

SEIXAS AND SOLER, DEFINING FIGURES OF THE PORTUGUESE AND SPANISH BAROQUE MUSIC

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Abstract: *In the last years, due to our work as pianists and pedagogues, we have also studied Baroque music by focusing on its most important defining figures for the Portuguese and Spanish music, i.e. Seixas and Soler, who rose to the level of European music, and discovered step by step a fascinating universe that we wish to share with both peers and students. We hope that our endeavour will draw them closer to the personalities and works of two amazing musicians who enjoyed appreciation during their lives and are now being rediscovered.*

Keywords: *Seixas, Soler, Baroque, Portuguese and Spanish music.*

1. Introduction

The word "barroco" is of Iberian origin, Spanish or Portuguese (being used to designate Oriental pearls that will become characteristic of European jewellery in the late 16th and throughout the 17th century). Later on, the extended meaning expresses the notion of unique, when it comes to an object, an idea or an expression. The Baroque manifests itself as a cultural phenomenon that will exert influence on all arts (in the last years of the 16th century, until around 1760) and thus, for almost two hundred years, the entire Europe becomes Baroque. Portugal and Spain will embrace without hesitation the Baroque that manifests itself with great creative force in literature, painting, architecture, sculpture and music. European Baroque and harpsichord music were, in the early part of the century, at their peak, the keyboard

instruments of the epoch being the organ, harpsichord and clavichord, the last one being widely used and appreciated both in Portugal and in Spain. Besides these, the pianoforte built by Bartolomeo Cristofori made its appearance at the beginning of the century. The musical genres were the same as in the past, with one particularity: the growing importance of the sonata, which will undergo a major transformation over the century.

This particularity will be felt in the Portuguese instrumental music, the traditional *Tento* (coming from *tentare* or *intentare* – to *try* the instrument) making place for the Italian *Toccata* and *Sonata*. In what Spanish instrumental music is concerned, this too regains its old time brilliance, also mainly due to the *Sonatas* for keyboard instruments.

During this period of profound transformation, the star of Carlos Seixas

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(1704-1742) shone in Lisbon and that of Antonio Soler (1729-1783) in Madrid, the most important defining figures of the Portuguese and Spanish Baroque music.

2. Carlos Seixas

José António Carlos de Seixas was born in Coimbra, on June 11, 1704, son of Francisco Vaz and Marcelina Nunes [1]. He studied music with his father, cathedral organist and heir of the Iberian organ tradition of the 17th century. The effervescent musical activity in the monastery of Santa Cruz in his hometown also had an important role in the training of the young musician. At the age of 14, a few days before his father's death, he became the organist of the cathedral himself. The salary being the same his father used to receive, it was certainly enough for living, but it is likely that the aspirations of Carlos Seixas were higher. Therefore, after his mother's death, he headed for the capital.

Since 1720, we find him in Lisbon as court organist and harpsichordist of King João V and the cathedral. Carlos Seixas, particularly appreciated for his agility and elegance in playing keyboard instruments, was the favorite harpsichord teacher of the noble families in the capital. His talent as a composer also amazed the musicians of his epoch (professors of the harmonic faculty), being considered already, at about 18 years of age, a sacred monster of the office, due to his abundant fruitfulness and creative imagination.

He married in 1731 with D. Maria Joana Tomásia da Silva, with whom he had two sons and three daughters. He was a captain in the army of the viscount of Barbacena (1733), a member of the military Order „de Santiago” (1738) and Knight of the „de Cristo” Order, more honorific titles proving the appreciation he enjoyed in life. He died on August 25, 1742, at the age of

38, being sick of rheumatism which degenerated in a high fever, for which there was no medical solution. He is buried in the Santa Maria Basilica in Lisbon.

In the same period (1719-1728), in Lisbon we find Domenico Scarlatti, master of the Royal Chapel and teacher of infant Maria Barbara and of the king's brother, D. António.

