



Australian Brandenburg Orchestra: Spanish Steps

by Andrew Wailes | 5th March, 2023

Commencing the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra's 2023 Melbourne season, *Spanish Steps* provided an opportunity to explore some rarely heard music of the Galant period, and more specifically the music of Luigi Boccherini (1743 -1805) and the lesser-known Giovanni Battista Sammartini (1700-1775).

Such a program may have been confusing given the obviously Italian surnames of the two featured composers on offer, but ABO Artistic Director Paul Dyer explained the inspiration for the program – the monumental stairway of 135 “Spanish Steps” in Rome, built to link the Trinità dei Monti church under the patronage of the Bourbon Kings of France at the top of the steps, and the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See in the Palazzo Monaldeschi on the Piazza di Spagna at the bottom. When one considers that Italian-born Boccherini never left Spain after relocating there as a young adult, the rationale became more obvious. In many ways, the steps became a metaphor of the musical journey (and compositional style) of Boccherini, who had made his way to Madrid as a young man, and who by 1770 was employed by Cardinal Don Louis Antonio Jaime of Bourbon, the younger brother of King Carlos III of Spain. In 1777, Don Louis

was exiled to a remote little town in the Gredos mountains in Ávila. It was there that he was enabled to develop his own unique style away from the major centres of Europe.

In any case, the program provided the ABO's Melbourne audience with the welcome of Elinor Frey in her first visit to this city. A leading cellist, gambist and researcher, Frey is a professor at the University of Montréal and enjoys a glittering international career as a soloist and recording artist.

Boccherini's *La Musica Notturna delle strade di Madrid*, the Quintet in C Major, Op.30, vividly describing the night life of Madrid (even though the composer was in isolation at the time he wrote it in 1780). Very much program music, it is a clever composition that attempts to musically represent the sights and sounds of a busy Madrid street at night. Divided into five movements, the dramatic pizzicato chords representing the "Ave Maria" bell – Madrid's main church bell – is followed by the Military Nightwatch in Madrid follows, *Il tamburo dei Soldati* – The Soldiers' drum call, the sound of the military drumrolls on his violin. Next we heard a breezy minuet, *Minuetto*, and finally, the Madrid, who would share the scandals of the day in song accompanied by Guitar. He was joined by the strings, playing instruments in the manner of a guitar, strumming the strings with the cellos lying across their knees, the gentle music occasionally

broken by the pizzicato notes of Ben Dollman's violin and Monique O'Dea's viola representing the bells of the liturgy. *Il Rosario*, a slow movement representing the Rosary, and not played strictly in time, demonstrated an almost organic sense of unity from the Brandenburg strings, who played with a dignified, unhurried calmness and impeccable intonation. The energetic *Passa Calle* – The Passacaglia of the Street Singers – imitates their singing. In Spanish, pasar calle denotes "pass along the street", singing as one seeks amusement. This movement featured an elegant solo from Jamie Hey's period cello, before principal second violin Ben Dollman's energetic outburst of brilliant semiquavers gave way to concertmaster Shaun-Lee Chen's "drum rolls" in *Il tamburo*. At one stage, with the Brandenburg strings all strumming away and Dyer beaming from behind the harpsichord, there was a real sense of fun being conveyed from the stage. All that was needed was few jugs of sangria and some glasses, and we could have all been right there in the balmy streets of Madrid!

In the work's famous final movement, *Ritirata*, we hear the retreat of the Madrid military night watch – the watch's patrol announcing the curfew, and closing the streets for the night. A slow majestic march, urged on by Dyer with a few suitably grand gestures from the harpsichord, led to a beautifully controlled, extended diminuendo from the entire orchestra, which was almost hypnotic as the intense red light on the stage gradually faded away to pale moonlight.

