

The end of “a beautiful chapter”

An Interview by Tom Bickley, Compact Disc Reviews Editor, with Members of the Flanders Recorder Quartet for their approaching 30th Anniversary and Final Tour

Since being founded in 1987, the Flanders Recorder Quartet (FRQ) has evolved into one of the world's top ensembles. Their success in 1990 at the prestigious *Musica Antiqua* competition in Bruges (Belgium), organized by the Flanders Festival, was the start of an extensive concert career.

In 2017, FRQ will celebrate its 30th anniversary of music-making. On this occasion, after over 2500 concerts in 52 countries, plus workshops and master classes all over the world, FRQ members have decided to bring the ensemble to a close. The reasons are positive: doing so allows the individual members to become involved in new projects—in writing articles and books, doing more research, conducting and arranging.

Before taking the final curtain call and drawing a double bar at the end of the FRQ, the group will embark on a farewell tour lasting through 2018. The next couple of years may be some of the group's busiest: they have to travel to see many fans!

The members of FRQ have built up impressive individual careers as teachers, conveying their pedagogical ideas in an inspiring manner both as professors and in master classes. In doing so, they do not avoid the confrontation between contemporary and early music. A tangible result of this work is the book *The Finishing Touch of Ensemble Playing* (Alamire, 2000), which has been translated into a number of languages. They are popular workshop and master class presenters in the U.S., as well as concert performers.

FRQ has been acclaimed for its sensitive arrangements, and more than 50 compositions have been dedicated to the group. Some of these pieces—by them and for them—have been made publicly available in the ensemble's own series of editions, “The Flanders Recorder Quartet Series,” published by the German publishing house Heinrichshofen.

Numerous prize-winning recordings have been made by FRQ for record companies such as Harmonia Mundi, Archiv/Deutsche Grammophon, Ricercar and OPUS III. In 2003 the quartet entered into a long and intensive collaboration with the German label AEOLUS.

Their extraordinary collection of instruments includes reproductions after illustrations by Virdung (1511), after originals from the collection of Henry VIII, a Baroque contra bass recorder some 2.3 meters in length, built by the late Friedrich von Huene

in 1998, and a large set of Renaissance recorders by Tom Prescott. (See this issue's cover for a sampling.)

The wit and insights that characterize the playing of the Flanders Recorder Quartet—both live and in recordings—comes through in their responses to the questions below.

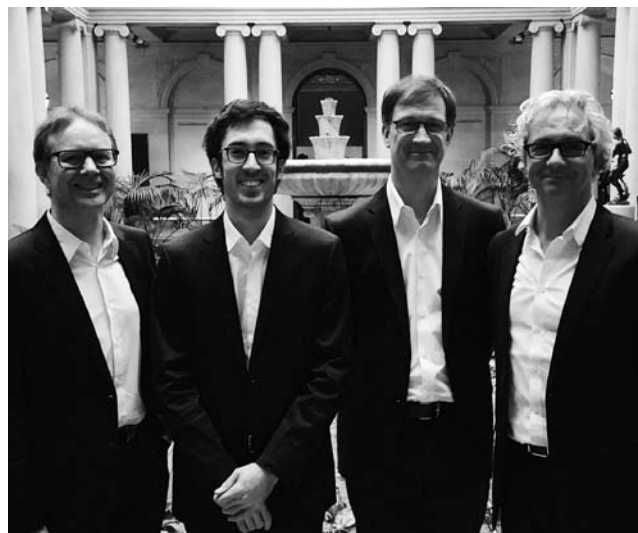
The Flanders Recorder Quartet stands for ingenuity, originality, creativity and the joy of music-making. The group will release one more CD in 2017, an anniversary special with Saskia Coolen; for a list of the group's CDs, see www.flanders-recorder-quartet.be/en/shop/. FRQ would also love to share its passion for the recorder once more with you in a new jubilee concert program. Contact Valerie Bernstein, valerie@sempremusica.com, to arrange a 2018 farewell concert. Congratulations to the FRQ for their 30 years of music-making together.

