



Violonchelo del fuego

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Zeitung

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 Cheng²Duo – 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.

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Posted by Ken Stephen at 09:25

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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 Cheng²Duo 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.

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Another Cassadó rarity follows, Requiebros ("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.



Friday 1 June 2018

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