

CD Review

Nigra sum sed formosa

Il culto di Maria tra Monastero e Corte

Ensemble San Felice - Federico Bardazzi, dir.

Cantigas de Santa Maria

del Ray de Castilla y Leon Alfonso X el Sabio

Secundis Vesperis in Festis B. M. Virginis per annum

It is a commonly accepted axiom that in order to truly grasp a given phenomenon, one must first make a serious effort to understand its origins. For instance, without a clear understanding of historical precedents, one cannot begin to make informed and accurate judgments about the possible outcome of current events. Concomitantly, the serious audiophile, who wishes to attain a balanced appreciation of contemporary musical trends, must first come to terms with the origin of those trends. In their new CD, *Nigra sum sed Formosa*, the Ensemble San Felice has provided listeners with just such an opportunity.

Under the direction of Professor Federico Bardazzi, the Ensemble has consistently explored a wide range of styles, from medieval to baroque to contemporary. On *Nigra sum sed Formosa*, they opt for a return to medieval music with the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. Prepared between 1250 and 1280 A.D. under the supervision of King Alfonso X the *Cantigas* are a series of 400 songs chronicling the life of the Virgin Mary, a figure often overlooked in the study of European socio-cultural development. As pointed out in the CD, liner notes:

The Virgin Mary was a very important figure in medieval culture both at monasteries and at court, it is interesting to remember that whenever Christianity was going through a crisis, the Catholic Church always chose the Virgin Mary as the symbol with which to reaffirm it.

The opening track, *IN PRINCIPIA HORARUM* introduces the work, a melodic foundation by means of a single voice that reverently intones the *tonus solemnis*. This is followed by a series of *Cantigas* from the original codex (housed in the Florence National Museum), which demonstrates the remarkable instrumental and stylistic devices that were available to the medieval composer. Of particular interest is the appearance of the oud, an instrument normally associated with Middle Eastern styles. The concluding track, *IN FINE HORARUM*, creates a satisfying sense of return, thereby validating the *Cantigas* overarching formal structure.

Although Professor Bardazzi and the Ensemble San Felice are to be roundly applauded for the exuberant performances and skillful organization evident on *Nigra sum sed Formosa*, their most significant achievement is the meticulous approach evident with regard to musical authenticity. Since the original codex was sketchy concerning precise instrumentation, great care was necessary in order to arrive at the most appropriate choices for each setting. The CD, liner notes present convincing historical evidence to justify these choices,

Interestingly enough, while, the (King Alfonso) was winning back part of Spain for Christianity by beating back the Moors, his court was a meeting place for the Arab, Jewish, and Christian cultures ,Äi in fact, his musicians came from all three of them. The influence of Arab music can be heard in some of the Cantigas.

The resulting music paints a compelling portrait of a European society rich with multicultural influences. Undoubtedly, these influences did much to affect subsequent musical developments in the West and throughout the world. In this sense, Nigra sum sed Formosa is not only a satisfying exploration of the development of the Western musical aesthetic, it is also a noteworthy contribution to future onto-historical research.

Thomas MacFarlane (New York)  
7/9/02