AR: Where/when/how did the FRQ members meet?

Paul Van Loey: Thirty years ago, we decided to form a recorder quartet to play our final examination in the conservatory in Antwerp. There was already a famous recorder quartet, Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet, that inspired us. Our time rehearsing together, the joy we had in making music, the passion of playing the recorder and all those musical expectations came together in playing finally in an ensemble, a recorder quartet ... quite rare.

It was not only fun to rehearse together, but also there was the fun we had besides. The rehearsals were on the third floor, and it was sometimes dangerous to ring the [door]bell, with a chance of getting a bucket of water dumped over you.

Our examination resulted in an enormous success with the highest points. A lot of our friends and professors encouraged us to stay together and ... we did. We were all



Flanders Recorder Quartet at the Frick Collection, New York City, NY, 2016 (l to r): Joris Van Goethem, Tom Beets, Bart Spanhove, Paul Van Loey

students and we had time enough to spend doing what we loved the most ... playing together in an ensemble.

It was a search for repertoire and instruments. We didn't have Renaissance instruments and could not invest in a normal F-basset recorder (Baroque) because we were poor students. So we played music for every occasion we had ... even in the supermarket! People heard and saw us playing and there was always someone who was willing to invite us for the next opportunity.

"*Vier op 'n rij*" (Dutch for "Four in a row") was born. Later we felt the need to change our name to something that is internationally understood ... Flanders Recorder Quartet.

AR: *What do you remember about your first performance as FRQ?*

Bart Spanhove: Our first concert was a pedagogical one. We performed for *Jeunesses Musicales* in one of the most prestigious concert places of Belgium, the *Singel* in Antwerp. *Jeunesses Musicales* is a splendid organization, which brings music to schools and families.

What I remember the most of our first concert is that we made completely wrong decisions in working out a beautiful pedagogical program. We played too-long compositions by L. A. Dornel, R. Vaughan Williams, J. S. Bach and others—pedagogically unsound practices, playing compositions without interruptions, for 15

minutes for a public who had never gone to a recorder concert, and presenting such styles as, e.g., French Baroque music. Teenagers couldn't understand what we did.

Besides that, we performed in black dinner jackets, the outfit of the most prestigious evening concert. In Anno 2016 it would be a lost cause—but in 1987, there was a totally different climate: teachers accepted this and thought that this was a typical classical concert.

Today, I can only state that we have a strong pedagogical plan, an interesting program (a "show," as Americans nicely describe it) and that we are most likely the most successful ensemble in Belgium, presenting in an interesting way all types of recorders and music styles: a feast of flutes!

AR: *Please tell us about FRQ's first commercially released recording.*

Joris Van Goethem: The first CD? Huh? I am not sure, so as a real adventurer I must get over my fear of spiders, go up into the attic, and start my Quest for the First CD.

My inner Indiana Jones is not disappointed. In the section Memorabilia FRQ, I find *Les Nations*, our first CD, released in 1990. After winning a chamber music competition in Rotterdam and toasting the success, I was asked two questions I never forgot. The first came from a university professor: "you played extremely beautifully, but is it really a good idea to dedicate your life to music?" As music was and still is a passion, I'm happy that my recorder playing brought me all over the globe and in contact with so many fascinating people. What I realize now is that you don't have to be a pro: the satisfaction of making music is the same (or more...) when you are an amateur.

The second question, from Arcobaleno/EMS—"would you like to make a CD for our label?"—was breathtaking for our young quartet. [The process for] making a digital

recording and producing a CD was not obvious in 1990.

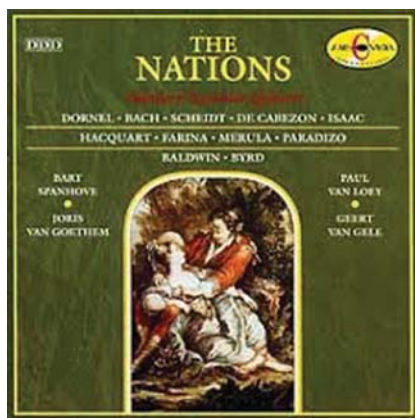
The booklet of this old CD, unopened for 26 years, sticks together like melted toffees. I start a violent attack with a sharp knife and manage to destroy some historical pictures of our quartet. I experience instant delight as I notice that, after my attack, nobody can ever again look at these pics, with the widest trousers, the longest ties and the pinkest shirts I've ever seen.

