

Discovering Leonardo Leo: An Interview with Miguel Ulla

The Spanish label HR Recordings has an extensive and always interesting catalog. In the spirit of adventurous and richly rewarding repertoire, countertenor Miguel Ulla has released two discs of music by Leonardo Leo. It was a pleasure to speak with Miguel about this music, and what it means to him.

The focus will probably fall on Leo here, given that these are first recordings of fascinating repertoire, but would you first like to introduce yourself, your background (including significant teachers and places of learning), and how your collaboration with HR Recordings came about, and then how the present two discs were born?

First of all, thank you for this interview and for helping to promote these outstanding works that have been forgotten over time.

My name is Miguel Ulla; I am currently 25 years old. From a very young age, I became interested in early music: I studied the harpsichord for nine years, percussion for 10 years and, also, four years of cornetto, beside from singing, which I have been studying and performing singing continuously since I was seven. From a very young age, I found in Baroque vocal music (especially 17th century-ish) a raw and sincere beauty that has always moved me. I was fortunate enough to study with the great countertenor Gérard Lesne, from whom I learned what is now my technical approach: the *old school* of countertenors, a way more individualistic path than today's vision, where technique sprang from textuality and its affections, with declamation taking precedence over "impressive" virtuosity. As well as Gérard, despite offering a less chamber-music-oriented approach, the contralto Sonia Prina taught me greatly about pure bravura. With her, you could experience the opera in every note.

Along this path, the guitarist Agustín Maruri, owner of the Spanish record label HR Recordings, listened to my ideas as well as recent performances and offered to record them. We were planning through some projects, including Leo's cantatas, and we decided to start this journey, which was a great joy. It seemed to me profoundly unfair that these works had been forgotten for so long, and recording them as well as casting the musicians that were up to deep research on

them seemed financially out of reach; the fact that someone was willing to back this project was almost miraculous.

Would you care to introduce Leonardo Leo the composer for readers who might not know too much about him, and how you came to know these cantatas?

In terms of musical and vocal quality, the so-called Neapolitan school of composers was undoubtedly a benchmark throughout Europe; composers such as Alessandro Scarlatti, Leonardo Leo, Francesco Durante, and others were the foremost exponents of the musical art of their time; without them, the history of music would have been completely different. But curiously, something quite paradoxical is happening today: those composers, once so highly regarded and objectively good and important, now find that much of their music is largely unknown.

Personally, I believe they represent the pinnacle of Baroque vocal music; one need only listen to arias such as “Dormi o fulmine di guerra” by Alessandro Scarlatti to be moved to the very core. In 2019, I had the opportunity to receive a few short lessons and some advice from the countertenor Filippo Mineccia, whom I greatly admire. Shortly afterwards, he sang some of these cantatas in Madrid, and I fell in love with them; their beauty and expressiveness moved me deeply. From that moment on, I began to research and study them, and above all, I was surprised that no one had ever recorded them.

What part do these cantatas play in Leo's overall output? Are they supplementary to the operas? And why haven't they been recorded before? (These are all world premiere recordings.)

Leo was a truly accomplished composer; he is best known for his operatic works, but in my view, he is at his most brilliant in the realm of chamber music: for example, at his *Salve Regina* and, of course, these cantatas. I have no hesitation in saying that they are every bit as good as Handel's Italian ones; in fact, I believe these are even more masterful.

I honestly don't understand why no one has recorded them until now; I think there is a certain disregard these days for the smaller repertoire, consisting solely of continuo and voice.

This does feel like a labor of love. Do you have a particular passion for the music of Leo, and if so, how did it develop?

Yes, I am someone who follows my heart, and when I first heard them, I was so moved that I wanted to study them, bring together people who shared my faith in this project, and, finally, record them. Music this good should be accessible to everyone, and I wanted with all my heart to make my own sincere contribution.

What, to you, makes his music special? And relatedly, stylistically, which aspects would you say are individual to Leo? Some very expressive descending sequences in “Di Dolchezza,” for example (from Adorato Giesù) spring to mind, but also Leo’s expressive use of “tangy” dissonance.

I firmly believe that singing stems from the text and its recitation; the themes of these cantatas are, for the most part, the Last Judgment, the judgment of the soul, redemption from sin, and lamentation for a dissolute life; the arias are supplications, laments, and songs of hope. With such poetic depth and Leo’s vivid imagination, the result can only be something truly moving. Furthermore, its minimalist format of just continuo and voice means that it sometimes feels like an intimate dialogue, almost like a prayer.

Which composers might Leo be likened to? I notice from IMSLP that “Tu che malora dice,” for example, has been attributed also to both Palestrina and Gregorio Sceroli (1722–81); and in parts of “D’esser marmo” I hear references to the Monteverdian madrigal!

