

CD Review by David Denton

RODRIGO Concertos and Orchestral Works • Enrique Bátiz, cond; Royal PO; ¹ London SO; ²Mexico State PO; ³ Nancy Allen (hp); ⁴ Lisa Hansen (fl); ⁵ Jorge Federico Osorio (pn); ⁶ Alfonso Moreno ⁷ , Deborah Mariotti ⁸ , Minerva Garibay ⁹ , Cecilia Lopez ¹⁰ , Jesus Ruiz (gtr); ¹¹ Agustin León Ara (vn); ¹² Robert Cohen (vc) ¹³ • MUSICAL HERITAGE SOCIETY 546010W (4 CDs: 305:34)

Concierto Serenata. ⁴ **Concierto pastoral.** ^{1, 5} **Concierto heroico.** ⁶
Concierto madrigal. ^{2, 7, 8} **Concierto de estío.** ^{2, 12} **Concierto de Aranjuez.** ^{2, 7} **Fantasia para un gentilhombre.** ^{3, 7} **Concierto Andaluz.** ^{3, 8, 9, 10, 11} **Concierto en modo galante.** ^{2, 3} *Per la flor del Iliri blau.* ²
Música par un jardin. ² *A la busca del más alla.* ² **Zarabanda lejana y villancico.** ² **Soleriana.** ¹ **5 Children's pieces** ¹

The immense popularity of the Concierto de Aranjuez and the Fantasia para un gentilhombre has been such that they have tended to obscure the many other concertos of Joaquin Rodrigo. At the same time, as this four-disc survey demonstrates, he was a much more modern composer than the two famous guitar works would suggest. Indeed, some of the music would prove rather "difficult" for many for many of the listeners who have enjoyed his guitar music, as the second movement of the Concierto Serenata immediately confirms. His group of concertos covers most of his career, the earliest being the piano concerto, Concierto heroico, from 1933, and extends through to the flute concerto, Concierto pastoral, commissioned from the 77-year-old composer in 1978 by James Galway. Throughout the whole of this period Rodrigo's style was to show little change, his mixture of melody and a pungent modernism providing the inspirational basis. There is a Spanish element that runs through his works, though he places this at the disposal of his music rather than using it as the starting point.

This very convenient package of four discs contains the complete concertos apart from the second guitar concerto and the later cello concerto. They were first issued as a boxed set in 1992 on the EMI label, having been derived from a number of recordings made over the period 1980 to 1985, which places all of the

tracks in the digital era. The soloists were well chosen, the harpist, Nancy Allen, providing the required delicacy and virtuosity in a stunning account of the *Concierto serenata*. Osorio's brilliant and extrovert account of the *Concierto heroico* is magnificent, Bátiz taking the second-movement scherzo at a pace that ensures clarity. Throughout the first disc the RPO plays with verve and considerable impact when called upon, though it does have a few moments of uncomfortable string intonation in the *Concierto pastoral*. Lisa Hansen is a silver-toned soloist whose nimble playing gets around the myriad of notes with the utmost security.

Alfonso Moreno is a strong advocate of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* and *Fantasia*, though at times he is rather optimistic that his fingers can preciously meet the fast tempos. For both works I would prefer the scintillating and physically strong playing of Norbert Kraft on Naxos. The dry and confined sound accorded to the two guitar soloists in the *Concierto madrigal* is a drawback that no soloist could transcend. The LPO suffers from a very obviously multimiked sessions in the Watford Town Hall, some instruments close, others quite recessed. It is doubly puzzling when compared with the bright—almost overbright—sound given to the violin concerto, *Concierto de estio*, at the same venue 18 months earlier. It is a work of horrendous difficulties for the soloist, and you have to compliment Agustin León Ara at coming so close to navigating a safe passage through them. Intonation often becomes suspect as he hurtles through pages black with notes, and above all he brings such a sense of mischievous happiness to the final *Rondino*.

We move to Mexico for the two concertos that open the third disc, the State Philharmonic Orchestra having a more "authentic" Spanish pungency than the British orchestras but lacking a degree of security in tenus of string intonation. I particularly enjoyed the *Concierto Andaluz* for four guitars, the very varied colors they produce constantly delighting the ear. Returning to Watford, the cello concerto, *Concierto en modo galante*, is given a masterly reading by Robert Cohen. His playing moves effortlessly from the suave beauty to a spiky brilliance, with the LSO providing a beautifully detailed accompaniment. The fourth CD contains six orchestral pieces, the earliest being the *Five Children's Pieces*, completed in 1924 as a work for piano, and later orchestrated.

Each one is given a title, and it is then left to the listener to devise the scenario. The *Música par un jardin* also started life as a group of piano pieces on the theme of cradle songs that bear the titles of the four seasons. Totally different from their gentle nature is that of the symphonic poem *A la busca del más allá* (In search of the beyond). Completed in 1976, it is a very powerful score not intended to look into the future, but it takes the listener on an exploration into the mystery of the unknown. Rodrigo uses a large orchestra with tremendous élan, the LSO reveling in the virtuoso demands. *Per la fior del Iliri blau* (For the flower of the blue lily) is based on the Valencián poem that reflects the mourning of all nature for the death of the young Prince. As that would suggest, the work is essentially elegiac, the many solos immaculately performed by members of the LSO. *Soleriana*, a work in two movements, is conceived as neo-Classic evocations of 18th-century Spain. The composer goes back a further two centuries in *Zarabanda lejana y villancico*, a work in homage to Luis Milán, the 16th-century master of the vihuela, the forefather of today's guitar.

Enrique Bátiz is a master of this genre of music, his Latin American background providing interpretations that search far below the surface of the music. At times I feel he would have welcomed more urgent tempos from some of his soloists, but he is always a sympathetic accompanist. He has greater freedom in the orchestral works, the music shaped with obvious affection. He is always a conductor who values the creation of a work, even at the expense of performing accuracy, and you have here that feeling of spontaneity in the vibrancy of his readings.

The set does offer a very convenient way to purchase the concertos without the duplication that would be involved in obtaining otherwise obtaining the works. You may well be happy to overlook the shortcomings I have detailed for this easy accessibility. Many serious collectors will recognize most of the long list of soloists, but there is really no excuse for omitting any reference to their background in the accompanying booklet. It is a fairly Spartan document containing just five pages of notes on the composer and the works included, together with an old photograph of the conductor.

David Denton

This article originally appeared in Issue 24:4 (Mar/Apr 2001) of *Fanfare Magazine*.