

Wild at Heart

By Joseph Sargent

Musica Pacifica's most recent program of Spanish-tinged Baroque music bore the official title of "Jácaras," after a dance of the same name. But the program's true nature was more aptly indicated by another, more provocative headline atop the program notes: "The Civilized and the Wild." Saturday's concert at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley encompassed not only the gallantry of Baroque concertos and sonatas, but also the sparkle of dance suites and variation sets. And while the "civilized" repertoire was certainly given its due in Musica Pacifica's unfailingly polished performance, it was the "wilder" pieces that provided the evening's more compelling moments.



Musica Pacifica

The ensemble itself, an eclectic group of Bay Area early music veterans, acquitted itself impressively throughout the evening. Recorder player Judith Linsenbergh displayed dazzling virtuosity and great sensitivity across the repertoire, while violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock matched her, gesture for gesture, with crystalline sound and effortless technique. Cellist/viola da gambist David Morris and harpsichordist Charles Sherman provided unerring harmonic support, while guest artists Stephen Stubbs and Maxine Eilander added evocative colors with Baroque guitar and Spanish Baroque harp, respectively.

Listening to the more "civilized" pieces first required an adjustment to Musica Pacifica's unusual instrumental forces, for hearing a recorder, guitar, and harp play Corelli trio sonatas makes an initially jarring impression. Once this adjustment was made, the performances were easy to enjoy. The Preludio from Corelli's Sonata X (Op. 4) and the Ciacona, Sonata XII (Op. 2), featured nuanced dynamics and careful attention to individual melodic gestures. Vivaldi's *Concerto alla rustica* in G Major came alive with hearty pastoral drones, rollicking rhythms, and punctuated outbursts of energy.

The opening suite of short pieces from Andrea Falconiero's *Il primo libro di canzone, sinfonie ...* shared with the Vivaldi a sense of rustic charm. Musica Pacifica delivered the driving rhythms, virtuosic melodies, and rapidly shifting textures of "Battala de Barabaso yerno de Satanás" with graceful ease. The ensuing Passacalle was a model of quiet intensity, while the closing La Follia found the ensemble awash in a dizzying stream of textural, rhythmic, and melodic variations.

A series of pieces for guitar and harp alone gave the ensemble's two guest artists their moments in the spotlight. Stubbs was the star performer here, showing great dexterity and sensitivity in movements from Italian guitarist Giovanni Paolo Foscari's *Li cinque libri della chitarra alla spagnola* and Francisco Guerau's *Poema harmonico*. Eilander's fluid playing in dance movements from Lucas Ruiz de Ribayaz' *Luz y norte* matched Stubbs' in grace and beauty of tone, if marred by intonation issues.

Wildness within

Enjoyable as these pieces were, the heart of Musica Pacifica's program lay on the "wild" side — several pieces that vividly evoked folk traditions or were otherwise more viscerally expressive in character. Johann Heinrich Schmelzer's dance suite *Balletti a 4 (Pastorella)* found the ensemble traversing an array of styles, from the majestic opening Intrada to a series of nationalistic gavottes. Graced with hints of Irish, English, and German folk music, these movements afforded Musica Pacifica ample opportunity to showcase its impressive versatility and bravura virtuosity.

Selections from the *Codice Saldivar No. 4* by Santiago de Murcia captured folk sounds of both the Old and New Worlds, from the Afro-Caribbean rhythms of "Canarios" to the sound of an old Spanish bagpipe in "Gaitas." The piece was originally scored for solo guitar, but Musica Pacifica's arrangement for its own colorful ensemble vivified the work with hand claps, novel harmonic sonorities, and back-and-forth playing between guitar and ensemble, combining in a delightful menagerie of sounds.

Most crowd-pleasing of all was Musica Pacifica's own medley of *folia* settings, mixing together a potpourri of international composers both famous and obscure into one long variation set. Extended variations on underlying harmonic patterns such as the *folia* formed the cornerstone of early Spanish instrumental music, and Musica Pacifica did justice to this tradition with a riveting display of musical variety, losing none of its potency throughout the seemingly endless array of styles and textures.

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