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Sebastián
AGUILERA
de HEREDIA
Organ Music

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At the Renaissance organ of
Sta. Maria de la Consolación Church,
Garrovillas de Alconétar (Cáceres), Spain

Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia and his work

Despite little of his work being known today, with 18 compositions for organ and his book of ‘Magnificats’ of 1618, Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia (Zaragoza, 1561–Zaragoza, 1627) has gone down in the history of Spanish music as one of the great figures of the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque, comparable to his contemporary, the Dutch composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelink (1562–1621). His style reflects the polyphonic tradition of the Spanish Renaissance along with the elements of an incipient Baroque. His work bridges that of Antonio de Cabezón (1510–1566) and Francisco Correa de Araujo (1584–1654), the most important exponents of the organ in Spain in the Renaissance and the Baroque, respectively.

Unlike Italian composers – in particular Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–1643), whose music represents a substantial change from and an almost total break with the aesthetics of the Renaissance and who became the role model for composers in Central and Northern Europe – the Spanish organists’ transition to the new style was gradual. They maintained a strong link with the Renaissance tradition based on four-voice vocal polyphony and counterpoint as the foundation for compositions. However, Baroque elements can be observed in Spanish works such as the *tientos ‘de bajo’* (in the bass) or *de tiple’* (in the alto), also known as *tientos ‘de mano izquierda’* (in the left hand) or *‘de mano derecha’* (in the right hand), in which there is a solo voice accompanied by other voices that serve as something akin to basso continuo. This solo voice is typically lively, employing numerous glosses or ornaments of small notes infilling the larger intervals, what in Italy was known as *passaggio* or *diminuire*, and these are present in Aguilera’s *tientos* and *discursos*. Likewise, the so-called *tientos ‘de falsas’* (on dissonances), reveal yet another element of the Baroque, considered the era of the liberation of dissonance.

Among his compositions, we find the *ensalada* (salad), a term that in the 15th century referred to polyphonic vocal works blending various musical styles, different languages, textures, etc., unified by a common thread, usually from a lesson in Christian morals. Its main exponent was Mateo Flecha ‘el Viejo’ (the Elder) (1481–1553). Aguilera’s *Ensalada* in a way recalls these ancient pieces with its alternating contrapuntal, homophonic sections, etc., its allusion to contrasting lively and calmer rhythms, as well as its constant rhythmic underpinning of hemiola, so rooted in Spanish musical tradition, though for the same reasons the *Ensalada* also brings to mind the coeval Italian *canzoni*.

Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia – who died a year after the publication of another key work of Spanish instrumental (specifically keyboard) music, Francisco Correa de Araujo’s *Facultad orgánica* – is a composer whose work makes deliberate strides away from the academic and erudite, unlike Correa, whose publication is in fact a practical keyboard and composition method. Aguilera adopts a style uniting the counterpoint, elegance and seriousness of vocal polyphony, a genre in which he was an accomplished master, with music more aligned with popular tastes and with dance, achieving an absolutely astounding result, with works full of life, capable of conveying passions and affects yet clearer and more comprehensible to the ears and tastes of all audiences, regardless of their musical education.

Little is known about the musical beginnings of young Sebastián, though he likely studied with Zaragoza’s organists and capellmeisters, in particular those working in the Catedral del Salvador (Cathedral of the Saviour), also known as *La Seo*. In his book *Music in Zaragoza in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, the Spanish musicologist Pedro Calahorra draws attention to the emergence in Zaragoza of two indisputable greats of the music of that period, Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia and the great polyphonist Pedro Ruimonte (1565–1627), possibly directly attributable to the fact that Melchor Robledo (c.1510–1586) was capellmeister, first in the Basílica del Pilar and then in the *Seo*. Robledo, considered the founder of the Aragonese school of polyphony, was one of the most prestigious composers of his time, belonging even to the Sistine Chapel choir in Rome. It seems more than likely that Aguilera and Ruimonte were his students.

Aguilera’s training as an organist, on the other hand, was most likely provided by Juan Oriz, who preceded Aguilera in the post of organist at the *Seo*. Aguilera was ordained as a priest in 1584, and the year after he won the post of principal organist at the Cathedral of Huesca (Aragon), earning high praise and a salary increase for the exemplary performance of his duties.

He returned to Zaragoza in 1603 as the *Seo*’s principal organist. In 1605 he requested the main organ, which was in bad condition, be repaired. In so doing Heredia insisted on the need to install half stops, already introduced in Spain by Flemish organ builders such as the Brevos family. These were what allowed him to perform and compose his half-stop *tientos* like the *‘de bajo’ tientos* that have come down to us today. Half stops allow organists to assign two different stops to the same manual, above and below a division at the central C-sharp.

Aguilera would remain in his position at the *Seo* until his death in 1627, dedicated not only to playing and composing works for organ and voices but also to the teaching of young musicians. One of his disciples was Jusepe Ximénez (1600–1672), who served as second organist and later principal organist and who in turn went on to teach his nephew, Andrés de Sola (1634–1696). The latter would teach a young Sebastián Durón (1660–1716), considered the best composer of Spanish Baroque sacred music, and thus also the culmination of a stylistic lineage originating in Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia.

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The Renaissance organ of the Iglesia de Santa María de la Consolación, Garrovillas de Alconétar (Cáceres, Spain)

This is the only known organ in Spain today that dates from the time of Aguilera de Heredia. Although smaller than those of the great cathedrals, it allows us to approach what might have been the original sonority of his music. It is not possible to give a date of its manufacture, but it was certainly prior to 1578, according to existing documents. In 1677, the Spanish organ builder Juan Amador 'el joven' (the younger) undertook a thoroughgoing restoration adding, in all probability, the half stops.

Stop list

Left Hand

Octava general
 Tapadillo
 Quincena
 Llento
 Decisetena

Right Hand

Octava General
 Tapadillo
 Quincena
 Llento
 Decisetena
 Flautado de 13 (whole manual)

1 manual of 42 keys (C–aⁿ) with a short octave.

Miguel del Barco Díaz graduated with honours in organ from the Royal Conservatory of Music in Madrid, and completed a postgraduate degree in Barcelona with Montserrat Torrent, specialising in Spanish Early Organ Music. He also earned a degree in Harpsichord and Basso Continuo with Tony Millán in Madrid and has studied with other masters such as Jacques Ogg, Hubert Meister, Lorenzo Ghielmi, Jan Willem Jansen and Michel Bauvard.

He has extensive experience in Spain and abroad as an early music soloist and accompanist for instruments and voices. His career has seen him give performances at important national and international festivals in places such as Estonia, Latvia, Washington, Boston, Slovenia, etc.

He is currently a teacher of organ, harpsichord and basso continuo at the Official Conservatory of Music of Cáceres in Spain.

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