To perform Boccherini's Cello Concerto No. 9 in B flat, visiting soloist Elinor Frey took to the stage wearing a suitably red gown in keeping with the Spanish theme. Performing from a raised platform in the middle of the orchestra without conductor, this piece provided a fine example of the elegance of the Galant period. Throughout the performance there was a surprising amount of freedom in Frey's interpretation, supported with some impressively restrained playing from the ABO strings – ensuring they never dominated the delicate playing of the soloist in the classically themed opening *Allegro moderato* movement. After some premature applause, Frey took the opportunity to retune her gut strings before the almost Bach-like *Andantino grazioso* second movement, which featured some beautiful pianissimo playing from the soloist. In the final *Rondo*, Frey demonstrated some technically impressive rapid playing across the entire range of her instrument, particularly in the very highest reaches. At times, the cello sounded more like a violin such was the range employed during the animated musical conversation between soloist and orchestra.

The *Spanish Steps* theme really became most obvious in the *Grave assai* and *Fandango* from Boccherini's Guitar Quintet in D Major. For these items the orchestra was joined by Queensland-based flamenco dancer Yioda Wilson, who, dressed in a magnificent scarlet gown added her seductive fan dance to the slow movement. With the stage once again flooded in red light, Wilson's dramatic footwork in the *Fandango*, her beguiling hand gestures and spectacular castanets all added significantly to this most Spanish of dances. Arresting dynamic outbursts from the orchestra, accompanied by the percussive sound of the dancer's heels stomped on wood, the energetic

baroque guitar of Tommie Andersson strumming away throughout, and extended to the end of the concert with a sense of joy and excitement. From the moment Wilson took to the podium, the audience was enraptured.

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The next offering was the Australian premiere of the rarely heard Sammartini Concerto in D major. I must confess this Milan born composer was relatively unknown to me, and the program notes that, like Vivaldi, Sammartini's music was largely lost and only rediscovered in the 20th century. The concerto featured Frey's 250-year-old piccolo cello (a small instrument, only three quarters the size of a standard cello, and played below a violin with a bright, delicate timbre). Unlike some of the other works on the program, this was a Vivaldi concerto, with fiery writing for both soloist and orchestra and an exuberant rondo. The concerto, which featured concertmaster Saun-Lee Chen dancing his way through the forte passages, was, however, an ideal vehicle for the delicate tone of the piccolo cello, and the demanding passages for the soloist was almost dizzying at times. In the quieter passages of the almost Bach-like movements, the piccolo cello was unobtrusive. So cohesive was the playing of the continuo section it was almost easy to forget the harpsichord, Nicholas Pollock's theorbo and Tommie Andersson's Baroque guitar playing.

The addition of period horns and oboes in the final *Allegro assai con moto* from Boccherini's *La Casa del Diavolo* Symphony in D minor provided a bigger and more powerful sound for the concert's dramatic conclusion. With the stage again flooded in red light, the frenzied tempo of this piece with its aggressive tremolo in the violins and violas, and tumultuous descending runs in the lower strings was a genius bit of programming. Combined with its Beethoven-like changes of mood and tempo, this work provided a spectacular end to this most enjoyable concert, the constant cries of the ABO horns leading the listener on to a triumphant, rousing finale.

Earlier in the evening, soloist Elinor Frey had spoken glowingly about Boccherini and her quest to uncover a few new fans during this her first visit to Melbourne. "... one at a time, we are going to get you all" she quipped. Thanks to the ABO and Artistic Director Paul Dyer, along with such a self-possessed soloist in Frey, that mission was clearly accomplished.

Photo credit Keith Saunders.

Andrew Wailes reviewed "*Spanish Steps*", with **Elinor Frey** (period cello) in concert with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra at the Melbourne Recital Centre, Elisabeth Murdoch Hall, on March 2, 2023.

ANDREW WAILES

AUSTRALIAN BRANDENBURG ORCHESTRA

ELINOR FREY

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Andrew Wailes is well known to Melbourne audiences as Artistic Director and Chief Conductor of the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra, and as a freelance conductor and chorusmaster of various choral and orchestral ensembles in Melbourne, and around Australia. He regularly appears with local groups including Melbourne University Choral Society, Box Hill Chorale, and has recently directed ensembles for groups such as Opera Australia, Sinfonia of St Andrew's and the Sunshine Coast Oriana Choir in Queensland.





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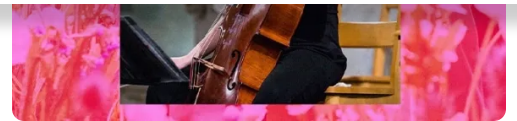
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