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Light in the darkness:  
Red Priest is inspired by  
gypsy-esque virtuosity





# Vivid virtuosity

*After a tumultuous two decades, Red Priest are roaring into their third in a riot of colour and virtuosity. Co-founders PIERS ADAMS and JULIA BISHOP speak of inspiration, movers and shakers, and what's next for the group with Rhian Morgan*

I've yet to meet a musician who doesn't complain about the miserable problems touring and late nights bring to a relationship, so it was with the aim of seeing more of each other that almost 20 years ago Piers Adams and Julia Bishop formed Red Priest, a Baroque group whose name today is rarely mentioned without the words 'flamboyant' and 'irreverent'. Their reasons at the time were not entirely romantic: recorder player Adams was concerned about the increasingly restrictive nature of the early music scene in the UK in the late 1990s and Bishop, a violinist who was impressed by the Italian ensemble Il Giardino Armonico, felt that 'London needed a shot of this approach and that we were the people to do it.'

Twenty years on, with 38 US tours, visits to Russia, Australia, Japan, many European festivals, a multitude of recordings and a clutch of amusing and cheerily cringe-worthy titles (think 'Johann', 'I'm only Dancing', 'Pirates of the Baroque' and 'Priest on the Run'), Red Priest now prepares to launch its 20th anniversary series. The new programme, *Fantasy*, is the brain-child of the group's new violinist Adam Summerhayes, who has worked extensively in gypsy and tango fields with his group Zum, and wanted to create a new gypsy-baroque crossover.

'Generations of now-forgotten gypsy musicians have exerted a powerful fascination on composers from Biber and Telemann in the 17th century to Ravel in the 20th,' says Summerhayes. 'An erotic blend of expressivity and virtuosity and a sense of freedom and rule-free, unbounded creativity made the musicians in this race of persecuted social outcasts a valued social commodity for centuries.'

Red Priest's imaginary gypsy band relives the wild gypsy-esque virtuosity of

Biber and Castello, and explores tunes from the 1730 Uhrovska Collection, a treasure trove of some 350 folk melodies from Hungary, Slovakia Poland, and beyond. According to Summerhayes, 'these would have been the type of melodies that gypsies played, bringing their own eastern ornaments and melodic distortions and, according to Telemann, improvising in between. We revel in the self-avowedly gypsy-influenced music of Telemann before reimagining music by Handel and the original Red Priest, Vivaldi himself.'

## BISHOP'S BLESSING

Since the early days of Red Priest several members have come and gone; Howard Beach, described by Adams as 'a central part of Red Priest for 10 years' brought considerable skills as a keyboardist and arranger. He also collected fine perfumes and after leaving the group in 2010 he went to work for a perfume house. The late Julian Rhodes, in Adams' opinion, was 'the greatest and yet least heralded harpsichordist of all time' and also worked with the group. The American violinist David Greenberg remains as their regular US guest.

Red Priest cofounder Bishop has recently left because of ill health. She was 'an integral part of Red Priest's life from its inception, bringing both musical flair and skills in visual elements, staging, costumes, programming,' says Adams. 'She was also the group's most reliable conversationalist, with a skill for talking to absolutely anyone about absolutely anything.'

Bishop herself describes Red Priest as 'my other baby' – she and Adams have a 10-year-old daughter, Sylvie, and says she 'will always be very proud to have been a part of it. It was never an easy path as we goaded each other into hair-raisingly

virtuosic arrangements and then chastised each other when we hadn't yet memorised it all.

'But the group helped me to develop very much as a musician and as a performer and, being someone who was not always a natural stage beast and suffered from nerves, I feel the confidence I gained through the years of Red Priest will always help me to teach others what I've learned from the experience.'

The flamboyance of their performances, both musically and visually, and even the programme names, stem from Adams' need to 'shake up the smug complacency of the scene and to widen the audience for baroque music.' It's a view shared by both the cellist Angela East, who has been with Red Priest from the start, and harpsichord player David Wright, who joined in 2011. 'David's unconventional background and unsurpassable technique made him a natural to join Red Priest,' says Adams, while East's performing style 'also makes her a natural for the group.'

