

For starters, it must be said that Yardani Torres Maiani's 'starlit night' stems from an experiment. A sensory experiment, on the face of it, carried out through masterful work on the timbres and string tone that immerse the listener in a succession of musical pictures, with an atmosphere by turns soothing, exalted, or meditative. But also, an aesthetic experiment, operated through the unexpected synthesis between the underlying influence of classical music and the assimilated Gypsy heritage, profoundly marked by geographic displacement and empirical knowledge. The confluence of these two spheres is embodied here in the work of a committed violinist and composer, who is eager to reshuffle the cards of his flamenco lineage that is full of wonders as it is fraught with pitfalls. Thus, the pieces of Asteria are categorised by their style according to a typical classification of flamenco : their *palos*. But clearly (and here we touch on the unique originality of the result), the formal similarity with tradition ends there, and a new approach emerges.

In the words of its creator, Asteria is 'a state of mind' that is articulated in the course of a set of ten pieces, each of which reflects a 'direct spontaneous feeling'. And this is perhaps its key indebtedness to the original spirit of Andalusian music. Form and feeling unite, becoming one and the same when penned by Yardani. However, initial observance of this constraint soon leaves convention behind, liberating itself from facile effects and moving toward a remarkable space apt for autonomy. To describe the music that is created as a result by giving a brief list of influences is the surest way to miss its remarkable uniqueness, given how intimately its language reflects the musician's trajectory, from conscious inspiration to a clutch of unconscious memories : 'In this composition, I put everything there. My childhood travels across Europe with my parents, my career path, my musical inclinations. It's an ideal'.

One cannot grasp the essence of Asteria without linking it to its intimate geography which follows that of its composer. Spain represents its source and origin, coloring all the writing for the violin ; at times it is the heart and soul not just of the violin but also of the guitar, expressed in its phrasing and chord changes. It brings with it the *cante jondo* that we hear seeping through the melodic shapes (much more so than in the dance rhythms) : a form so firmly lodged in the fabric of this musical material that it can materialize at one conspiratorial wink (Fandango de Huelva) ! Besides, Spain's folk traditions, filtered through the lens of Baroque repertoire, already in themselves constitute the bedrock of references that directly resonate with the choice of instruments heard here. No sooner does one become aware of a cadential figure reminiscent of Scarlatti than hearing it dissolve into a series of chord changes in the latest fashion.

If we are indeed, as Yardani says, 'living in a age when, for the first time, we can look at our musical past in its entirety', in contexts ranging 'from early music to contemporary composition', neither the sensual buzzing of *El afilaor de Torremolinos*, nor the Piazzolla-inflected harmonies of the *Lamento gitano* (to take only these examples) will disprove his premise. To consider the music of his origins, the beloved oral tradition of his childhood at the completion of his studies in classical music – taking into account all that this entails in terms of distance and theoretical baggage – perhaps this gives a clue of the inner workings of Asteria, a work whose realisation was the fruit of a long period of gestation and new philosophical awareness.

Indeed, flamenco, in its purest expression, is relatively unknown even to the inhabitants of Andalusia themselves, and the general public often equates it with a sum of characteristic, spectacular effects and timbres, while in fact it is a music of mystery and of the moment. And, like any music that is firmly rooted in its history and in its *terroir*, flamenco has been and continues to be exploited by the political sphere. That's why taking a fresh look also means changing focus.

The aims are precise, and the pattern from the very first bars generates a music score 'written out in detail and at the same time conducive to an interplay between the voices' explains Elisabeth Geiger, the harpsichordist of the ensemble – in short, this music is set down on paper but not frozen. The harpsichord is at the center of Asteria's soundscape. With its handsome androgynous tone, it can probe different registers, facilitating harmonic changes and articulation. A sonority that sings and narrates, and when necessary, is capable of setting the stage. All of this is aided by the guitar which in the score is given fine opportunities for moments of improvisatory freedom. Its composite sound, halfway between acoustic and electric, creates an opening in the sonic palette. From continuo to jazz,

this pair of plucked string instruments, from two different traditions, shares a legacy of orchestral transcription and improvisation. Violin II performs its duties with a dexterity that at times borders on the impossible (at least, one imagines so), given that the score is teeming with technical challenges and innovation. Time and again, Violin II is in the foreground. As it was never Yardani's intention to write an accompanimental part, the sense of give and take is constant. As for the cello, one can easily guess the fascination that its sound exerts on the composer's creativity – 'To this day I still wonder why I'm not a cellist', he says with a twinkle in his eye. In *Amaro Drom* (tangos flamencos), violin and cello lead a dance of seduction in which the dynamics of attraction/rejection echo the cosmic theme of the work's title. Two planets revolve around one other in a perpetual and ascending motion – in a metaphor for a journey that will never come to an end. It is also worth noting the judicious use of the double bass, whose grounding pulse, so musical and supple, anchors the framework of *Asteria*.

In the middle, his bow serving as a conductor's baton, Yardani Torres Maiani seems to be the synthesis in action of all this power currents. His origins as a wanderer have engendered these nine pieces which, listened to individually, could give the impression of appropriate versatility. An impression that is quickly dispelled when the entire opus is heard altogether – because it is indeed a single work that we have here. The organic unity that emerges from it could be compared to a painted altarpiece whose glory can only be fully appreciated – from a few meters off – when all the panels have been unfolded. A work that has the acumen for bringing out emotion, that lends itself to being the object of concentration, and that gives life to images. One of which serves to connect, parse, unite, stir the vortex of all the poetic themes inherent in the work itself : 'The entire region of Saintes-Maries and the Camargue is for me the wellspring where I can find my creative inspiration. In Spain, during Holy Week, it is famously said that the *saeteros** « sing for the Virgin » (*'le canta a la Virgen'*) during the procession. In my compositions, I can say that it is from this impulse that I figuratively want to « sing to the Saint » (Sarah), to the Saints (Marie-Jacobé and Marie-Salomé), and to this wild and indomitable character.'

The town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is thus at the core of *Asteria*'s musical models. They represent the connection between the labyrinthine inner workings of a child and the artistic imagination of a young man, they blur notions of time and space, and erase boundaries. Along the lagoons where wild flora and fauna rustle and stir, the sea drives back sparkling pebbles washed up by the tide, leaving them aground on the large saline expanses. In the distance, the Romanesque church, like an ark awaiting its day, dominates the landscape ; for a split second, one could imagine it was only a short walk away. It is here that everything ends and begins with the cycle of life, it is here that many artists , from Van Gogh to Hemingway, from Manitas de Plata to Picasso, had come to find their creative impulse. For Yardani and throughout his initiation, the impulse could simultaneously be an imaginary Andalusia, so dear to a Gypsy heart, or this Provençal *terroir* with its endearing personalities whose faces are chiselled by the mistral. During a Holy Week procession, the village becomes the centre of the world, subject to a never diminished devotion. But for the artist in search of his ideal, the place becomes a gateway to the realms waiting to be explored.

ENGE HELMSTETTER

Translation : Mike Sklansky