The CD is better preserved than the booklet. So, earphones on! I must confess, I never listen to recorder music but I'm getting more curious every second. Mmmm, I can already hear the "Flanders" sound *and* all the individual differences in playing style. I guess this is a great *plus* of the quartet. We have a very recognizable group sound, but we don't want to hide every player's individual sound.

I can also hear the typical straight, almost inflexible tone, which was favored 25 years ago, and some pointilistic staccato ☺. In 1990, by law all staccatos had to be finished with the tongue! I also discover beautiful compositions by Farina and Hacquart: will look for the music!

More important, this CD brings back memories of rehearsals, more rehearsals and even more rehearsals. We worked as hard as we could and learned to become "ensemble players." I believe that all young recorder virtuosos should have this ensemble training and not only the "soloist" approach during their studies.

We rehearsed in a completely different way in the first years. More often than was healthy for us, only two



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*Flanders Recorder Quartet
in Antwerp Augustine Church
(with Ulrich Lorscheider, left,
holding headphones; with
Saskia Coolen, below).
Photos: Michiel Stegen*

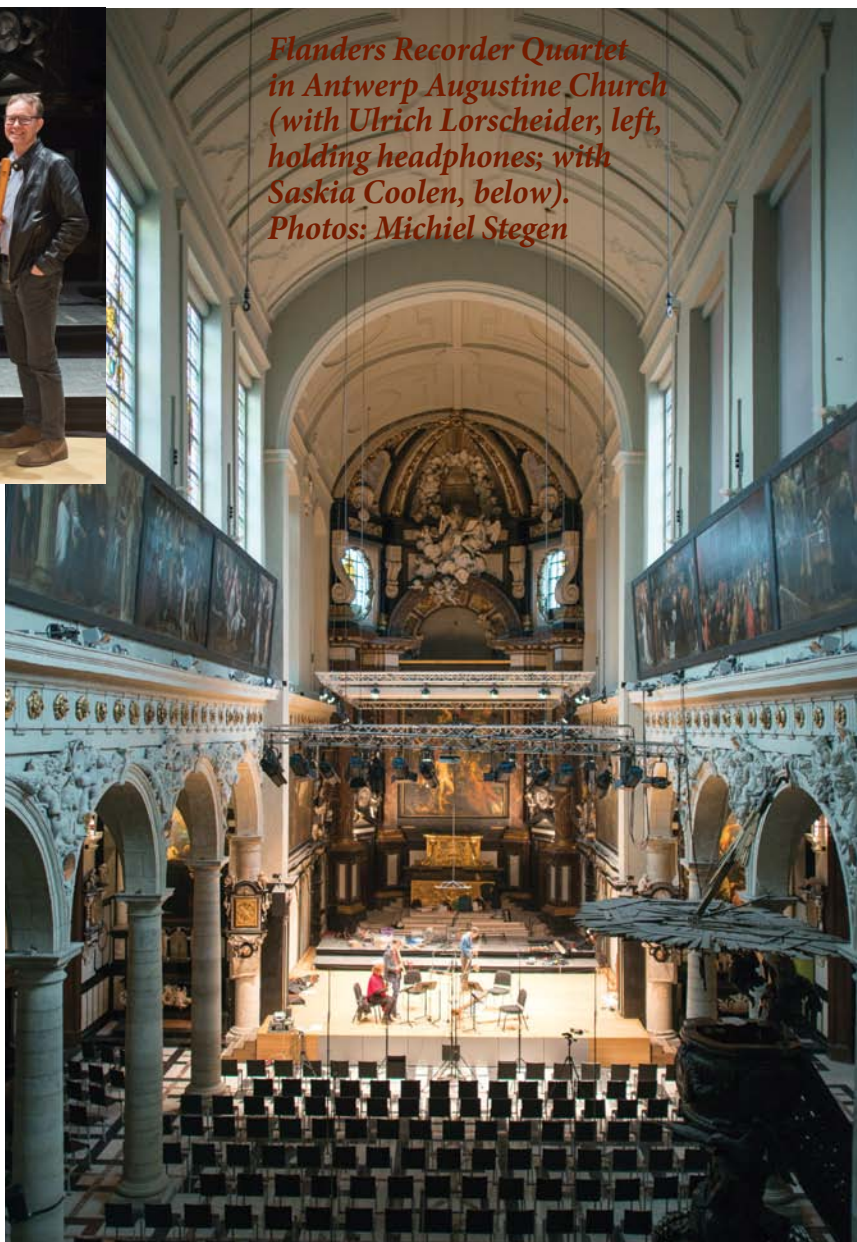
players played, while the two others gave advice, positive and otherwise. Nowadays, we don't talk so much anymore, but listen to the musical ideas of the others when playing the piece—an intelligent, musical conversation of equal voices. We also don't have a “first violin” or “conductor.”

