

MUSIC

Review: From Early Music New York, Spanish Satire

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER OCT. 19, 2015

With its slapstick humor and satirical tone, Jacinto Valledor's "La Cantada Vida y Muerte del General Malbrú" (1785) seems like a Spanish precursor to Gilbert and Sullivan. The work is a tonadilla, a type of short musical comedy popular in 18th-century Spain, now seldom performed in the United States. Frederick Renz and Early Music New York offered a rare chance to hear the genre at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine on Oct. 10 as part of the New York Early Music Celebration.

During the 18th century, the tonadilla skits were sometimes staged between acts in performances of early zarzuela, a form of Spanish musical theater that blends dance with spoken and sung elements, and also has a satirical edge.

The "Cantada Vida" mocks the Duke of Marlborough, who led the English Army in the War of Spanish Succession. As the title character, Jorge Prego, wearing a curly wig and carrying a hobby horse, declared his love to his sweetheart (Rachel Rosales), rubbed his large (fake) paunch and sang lyrics like "I will my body to the earth, my belly to Sancho Panza." His page (Elaine Lachica), ready to write her boss's will, declared: "Here I have ready all that shall be used,/Consentibolous, meritoricous, zurumbaticous, I am eager to begin." A trio of heavily rouged soldiers cavorted amid the proceedings. Mr. Renz became part of the drama when he turned on the podium and stabbed Malbrú with his baton.

The singing was variable throughout, although the comedic elements were aptly

realized. The program included another tonadilla: “La Maja y el Majo” by Manuel del Pópulo Vicente García.

Accompanied by guitar and lute, Mr. Prego sang beautifully in the seguidillas by Fernando Sor (performed as part of the tonadilla), infusing the excerpts with the appropriate melancholy and dramatic flair. But he and Ms. Lachica, who didn’t project sufficiently, sounded stiff in their overly polite, tepid rendition of García’s tonadilla, an earthy, humorous duo between the two working-class Madrileños of the title.

There were also amusing touches in Boccherini’s “Musica Notturna Delle Strade di Madrid,” a picturesque work that evokes nocturnal life in the Spanish capital. The program opened with another rarity: the Overture from the opera “L’amant Anonyme” by the Chevalier de St.-Georges, the virtuoso violinist of French and African heritage. The work falls in the “pleasant but unmemorable” category, although more buoyant and vivid playing from the ensemble would have certainly rendered it more engaging.

Correction: October 20, 2015

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this review confused a role and two performers. Jorge Prego (not Frederick Renz, the conductor) is a tenor who sang the role of title character; that is not the character’s name. The character is General Malbrú.