

A SPANISH MUSICAL ODYSSEY

By Stuart Mole

PRELUDE

The journey to Spain for the main party of EPC singers had been long and tiring. Travelling northwards from Madrid across the *meseta*, the high central plain, on the final leg to Salamanca, the landscape had been steadily enveloped by the gathering darkness. By late evening, as the Exeter Philharmonic touring choir checked into the Abba Fonseca hotel, their first proper glimpse of Spain, and what lay ahead, was revealed through the upstairs corridor window, and the spectacular sight of their first concert venue. On the crown of the nearby hill, in the centre of the old city, lay the floodlit and commanding bulk of Salamanca's old and new cathedrals.



DAY ONE

In planning the next five days, the tour organisers had been careful to maintain a balance between singing, rehearsals and performances, on the one hand, and sufficient time to relax and explore this beautiful corner of Castile & Leon, on the other hand. As the group gradually assembled the next morning for a hearty breakfast and guided tours of Salamanca's historic core, the weather was not encouraging. The skies were overcast, and the first drops of rain were beginning to fall. Undeterred, we were eager to explore the soaring, honey-coloured sandstone spires and towers of the ecclesiastical city, interwoven with the numerous colleges and faculties of Salamanca's ancient and distinguished University.



The New Cathedral, built between 1513 and 1733, spans the late Gothic, Plateresque and Baroque styles. It is magnificent and it is vast – one of Spain’s largest Cathedrals – with a bell tower rising ninety-two metres. Only by traversing the new Cathedral could we enter the old building, the Romanesque Cathedral of Santa María, begun in the 12th century and, like its successor, completed over a period of two hundred years. Lying parallel to the new Cathedral, the old structure was scheduled for demolition but survived as a temporary home in the centuries that followed. In the end, its destruction became unthinkable, and its simple heavy pillars and arches provided a much more accessible and open space for the choir to perform their first concert than would have been possible in the elaborate cloistered spaces of its larger twin.



By the afternoon, the rain had stopped and, as promised on the tour logo, the sun had begun to emerge. We gathered in the magnificent Plaza Mayor, a natural meeting point (and at one point used for bullfighting), and sipped our coffees, nibbled *tapas* or set about our first beer of the day.



Salamanca has many attractions – from the *Museo Art Nouveau Y Art Deco*, the impressive Roman bridge across the River Tormes or the numerous shops, bars and restaurants spread around the city centre. But we were here to sing as well and our conductor, Howard Ionascu, wisely added several rehearsals to the schedule. Our voices needed to be kept in shape, and there were still tricky parts of the repertoire which required attention.

DAY TWO



On our second full day in Salamanca, it was time for a dress rehearsal in the *Catedral Vieja*, prior to the start of the concert at 8.30pm. As we assembled for the evening's performance, we were surprised to find a large queue already formed outside the Cathedral and snaking round the corner out of sight. This was not signs of a rival attraction, as some initially thought, but the audience for our concert, who were soon filling the available seats.

In recommending a concert programme for the tour, Howard had chosen a selection of English choral music across the centuries. Some of this was unaccompanied, such as Purcell's 'Hear my prayer' and Byrd's 'Sing joyfully'. Other pieces, as might be expected, relied on a full-blooded organ accompaniment, and this presented a particular challenge for our Assistant Director and accompanist, Stephen Tanner. He only had a limited time before each concert to become acquainted with the organ at our disposal, whatever its quality, and to deliver the high levels of performance we had all come to expect. He did not disappoint and while the acapella singing softly echoed around the Cathedral's pillars, the organ-accompanied works of Charles Villiers Stanford, George Dyson and Ralph Vaughan Williams filled the huge Cathedral with reverberating sound and lifted the dramatic delivery of the chorus.



The local news organisation, *Salamanca 24 horas*, described the evening as ‘magic’ and reported: “Nobody wanted to miss this performance, and everybody was very moved by this great concert which filled the historic building with melody and passion.” A few singers had been part of EPC’s previous tour to Salamanca, twenty-six years before. On that occasion, when they sang Joaquín Rodrigo’s composition “Ode to Salamanca”, the choir had received a standing ovation. This time, the warmth and goodwill expressed afterwards seemed just as powerful.

DAY THREE

A late programme change saw the group journeying the next day, not due North to Zamora but, north-east, to Valladolid, the de facto regional capital and the former home of Spanish Kings. Once again, our concert venue was a monumental cathedral.



