

Reviews

Xuefei Yang

Albéniz España, Op. 165 (arr. Yang).

Goss The Albéniz Concerto^a.

Rodrigo Concierto de Aranjuez^a.

Invocación y danza.

Xuefei Yang (guitar); ^aOrquestra Simfònica de Barcelona i Nacional de Catalunya/Eiji Oue.

EMI Classics 6 98361-2 (full price, 1 hour

16 minutes). Website www.emiclassics.com

Producer Jørn Pedersen. Engineer Arne Akselberg.

Dates July 12th-15th, 2010.

Comparisons:

Rodrigo *Concierto de Aranjuez*:

Fernández, ECO/Martínez (Decca) 455 364-2

(1985, two discs)

Romero, ASMF/Marriner (Decca) 475 8248

This is the première recording of *The Albéniz Concerto*, a work for guitar and orchestra after the piano music of Albéniz by the British composer Stephen Goss. Written in five movements, with each one loosely based on four of Albéniz's piano pieces – 'El Albaicín' and 'Evocación' from *Iberia* and 'Cataluña' and 'Aragón' from *Suite española* – it was commissioned by EMI for Xuefei Yang and the Orquestra Simfònica to mark the 150th anniversary of Albéniz's birth.

The concerto begins in a delicate and attractive Albéniz-like mode, then suddenly hits an orchestral explosion with Goss employing the full force of the orchestra; this dies down to a fantasia-like section for guitar, which Yang performs lyrically. It is a piece of great dynamic extremes, which makes one appreciate the more intimate sections with guitar and orchestra all the more. Goss, himself a guitarist, has managed the balance between guitar and orchestra very well, making excellent use of the orchestral tonal palette available to him, with richly romantic strings, blazing brass, bells tolling and the sound of distant castanets contrasting with the delicacy of the guitar. Yang, for whom Goss has written several pieces, excels in the attractive cadenza before the final movement. It is a Spanish fantasy with a dark side lingering always in the shadows. Albéniz himself wrote relatively few orchestral works, most of which have been lost or were incomplete.

The recording opens with Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, undoubtedly the most often played guitar concerto and the most recorded, but most of us guitar lovers never tire of hearing the piece! It is tightly rhythmic here, which is immediately engaging, with a sprightly speed. Yang has a punchy sound, with pleasingly clear notes in the fast passages. The orchestra is vibrant in the first movement and the guitar matches its ebullient spirit. The slow second movement has one of

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the most engaging cor anglais performances I have heard, performed with a rich tone and a beautifully poised melodic line; unfairly, the player is not credited. Unfortunately, the guitar solo, despite the strength and warmth of tone, lacks the fantasia-style phrasing and does not match the level of interpretation achieved by the cor anglais. For this one should turn to Eduardo Fernández or Pepe Romero, whose playing in the second movement is full of dramatic inflexion which ebbs and flows.

Fernández's performance with the English Chamber Orchestra is strong and pleasing throughout, but I found the orchestral contribution uneven in quality. This is certainly not the case with Orquestra Simfònica de Barcelona i Nacional de Catalunya or with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, conducted by Neville Marriner, where the orchestra provides an emotionally charged performance to match Romero's powerful but natural style: it mesmerizes almost to the point of being haunting. The ASMF has a personality equal to that of its soloist.

The disc closes with Yang's arrangement of Albéniz's *España*, which she performs with strong but lyrical lines. Her unhurried approach allows one to appreciate the music and the warm tones of the guitar. Rodrigo's *Invocación y danza* was written in homage to Manuel de Falla. Rodrigo makes use of the guitar with delicate harmonics and richly arpeggiated chords; it is only in the rhythmically varying *rasgueados* of the final section of the piece where Xuefei Yang's interpretation is disappointing. Otherwise, one senses her deep commitment to these pieces for solo guitar.

The recording was made in the same auditorium in Barcelona where the *Concierto de Aranjuez* was premièreed 70 years earlier. The guitar feels close, with a warm rounded sound, even when performing with orchestra, and the individual instruments can be identified and enjoyed.

Thérèse W. Saba

J. S. Bach

Die Kunst der Fuge, BWV1080.

Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin/Stephan

Mai (violin).

Harmonia Mundi HMC902064 (full price, 1 hour

18 minutes). Website www.harmoniamundi.com

Producer Tobias Lehmann. Engineers Thibaut Maillard, Julian Schwenkner. Date October 2009.

There is no definitive solution to the mysteries surrounding Bach's contrapuntal masterpiece *The Art of Fugue*. Ever since his death in 1750 the work has been acutely

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susceptible to speculation, hypothesis, fantasy, legend and romance. We should not be surprised, since Bach did indeed leave questions, which, in all probability will never be answered. In an authoritative essay the Bach scholar Peter Wollny deals interestingly with those ambiguities which have led generations of scholars and commentators down a variety of paths towards differing conclusions. He also lays to rest, as many writers before him have done, the once-held romantic notion that Bach died, pen in hand, while working on the last page of his contrapuntal *magnum opus*. We have C. P. E. Bach's annotation to thank for that, but science and research contradict him. Much of *The Art of Fugue* had been completed by 1742 during a notably active period in Bach's creativity. Several fugues, including the glorious mirror fugues and three canons, followed in the immediately ensuing years but only in 1749 did Bach write down the great unfinished fugue. There is still a modicum of romance there, perhaps, though Christoph Wolff advanced a theory, some 35 years ago, that Bach probably did complete it.

Though he left no specific instrumental requirements for performing *The Art of Fugue*, it is likely that Bach conceived it for keyboard. He died during the process of engraving, leaving us in the dark over his final intentions. While keyboard is now generally accepted as being Bach's probable preference, a taste for alternative instrumentation has held its own since Wolfgang Graesser's large, 'orchestral' edition of 1926. Some since have been clumsy or inept, but the version here, the work of Stephan Mai, who leads the band, has features to commend it. One of them is to introduce *The Art of Fugue* with a solo organ performance of the concluding chorale of the cantata *Aus tiefer Not*, BWV38. Mai makes no extravagant claims or precedents for so doing but merely points to its 'uncanny resemblance between the German hymn setting of Luther's translation of Psalm 129 and the mirror form of the main theme of *The Art of Fugue*.

The instrumentation of the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin is modest but colourful, consisting of strings with three sizes of oboe, bassoon, trombone and organ or harpsichord. For readers who for whatever reason do not wish to follow the music with a score, this approach is helpful, for it elucidates Bach's textures in a way that is more easily discernible than that offered by solo keyboard. The kaleidoscope afforded here by the ever-varying instrumental configurations and their concomitant colours is both texturally illuminating and aesthetically pleasing. The ordering of the movements essentially follows that of the original printing, though the four canons are interspersed among the *Contrapuncti*, the first of them, understandably on account of its greater complexity, being placed penultimately in the scheme. It is played