



Luis de NARVÁEZ (c.1503-1547)

Los Seys libros del Delphín de música de cofra para tañer vihuela (Valladolid, 1538)

Full details at end of review

Agustín Maruri (guitar)

Marta Infante (mezzo) (CD2)

rec. Sala Capitular, Real Basilica de San Francisco el Grande, Madrid, February, 2008.

DDD

2 CDs in book format with booklet in pouch.

EMEC RECORDS E-100/101 [63:35 + 22:30]

This is the first complete recording of Narváez's instrumental publication of 1538, though there have been other recordings of selections, one quite substantial – see below. The two CDs are contained in a roughly DVD-sized cardboard booklet.

Let me get a technicality out of the way first. These performances were recorded on a modern (2008) guitar but the music was intended, as the title makes clear, for the vihuela, an early ancestor of that instrument. There are recordings of some of these pieces on the original instrument – see below – and purists will prefer them, but the sound of the modern instrument, though tuned slightly differently, is not vastly different from that of its predecessor and most listeners will be happy with what they have on the new Emecc recording. I'm just slightly surprised that, considering the amount of attention which has been given to the production of this set and the documentation which accompanies it, the original instrument was not employed, as on the recordings which I've listed below.

The modern guitar has a wider range of tone than its predecessor and the temptation must have been to produce a sound which would never have been possible on the vihuela. Agustín Maruri deserves praise for avoiding the temptation to give the music a greater degree of variety, with clarity rather than richness of tone the keyword of his playing. Spanish readers will find an interview from the May 2012 classical music magazine *Ritmo* online – [here](#) – in which he extols the virtues of Narváez's music and considers the pros and cons of playing vihuela music on the guitar.

An important point which he makes in that interview is that Narváez's music is not easy to play, so it's a considerable virtue of these performances that, with art that conceals art, he makes it sound easy. Interestingly, he cites as a precedent Julian Bream's ability to make lute music sound 'right' on the guitar and Julian Bream's manner sprang to mind, even before I had read that interview, in the very first *Fantasia* on CD1, even down to the habit that Bream had of making slight 'noises off' as his fingers brushed the other strings. I mention it because I did occasionally find some of these extraneous noises obtrusive and others may be more affected.

The early sixteenth century was the Golden Age of polyphonic music and, difficult as it may seem, Narváez created a kind of two- and even three-part polyphony on the one instrument. Not only does Maruri guide us through all this with a sure technique, he also displays imaginative sympathy with the composer.

Readers may find themselves confused by the complex notes in the booklet because whereas the Spanish original clearly refers to the *vihuela*, in Portugal and Italy the instrument was called a *viola* and the English version translates the word consistently as 'viol'. To cut a long story short, the vihuela was essentially a flat-backed lute and tuned like the renaissance lute. Narváez and Luis de Milán were the chief composers for

the instrument; the latter composed a tablature book, dating from two years before Narváez's collection and portraying Orpheus playing the instrument and hailing him as *primero inventor por quien la vihuela paresce en el mundo*. The name was retained in some quarters for the baroque guitar which, in turn, was the ancestor of the modern instrument. What we usually term a viol is a bowed instrument, especially the *viola da gamba*, much loved by English composers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

There is a CD of some of the works from this collection on *Almaviva Musica Antiqua DS0116* on which they are performed by Juan Carlos Rivera on the instrument for which the title clearly indicates that it was written, the vihuela, and Hopkinson Smith has recorded a sizeable body of excerpts from all six books, also on the vihuela (Naïve E8706). Almost complete on one CD, his recording has a clear price advantage. I haven't been able to hear that recording in its entirety but its original appearance on *Astrée Auvidis* was warmly welcomed and I listened to his account of *Veinte y dos diferencias sobre 'Conde claros'*, on *Hopkinson Smith: A Portrait* (E8908) courtesy of [Qobuz](#). Allowing for the difference in timbre between the two instruments – Maruri's modern guitar is slightly brighter – there's not a lot to choose. Smith is more expeditious and less showy, but I enjoyed both.

There's another selection of Narváez's music on the modern guitar to which Glyn Pursglove gave a very favourable [review](#) (ECM New Series 4765878: Pablo Márquez)

If you are just looking for a selection of music from Renaissance Spain rather than one devoted entirely to Narváez, there's a thoroughly enjoyable and inexpensive Naxos CD, which I've owned for some time and to which I return frequently, on which Shirley Rumsey sings and performs on vihuela, lute and renaissance guitar (8.550614). Her account of *Veinte y dos diferencias sobre 'Conde claros'* is closer in style to that of Hopkinson Smith, though taken at a slightly slower pace than his or Maruri's. In the vocal items Rumsey's pleasantly languid voice is well suited to the music.

Another fine bargain recording from Christopher Wilson (vihuela) offers ten pieces from the *Libros del Delphín* coupled with music by Luys Milán (Naxos 8.553523). His version of *Conde claros* is sprightlier than Maruri's or Rumsey's and somewhat brighter than Smith's.

If, however, you are prepared to hear the modern instrument played in a manner sympathetic to its predecessor by a guitarist with a genuine feeling for the music and well recorded, the Emec is the only choice for hearing the six books complete. Though generally happy with Maruri's playing, I was much less impressed by Marta Infante's rather fruity contributions to the *Romances* and *Villancicos* on CD2. She sounds rather backward in the sound picture and has a tendency to swallow her words, so that, since these are not included in the otherwise comprehensive booklet, we are left none the wiser apart from the opening phrases listed.

Apart from the vihuela/viol confusion in the English translation, the scholarly notes are very informative if, perhaps, a little abstruse for the general reader. The inside front and rear covers of the book reproduce pages from the original publication. Complete scores of the six books can be found at imslp.org.

Overall, then, despite some minor reservations, about the need to have the complete collection as opposed to a selection and the guitarist's 'noises off', I enjoyed hearing CD1. Ms Infante's contribution to the short second disc gives me more serious pause for reservation. I shall not be playing that second disc much, which adds to the fact that with just over 22 minutes on CD2, it seems a bit steep to charge for two full-price CDs.

Brian Wilson

Full track details

CD 1

Los Seys libros del Delphín de música de cofra para tañer vihuela (Valladolid, 1538)

Libro I, Fantasías 1-8 [19:51]

Libro II, Fantasías 9-14 [8:16]

*Libro III, Sanctus and Hosanna from **Josquin des Prés** Misa Hercules, Dux Ferrariæ and Misa Faysans regrés; Cum Sancto Spirito from Misa de la fuga and Canciones 1-4 [14:50]*

Libro IV: O gloriosa Domina - Diferencias 1-5 and Sacris Solemnis - Diferencias 1-5 [11:15]

Libro VI: Veintidos diferencias sobre 'Conde Claros'; Cuatro diferencias sobre 'Guardame las vacas' (x2); Baxa de contrapunto [9:09]

CD 2

Libro V [22:27]

Ya se asienta el Rey Ramiro [1:16]

Paseabase el rey moro [4:11]

Si tantos halcones I [1:27]

Si tantos halcones II [2:05]

Si tantos halcones III [2:42]

Y la mi cinta dorada [3:47]

La bella mal maridada [2:28]

Con que la lavare [2:57]

Arded, corazon, arded [1:34]

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