

Pride and passion

The degree of maturity attained by Spanish early music over the last decade can be seen in such complementary fields as the recovery of its musical heritage, the increase in the number and quality of ensembles performing the repertoire, musicological research and also, of course, the existence of magazines like *Goldberg*, now arriving at its 50th issue, which has witnessed from 1997 until today the imaginative growth of the sector. At times like this, it is hard not to feel a certain Spanish pride. It is, quite simply, a sense of pride at something well done. And we again experienced that pride on 11 January 2008, when the Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla gave a memorable performance of Handel's *Messiah* in the legendary Salle Gaveau in Paris. Imagine the atmosphere of restrained excitement in the theatre when, at the end of the performance, several members of the audience came to congratulate the Spanish contingent in the stalls on discovering that we were from the same country as the instrumentalists!

Theirs is an uncomplicated story. The Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla was born in 1995, thanks to the initiative of Ventura Rico and Barry Sargent, who set out to scratch beneath the surface and rediscover the freshness of 17th- and 18th-century repertoire. Andalusia's link with baroque culture is so strong that it has led one professor of the History of Art, Antonio Bonet Correa, to state that "there is no expression of popular culture in Andalusia today which doesn't bear the stamp of the baroque". Although that is a self-evident truth in the realm of painting (one only needs to consider the plethora of exhibitions devoted to the subject), in music an in-depth focus on the Golden Age has been long overdue. The commendable efforts of early music festivals such as those of Seville, Úbeda and Baeza were urgently crying out for a specialist ensemble capable of delivering on all those converging vocational endeavours and interests. The Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla achieved almost immediate and considerable prestige at the regional level and even, albeit a little more slowly, at the national level. All that remained was for the group to establish itself on the international scene, and in this regard it had two impressive letters of introduction in the form of recordings of Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*, conducted by Barry Sargent and, especially, Alessandro Scarlatti's *Colpa, Pentimento e Grazia*, under the dynamic direction of Eduardo López Banzo and the backing of the record label *harmonia mundi*.

As the old saying coined by French King Henry IV goes, "Paris is well worth a Mass" or, at the very least, an oratorio. The Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla prepared its Parisian debut with all due care and thought, reserving for some future occasion such favourite Spanish composers such as Iribarren, Garay, Delgado, Vidal, Mendoza, Bager, Llusá and Moya, and opting instead for the most popular of all choral works: Handel's *Messiah*, pure and unadulterated, in spite of the usu-



The Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla

al surfeit of performances of this work over the Christmas period. The ensemble's French tour went from the Jura region to Burgundy, where they performed in theatres and churches, the high point of the tour being their appearance at the Gaveau. Earlier in December, they had "run in" their interpretation of the oratorio in Madrid, Seville, Coruna, Palma de Mallorca and Girona, working with both amateur choirs in "popular" performances and choirs as exquisite as the professional Burgundy-based *Arsys*, which was chosen for the Paris performance. On each occasion, the ensemble was directed by a "chapel master" in the best sense of the term, the conductor Pierre Cao, with whom the musicians formed a great rapport. The four vocal soloists in Paris were the sensational Carlos Mena, Cornelia Samuelis, Markus Schäfer and Thomas Bauer. The Seville-based ensemble had certainly done its homework and acquitted itself with exemplary focus and concentration. Their teamwork was faultless in terms of overall skill and balance, not for a single moment making any concessions to a facile approach to the work. It was a superb rendition. With all due apologies for singling out individuals in such a cohesive piece of teamwork, I nevertheless feel I must particularly comment on the sensational performances of the cellist, Mercedes Ruiz López de la Cova, the trumpeter, Hannes Rux and the harpsichordist Carlos García-Bernalt. The performance as a whole brought the house down, and the rhythmic applause "à la française" at the end was like the flamenco hand-clapping characteristic of festivals in Seville. It was a truly thrilling occasion, one of which to be proud.

The Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla has passed its international initiation rite with flying colours. It came one day after Jordi Savall performed in the same city with his ensemble at Cité de la Musique. A strange conjunction, this: the Spanish musician France knows best, followed by a Spanish ensemble that is only just becoming known there. Are they an alternative, perhaps? Yes, something of the sort. Or, rather, a continuation. The immediate plans of the Seville orchestra include appearances with Gustav Leonhardt and Sigiswald Kuijken, as well as the usual performances with Monica Huggett, their principal guest conductor. They have several albums waiting to be released, featuring works by Domenico Scarlatti and Iribarren and music from the cathedrals of Cádiz and Málaga, with soloists such as the countertenor Carlos Mena. The Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla has tasted success at the very highest level, and it is a privilege for us to share in their triumph in this special, golden issue of *Goldberg*. We do so with pride and passion. The trumpet has sounded and once more Handel has lighted the way. Under his protection, other works and other composers await their "resurrection". They will not have long to wait.

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