In his *Diccionario biographico de Musicos portugueses e noticia das suas composições* of 1780, José Mazza relates an encounter between Scarlatti and Seixas, D. António wanting the Portuguese musician to take lessons and refine with the Italian maestro. It is said that as soon as Seixas began playing the harpsichord, Scarlatti would have recognized his qualities, saying: „you can give me lessons”; and to the infant he would have said that the Portuguese was one of the greatest „teachers” he had ever heard. Even if we can doubt the veracity of these claims, at least in terms of hyperbolic use, we consider that two issues leave no doubt: Seixas' real value and Scarlatti's collegial and friendly attitude. Unfortunately, the great qualities of the Portuguese composer did not reach complete assertion because of his early death; however, undoubtedly, he is the greatest Portuguese composer of the Baroque era and one of the most important personalities of Portuguese music. He can also be considered the creator of the Portuguese harpsichord school.

The cohabitation with Scarlatti in the musical environment of Lisbon was certainly reflected in the works of the two, resulting in a spiritual and musical enrichment on both sides. Musicologist Santiago Kastner, one of those who studied most deeply Seixas, wonders whether Scarlatti would not have benefited more from the Portuguese than vice versa [5]. This statement is based on the analysis of the evolution of Scarlatti's creation and on

the fact that the most representative of his works follow the death of Seixas; it is possible that the Neapolitan adopted ideas of the younger colleague, such as introducing folklore in compositions (there are Sonatas by Scarlatti based on Portuguese folklore). On the other hand, the Italian harpsichordist style is quite often felt in Seixas' Sonatas. However, „the Portuguese composer knew how to imprint his works with that personality and the specific temperament of the people he belonged to, for example the unstoppable national tendency to nostalgia” [7]. So Seixas was not converted into an epigone, his work having its autonomous character and its own imagination. Nevertheless, in Seixas' work, the harpsichord acquires great importance, he being the first Portuguese composer who favored this instrument in relation to organ and clavichord; as there were no Portuguese precedents that would have opened this way, in this respect we can consider Scarlatti's influence as decisive.

Although he did not travel abroad, Seixas knew and was influenced by the repertoire of the preceding and contemporary epochs, especially the Iberian and the Italian ones. French influence was manifested through frequent use of minuet, the most appreciated dance of the time in the Iberian Peninsula. The distance from central Europe can be seen in the simplified, even ingenuous form of the fugue; like Scarlatti's, the apparent character dominates the structure of the context, the interpretation of the term fugue being very distant from that of Bach and Haendel.

Today we know there are about 135 Sonatas (including 119 authenticated), of unequal value, probably due to various receivers of various instrumental capacity, and equally to the fact that no original manuscript has survived, existing only subsequent copies. We cannot forget the

fact that, while Scarlatti was composing for a very gifted pupil or for his own activity as a virtuoso, Seixas was writing for various receivers, from the ones aspiring to professionalism to mere amateurs.

2.1. Stylistic highlights in Seixas' sonatas

The stylistic variety of the Sonatas by Carlos Seixas (often called Toccata) shows that they were written for various keyboard instruments: harpsichord, organ and clavichord. This last instrument was widespread and appreciated in the Peninsula, its sonority adapting itself especially to the discrete lyricism and melancholic nostalgia, specific Lusitanian. Also specific to the Portuguese melos is the use of minor tonalities in most compositions. Testimonies of the epoch emphasize on the legato which Seixas used to give a vocal character to the instrument; it is not impossible for him to have acquired this art by practicing on the clavichord, an instrument on which the hands can gain deep experience in this field.

As regards the structure, Seixas consolidated the bipartite monothematic form, of large size, using enough harmonic freedom and successive modulations. His phrases are often asymmetric, reminding of improvisation. The emergence of a secondary idea encountered quite often and sometimes to the dominant, demonstrates the actuality of the musical thinking in relation to the rest of Europe, where in the sound space floated the incipient classical sonata. Usually, the second section is longer than the first one, the development being more elaborate; specific is its beginning with the initial theme in the base tonality, but the passage being different. There is rarely a tripartite structure, in which the third section is a true resumption. Santiago Kastner points out

the similarities in form between Seixas and Ph. Em. Bach, citing the temporal anticipation of the Portuguese, given that the more evolved Sonatas of Bach's son follow the death of Seixas (occurring in 1742) [5].