I also remember that making a first CD was not a relaxing experience. There were hardly any takes, so we started focusing more on “no mistakes” instead of relaxed playing.

AR: *What do you find most satisfying and most challenging about the process of recording?*

Tom Beets: Basically there are two stages in the artistic process of making a CD. First of all, there is deciding on a repertoire, and compiling the so-called “track list.” Choosing the pieces and their order for a concert program is utterly different from making a program for a CD. The tension, the dynamic line, the way the audience is able to concentrate and/or fast-forward makes these two concepts so different.

The second aspect is the recording process itself. Where one could say that, in a concert the audience is the fifth person of the quartet, during the recording without a doubt a



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fully-fledged member is Ulrich Lorscheider, our sound engineer and recording supervisor. Add up our experience with his ears, and you've without a doubt got a winning combination. Ulrich gets the best out of the ensemble. Since he is not a recorder player, but a man with the best aesthetic ears one could imagine, he tends to give feedback that often is an eye opener. He adds quality and edge to our playing.

AR: How do the locations of recording affect your playing? For example, how does a radio or recording studio compare with a church or other performance venue?

TB: The location matters greatly. For instance, locations with their specific acoustics require certain tempi and demand certain intensities and clarities of articulation.

Nowadays, you can often change the acoustic parameters of a historical church with acoustic screens and blinds, as is the case where we've been recording for the last 10 years. Our location, the Antwerp Augustine Church (also known as the music center AMUZ), was once the convent church of the Augustinian friars. It was built between 1615 and 1618 by Wenzel Coebergher, the court architect of the Archduke Albert and [his wife the Duchess] Isabella. In 2006, after years of renovation, it opened as a cultural center (see photos on previous page).

Rarely we record in a modern studio setting, one track after another, with the previously-recorded tracks on headphones to play on top of. That method of multi-track recording has nothing to do with ensemble playing. We only use it when there is digital postproduction and the addition of samples needed, e.g., in our children's project *Malus* that we released a dozen years ago. You can hear a sample of this recording at www.flanders-recorder-quartet.be/malus.mp3. Multi-track recording does not interest me so

much, as it's not satisfying for me; it lacks "real ensemble playing," the give-and-take of movement and sound.

AR: What do you find most satisfying and most challenging about performing for a live audience?

PVL: Playing for a live audience can be smooth and easy, or can feel like a lot of work—not always easy, as the circumstances in Mexico are at certain times very different from, for instance, those in New York or Tokyo. The instruments are reacting to humidity and more.

In fact a concert is always better than a recording version. Maybe there are mistakes, but the intensity is always very honest. The audience feels that. We do also! Live playing is a beautiful risk ... compare it with a pop musician. Live is always better ... you feel the spirit.

AR: What venues/audiences/occasions have you most enjoyed?

