

MUSIC IN CATALONIA TODAY



ORFEÓ CATALÀ

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CATALONIA'S MOST CHARACTERISTIC CONTRIBUTION TO UNIVERSAL MUSIC HAS BEEN ITS REPERTORY OF FOLKSONGS, ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND RICHEST IN EUROPE. IN CLASSICAL MUSIC, ALONGSIDE QUITE OUTSTANDING COMPOSERS, THERE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY LIST OF FIRST-RATE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMERS.

SEBASTIÀ BENET I SANVICENS MUSICOLOGIST

The music scene in Catalonia today has a remote ancestry which has fashioned its character down to the present moment. In the course of this evolution we see that Catalonia's most characteristic contribution to universal music has been its repertory of folksongs, one of the most beautiful and richest in Europe. In classical music, alongside quite outstanding composers,

there is an extraordinary list of first-rate international performers.

Pau Casals, father of the modern cello, contributed to a universal knowledge of Catalan folk music by adopting the beautiful tune "El cant dels ocells" as a testimony of his cultural origin. Our popular music also includes a wide variety of dances, in particular the *sardana*, Catalonia's national dance since the

end of the nineteenth century. The music is played by a special band, the *colla*, led by the *tenora*, an instrument which originated in Catalonia. The *sardana* is a living dance, which people of all ages take part in at any celebration during the year, and which has produced masterpieces composed by some of the best Catalan musicians, including Pau Casals himself. Igor Stravinsky,



GRAN TEATRE DEL LICEU. BEFORE AND AFTER THE FIRE



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on a visit to Barcelona in 1924, was filled with enthusiasm for a sardana with music by Juli Garreta, a musician from the Empordà region.

Folk songs were also the basis for the widespread choral movement in Catalonia, which is still very active today. Josep A. Clavé (1824-1874), with the philanthropic aim of getting the workers out of the taverns and infusing them with progressive ideas, created the "Cors Clavé", male-voice choirs, to which the "orfeons", or mixed choirs, were added later, originally devoted to performing popular songs which they alternated with the great classical choral works. The "Orfeo Català", founded by Lluís Millet (1876-1941) and to which Pau Casals entrusted the Florence debut of his oratorio "El Pessebre" in 1962, has had great success in Paris, London and Rome. After the fifties the choral movement produced smaller mixed groups with more professionally trained singers—such as the "Coral Sant Jordi", set up by Oriol Martorell in

1927—, which had a primarily classical repertoire and soon took their place in the European choral movement. Catalan popular music, then, is more than just an ethnic or folkloric curiosity of interest only to musicologists; it is a living reality which has never been entirely divorced from serious music.

There are accounts of religious music in Catalonia going back to the sixth century. Six centuries later, troubadours and minstrels from neighbouring Provence introduced profane music into the court of the count-kings of Catalonia and Aragon. At the same time, there was already a music school in Montserrat for training the choir of young voices that served the mass. This school, one of the oldest of its kind in Europe, is still active and has produced some fine musicians: Antoni Soler (1729-1783), known internationally for his sonatas for harpsichord; Ferran Sors (1778-1839), a guitarist and composer who made a name for himself in Paris, London and Saint Petersburg, and more

recently, the conductors Salvador Mas and Josep Pons, successful international figures. The monastery of Montserrat also led the recovery of Gregorian chant in the Iberian Peninsula, begun at the end of the nineteenth century at the French monastery of Solesmes.

In more recent times, the world of serious music in Catalonia has been characterized by great individual figures and by teaching facilities that are insufficient to train the musicians we need to cover internal demand. We have a Pau Casals (1875-1973), but we have to import musicians from other countries for our orchestras, which, admittedly, have started a period of definite improvement, but which are not yet amongst the best in Europe. At the present moment, though, the extraordinary activity in all fields of music in Catalonia promises a splendid future. The concert season in Barcelona gets longer and longer and the summer music festivals attract more and more music-lovers from this country and abroad.



