

Review

Apollo's Fire: "Tangos and Fandangos" at Fairmount Church (November 15)

by Timothy Robson



One of the best things about Apollo's Fire's programs is that director Jeannette Sorrell and her musicians plan programs that are entertaining. They are scholarly, but not pedantic; instructive, but not condescending; and the expert musicians give every appearance of enjoying the act of performance, with awareness of their fellow musicians.

Such was the case again on Friday night, November 15, at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights, for the first of four performances of "Tangos and Fandangos," an exploration of the Mediterranean musical styles from 18th century Spain that crossed the Atlantic and evolved into those sexy South American dances, the fandango and the tango. The full house responded enthusiastically to this unfamiliar music by Santiago de Murcia, Luigi Boccherini, Carl Friedrich Abel, and Apollo's Fire regular René Schiffer (writing under the *nom de plume* René Duchiffre).

Baroque guitarists Simon Martyn-Ellis and William Simms opened the concert with 18th century Spanish composer and guitarist Santiago de Murcia's *Fandango* (c.1730). The performers entered from opposite sides of the stage, bowed to each other and commenced a musical "duel," trading phrases in increasing virtuosic variations above the descending bass line that is the hallmark of the fandango. The tension increased until the music dramatically stopped without warning.

Two works by Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805) filled the remainder of the first part of the program. Boccherini's fame as a composer and cellist were considerable in his lifetime; in modern times, he is mostly a footnote in music history. The performances here, of the *Cello Quintet in E*, G. 275, and the *Guitar Quintet No. 4 in D*, G. 448, argue for the resurrection of more of his music, which is graceful, melodic, and expert in its development of musical themes, trading material among the various instruments.

Special guest Mimé Brinkmann and Schiffer were the soloists for the cello quintet. Two of the four movements featured the sweet sounds of muted violins, blending into the mellow tones of the Baroque cellos. The performers, also including violinists Olivier Brault

and Andrew Fouts and violist Karina Schmitz, all shared in the closely integrated musical texture, with flexibility of rhythm and phrasing. Boccherini makes remarkable demands on the cellists in his use of the extreme high register on the instrument, sounding like the mid-range of a viola. But then the composer plunges the cellos into a low register, so there is no question of his intent. Brinkmann and Schiffer carried off their assignments admirably.

Boccherini's "Fandango" guitar quintet has a definite Spanish sound to it, with both strummed and plucked guitar. This "quintet" was here performed by seven people, with two guitars and two cellists. There was no mention in the program notes on what authority this instrumental assignment was made, whether in the score or editorial by the performers. The two cellos and two guitarists shared the musical material. The fourth movement, from which the "fandango" title is derived, included some theatrical elements, with Brinkmann getting up from her seat to cool off her colleagues with, appropriately, a Spanish fan. The quintet has numerous dramatic elements; at one point Schiffer tapped on the body of his instrument to emphasize the syncopated rhythms.

The second part of the program opened with Carl Friedrich Abel's *Adagio and Allegro in d minor* for solo viola da gamba, with veteran performer Catherina Meints. Meints has played an influential role in performing and teaching early music in northeast Ohio for most of the last four decades, and she is justifiably beloved by the musical community. Her reading of the *Adagio* was somber, emphasizing the improvisatory nature of the music. The *Allegro* showed Meints's virtuosity in a score that called for many double stops, implying the polyphonic nature of the movement. Meints received an ovation at the conclusion of the piece, with the audience calling her back for multiple bows.

Two contemporary works, but in 18th century style, both by "René Duchiffre" (René Schiffer), concluded the concert. In the *Fandango for two cellos and continuo*, Schiffer has absorbed the Boccherini style, with the solo cellos trading melodic material back and forth. The continuo instruments were theorbo and guitar, with Martyn-Ellis and Simms.

The entire ensemble, with the addition of Catharina Meints and double bassist Sue Yelanjian, returned for the *Concerto in d minor for two violas da gamba, "Tango."* This was the only work on the program that made the leap from the Spanish-inflected fandango to the Argentine dance that was popularized in the late 19th century. After an opening "Adagio morganesco" and an elaborate "Cadenza abrupta," the tango rhythm took over, inspiring the performers to heights of ecstasy, only to have the music return at the end to the opening adagio and a final cadence on an arpeggiated single note. It was a delightful conclusion to a fun and imaginative evening.

The final performance of "Tangos and Fandangos" is Tuesday evening at First United Methodist Church in Akron.

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