

26th January 2017

**MUSIC OF SPAIN, I ADORE YOU****MARIA CAMAHORT QUINTET - IBE...**

I have just returned from the Canary Islands, and was therefore ready for something Spanish. Well, Spanglish, anyway; you're more likely to get an English breakfast than a castanet in the Canaries.

If you wanted something different, inventive, emotional and as Spanish as jamon iberico last night, the place to be was not Madrid but Newcastle under Lyme. The Maria Camahort Quintet were performing their latest disc, Iberian Colours, at the New Vic theatre, under the auspices of the Keele Concerts Society (as I understand it, some sort of clever Arts Council plan intended to attract two audiences for the same grant.)

Let's take the unusual quintet, for a start. I've just bought a disc of Spanish piano quintets by Granados and Turina, featuring Javier Perianes and the Cuarteto Quiroga. I recommend it highly (Harmonia Mundi HMC 902226) and it reinforces my belief that Turina may be a neglected genius.

But this was a different sort of Spanish quintet. Violeta Garcia had one of those dusky, smokey, Spanish voices, which went very well with the more "trained" soprano of Laura Ruhi-Vidal. Oh, and the amazing Ms Garcia had the astonishing ability to play the violin as well, often AT THE SAME TIME AS SINGING.

Nicola Benedetti doesn't do that, does she?

Sergio Serra's cello was sweeping and plangent, and Demi Garcia played what he told me was called the cajan. Google translate says this means box, and it was indeed a box, but he sat on it and hit it, producing a wide range of percussive effects. He also had a couple of cymbals and a rope of bells in his armoury, all of which he played with extreme discretion.

Central to this group was, of course, Maria Camahort, a guitarist of considerable distinction and a composer and arranger too. She trained at the Guildhall school of music, and is currently based in London (take that, Brexit.) And so to the music. Most of it had an air of what the Portuguese call saudade, which translates as missing in English and nostalgia in Spanish; let's settle for longing, which is hardly surprising given the subjects include exile, weeping and the tragedy of the Spanish civil war. The notes were quite detailed, but it would have been nice to have had translations of all the songs.

What is striking is the ability of this music to combine traditional Spanish rhythms and flourishes with western classical styles – or should that be the ability of Spanish classical music to incorporate folk and flamenco music. The concert opened with two pieces by Federico Mompou, one of those composers I have been for some time intending to investigate. Although he died in 1987, his music is tonal, highly tuneful and simple, concealing a wealth of art. Must buy some.

Then came pieces by Roberto Gerhard, a Spanish composer who spent most of his life in England. He was, unfortunately, taught by Schoenberg early on, and I find his later works difficult and unattractive; but these Cantares for voice and guitar were melodic and appealing (I was reminded of Villa-Lobos's Bachias Brasileiras).

A couple of quite modern pieces followed. Feliu Gasull, said to be one of Spain's leading composers and guitarists, combines contemporary music with folk idioms (there are some interesting audio clips on the web). Singer songwriter Lluís Llach composed the music to Corrandes D'Exili, now said to be a symbolic song in Catalonia.

Then came the traditional Catalan song the Song of the Birds, a Christmas carol which Casals used to play to begin his concerts.

The first half ended with De Falla's Seven Spanish Folk songs, some of which I recognised from his classical orchestral works (though they sounded very different here.)

Granados made an appearance in the second half of the concert, with the very lovely Spanish dance Oriental (I know the more famous Goyescas but I didn't know this and must find his dances). Strangely, it bore a remarkable resemblance to Gershwin's Summertime.

There were some pieces inspired by the words of Spain's famous poet, Federico Garcia-Lorca, to music created by Maria Camahort herself, and Nana y Danza del Aire composed for the group by Angel Retamero, another composer who manages to fuse Classical and Flamenco.

I had been waiting all evening for the group to really rock (yes, even we classical buffs like some all-out, full-on action occasionally), and there were some moments here when, it seemed, the quintet let themselves go.

This just in; when I was in the Canaries I passed a nice-looking modern concert hall, the Auditorio Infanta Leonor, but there appeared to be nothing on – no posters or indication that it had ever been used at all. Well, I was wrong; the website reveals plans in early February for a feast of flamenco and guitar. I'd come off the beach for that, no problem. I think.