Seixas was the first Iberian composer who wrote sonatas with two or three parts. The second part is a minuet, often linked thematically to the previous part and in the same tonality, which is an extension of the sound vibration of the first part, a kind of postlude that turns the listener back to reality; in other cases, the minuet is not linked in any way to the first part, their existing even distant tonal relations that create violent contrasts. In the works with three parts, the final minute is preceded by another dance, usually a gigue.

One of the oldest sources is a manuscript entitled *Toccatas per Cembalo del sig.r Giuseppe Antonio Carlo e Seixas*, dated around mid 18th century, originating from Santa Cruz monastery in Coimbra, now kept at the National Library in Lisbon. Apart from this, there are known a Concert for harpsichord and string orchestra, *Sinfonia* and *Overture* for string orchestra, *Te Deum Laudamus* for 4 choruses, 10 Messes on 4 or 8 voices with various instrumentation and Motets on 2, 3 and 4 voices, with or without accompaniment.

3. Antonio Soler

Antonio Francisco Javier José Soler Ramos [9], known today as Padre Antonio Soler, was born in Spain, in Olot, in the province of Gerona in the Catalonia region. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but it is known that he was baptized on December 3 1729. Little Antonio learns the basics of music from his father (a musician in the regiment of Numancia), who, noting his son's beautiful voice from the age of six, enters him in the famous music school "Escolania" of the

Montserrat monastery, near Barcelona. At Montserrat, the future composer takes lessons of musical notation and solfeggio, organ, harpsichord, musical theory and composition, also having for his teacher the famous organist and composer of the time, José Elias.

During the time spent at the Catalan school, Antonio studied the most important compositions of Juan Cabanilles (the greatest Spanish organist of his epoch) and Miguel López (Benedictine monk, organist and choir master of Montserrat monastery, writer and composer, creator of an extremely valuable liturgical and non-liturgical poly-choral music). The influence of the two will be felt in some of the works Soler will compose at his maturity. Following the great progress he made at the school in Montserrat, Soler occupies at the age of 15 a position of maestro di capella at the cathedral Santa Iglesia in Lérida. The year 1752 is a turning point in Soler's existence because, on September 25, he enters the Order of Ieronimo's monks and, in the same year, he becomes the organist of the famous monastery El Escorial near Madrid, where he stays until the end of his life. At the end of the probation year for monks, Soler is described in the registers of Escorial as satisfactory in Latin, but with an exceptional ability for organ and composition. [4]. At the covenant of monasticism, which he makes on September 29, 1753, Soler composes a *Veni Creator* for 8 voices and string instruments, the preface to the manuscript of this work keeping one of the few portraits of Antonio Soler, of which Frederick Marvin says it could be a drawing by Soler himself [8].

Since 1757, Soler is also appointed maestro di cappella of the Escorial monastery. Apart from his duties as maestro di cappella, teacher at the monastery school and conductor of the boy

choir, a great part of the day he dedicated to religious obligations because he was a monk and priest.

In 1761, he writes a monumental theoretical work, which would attract many controversies [6], entitled "Llave de la Modulaci3n y Antiquedades de la M3sica" (Keys to Modulation and Origins of Music), a work in two volumes published in 1762.

From 1765, Soler starts his correspondence with Padre Martini; continuously composing numerous works, including his lessons for the harpsichord, in fact his numerous sonatas. An expert in mathematics and organ construction, he developed for his pupil, prince Gabriel of Spain, a keyboard instrument called *afinador* or *templante*, being meant to illustrate the differences between various types of tones or semitones [6]. The honour of being appointed teacher of the infant of Spain (of whom Soler will be a teacher from 1766 until the end of his life), comes as recognition of the exceptional merits of the great musician (organist, composer, pedagogue ...). Henceforth, many of his works composed for this type of instruments (120 sonatas for harpsichord, six concerts for two organs and six quintets for string quartet and organ) will be written for the infant to improve his musical training, the technique and interpretation necessary for playing keyboard instruments. After a life dedicated to God and music, Padre Antonio Soler dies at Escorial, on December 20, 1783.

