An overdue cultural exposé

As a major Spanish Arts Festival opens in London, Alfredo Aracil argues that, despite the repressive Franco years, the country’s music has remained part of a wider European scene.

Spain may have opened its gates to the world in the last two years for the Olympic Games and World Expo ’92, but its own contemporary culture has so far received little exposure. For many people, Spanish arts’ means only tired Flamenco clichés, Ravel’s Boléro, Rodrigo’s Concierto de Aranjuez and the bull fight. However, London now redresses the balance by hosting a festival of Spanish arts, which includes an exploration of music since the repressive nationalism of the Franco regime.

Alfredo Aracil, a 39-year-old composer whose work has been likened in its tranquility and accessibility to that of Tavener, will have his music featured in this festival. Here he gives an insider’s view on how his country’s music has been affected by the same factors which have dominated music in the rest of Western Europe.

After the death of Franco, Spain began a process of transition towards democracy at home and integration into the international community. It began without us knowing where the limits of this adventure would be. Luckily there were no limits.

The new political situation paved the way for large and positive changes in attitudes towards culture in general. Composers welcomed their renewed freedom which swiftly resulted in a considerable increase and diversification of music being written. The public, too, became more receptive, and now the growth in education and training of musicians is beginning to bear fruit, as will be heard in the Soloist Recital series at the Wigmore Hall.

As far as artistic creation is concerned, I believe the changes have been quantitative but not necessarily qualitative. The number of composers has definitely gone up, partly because there are more training centres and more channels for the spread of their work. This should mean that the average level of quality has been raised, although I don’t think one can make any specific links between aesthetic changes in contemporary music and recent political transition — with the exception of some nationalist tendencies.

The artistic ‘opening up’ of Spain happened a little over two decades ago and its evolution since then is more or less in line with that throughout Western Europe.

We have all shared and brought about the change in musical sensibility from that which dominated the Fifties and Sixties. At that time objectivity, or the search for what was supposedly ‘essential’ or ‘authentic’, were considered to be basic values in a work of art. In music this was not only the case in composition but also in its interpretation.

Composers systematised the use of chance, or invented methods of organisation based on laws of maths or physics. At the same time a group of musicians established new ways to interpret early music. It was neither a widespread whim, nor a coincidence...
Thirstysomthing

Once again, Birmingham, London and Cardiff play host to ‘Towards the Millennium: Thirty’, Simon Rattle’s 10-year spring festival covering the arts of the 20th century. Now in its fourth year, the festival celebrates the culture chiefly of Europe and the Americas from 1930-39, and encompasses music, dance, drama, film, art and photography.

The Thirties saw the invention of nylon, the electric razor and television broadcasts; the rise of fascism in Europe; the abolition of Edward VII, abolition of child labour in the UK and successful transatlantic flights. Pioneering ideas evolved against a backdrop of political extremism, and, as this festival will show, diverse musical developments continued at an astonishing pace.

The CBSO, London Sinfonietta and BBCSO are the main performers, showcasing significant works as Berg’s Lulu (see Broadcast article), Stravinsky’s Petrushka, Vásquez’s Itonamitoe and Britten’s Les Illuminations. Smaller bands outline the growth of jazz from Gershwin to boogie and the tea dance.

Box offices: Birmingham (021 643 2514); Cardiff (0222 371 236); London (071 928 8800)

March Highlights

A choice of classical music events in London, throughout the UK and Elsewhere.

LONDON

Key to venues

Barbican Centre
Silk St, EC2 (071 838 8891)
London Coliseum
St Martin’s Lane, WC2 (071 836 3161/240 5298)
Royal Festival Hall (RFH)
Queen Elizabeth Hall (QEH)
Purcell Room
South Bank Centre, SE1 (071 928 8800)
Royal Albert Hall (RAH)
Kensington Gore, SW7 (071 938 2112)
Royal Opera House (ROH)
Covent Garden, WC2 (071 240 1066/240 1911)
St John’s
Smith Square, SW1 (071 222 1061)
Wigmore Hall
36 Wigmore St, W1 (071 935 2141)

CONCERTS

1-3 Electroacoustic Festival
Annual festival with works from Canada, Mexico, Europe and the US. 7-9 New Hall, City University, Northampton Sq, EC1 (071 477 8282)

1. 5 & 8 Nash Ensemble
20th century music series encompassing chamber music from Strauss to Poul Ruders.
8pm Purcell Room £7-£10

2. 15, 25 & 29 Discover American Song
With baritone Thomas Hampson (2 Mar) and Kurt Elling (15 Mar), soprano Roberta Alexander (25 Mar) and Dawn Upshaw (29 Mar). 7.30pm Wigmore £6-£18