Bishop recalls East playing in the *St John Passion* and hearing 'an incredible explosion of sound from the cello section at the rending of the veil, quite unlike anything I had heard before in the many more sedate renditions and I knew immediately I wanted to perform with her.'

While feeling naturally drawn to this spontaneous and intuitive style of playing, Adams also 'felt that the emphasis on historical correctness was killing the spirit of natural, spontaneous, creative music making and turning what started out as a bold, raucous cultural movement into a restrictive museum mentality.'

'For me, the problem is that the performer was becoming written out of the equation and had become reduced to a neutral transmitter of ideas of the past whereas at the time, the performer was everything, the co-creator, and often





Red Priest enters its third decade with rip-roaring energy

actually the composer, so there was a natural, in-the-moment dynamism to the whole process.'

Summerhayes is equally aware of the dangers of boundaries and the natural tendency for what begin as exploratory ideas to become rules. 'I remember the excitement generated in the 80s as the early music world rejected the 20th-century playing style and insisted on searching for a way to play that reflected what could be found in written descriptions from the past – ignoring the jeers of 'modern' players. Now a specific way of playing seems to have developed – but how much can we really know? I think we have to remain open. I'm fascinated by looking at the way the violin is played in traditional folk cultures, western and eastern, to see what it reveals about playing unmarked by centuries of classical pedagogy.'

Their first concert, almost two decades ago, featured 11 musicians, and included Vivaldi recorder concertos and Bach Brandenburgs, all performed with maximum energy. The concert opened with an ear-piercing scream from the back of the hall to hail the beginning of Vivaldi's 'La Notte'. Adams was particularly impressed with the bloodcurdling debut but, he says, 'seven of those musicians evidently didn't share the enthusiasm for such boundary pushing, and we rapidly reduced to a core of four. We didn't want to become just another trio-sonata ensemble so the group

started creating its own arrangements. Freed from the constrictions of playing the music in its original format we became more and more experimental, increasingly thinking "what if...?" and "why not...?"'

Pushing boundaries aside, Adams believes it is vital 'to keep a firm foot in the authentic music camp, and the in-depth historical knowledge and experience of the members is always at the root of the ways in which we will phrase and ornament the music. As the programmes and recordings progressed we have moved further and further towards our own arrangements. *The Four Seasons* was a turning point, as we had to pull out all creative stops to make such a tired old war-horse come to life with a four-piece recorder-led ensemble.'

### PARANORMAL MATTERS

Outside music, a plethora of interests informs the rather left field style of all the players. For Adams, it's a lifelong fascination with a broad range of alternative philosophies, including conspiracy theories, alternative medicine, the paranormal, crop circles, Eastern philosophies, alternative science and history, 'and debating with those who try to sweep such matters under the carpet with so-called rational thought.'

Summerhayes is similarly fascinated by 'holes in current scientific thinking, the fact that physicists have no knowledge whatsoever of the dark energy and matter that they say make up 95% of the universe

and by the philosophical implications of trying to understand history in the context of a purely biological and genetic perspective.' He is also a prolific composer and arranger, artist, award-winning landscape photographer and, he says, a 'cheerful dabbler in any technical challenge that needs mastering, from graphic design to video editing.'

Wright, meanwhile, spends much of his time restoring by hand his Georgian townhouse in Wisbech to its baroque glory, and has taught himself many restoration skills along the way. Having followed an unconventional path from the East End of London into music, he also restores and sells harpsichords.

Angela East, who Adams describes as Red Priest's 'secret weapon and an absolute power house' is an Alexander Technique practitioner, a Suzuki teacher-trainer and runs a cello teaching practise from her home in London.

All these intricate and often far from mainstream aspects of the musicians' lives have influenced their playing and made for what critics have variously described as 'visionary and heretical', 'outrageous yet compulsive', 'wholly irreverent and highly enlightened', 'completely wild and deeply imaginative', with a 'red-hot wicked sense of humour' and a 'break-all-rules, rock-chamber concert approach to early music'.

For the anniversary season, with visits to Hong Kong and York, Switzerland and Sevenoaks, Germany and Croatia, Adams is keen to continue pushing the boundaries. 'This may well be our most "out there" programme so far in terms of sheer energy and deviation from the baroque, but also has historical and musicological justification ... together with a little speculation!'

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