PVL: Difficult question...☺ So many places all over the world. The Frick Collection, New York City, NY; Tokyo opera city concert hall; Amsterdam Concertgebouw ... and many more (we've played in more than 50 countries), but also the smaller venues that are not known over the world. They all were/are fantastic!!

AR: What repertory do you find particularly challenging? What repertory do you find particularly satisfying?

BS: Every style, every period, every genre has its charms. I love and strongly appreciate jazz, folk, avant-garde music.... At home, I have more than 1,500 CDs, but I don't understand all music. It's so difficult to know everything about the different types of music, instruments, styles.

We live in a period where you have to specialize to be called an "expert." Baroque music no longer has secrets for me. I have found 1,001 ways to under-

stand it, to analyze, to approach, to give the musical language of the 17th and 18th centuries a clear and convincing interpretation. I love it, but I cannot invest the time to do the same for other genres and periods of early and classical music.

As a teacher, I'm happy to possess a kind of all-around education, so I can effectively teach my students all kinds of stuff, and let them go to a specialist, once they find their favorite music.

AR: *How do you devise the programs (repertory and sequence of pieces) for performances and recordings?*

JVG: Some composers are a delight to play. Their compositions invite you to give a new twist to the music every time you play it. Other composers really expect you to follow all the remarks and articulations they prescribe. Although their compositions can be world-class too, we try to avoid them in concerts and recordings. They

The crowd-pleasing On the Bottle (Op de fles, meaning "bankrupt, out of business") by Frans Geysen. For two FRQ renditions, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIuhSKXYpwY> (2005) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hgtJaFowmE> (2008).



feel wrong to the quartet—like a beautiful pair of shoes in the wrong size.

Some composers offer you healthy, pure ingredients and beg you to make your own creative recipe with a lot of herbs and seasoning. Bach invites you

to concentrate and follow his flow of the music. I think playing and listening to Bach is like drinking a great wine. Your brain is pleasantly overwhelmed and controlled by your senses only.



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AR: How did you decide to develop the innovative Jukebox concert approach (and the Encore recording)? Did the Jukebox approach yield desired results?

TB: During the 2010–2011 season, we presented an exceptional program: our own *Jukebox* in concert. There was no thematic program. In *Jukebox* the audience would decide what FRQ was going to play that afternoon or evening.

The concept was as easy as it was straightforward: we would bring along all our instruments and folders of music scores. The collection of over a hundred available pieces offers a beautiful cross-section of the varied literature for recorder, as well as personal favorites. A computer would tally the audience vote and hand us the result, giving us 15 minutes before the concert to decide on the order. Wherever we tried it—whether in a small mansion in Germany, a country school in Flanders or a music festival in South Korea—it worked!

Twenty *Jukebox* shows later, we drew the conclusion: our audiences favor the spectacular—virtuosic, engaging, upbeat, swinging, a little crazy. The pieces that embody all these attributes turn out often to be the encores at an FRQ concert. The pleasure that the audience and the four musicians got from *Jukebox* finds a culmination on the *Encore!* CD [reviewed in *AR*, Spring 2014].

AR: What is your last recording project?

TB: An anniversary calls for a special CD project. We like to invite friends to join us for these champagne moments.

In the past we had *Magic* (15th anniversary) with vocal ensemble and Eastern plucked instruments. The 20th anniversary brought us a cooperation with a percussionist in *Banchetto Musicale*, and at 25 we toured Europe with a string orchestra.

What are we up to now? We're keeping it simple. Pure recorder, but then in quintet format, together with



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Saskia Coolen. The repertoire is quintet music that ranges from Renaissance (on the new fantastic Tom Prescott consort) and Baroque evergreens to contemporary commissions by our friends Pieter Campo and Sören Sieg, and jazzy arrangements by New Yorker Stan Davis. All of the pieces make us smile, that's for sure!

AR: What is your approach to newly-composed music?

BS: I love modern music. With FRQ we have worked intensively especially with Flemish modern composers such as Frans Geysen [see *AR*, September 2004, with accompanying music files], Jan Van der Roost, Jan Van Landeghem, Piet Swerts and many others. More than 50 compositions are dedicated to FRQ.

