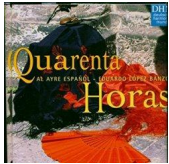


Al Ayre Español - Quarenta horas (1999)

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1. José de Torres - *Arpon que glorioso* 2. Antonio Literes - *(El) pan de los cielos* 3. Antonio Literes - *Fieras que el monte habitais* 4. José de Torres - *Canten afectos* 5. José de Torres - *Perlas, luzes* 6. Antonio Literes - *Ven a venerar afecto mio* 7. José de Torres - *(Un) relox* 8. Joseph de San Juan - *Pan de angeles* 9. *Andense en flores* 10. José de Torres - *Si ves moverse las piedras* 11. Joseph de San Juan - *(Una) noche que los reyes*
Al Ayre Español (Ensemble) Eduardo Lopéz Banzo - Conductor

This is the sixth recording in Al Ayre Espanol's Barroco Espanol series for Deutsche Harmonia Mundi and is no less fascinating than its predecessors. The title 'Quarenta Horas' refers to the liturgical ceremony of the Forty Hours' devotion to the Eucharist; this was not exclusive to Spain, but was celebrated with special reverence and great assiduity in the Spanish royal chapel during the 17th and 18th centuries. However, this is not an attempt at a reconstruction of the liturgy, which was spread over three days, but a selection of vocal pieces in the vernacular that would have been sung during the quiet period of contemplation which followed the processions and Mass held on the first two days.

At least, all but two of the villancicos and cantatas on this CD are dedicated to the 'Most Holy' and contemplate the Eucharist through complex, even abstruse metaphors and conceits. It is not clear why the other two pieces - for Holy Week and Epiphany - are included, although this last, a lively jacara full of humour and irresistible castanet-punctuated rhythms, would serve well as an encore. Eduardo Lopez Banzo and his team seem to feel most at home with this sort of repertory, and deliver it with the panache that has drawn the group to the attention of the recording world.

Elsewhere the performances are less convincing, having a highly polished veneer, but lacking substance. To be fair, not all of the music by Torres, Literes and Joseph de San Juan is of equal

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quality, but at times there is a feeling that at least some of the pieces were taken into a recording studio before they had really been played in, and the cracks are papered over by an excess of guitar strumming and a sense of vitality manufactured by adrenalin rushes on the part of the director. This tends to rock the tempo (and ensemble) at certain moments, but also raises potentially more serious questions of interpretation. The performance of villancicos with such drive and energy is certainly one of the hallmarks of Al Ayre Espanol, but the texts of many of these pieces - and very probably the context in which they were sung and heard - seem to be at odds with such a persistently upbeat interpretative stance. At times I found myself craving a calmer, more spacious approach, glimpses of which were to be had in some of the solo singing, notably in Carlos Mena's poised account of Literes's very Italianate cantata Ven a venerar afecto mio, and in Jordi Ricart's more detailed response to the words in Torres's villancico Andense en flores. Here the plucked string accompaniment was expressive, and lively without being frenetic.

I do not wish to be overly critical, because there was much that I enjoyed on this disc, which in many ways is well up to the high standards we have come to expect from this group. But it did leave me feeling uneasy, possibly because Lopez Banzo seems to have created an Al Ayre Espanol approach so distinctive that it is in danger of becoming fixed in a number of cliches, very attractive ones, but nevertheless potentially limiting. ---Tess Knighton, gramophone.co.uk

Al Ayre Español is a vocal and instrumental ensemble specialized on early music founded in 1988 by Eduardo López Banzo (harpsichordist).

The name of the ensemble was inspired by the title for a guitar Fugue of the Calanda (Aragón) composer, Gaspar Sanz. In this Fugue he indicated the musician to play with "ayre español" (in the Spanish way).

Banzo has done a great deal to restore the Spanish Baroque musical heritage and in recognition of this work, the group was awarded the Premio Nacional de Música by the Spanish Ministry of Culture. In 2004, Al Ayre Español became an orchestra, broadening out their repertory to encompass much of the European Baroque. ---ipfs.io

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