FREDERIC MOMPIU

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The most important festivals, affiliated to the European Association of Festivals, are the ones at Torroella de Montgrí and Perelada, both close to the Costa Brava.

The list of Catalan virtuosi contains plenty of international stars. Ricard Viñes was the pianist to whom Debussy, Satie and Ravel entrusted the first public performances of their work, and today the pianist Alicia de Larrocha is considered the best performer of Catalan and Spanish Music. Jordi Savall is recognized as the best viola virtuoso and one of the most important conductors of early music today, with his groups "Le concert de les Nations" and "La capella Reial de Catalunya". The cellist Lluís Claret, a pupil of Casals, is also his best heir. Antoni Ros Marbà is making an important name for himself internationally as a conductor. But it is in choral singing that Catalonia has produced the most outstanding performers. At the beginning of this century, Maria Barrientos, Conxita Supervia, Francesc



XAVIER BENGUEREL

Viñas and Concepció Badia had considerable success in Europe and America. Today, Victòria dels Angels is at the peak of a triumphant international career both in opera and in the *lied*, the test for singers who want to be more than just vocal jugglers. Also in top-

level opera, Montserrat Caballé, Josep Carreras and Jaume Aragall head a list of stars which continues with Enriqueta Tarrés, Carme Bustamante, Joan Pons, Enric Serra and Joan Cabero. Anna Ricci, for her part, is a recognized specialist in contemporary and experimental music.

I ought to mention that Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) and Enric Granados (1867-1916), well-known for their work in a Spanish vein, were both Catalan too. Granados created the modern Catalan school of piano, whose pupils include Alicia de Larrocha and the late Rosa Sabater. Subsequently there have been composers of the calibre of Eduard Toldrà (1895-1962), whose works are filled with the light of the Mediterranean, though he was primarily a conductor. Robert Gerhard (1896-1970), a Catalan of Swiss father and French mother, studied with Granados and Arnold Schönberg and introduced twelve-tone music into Catalonia. In 1993 he moved to England, following a tradition



XAVIER MONTSALVATGE

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begun by Handel and Johann Christian Bach. The contemporary composer who has deservedly achieved most recognition abroad is Federic Mompou (1893-1987), who was initiated into music listening to the ringing of the family bell-foundry. Mompou studied in Barcelona and Paris and his music, with its undeniable French influence, is fully Catalan in meaning. He was an extraordinary pianist and his works sprung from his fingers rather than from a pre-established technique. His series of "Songs and Dances" for piano contain many melodies from Catalan folk-music and his "Silent Music" is considered the peak of his musical career. He has also written songs of great beauty, such as "Damunt de tu només les flors" or the moving "Cantar del alma", with words by Saint John of the Cross. Joaquim Homs (1906), a friend and pupil of Robert Gerhard, carries on his master's teaching with rigour but in his own style. Another composer who is still active is Xavier Montsalvatge (1912), who



THE CLARET BROTHERS

has been successful all over the world with excellent works in an eclectic style, such as "Canción de cuna para dormir un negrito" and the "Concert breu" for piano and orchestra.

Another generation of composers who have made a name for themselves

abroad is the one made up of Lleonard Balada, Xavier Benguerel, Narcís Bonet, Joan Guinjoan, Josep M. Mestres Quadreny, Salvador Pueyo and Josep Soler. Today, Catalan music is in mourning: the destruction by fire of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, one of the oldest and most beautiful opera houses in Europe, has opened a parenthesis it is hoped will be closed in 1997 with a renovated Liceu to mark the 150th anniversary of its original inauguration. This will be the continuation of a glorious past written by the world's greatest singers –Caruso, Renata Tebaldi, Maria Callas– and by a large, enthusiastic and demanding public who have always given it all their support. The Liceu, alongside the Palau de la Música Catalana, built by Domènec i Montaner, is the symbolic heart of Catalan music and its public anxiously awaits its return. Catalonia is an open, welcoming country, a melting-pot of cultures, and there is no doubt it has a place of its own in the music world. ■