People are mostly overwhelmed by modern music, when we dare to play one modern piece in an early music program. Modern music can be so attractive and expressive. It's sometimes easier to let your public know the unlimited possibilities of a small instrument, which can sound magical with its rich arsenal of colors, techniques, shapes, virtuosity...

I wrote a book of 152 pages titled *De blokfluitmuziek van Frans Geysen* (*The recorder music of Frans Geysen*, published by Mieroprint, Germany), about the Belgian minimalist and repetitive composer.

Over six years, I did intensive research to understand his ideas by analyzing musical mirrors, Fibonacci numbers, full chromaticism and structures. The monthly conversations and written exchanges with this composer were very helpful. But it's really impossible to invest such energy for every type of music.



Recorder maker Tom Prescott (center) flanked by FRQ members in 2014

AR: How did you choose to work with instrument maker Friedrich von Huene? What about other recorder makers?

BS: Besides Friedrich von Huene, I favor the recorders of Fred Morgan, Peter Van der Poel, Adrian Brown, Thomas Prescott and Adriana Breukink. I cannot choose my favorite maker. They all have splendid qualities, and I fervently hope [those who are still living] work together one day to create "the perfect recorder."

These recorder makers have tried everything to fulfill my unrealistic wishes—a flawless technique, surrounded by the most characteristic

sound and resonant high notes, an easy articulation speed, interesting colors, referring to historical originals....

I had the most contact with Friedrich von Huene and Peter van der Poel. Their recorders are all jewels and give me happiness inside.

AR: What advice do you have for working together as an ensemble? How have you succeeded in working together for 30 years? Have there been changes in personnel over time?

JVG: Most musicians are extremely sensitive, so we must be sweet and careful with the other ensemble members. Talking about interpretation is talking about your feelings. It's great if everybody can be heard.

An ensemble rehearsal can also be Dangerously Democratic, especially if the group is too big. So if you have seven players or more, look for a leader.

I believe the keywords for succeeding in working together so long are Flexibility and Questioning Everything. Taking nothing for granted gives the group a vibe.

Our group had different members over the years (*see photos, next pages*). We started with Geert Van Gele and also Fumiharu Yoshimine and later Han Tol—very different players, but one of the strong points of the quartet



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is that individual playing is encouraged, but [the group] still manages to have its own sound, like a sort of handwriting. No two handwritings are the same, so you can always hear the "Flanders Quartet Sound."

I'm very curious about our "Flanders Quartet Sound" in our most recent recording project, because we have made a CD as a quintet. Saskia Coolen joined us for this 30th anniversary CD and concerts—consort music, Lully and Bach, African music, Swingtime and more! Release date is probably March 2017.

AR: Do you have other comments to add?

BS: What does 30 years of FRQ mean?

FRQ colors my life. I have seen parts of 52 different countries. I have friends worldwide and could enjoy many music projects.

I'm up-to-date because of constantly getting feedback from my colleagues, the many international contacts, of assisting with prestigious festivals and giving lecture-demonstrations.

I always thought I would be a music teacher at a local music school. I feel happy that my employer and my family have always supported my pursuit of these unexpected dreams.

FRQ was not work, but a passion and an easy way to develop my insights, ideas and ideals. It's a beautiful chapter in our lives and a nice Belgian product, besides our chocolate, diamonds, football players....



Flanders Recorder Quartet through the years: early 1990s "Vier op 'n rij" (top, l to r) Paul Van Loey, Geert Van Gele, Bart Spanhove, Joris Van Goethem; (bottom) Spanhove, Van Gele, Van Goethem, Van Loey; next page, left column (top two photos), late 1990s, with Fumiharu Yoshimine; (bottom two photos) 1999-2006 with Han Tol



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Flanders Recorder Quartet anniversary years: (right column, top to bottom) 2002, with Magic CD musicians; 2007, current members (l to r) Tom Beets, Paul Van Loey, Bart Spanhove, Joris Van Goethem; 2012, Van Loey, Beets, Van Goethem, Spanhove