Had the renaissance *Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción* ever been completed, it would have been the largest cathedral in Europe. However, the hopes that Valladolid, the home of King Philip II, would become the permanent capital of a unified Spain were dashed when the court moved south, to Madrid, in the 1560s. Funding for the Cathedral dried up and barely half the structure was built. While an enduring disappointment to the city's citizens, this came as a relief to EPC singers who felt they had challenge enough on their hands. Indeed, during rehearsals, Howard, our enterprising Director of Music, discovered a sweet spot half-way down the great nave. During Bob Chilcott's 'Missa Cantata', and particularly the concluding Agnus Dei, the choir was dispersed to the transepts and to behind the high altar, with our conductor barely in sight. Singing unaccompanied and in free form in dispersed locations, the sound was gathered by some alchemy to meet in echoing and tumbling cadences around the heart of the nave, to profound effect.



Given the recent switch of venue, our tour guide, Marianne, warned against expecting an audience of Salamanca proportions. Publicity had been rushed and the city had not been included in EPC's previous tour, despite its historic importance. We need not have worried. As the doors opened, our audience flowed in, rapidly filling the nave and its side aisles. Once again, Stanford, Dyson and Vaughan Williams thundered out; but perhaps it was the modern English composers who won Spanish hearts – Rutter's 'Ukrainian Prayer', Chilcott's haunting 'Missa Cantata' and, as a special commission (and as an homage to Spain) Stephen Tanner's magnificent 'Un Salmo Español', with its rhythms of the flamenco woven through the majesty of Psalm 21.

On this occasion, many in the audience did rise in tribute and, sensing the importance of a response, Howard asked the choir to line the route to the exit so that hands could be gripped and greetings exchanged (in whatever words came to hand). Once again, music had demonstrated its ability to bring strangers together through a language that all instinctively understood.

DAY FOUR



Sunday morning dawned clear and bright. An early start was needed if we were to get to the glorious walled city of Avila in time for the start of the Mass. This time, having entered through the city walls, we paused only briefly at the imposing and ancient cathedral, and walked on. In so doing, we left behind the bones of Adolfo Suarez, born locally, who was the first elected Prime Minister of Spain after the death of Franco. Together with the young King, Juan Carlos, he is credited with finding a pathway from dictatorship to democracy. However, we were in search of another notable Spaniard. Our destination was the *Basilica de Santa Teresa*, a large baroque church built over the birthplace of St Teresa of Avila, and part of a Carmelite monastery. St Teresa was an inspirational mystic and church reformer who preached the primacy of perfect love.



Coming to her home, the choir was duly installed in a large gallery at the west end of the Basilica where, to his delight, Stephen Tanner was presented with the finest organ he was to play all tour. He explained his excitement: “Firstly, it was the only pipe organ that I got to play on the tour but most importantly it was the work of the great French organ builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll, I suspect in its original condition.”



Cavallé-Coll was a towering figure in the development of the organ, both tonally and mechanically. His *symphonic organ*, which reproduced and combined the multiple sounds of the orchestra, proved to be hugely influential with composers such as Franck, Widor, Vierne, Guilmant and others.



Encouraged by having the use of such an organ, hurried consultations took place between Howard, Stephen and the church authorities on what the choir might sing. Chilcott's 'Missa Cantata' was an obvious choice, and an Introit and a Motet at communion were not hard to find. However, as the mass ended, the congregation turned and applauded the choir. They then remained standing, faces lifted expectantly towards the gallery. More whispered discussions followed and then Howard announced three more pieces for us to perform, including for organ. It became an impromptu but much-appreciated informal concert.

Later in the afternoon we sank into Avila's cafes and restaurants, walked the walls or bought *Yemas de Santa Teresa*, a local delicacy made from egg yolks, sugar and water.



One of our number, however, stumbled into a group of Japanese tourists who quickly recognised the tour logo, said they had been at the mass and the singing afterwards, and demanded selfies all round.

POSTLUDE

The tour was almost complete and on Monday we began the long journey home. A day or two before, we had begun to see absences among our fellow singers at breakfast, at dinner and then from the concluding concerts as well. By the time we were back in the UK, it became apparent that many had been afflicted by Covid and, with our coach travel, close choral singing and camaraderie, we had unwittingly created a mobile superspreader event.

Fortunately, there were no lasting ill-effects and certainly none that could diminish our memories of a fabulous singing experience, in a beautiful part of Spain. Our special thanks go to Howard and Stephen, for their musical leadership; to Specialised Travel and their wonderful guide, Marianne Swienink-Havard; and to our EPC Co-Chairs, Adrienne Long and Roland Chant, and in particular to the tour's chief organiser and constant inspiration, Ann Weiler.



Howard Ionascu



Stephen Tanner



Ann Weiler