3-30 Women in Music
This popular annual event promotes female composers and performers. With mini-opera, chamber music, film screenings and recitals. Artists include Capricorn Ensemble and Birmingham String Quartet. Venue: Wigmore Hall, SW1; Union Chapel, N1; Leighton House, W4. Info: 071 837 2511

4 Towards the Millennium: Thirties
Simon Rattle conducts the CBSO in Hindemith’s Mathis der Maler, Roy Harris’s Symphony No. 3 and Copi’s Billy the Kid. Andisja Schif plays Bartok’s Second Piano Concerto. 7.30pm RFH £55-£25

5 Luciano Pavarotti
The tenor joins sopranos Nina Rautio and others plus the Bournemouth SO and World Festival Choir in Verdi’s Requiem. Bournemouth Arts Centre (071 240 7200 or 881 900 1234) £35-£55

6 & 8 Puccini’s La bohème
Michael Tilson Thomas conducts a concert performance of La bohème with the LSO and chorus, plus soloists Barbara Fritziu (Mimi), Francisco Araiza (Rodolfo) and Thomas Hampson (Marcello). 7.30pm Barbican £6-£29

7 London Philharmonic/Wolser-Möst
Mitsuko Uchida is soloist in Schumann’s Piano Concerto, plus Haydn’s Clock Symphony and Edgar’s Enigma Variations. 7.30pm RFH £5-£28

8 & 20 Sunday Concerts at Blackheath
Erdodi Ensemble (6 Mar) and Chilingirian Quartet (20 Mar) play Mozart and Schubert.
11am (6 Mar); 3pm (20 Mar); Blackheath Concert Hall, 23 Ice Rd, SE3 (081 463 0100) £7.50

9.14.21 & 28 BBC Lunchtime Concerts
Amanda Roocroft joins the City of London Windrupia in a memorial concert to Arleen Auger (7 Mar); Camerata Quartet plays Haydn and Brahms (14 Mar); Kalichstein/Laredo/Robinson Trio plays Beethoven and Shostakovich (21 Mar); Tilson Thomas Quartet plays Schubert and Schostakovich (28 Mar). Broadcast live on Radio 3 1pm at St John’s £5

7 Vienna Boys Choir
All British programme with Academy of London and men of the Academy of London Chorus. 7.30pm St John’s £6-£28

8.23 International Piano Series at the Wigmore
Andrea Haefliger plays Beethoven, Schumann, Gubaidulina, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff (6 Mar); Rudolf Schalyn plays Schubert, Jodick and Smetana (23 Mar) 7.30pm Wigmore £65-£15

9 RPO/Tomikawa
John Lithgow plays Brahms’s First Piano Concerto (also 20 Mar); Plus Prokofiev’s Fifth Symphony. 7.30pm Barbican £5-£27

Towards the Millennium: Thirties
London Sinfonietta in works by Copland, Webern, Varèse and Schoenberg. With Susan Bullock (soprano) and Stephen Richardson (baritone). 7.45pm QEH £5-£15

12 & 18 Vogler Quartet of Berlin
Haydn, Schumann, Zellinsky, Hartley and Lutosławski. 7.30pm Wigmore £6-£12

10 Towards the Millennium: Thirties
Simon Rattle conducts the CBSO in Varèse’s Ionisation and the Fourth Symphony by Shostakovich, Gilot Kerman is soloist in Berg’s Violin Concerto. 7.30pm RFH £5-£25

Verdi’s Ernani
Marcello Viotti conducts the ECO and Pro Musica Chorus of London and soloists. 7.30pm Barbican £6-£28

11 Chamber Orchestra of Europe/Haroncourt
Nicholas Haroncourt conducts Schumann’s Symphony No. 4 and Brahms’s Symphony No. 1. 7.30pm Peace Church £5-£28

Towards the Millennium: Thirties
Andrew Davis conducts a concert performance of Berg’s Lulu (see Broadcast article) with the BBCSO and soloists. Patricia Wise and Ryszard Karzyczynski. 7.30pm RFH £4-£19

13 Stravinsky’s Les rossignol and Bizet’s Djamileh
Chelsea Opera Group presents concert performances of Stravinsky’s tale of a Chinese Emperor and Bizet’s tale of an Indian princess. 7.15pm QEH £7.50-£15

Main music events: 28 Feb-10 Apr

Spanish New Music series at the Almeida Theatre: Soloist Recital series at the Wigmore Hall
Various Spanish and UK ensembles in Spanish programmes at the South Bank Centre, St John’s Smith Square and St Giles in the Barbican

\*Locura: an Evocation in Words, Song and Dance* presented by Trader Faulkner, musicians and dancer; *Sueños Flamencos* presented by Christina Hoyos. Both at Sadler’s Wells

Festival box office: 071 356 4777; Information line with facility to purchase tickets: 0891 888 780 (0591 only) post 25p per minute charge rate: 45p per minute at all other times