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## Holy Week in Cuenca

The Semana de Música Religiosa de Cuenca (30 March – 8 April 2007) is one of the longest-established annual music festivals in Spain: this was its 46th year, and it is clearly set to continue for the foreseeable future, thanks to the financial commitment of the various national, regional and local bodies, as well as the Fundación Caja Madrid. Cuenca is, in fact, a two-hour drive from Madrid, in the direction of Valencia, and very much in the middle of nowhere in the flat plains of Castilla La Mancha. The old part of the town, constructed on the side of a dramatic ravine and famous for its 'casas colgadas' (literally, 'hanging houses') built into the sheer rock face, retains its medieval character and is an important tourist attraction, particularly in Holy Week when the *nazarenos*, the members of the many different confraternities, process, day and night, through the streets wearing robes and pointed hats in their respective colours, and carrying their impressive floats (*carros*) with polychrome sculptures of the various stages of the Passion of Christ and the figure of the Virgin. This local colour, as it might be described in a tourist brochure, not only forms a striking backdrop to the festival, but also forms an integral part of the urban sound-world during this long week of concerts dedicated to sacred music, talks and liturgical ceremonies. For all these reasons, the SMR is a very special kind of cultural event in which the performative spaces and the prevailing atmosphere are an essential part of the whole, rather as is the case with the Aldeburgh Festival (though in other ways very different from it).

This was Artistic Director Pilar Tomás's second year, and the first for which she has been responsible for the whole of the programming, which, though not entirely dedicated to early music, features it strongly. This year one of the themes of the festival was the mass, represented in a range of different settings from Pierre de la Rue, through Monteverdi and Bach, to Beethoven, Bruckner and Stravinsky. The concerts were as high-profile, international and impressive as has been the case for some years, but there is a noticeable development in the matching of performative space to concert programme, in part taking advantage of the gradual restoration of churches in the old quarter, and enhancing the essence

of the musical repertory. The modern Teatro Auditorio, situated almost at the bottom of the ravine, opposite the hanging houses, is an attractive and comfortable small concert hall, with a clear but slightly dry acoustic. Gustav Leonhardt's programme of three Bach masses with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the superb English Voices suffered somewhat in this context. Leonhardt, whose organ recital in the cathedral of music by Buxtehude, Hassler, Pachelbel, Bach, Correa de Araujo, Cabanilles, Martín y Coll and Blow (among other composers!) was a model of clear articulation, seemed to regard the small choir as a mini-rank of organ pipes, their voices clean and articulated, but largely devoid of expression and variation in intensity, this being exacerbated by the reverential tempos he adopted. This approach might have worked better in a more resonant acoustic, such as that of the cathedral, but in the concert hall it all came across as rather clipped and unsustained. English Voices did, indeed, sing Domenico Scarlatti's so-called 'Madrid' Mass in the cathedral at the service on Easter Day, and the sound easily filled the space with a much more direct and uplifting approach.

The cathedral was the focus for the various liturgical celebrations held throughout Holy Week. It was quite something to experience the ceremonies of the Triduo Sacro there, with plainchant sung by Juan Carlos Asensio's excellent Schola Antiqua. Particularly striking was the reciting of the St John Passion on Good Friday, preceded by the Adoration of the Holy Cross. Both the liturgical 'choreography', especially of the procession of the Holy Cross (accompanied by the chanting of the 'Ecce lignum', the antiphon 'Crucem tuam', the Improperia and the hymn 'Crux fidelis'), and the austere, yet dramatic singing of the Passion with just three singers (the Evangelist, Christ and one other to take the parts of Pilate, Peter and the *turba*), clearly differentiated (and thus dramatized) by the simple expedient of three different vocal registers, made a strong impression. It was as if recent centuries has been peeled away, and yet, outside the cathedral, and clearly audible within it during the liturgy, were other musics, primarily the drums and municipal bands accompanying the floats of the *nazarenos* with their mournful, penitent marches. A Charles Ivesian experience, perhaps, but whether such Good Friday urban processions impinged sonorously on the celebration of the liturgy in the cathedral choir in this way from medieval times is not clear.