



Tientos y Glosas - Iberian Organ & Choral Music from the Golden Age

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Organ music by composers from the Iberian peninsula has a special place in the repertoire. Its peculiar style and the specific timbre of the organs for which it was written makes it rather difficult to be performed on organs in other parts of Europe. This inevitably has led to this repertoire being less well-known than that of other countries.

The music included on this disc is presented as being written during the Golden Age. However, the largest part of the repertoire played here was written when that era - roughly speaking from 1520 to 1620 - had come to an end. Moreover, one of the composers, Manuel Rodrigues Coelho, was Portuguese; in 1580 his country had lost its independence which was only restored in 1640. Coelho published his Flores de musica from which the pieces on this disc are taken in 1620. At that time the country was not in very good shape; it certainly was not enjoying a golden age. Coelho also did not dedicate his collection to Philip II, as Martin Neu writes, but to Philip III; his father had died in 1598. The information in the booklet in regard to the historical context is not very accurate.

Fortunately the information about the music is more reliable. The main genre in Iberian keyboard music is that of the tiento. This is what would be called a ricercar or fantasia outside Spain, and is characterised by counterpoint and imitation. Many tientos employ the medio registro, the 'broken keyboard'. In many organs the keyboard was divided into two halves with different dispositions. This allowed the composer to write a solo part for one hand, often including virtuosic figurations, and a polyphonic accompaniment for the other hand. A good example is the Tiento de medio registro de tiple de octavo tono by Francisco Correa de Arauxo. He seems to have been more or less self-educated and acquired his skills by studying the works of others. He was ordained a priest and worked for many years as an organist at the collegiate church of S Salvador in Seville. From 1636 to 1640 he held the same position in Jaén Cathedral. In 1640 he was elected a prebendary of Segovia Cathedral. Here he also died in poverty. His organ works are collected in one book which was printed in 1626 and has a clear didactic purpose as the title indicates. This explains why the pieces are arranged in various stages in order of difficulty.

The Tiento tercero de sexto tono sobre la primera parte de la Batalla de Morales refers to another popular genre in Spain: the battaglia. It is an arrangement of a batalla by Morales, the most famous Spanish composer from the first half of the 16th century. His batalla is lost and therefore this tiento by Arauxo is the only way to get some impression of what that piece may have sounded like. The closing episode includes some typical features of batallas: repeated fanfare motifs and echo effects. The Tiento de dos baxones de octavo tono is another brilliant piece with two independent bass parts. As Spanish organs usually didn't have a pedalboard these

parts are played on the manuals. The Tiento lleno segundo tono is a late specimen of the genre of the tiento. It has come down to us anonymously but is attributed to Diego Xaraba for stylistic reasons. He was organist at the Royal Chapel in Madrid.

Another important genre is that of the glosas. These are not fundamentally different from diferencias, or - in other languages - divisions, diminutions or passaggi which were frequently written in England and Italy during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The Tres Glosas sobre el Canto llano de la Inmaculada Concepción is one of the best-known compositions by Arauxo and appears in many recordings of Iberian organ music. However, the Hymn to the Virgin Mary which is the subject of these variations is hardly ever sung. It is very nice that here the variations are embraced by a vocal performance of this hymn.

The third genre represented here is liturgical music. In the Catholic liturgy the organ played an important role in alternatim compositions: the verses of the mass or another liturgical chant were performed alternately by the choir and the organ. Here we hear two examples from the only published collection of keyboard music by Coelho, Flores de musica. It is the earliest surviving keyboard music printed in Portugal. According to the title the music is conceived for a keyboard instrument or the harp. It contains 24 tentos (Portuguese for tientos), three for every tone, and also over a hundred verses on various hymns and Kyrie settings. A specimen of the latter are the 5 Versos de Kyrie do 1. tom. The hymn Ave maris stella is also performed alternatim: the organ plays four verses with the cantus firmus moving from soprano to bass.

This disc offers a good survey of the keyboard music written on the Iberian peninsula during the 17th century. The value of this disc is enhanced by the fact that Martin Neu in his choice of repertoire has largely avoided the most obvious. Although Arauxo's music is often played, the pieces recorded here are not among the most frequently recorded, except the Glosas. Coelho's oeuvre is far less known. The collaboration with the ensemble officium in the liturgical pieces is another real bonus. On top of that Neu plays a magnificent organ, one of Spain's larger instruments with two manuals and 35 stops. The tuning is 1/5 comma meantone, the pitch is a=430 Hz. It dates from 1735 and was restored and partly reconstructed in 2006/2007. It proves itself the ideal medium for the music played here.

Footnote

Martin Neu has commented on a couple of points made in the review:

- 1) King Philip III of Spain was simultaneously King Philip II of Portugal (and of Sicily and Naples, and of Sardinia). As Coelho was Portuguese he dedicated his collection of keyboard works to 'his' King, which explains the reference to Philip II in the liner-notes
- 2) The 'golden age' (siglo de oro) is a fixed term for a period on the Iberian peninsula. That doesn't imply that it was a time of happiness and prosperity for the people. That is also not suggested in the liner-notes.