

Josep Elies, organ master of Spain

The influence that the great organ master José Elias (ca. 1685-1755) exercised on his pupils and contemporaries is proved once more by the publication of the following volume:

Josep Elies, 24 obres per a orgue (peces i tocatas). Edited by Águeda Pedrero-Encabo

<http://www.trito.es/details.php?ref=TR00590&lang=es>

On reading through the musical text, the following thoughts occurred to me:

- 1) It is very possible that a printed version existed, as with the “Seis Fugas (sobre himnos) Para Organo” of José Lidón⁽¹⁾.
- 2) Considering that the “Pieza Primera de Primer tono” held in the Monasterio de Guadalupe⁽²⁾ is headed in the manuscript as being from the *primer ópera* of the author, the Tocatas could have been published later as his *Opera segunda*. We should also be aware that it was not unusual for single movements in any Iberian keyboard manuscript to lack any indication of either composer or context.
- 3) Its title could have been: “Examples to apply the newest Italian style to the organ”, that is to say a work with the purpose of training the new generation of organists raising the musical currents after Cabanilles into a channel worthy of the religious service.
- 4) He succeeds in keeping the compass of the pieces within the limits available on the instruments of the time, avoiding moreover the semitones in the lowest octave, in order that the pieces could be played on any kind of organ (including smaller positives) and not studied at the harpsichord, with the result that the player could work on the phrasing directly at the organ. Let us remember that the organ of Barcelona cathedral already had 54 keys before the 17th century, but in the same church there was a smaller (portative) organ called “de Sta. Eulalia”
- 5) Several composers demonstrate in their works that they studied this compendium consciously.
- 6) The esteem for this series of works would have diminished because of the stylistic change. The masters may have finally decided that it was no longer worth studying (and even memorising!) them and continuing to keep examples of the work.
- 7) Elies seems to have intended this series as teaching pieces right from the start. Probably conscious of his authority, he later wrote the “Obras entre el antiguo y moderno estilo”⁽³⁾ to restrain an eagerness for modernising that was caused by his first series of works, underlining the validity of the traditional organistic foundations.

We are fortunate that at least two complete copies of all the series of 2x 12 groups have been preserved⁽⁴⁾. Since it is such an extensive compendium, we can deduce that it was written with highly specific pedagogical purposes.

Although there are moments of great virtuosity, this never dominates the lines of development that are consciously clear. We find passages of deliberate repetition, excessive for any listener if the final aim of the performance was merely pleasure. Knowing that a capable and experienced organist used to improvise most of his musical contribution, these groups of pieces could show a way of how to play determined types of pieces in each tonality. We know that in Spain in the first half of the 18th century, in contrast to today, there were no collections of “scales and studies”. Some notations and theoretical treaties are preserved, but scarcely any extensive pieces with a pedagogical aim.

The sets of versets left by organists as examples of their style should be understood also as being conceived as a good pattern for their pupils. We could suppose that the aim of Josep Elies was to set patterns worked out in a manner that pupils should assimilate consciously the modern style which came from Italy, even memorising harmonic sequences applied to rhythmic patterns. His extensive *Juego de manos* or the *Tocata de contras* also do not seem true concert pieces, but- as well as in some of the largely repetitive passages of the 12 groups, we can imagine the master carefully watching the fluency of his pupils’ playing. In this way, the capability of the future organist would have been assured and enhanced. Regarding the compass of a suitable instrument for the pieces, we can observe that the musical score never exceeds *a*’ and (except in the *Pieza sexta*) only on a few occasions reaches *C* and *D*, avoiding also the semitones between *C#* and *Ab*.

Looking separately at the “piezas” and “tocatas”, I would point out the following: The most innovatory form of the pieces is that of the fugue. Except from X, XI and XII (groups in which concrete forms are treated or

in which reed registrations are indicated), each of them has a distinctive second part in which a second theme or countersubject is introduced. After gradually leaving behind the themes by means of sequences, this leads to a final part which is not marked or denominated in any way (*toccata*, *fantasía* or *postludio*), which may be considerably different from the initial themes.

The *Tocatas*, in contrast, seem less organistic. Here the task is to accompany melodies. The *Graves* offer us a pattern of good pedagogical training:

After figuring the bass, the realization can be made, playing it against a violin in the upper voice or even with the pupil himself singing the tune. The *graves* VI and X would be the most suitable for such a training, and the indication *partido* could refer to this practice. The *Tocatas* clearly remind us of non-organistic instrumental music, such as Italian sonatas for violin and thorough bass after the time of Corelli, or the instrumental accompaniment of some aria. This series could be dated with more certainty comparing the *tocatas* to non-keyboard instrumental motifs of which we know the date of composition.

A great novelty probably introduced by this series of pieces is the *da capo* (or *aria*) form applied to keyboard music. One of the earliest examples is a Presto movement that concludes a toccata by Alessandro Scarlatti. But for now no other example of a fugal movement in *Da Capo*-form is known. It was used almost exclusively by Barcelona organists in bipartite movements. This group (X) is the most likely to let us think that indeed there was the aim to set together *piezas* and *tocatas* before the composition of all had been finished.

