surprised by [Gilles's] impressive mastery of musical language and his knowledge of the expressive techniques of the grand motet'.

'We're really the second generation of early musicians,' points out Suhubiette, 'and while it's critical that we learn the approach and aesthetics of our predecessors it's also important to be rigorous in our own scholarship, return to the original source

materials and create our own aesthetic.' 'We have a duty to approach this music with the most integrity possible,' echoes Andrieu. 'And we have a responsibility to encourage our artists to do their own thing and not simply copy others.'

This is one reason why both men have made a commitment to teaching the next generation of artists, as well as working with school children (a pedagogical investment that's still relatively unusual in France). Suhubiette has been teaching at the Lyon Conservatoire nationale supérieur de musique for two years – in France's bureaucratic music education system, the only place in France for choral conducting at graduate level.

In September 2009, the Ensemble Jacques Moderne (a sister chorus to Les éléments that Suhubiette also directs) began a year-long project with local schoolchildren on Purcell's semi-opera *King Arthur*. 'We worked with a history teacher, a literature teacher and an art teacher. They focused on the Dryden text and appeared in the final performance, singing some of the choruses.' Les Passions, too, work with young people, inviting school children to final rehearsals, which they use, as Andrieu states, 'as an opportunity to speak about ancient music, why it was written, setting it in its historical context; we also explain the roles of the different instruments'.

This dedication has brought other rewards. Both Suhubiette's and Andrieu's ensembles receive regional government funding and support for their international touring activities – including to the 2010 Utrecht Early Music Festival in The Netherlands, where the decidedly Gallic theme was 'Louis Quartorze'. The Utrecht festival is the biggest celebration of early music in the world. The festival organisation now has an annual operating budget of €2.3m, and organises a year-long calendar of 230 concerts. Being invited to give a concert in the Dom Church during the main summer event – as Les éléments and Les Passions were – is the early music equivalent of headlining at Glastonbury.

'I heard the groups' recording of the Gilles Requiem and I was really impressed,' recalls Xavier Vandamme, artistic director of the festival. 'The artists are really serious and they're people who actively seek out "new" old repertoire. It's thanks to groups such as Les éléments and Les Passions that early music is doing so well. Utrecht should be the place where we encourage *non-vulgarité*, originality and fresh ideas. The research and development aspect of our work is a really important element of what we are about. And that's why Les éléments and Les Passions are invited here.'

www.les-elements.com; www.les-passions.fr