

Friday, 1 June 2018

## Fire and Passion

Once again, I am breaking my own self-appointed mandate of live performance reviews to review a new recording. There's no justification, other than to say that I've been following the career of the musicians involved -- the Cheng<sup>2</sup>Duo -- for some years now with considerable interest.

*Violonchelo del fuego* ("Cello of Fire") is the eye-catching title of this new release from the German label Audite. The cover photos underline the Spanish pedigree of the music we'll be hearing.

Unlike the Duo's initial recording, this one contains only one work originally written for the ensemble of cello and piano. It matters not, for the music is all performed with as much fire and passion as if it were specifically composed with these instruments in mind. This new release also includes works for solo piano and solo cello, another innovation on record for these fine Canadian artists.

This Spanish recital constitutes a whirlwind tour through the great Spanish/Catalan music renaissance during the first half of the last century. It might be called a "Greatest Spanish Hits" compilation, but only in part since some of the works definitely live at the rarely-heard edges of the repertoire. As well, there is one work -- the final one on the CD -- which is something of an odd number since it is only Spanish by virtue of the nationality of its composer, certainly not in any stylistic way.

Traditional images of the music of Spain often evoke such comparisons as the strumming and plucking of guitars, the stamping of flamenco dancers' feet, and the clacking of castanets. To capture this feeling on instruments such as cello and piano requires the most precise pedalling and playing of staccato (on piano) and pizzicato (on cello), combined with rapid articulation, plenty of freedom of rhythm, and sudden, sharp dynamic contrasts. But these composers also included many pages of melting lyrical beauty, where the needs shift to sustained legato and careful shaping of phrases.



In all these respects and others, Silvie Cheng (piano) and Bryan Cheng (cello) have entirely captured the voices of these composers, and they've done so with energy, verve, and spirit.

From the very first notes of the opening number, the *Intermezzo* from the opera *Goyescas* by Enrique Granados, it's plain that we're in a very different musical world from the one which the Cheng<sup>2</sup>Duo's previous recording explored. Later in the recording, we encounter Granados again in an arrangement of perhaps his best-known composition, the *Andaluza*, fifth movement of his twelve *Spanish Dances* for piano. This is one work where I noted especially the difference in colour of the whole as the melody was taken by the cello in a position in the centre of the harmony, where it originally appeared on the top. This gave the entire dance a more autumnal feeling.

Isaac Albeniz, the most redoubtable of all Spanish composers for the piano, appears for only one work here, but it's a delight: the *Malaguena* from his suite *Espana*. This work calls for a lighter texture and colour, and the Duo deliver, finding a real sense of fantasy in this beautiful number.

The music of Manuel de Falla is generously represented. The first *Spanish Dance* from his opera *La vida breve* opens with an energetic presentation of the main theme. The central slower section brings the most forceful bass notes on piano, again with matching powerhouse pizzicato playing on the cello. The return of the main theme is decorated in this arrangement with additional virtuosic flourishes, all played with great flair and verve.

Equally powerful, if anything even more vivid and dramatic, is the famous *Ritual Fire Dance* from de Falla's ballet *El amor brujo*. Especially impressive here is the very wide dynamic range of the playing as the music leaps instantly from the very quiet throbbing rhythm to a full-throated *fortissimo*.

For a microcosm of the entire musical world of this record, turn to de Falla's *Seven Popular Spanish Songs*. From the fleet-footed *Seguidilla murciana* and *Jota* to the languorous *Asturiana* and the serene beauty of *Nana*, the Cheng<sup>2</sup>Duo capture all the diverse moods of this masterly cycle. In such a performance, one scarcely misses the words. The passionate *Polo*, with its stabbing chords on the piano and leaping cello line is a highlight of the entire album.



Silvie Cheng plays Turina's *Exaltacion* with distinction, the dream-like opening giving place to a vigorous treatment of the main theme and a lighter, more fantastic tone for the central section. It's a pity that room wasn't found to include the other two *Fantastic Dances*, as these pieces are not heard on record nearly often enough.

Bryan Cheng presents a rare and significant *Suite* for solo cello by cellist/composer Gaspar Cassadó, a work which not only deserves but demands wider currency. Three movements, each inspired by different traditional dance forms, call for the widest range of tone colours and moods, and this thoughtful performance truly captures that diversity.

Another Cassadó rarity follows, *Requiebro* ("Flirtations" or "Compliments") for cello and piano -- another dance, this time somewhat more popular in character, and played by the Duo with panache. For a more detailed look at this music by Cassadó, go to my rare music blog: [Cello Beauties From Spain](#)

The final selection is the odd number, the famous *Zigeunerweisen* by Pablo de Sarasate, one of the staples of the violin repertoire. The central-European gypsy atmosphere of this piece contrasts oddly with the authentic voices of Spain heard in the rest of the album. What's most striking here is the absolute clarity and precision of Bryan Cheng's virtuoso fireworks on the cello, since the notes are much farther apart than on a violin and the cellist's hand has to race back and forth twice as quickly along the fingerboard!

Taken as a whole, this new recording presents a distinguished survey of that proud and magnificent Spanish musical renaissance of the early twentieth century. Silvie and Bryan Cheng fill every selection with the fire and passion which are so essential to this music.

Audite's recording team has captured all the precision and energy of the playing with great clarity, set against a nicely resonant backdrop. A word of warning though: turn your volume down before you play this recording -- it has been transferred at a very high level. The album includes detailed and informative programme notes in German, English, and French.