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Tuesday, December 16, 2008

A Mexican Christmas

Classical Review

By Rick Walters



Last Saturday evening Early Music Now returned to a seldom used performance venue, the St. Joseph Center Chapel on Layton Boulevard. A majority of Milwaukeeans have no idea of the existence of this ornate chapel, consecrated in 1917 and adorned with Austrian stained glass and mosaics. In a city of noteworthy church and chapel designs, this distinguished space stands out.

Considering the demographics of the nearby South Side neighborhood, the Rose Ensemble's program, "Celebremos el Niño" ("A Mexican Baroque Christmas") seemed especially appropriate. I had never before encountered this repertory, and I couldn't have been alone. Some of the music was European in style, primarily composed by Spanish born immigrants to Mexico, such as Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla (c. 1590-1664) and Antonio de Salazar (c. 1650-1715). Other selections were infused with Mexican and Caribbean dance rhythms. The program stirred provocative thoughts about what must have been highly developed arts at the Puebla Cathedral, completed in 1649 and a center for Mexican culture. There was certainly no comparable cathedral or sophisticated music culture in the American or Canadian colonies in that era.

With 10 singers and three players the Rose Ensemble of St. Paul has a refined, pure, technically polished sound. The individual voices have been insightfully cast, the timbres coming together in an easy and natural blend. The tone, balance, diction and pitch were clear and a delight at all times. The succession of pieces was artful, with variety of mood and style. The voices combined in various configurations along the way; all members of the group were able soloists. Light instrumental accompaniment was added for some numbers. The instruments included viola da gamba, violin, harp, percussion and the vihuela de mano, an ancestor to the modern guitar.

As an encore the group departed from the theme and performed a lusty, powerful rendition of an early American Christmas hymn. While it was a completely different genre and style, the encore had an unintended effect. It showed that the principal program preceding it, though beautiful in every way, did not hit the same red-blooded, primary colors of expression.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Review
Sunday, December 14, 2008

Ensemble takes wide-ranging Baroque journey

By [Tom Strini](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Dec.13, 2008 9:56 p.m.

Christmas music from the churches, homes and parties of Spanish colonial Mexico filled the ornate chapel of the St. Joseph's Center on Saturday evening, courtesy of the Rose Ensemble and Early Music Now.

Singer Jordan Sramek leads the Minneapolis-based ensemble of 13. This is a scholarly, period-conscious group, but they sing and play with a lusty ease that blows the dust off old music.

Much of the music, which dates from about 1610 to about 1710, follows normal European Baroque practice: A continuo group plays the bass and chords as voices harmonize and carry the melodies. Julie Elhard's viola da gamba carried the bass line, most of the time.

The Rose Ensemble passed on the usual keyboards and left it to Phillip Rukavina to play the continuo part on the vihuela da mano, a kind of guitar. Rukavina added lively ornamental lines to the harmonies, the jangly sound carried very well, and the color of the instrument added Spanish flavor.

More local color came from a tambourine and a djembe, a West African drum. It seems that the Guineans Spaniards brought to the New World were expected to bring their own music to Christmas celebrations. The djembe was brought to bear on a fascinating "Negrilla" by Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla. This micro musical comedy includes an exchange between the padrone and the Guinean leader and nonsense syllables ("toomboocootoo") to mimic African percussion.

The "Negrilla" and "Tarara tarara," a duet for Sramek and baritone Tim O'Brien with Rukavina strumming vigorously behind them, were the wildest of the 14 selections on this "Mexican Baroque Christmas" program. The latter, by António de Salazar, is a first-person song that with my rattle and my bells and . . . declares "I am Anthony the Moor my tambourine, I shall go to Bethlehem to dance the Puerto Rico and the Cameroun."

Gutiérrez, the same composer who wrote the rollicking "Negrilla," also made formal, liturgical music for the church choir to sing. This program included the Gloria from one of his Masses and a religious motet.

But that motet incorporates foot-stomping, hip-swaying dance rhythms. The Rose Ensemble gave us a wide-ranging look of what appears to have been a surprisingly free-wheeling musical life in the Spanish New World.

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