We may certainly believe that Elies himself wrote down his works meticulously before letting his pupils study them, the enthusiasm of his teaching being passed on to the pupils who copied them.

After the “good” style of Cabanilles no longer covered organistic ambitions, it was Elies who with diligence and effort chiefly enhanced the level of Spanish organ composition within the new style which would retain its validity until the end of the 18th century.

In spite of having composed this series after his departure to Madrid (most likely after 1730), it seems that he retained some contacts, since his impact was also most profound in Barcelona. Even if it was true that this series was never printed, organists and their pupils may have copied it eagerly.

COMPARISON WITH WORKS OF PUPILS AND CONTEMPORARIES

One of the Barcelona organists who in his young years could have been a direct pupil of Elies was Joan Vila (born in 1711, organist at the Sants Just i Pastor church until becoming organist of the Descalzas Reales convent in Madrid in 1725). His “*Obra cromática*” printed in the anthology *Organistes de Barcelona del segle XVIII*⁽⁵⁾ is derived directly from the “*Pieza tercera*” of this series. We may regard it as a pupils’ homage to his master, the former being inspired to express his highest skills. The highest level reached by the composer Francesc Mariner is the “*Obra llena sobre la Salve de 2º tono*”, included in the same anthology, which we can compare in some ways to the “*Pieza segunda*”. Please see the attached samples. We find the repetitive figuration of the final section of the “*Pieza novena*” reflected in the fugue in d (of the unique series of *Recercatas, Fugas y Sonatas*) of Sebastián de Albero.

Also Joaquín Ojinaga and P. Antonio Soler composed large double fugues. May this be enough to state that where Josep Elies taught (Barcelona and Madrid), this is where the best organ music of the Iberian peninsula of the corresponding time is to be found. In Madrid, organists like Félix Máximo López and José Lidón provide an even later proof of such a strong influence. Also Josep Teixidor left a fugue still extant entitled “*Tiento de empeño*”. Outside of this circle, there are only a few outstanding composers, such as Juan Moreno y Polo or Rafael Anglés.

CRONOLOGICAL CONTRAST OF COMPARABLE WORKS

The “*Tocatas para címbalo*” of Vicente Rodríguez were printed in 1744.

They seem slightly more modern, but not so much, and it is to be supposed that here the aim was more to exhibit the best keyboard art rather than to work on skills belonging to the organistic liturgical service. The repetition of some passages could also have had a pedagogical intent, but in this series the author doesn’t comply with the limitations (tuning and extension) of any keyboard. Better for comparison in the stylistic sense are the extensive organ works of Rodríguez to be found in the manuscripts E Bbc 1012 and 2248, which remain unpublished.

P. Soler, to demonstrate what for him would have been the best organ style of the time, wrote *Seis Obras para órgano/ con un Cantabile y un Allegro/ cada una/ Compuestas por el [?]/ R^{do}. P. M. F. Antonio Solér/ Año 1777*. This is written on the front page of the manuscript shelfmark E Bbc M 932/ 14 which contains the sonatas published as nos. 63 - 68 in the Rubio edition. From this indication we can see that an *Obra* for organ is usually a fugue, independently of the surrounding movements. The fugues of these pieces are the third movements, edited by P. José Sierra⁽⁶⁾.

Only in these does P. Soler stick to the bithematic fugue form introduced by Elies. In his other keyboard works we can feel him (when his personal genius is not noticeable) closer to Scarlatti than to Elies.

As a curious date, a Suite of J.S. Bach (BWV 997 for lute), presumably written in about 1730, has a movement order comparable to this series: Preludio, Fuga, Sarabanda and Giga.

CONCLUSION

We can see that the 1749 testimonies of some Madrid organists about Elies are neither exaggerated nor old-fashioned, as the spirit of this singular master stays alive, causing us to think about his works conceived to inspire teaching and musical creation.

(1): Musical funds of the Sant Martí church of Cassà de la Selva (Girona). I have a photocopy from which I could send a reproduction to those who are interested. The complete edition of keyboard works of José Lidón (1748-1827) has been edited in two volumes by Prof. Dámaso García Fraile, Sociedad Española de Musicología (Madrid), 2002 and 2004

(2): E: GU Leg. 34 núm. 1028-1031

(3) Modern edition: José Elías, Obras completas vol. I A y B, Josep Ma. Llorens, Diputación Provincial de Barcelona, Biblioteca Central, 1971

(4): E MO M 2999 , E Sc Libro 3º. de órgano (anonymous)

(5): *Organistes de la Catedral de Barcelona*. Edited by Martin Voortman, Tritó (Barcelona), 2002

(6): P. Antonio Soler, Obras para órgano. Edited by José Sierra, Ediciones Escorialenses

Martin Voortman, Wiesbaden Mai 2009

<http://voortman-musik.npage.de>

Note: It is possible to distinguish two different styles in the compositions of Josep Elies. The key date may be 1725, when he moved from Barcelona to Madrid to get in charge of the organist place of the Descalzas Reales convent. In spite of plenty of his works already being published (catalogued as well under **Elías, José**), there is a large number of compositions still waiting for their publication.