Leo possesses something that all great composers share; he is a melting pot of many others, yet everything is filtered through his own personal style, so that when you hear him, you know it is him. The declamation and textuality of the greats of the *seconda pratica* such as Monteverdi, Cavalli, and Caccini. The long, highly ornamented vocal lines of giants such as Alessandro Scarlatti; even the very Neapolitan virtuosity of the castrati, with their almost spoken singing, inhabits these cantatas. Leo is Naples: crowded, bustling streets coexisting with churches that can be the highest exponent of the Baroque. Without that sense of life, viewed purely from a musicological perspective, these cantatas would be utterly boring.

Is it fair to say that Leo is best known for his operas? And what was his part in the development of the 18th-century Neapolitan style?

Without a doubt, Leo is best known for his operas, as the theatrical genre is always more impressive and eye-catching. Rather than any specific contribution, his legacy was to enrich musical art and expand its repertoire. Honestly, for me, all the composers of the Neapolitan school—Scarlatti, Fago, Pergolesi, Leo, Porpora...—are wonderful and, as a singer, I consider them the pillars of *bel canto* which, from my point of view, was born at this point.

Do you class Leo as fully Baroque, or are there aspects that look forward to the early Classical era? Expansive melody, for example; similarly, are there elements that look back (the extraordinary “Tu mio Dio” from Dove fuggo might be an example of the latter, perhaps?)

That really is a brilliant question. To me, these cantatas still feel very Baroque; I sense a greater sense of antiquity in this music than in his operas, but there are glimpses that already hint to a new horizon of musical result. Still, to me they're very Baroque, which is what I prefer.

The intersection of church and secular musics—how much of secular music does Leo incorporate into his spiritual music? I'm thinking in particular of the dance music aspects of “Spera” from the first cantata of the six, but also of the opening section of “Polve sono” from Tremolanti d'intorno; the use of both organ and guitar/percussion is extraordinary.

The writing of these cantatas, despite consisting of just two parts (the basso continuo and the vocal part), reveals a distinctly Baroque style; the dances are a prime example of this, and the aria “Spera” is undoubtedly a fine illustration. My choice of continuo instruments (Baroque guitar and organ) was intended to further emphasize the aria's dancelike and almost folk-inspired character; I also added an idea of my own to the *da capo* which I believe further enhanced the theatricality of the cantata: in the *da capo*, when I say “spera”—meaning “wait”—my “soul” (performed very beautifully by the soprano Irene Guerrero Cediel) replies from afar, “spero”—a small detail that takes the music from the theoretical to the practical and representational. Similarly, to delve deeper into the practice of improvisation—especially with a score so minimalist yet at the same time so complete—the aria “Polve sono” had a Baroque fandango hidden within its continuo, so I suggested improvising a short introduction with a fandango, which I accompanied myself on the tambourine (an instrument commonly seen in popular Neapolitan culture). This was also to lend greater

authenticity to the soundscape; furthermore, the continuo in this aria was performed on the organ and a *chitarra battente*, a traditional instrument from that region of Italy which was particularly prevalent in the early 18th century.

Will you be including full texts and translations in the final release? I note each cantata has its own “tinta,” its own flavor: would that be fair? There seems palpable darkness to S’offendesti il mio Signor, for example, “Da quel fioretti” from Tremolanti d’intorno is not just dark, but fragile, exposed—and not just vocally, but emotionally also. What challenges does this varied emotional landscape pose for the interpreter?

And in pure performance terms, what technical challenges for you are there here, as a singer? Range? Diction? (This last is wonderful from you—every word is so clear!) ... and is another challenge how to allow for clarity of the words against the need for a smooth legato at times?

We are currently working on the printed edition; it should be ready by this summer. We will try to include as much information as possible so that the audience can gain a more detailed understanding of the project. Indeed, each cantata is a world unto itself; each offers a fresh perspective. They are works of great originality, which makes the music technically very complex.

The challenge remains in being able to express and convey all the nuances and emotions of the text without compromising the vocal line. I believe that the beauty of singing lies not in the sound but in the expressiveness; that is why, in this music, we must tread that fine line between the expressive and the histrionic. People like Dominique Visse or Pino de Vittorio are, for me, points of reference when it comes to stepping outside the “correct” aesthetic and entering the realm of theater, for there is nothing more Baroque than the most extreme mannerism.

Another element that is extremely difficult for the singer but deeply necessary is to cultivate surprise; the Baroque must surprise, so as to stir the soul from within, as one is not shielded by the beauty and cushioning of an orchestra; one must bring greater variety to avoid falling into monotony. I believe that correctness without meaning kills this repertoire; perhaps that is why it is performed so rarely nowadays.

... and related to that, and more specifically, what are your thoughts on decoration/diminution in this music? Especially on the “A¹” section in an ABA¹ aria?

