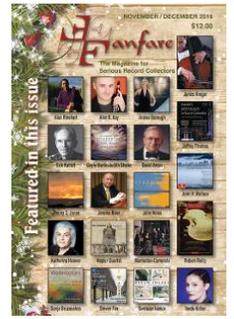




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***Dos estrellas le siguen: 17th Century Xácaras and Dances in Spain and Latin America* • Musica ficta • CENTAUR 3501 (70:24)**

It may be a fiction all its own to suggest that much of the music from the Iberian Peninsula and New Spain during the 17th century consisted of popular dances, some of New World origins. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that, despite active and vibrant traditional musical life, the popular works were enjoyed and disseminated broadly. Indeed, one can find evidence of some of the imports from across the Atlantic having a profound influence in their raw forms. Witness the Chacona, which was so popular and disruptive that it was both censured and banned in places for being lascivious. Most tend to regard these as folk idioms, but their influence has made its way into the developing new genres of the Baroque, becoming “civilized” after a fashion.

The originals, however, were also written down, and of late groups such as the Colombian early instrument ensemble Musica Ficta have begun to bring these to light. I’ve followed them for a number of years, since their recording of villancicos from 2001, and over the course of time they have lost none of their vitality and curiosity of this largely unknown musical repertory.

The ostinato form of the Folia takes on a new form here. In the title work, Manuel Machado’s *Dos Estrellas*, the parallel fifths make for an almost Medieval sound, decidedly old-fashioned for the early part of the 17th century. Machado was a Portuguese composer who died in 1646 and worked most of his life in the royal courts in Iberia. His work exists in three versions, one of which is for a group of instruments, including the jarana, an instrument that resembles a guitar and hails from Veracruz, Mexico. The strophic nature sounds more Renaissance with this ensemble than with the voices a cappella. The majority of works are versions of the Jácara (also spelled Xácara, for those wishing for extra points in Scrabble), a dance that is mainly instrumental and follows a pattern whereby a four-bar phrase that is short and diatonic is followed by a set of variations above the foundation. It is not precisely an ostinato, given that the pattern can be mostly rhythmic, but provides a framework for a more rhapsodic composition. The anonymous Xácara from a 1706 manuscript includes a rapid-fire recorder part. This is followed by a vocal version, also anonymously written, from about fifty years earlier. Here the rhythms tend to be more forceful, outlining a text that laments the arrogance of a woman the poet feels is unattainable. The “chaconas” by Gaspar Sanz (1640-1710) is a primer piece, taken from a guitar instruction manual from 1674. Musica ficta has added a discrete percussion to it, which gives it a dance line character. Another favorite is the Folia *Faronells’ Ground*, based upon a similar exercise piece by Nicholas Faronell (1649-1726), a French violinist who apparently wound up in Spain after brief careers in as disparate places as Lisbon, Rome, and London. The variations on the recorder do push the instrument to the limits, and yet they never depart significantly from the obvious chaconne ground bass that sounds quite like Purcell. Finally, here, the Ciacona is celebrated in an appropriate song by Juan Arañés, a composer about whom absolutely nothing is known, apart from the fact that he was active in Italy (and probably Naples, which was a Spanish possession at the time). Unfortunately, this text, quite obscene at times, is not reprinted (or translated), but it clearly supports the lascivious ban on the genre, if this is any indication.

Musica Ficta gives an energetic and eclectic performance, given that much of the various settings have to be recreated. By using a combination of Baroque instruments, percussion, and native guitars they have provided a wonderfully timely setting. The voices are pure and accurate in terms of pitch, and the occasional bending of this and that is done with a good sense of nuance and intonation. In short, this is one excellent disc. If you want something off the beaten path, this will be highly appealing to you, and for those others, this serves as a popular anodyne to the more regularized works of this period. Highly recommended.

**Bertil van Boer**