Like in the case of Seixas, the musical path of Soler is influenced by the personality and creation of Domenico Scarlatti. We know that Scarlatti, whose pupil was Maria B3rbara herself, was part of the entourage of the Spanish Royal family (of Ferdinand 6th and Maria B3rbara, and later on that of Carlos IIIrd, who spent his summers at the Escorial), so

we can assume that Padre Soler met the great Italian composer and was familiar with his work. An argument in support of this statement we find on the back of the guard page of the 27 sonatas by Soler, printed by Robert Birchall in London in 1796, after the original manuscript that belonged to Viscount Fitzwilliam: 'The originals of these harpsichord lessons were given to me by Father Soler, at the Escorial, the 14th February, 1772. Father Soler had been instructed by Scarlatti'. [3]. Even though this is one of the issues on which modern musicology has not yet agreed, namely whether Soler was Scarlatti's student, the influence of the Italian composer upon Soler is indisputable.

3.1. Stylistic highlights in Soler's sonatas

The sonatas in one part for keyboard instruments (the chronology of these sonatas cannot be established because neither of the existent manuscripts is dated), in which is seen the influence of Scarlatti, have a modular structure consisting of the entwining of petty motifs which conjugate in wide arches, such as phrases or periods that, in their turn, accumulate in sections. Like their Scarlattian correspondents, Soler's sonatas were a way for the emancipation of instrumentalism, for the separation from the syncretism in which it coexisted with vocal music and dance. Although paying tribute to the influences of the epoch, Soler's sonatas keep the local specific just by appealing to Spanish folk melodies and rhythms. Thus reported to the specific lyricism of the songs and folk dances of Catalonia, to the syncopated and dancing rhythms specific to the bolero or jota, his sonatas express the exuberance and verve typical for the Spanish Baroque even if their author lived secluded behind the cold walls of the Escorial, in a rigid and austere

atmosphere of monastic cemetery [2]. Like Seixas, Soler also writes sonatas in three and four movements. These sonatas can, through the dancing character of certain parts (rondo, minuet, and gigue) or the polyphonic one (fugue, canon), refer to the organ schools of the XVIIth-XVIIIth and to that “stile antico” of the “sonata da chiesa” or “da camera”.

On the instrumental level, Soler is also the author of a famous Fandango of 450 measures [6], and the vocal works composed during these years (over 500 works) are an important part of his creation. We know he composed eight autos sacramentales and around 132 villancicos.

4. Conclusions

Portugal and Spain had to fight for their integration in the European art world. The geographical fatality removing them from Europe caused time delays in the art and musical field. While European music was enriched by countless ornaments, in the Portuguese one simplicity had the precedence, while trills, mordents and groupings were quite rare. The musical Baroque is not fully refined, but it emanates health, it breathes naturalness [5]. Nevertheless, we can say that the Portuguese musical Baroque rose to the European level, and due to the creative personality of Carlos Seixas, the most important Baroque Portuguese composer who, although far from the convergence of musical ideas and cohabitation with numerous European colleagues, it demonstrated originality, own initiative, independence of thought and creative potential. Regarding the Spanish music of the early 18th century, it is characterized by a period of decline. Living at the intersection of two creative epochs, namely the end of the Baroque era and the beginning of the classical one, the

emergence of Padre Antonio Soler in the Spanish music scene is a moment of maximum importance for it. The most important Spanish musician of the XVIIIth century succeeds through his work (which contains elements of real competitiveness with the other works of the epoch) to assert his personality within the national tradition and restore the brilliance of the Spanish music.

(English version by Gilda Cristina Marinescu)

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