

LIR CLASSICS

LIR018 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Sébastián Albero 1722-1756: Sonatas for Harpsichord

Very few biographical details exist about Sébastián Albero who, along with Scarlatti and Soler, was one of 18th-century Spain's most important composers. This is probably in part due to Spain's isolation from the mainstream of musical activity taking place elsewhere in Europe at the time.

He was born in Roncal, Navarra on 14th June 1722, and became a prominent figure at the Royal Court in Madrid during the last decade of his short life. At the same time Scarlatti was acting as Harpsichord Instructor to Queen Maria Barbara, Albero was appointed Principal Organist of the Royal Chapel in 1748, and appears to have held this position until about the time of his death on 30th March, 1756.

Amongst his output for keyboard, none of which was published during his lifetime, are two fascinating collections of Harpsichord Sonatas, presumably composed sometime between 1746 (when Ferdinand VI ascended the throne) and 1756. There is a set of six three movement works entitled "Recercata, fuga y sonata" and a set of thirty single movement sonatas in the manner of Domenico Scarlatti, which were dedicated to the King, and from which the Sonatas on this CD are taken.

Scarlatti's collection of thirty "Essercizi" had previously been published in 1738. Whereas Scarlatti's set of sonatas ends with a fugue and contains very few pairs, Albero's collection is organised into two distinct halves, each consisting of seven pairs of sonatas followed by a fugue. This set is now housed in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice along with fifteen volumes of Scarlatti Sonatas copied out between 1742 and 1757. Also contained there is a volume of sixty-one sonatas copied out in 1742 of which Albero was the scribe. It once belonged to the English organist and composer Dr John Worgan and was presented to Charles Wesley by Dr. Worgan's widow. An interesting fact about this collection is the attempted eradication of Albero's name in the sonatas attributed to Scarlatti K.142, 143 and 144, which Ralph Kirkpatrick accepted as genuine Scarlatti, but whose authenticity was doubted by both Walter Gesteberg and Joel Sheveloff. These three "Scarlatti Sonatas" appear in no other source, and it now seems likely that Albero was the true composer of these works.

As with the sonatas of Scarlatti and Soler, elements of Spanish folklore feature prominently in Albero's works, melodically, harmonically and rhythmically. Elements of Spanish Dances such as the Fandango and Zapateado can be found together with the influence of Flamenco and the Spanish guitar. Albero's Fugues,

like those of Scarlatti, Soler and other 18th-century Spanish composers, are much freer in structure than those of Bach.

Sonata No.1 in C major

This is probably the most Italian in style amongst this collection and the unison opening coupled with march-like rhythms gives it a somewhat festive character. Scarlattian features include hand-crossings as well as the immediate repetition of short major-key phrases in the minor.

Sonata No.2 in C major

A typical Spanish dance-like movement in 3/8 time, very typical of Scarlatti in its phrase structure, particularly the repetition of short two-bar phrases, but there are some turns of phrase near the end of both sections which seem unique to Albero. One of the themes heard near the beginning is developed in its inverted form in the second half.

Sonata No.22 in F minor

Formally this is an unusual work which, although in binary form, alternates slow and quick sections in each half. There are a number of Scarlatti Sonatas which adopt a similar scheme (notably K.162 in E, and K.176 in D minor) though, unlike Scarlatti, Albero maintains the same metre throughout (3/4 in this case). The slow sections are restrained and sombre, while the fast sections are much more bright and flamboyant.

Sonata No.23 in F minor

A jig-like work in 3/8 time of much driving energy coupled with some irregular phrase lengths. Syncopations near the start add to the excitement and tension. Generally this work is more contrapuntal than the other works in this set, apart from the two fugues.

Sonata No.13 in B flat major

This lyrical sonata marked "andante" is somewhat "Galant" in manner and very fluid in its treatment of modulation. Imitative writing between the hands heard in the opening bars is repeated towards the end of each section, and the work contains hand-crossings as well as some strikingly unusual use of parallel fourths.

Sonata No.14 in B flat major

This exuberant work is very Spanish in idiom and exhibits some Scarlattian traits such as the imitation of hunting horns coupled with the alternation of major and minor modes.

Sonata No.11 in D minor

This is without doubt one of the most poignant and beautiful slow movements of the set whose main theme is continuously developed throughout the course of this work. Unusual features are the frequent use of wide intervals, notably that of the ninth.

Sonata No.12 in D major

By way of contrast the other member of this pair (one of only two minor-major pairs in the set) is one of Albero's most joyous works. The flamenco orientated harmonies in the strumming left-hand chords, coupled with striking modulations, help to drive the music incessantly forward. The opening, material reappears in the minor toward the end of each half.

Sonata No.15 in G minor

The first of the two fugues in this collection is a four-voice fugue (though the texture is three-part much of the time) and Albero's free treatment of this type of composition often results in the use of long sequential passages. The frequent use of octaves and chromatically rising bass lines later on add richness to the texture, culminating in the fugue subject itself appearing in octaves before the final coda.

Sonata No.24 in E flat major

Lively syncopated rhythms coupled with repeated quavers in the left hand help to give this very Spanish sounding works its drive and forward movement. Again there are repetitions of major-key phrases in the minor, and some surprisingly unorthodox harmonic progressions in places.

Sonata No.25 in E flat major

Nothing could be more characteristically Spanish than this striking dance movement (particularly the closing bars of each half) with its guitar like flamenco-orientated harmonies and unpredictable turns of phrase which seem to foreshadow the romantic period at times.

Sonata No.18 in B minor

An "Andante" movement which begins like a two-part invention and continues in this vein until the relative major is reached. After that guitar-like chords and sequential modulations help to carry the movement forward until a more lyrical second subject is reached, again somewhat romantic in feeling and involving the use of hand-crossings. Much of the thematic material is developed in the second half.

Sonata No.19 in B minor

A flamboyant Spanish dance movement of much rhythmic vitality whose features include short repeated phrases, unexpected harmonic twists and key shifts. Also there is some use of the Phrygian mode in places.

Sonata No.9 in G major

An amiable piece in triple time despite the "Allegro" tempo marking, with echoes of early Haydn in places, but not abandoning Spanish dance rhythms as well. Again the use of short repeated phrases and sequential passages help to give the work its impetus.

Sonata No.10 in G major

A charmingly rustic dance movement in 6/8 time with lots of repeated octaves and chords in the lower register, creating a rather thick texture at times, which could create balance problems on some instruments, but fortunately not on the one used on this disc.

Sonata No.16 in G minor

A profound slow movement which ranks alongside many works in a similar vein by Scarlatti, both melodically and harmonically.

Sonata No.17 in G minor

A "siciliano" type movement in 6/8 time making much use of the dotted rhythms associated with this type of dance. It is at times pastoral in feeling, containing some delightfully folk-like melodies coupled with some extraordinary harmonies and modulations in the second half.

Sonata No.30 in D major

A joyous and exuberant four-part fugue (again with three-part texture much of the time). The subject appears in octaves later on. The sequential coda, reinforced by octaves in the bass, brings this work and this whole set of fascinating sonatas to a suitably exultant conclusion.

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