I believe in spontaneity; great vocal treatises of the period, such as that by Pier Francesco Tosi, tell us, among many other things, of the singer’s ability to improvise new variations on the spot—something I always put into practice. By the end of studying a piece and those surrounding it, one unconsciously absorbs ideas that are then applied to the *da capo* sections in an organic way. Personally, I believe *da capo* sections should not be excessive; it is a matter of ornamentation, and using that ornamentation to emphasize something further, not to transform it into something different.

Fernando Reyes is an astonishing player—I’m thinking of his many contributions, but in particular the final recitative of the first cantata, prior to “Spera.” He uses a wide spread of instruments (theorbo, archlute, Baroque guitar, chitarra, battente, colascione), right? There is an astonishing variety in single movements, too (that first recitative of Tremolanti d’intorno), while the dissonances he brings to “Tu mio Dio” from Dove fuggo carry real weight. How did you decide which instruments to use when? Was it an agreement between all the musicians or did Reyes himself decide? Or are they notated in the score?

Fernando Reyes is a wonderful performer: as well as being a specialist in early plucked string instruments, he is the director of his early music ensemble Resonet, which is primarily dedicated to reviving the musical heritage of the Camino de Santiago and exploring the intersection between traditional and Baroque music. I worked with him from a very young age and, above all, learned from him. To remark on one of his teachings, I clearly understood that there are many ways to approach the basso continuo; today we are mostly accustomed to the cello, harpsichord and theorbo, but that is just one of the thousands of options that existed at the time. For this project, I wanted to seek out sounds that, despite being entirely historical, are very exotic nowadays. The theorbo, archlute and Baroque guitar bring beauty but still fit within today’s norm; however, the colascione—a huge three-stringed Neapolitan lute (deeply popular in the Baroque era)—and the *chitarra battente* bring a new dimension to this music. The choice of instruments stems from reflection on the period,

from working on these cantatas, and from the search; fortunately, the score says nothing—it is simply basso continuo and voice.

And Javier Jiménez is a fine organist—would you care to introduce him? I know he has also recorded for HR Recordings. And was this a portative organ he used? I know it's built by Acitores Organería y Arte, with limited stops.

Javier Jiménez is an extraordinary organist, as well as a theologian and a highly cultured musician, having written books on such important topics as the evolution of plainchant.

In this case, we used the same instrument for both volumes: a positive organ built by Federico Acitores, a highly skilled Spanish organ builder. It is a very versatile instrument, as its powerful sound makes it suitable even for solo repertoire. Ideally, I would have liked to use a church organ with a stop layout suitable for this repertoire, as at the time the box organ we see today in the continuo section did not exist as such; even so, as this organ has greater sound power, it fulfils the function of a large organ, and that is undoubtedly the most important thing.

Were there any challenges for editions/manuscripts? Were you working from a copy of the MS?

For convenience, I used the transcribed edition by Cantata Editions, which is quite good. But I also compared it with a copy of the manuscript to be on the safe side.

How do you determine the order of playing on the CDs? Is it possible to determine a chronological order? “Sono piene,” which ends Volume One, is just the perfect close, for example, its final aria, “Solo e Dio quel bene” magnificently interior, and yet it builds in intensity with some extraordinary organ contributions.

The order does not correspond to the actual order of the manuscript; it is the order I thought would sound most pleasing, with separate volumes in mind, so that it would be a pleasant listen, and never become tedious

I see there are different recording venues for each disc—what adjustments needed to be made? Did you allocate certain cantatas to each venue according

to suitability? If so, what were the criteria? Do you have a trusted engineer or producer you prefer to work with?

To be honest, I'd love to say there was more planning involved, but we basically recorded wherever we were allowed to. Luckily, both venues were churches with wonderful acoustics for this repertoire, and we had a relaxed atmosphere and a lot of respect for our work. The sound engineer was the same for both productions: Sean Murray. It's a pleasure to work with him, as he prioritizes naturalness above anything else, which I wholeheartedly agree with. I love recording as if it was a concert (obviously, with no audience), as organically as possible. Of course, every album involves some editing, but personally I prefer to record entire arias several times and, in most cases, choose the take that captures the natural feel of a live performance—that's part of the essence of this music.

Finally, thank you for widening my appreciation of this composer! Previously, it was a Christophe Rousset recording of Leo's Beatus vir (a coupling for the Alpha recording of Pergolesi's Stabat Mater) I knew well, and sundry smaller pieces in recording. To have two full discs is a real treat!

Thank you so much, Colin, for your kind words.

LEO Dove fuggo à che penso. S'offendesti il mio Signor. Sono piene di serene • Miguel Ulla (ct); Fernando Reyes (tiorba, archlute, Baroque gtr); Javier Jiménez (org) • HR 262 (41:47)

LEO Vissi nol niego. Tremolanti d'intorno. Adorato Giesù • Miguel Ulla (ct); Fernando Reyes (tiorba, archlute, Baroque gtr, chitarra battente, colascione); Javier Jiménez (org) • HR 388 (48:14)

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