

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 (42:36) Reviewed from a FLAC download: 96 kHz/24-bit multichannel

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 (48:00) Reviewed from a FLAC download: 96 kHz/24-bit multichannel

It's long been a pet theory of mine that precisely because the forms and structures of Baroque music were so rigid and confining, given a basic level of professional training and acumen it was quite easy to compose artistically acceptable Baroque music. I once outlined that idea to a church organist of my acquaintance, and he looked at me rather blankly and said, "But what about Bach?" My reply was that, if anything, Bach had to have an even greater level of genius than, say, Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner to compose masterpieces within the strict confines of the Baroque style.

Leonardo Leo (1694–1744) was an almost exact contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), but as far as imagination were concerned the two were almost on different planets. Bach so towered over the musical scene of his time that even during a period in which his reputation was in the doldrums (before Mendelssohn took him out of mothballs in 1829 with his revival of the *St. Matthew Passion*), Beethoven, punning on the name "Bach" (German for "brook"), said, "He should not have been called Brook, but Ocean!" Judging from the works heard here, no one was going to make a similar comment about this Lion of Music.

Leo, born in San Vito degli Schiavoni in what was then the Kingdom of Naples, was best known in his time as an opera composer. He wrote 49 of them, in both *seria* and *buffa* veins. Many of his *opere buffe* were sung in the Neapolitan dialect. He has 49 listings in the *Fanfare* Archive, but aside from two complete operas most of these are of concertos recorded on compilation discs showcasing the Italian Baroque in general and the Neapolitan Baroque in particular. There are also two discs of excerpts from Baroque operas featuring "name" singers like Joyce di Donato and Cecelia Bartoli that include arias by Leo as well as his better-known contemporaries (Handel, Gesualdo, Porpora, Hasse, Braun).

The *Six Sacred Cantatas* heard here are examples of perfectly good Baroque vocal music. The only surprise is that the texts are in Italian instead of in Latin, which was then usually considered *de rigueur* for sacred music in Italy. Leo plays by the rules of the form and gives the singer ample opportunities for display within the confines of Baroque traditions. There's nothing particularly interesting about the music—none of the sudden leaps of imagination that make Bach and (to a lesser extent) Vivaldi worth listening to today. But it's certainly pleasant and inoffensive.

What makes this release worth your attention despite the unmemorability of the music is the passion and intensity of the quite remarkable singer performing it. Miguel Ulla Berdullas (to use the full name on his website) is a 25-year-old countertenor. Born December 1, 2000 in A Coruña, Spain, he sang as a child with the Coro del Niños Cantores of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia until his voice changed. Then he moved to Madrid and trained as a countertenor, beginning at 15 under Fernando Balboa and fellow countertenor Gérard Lesne.

Given the sheer power and drive of Ulla's singing here, it's time to put to rest all the dumb jokes that have been made over the years about countertenors. Ulla is part of a new generation of singers that have made the countertenor as legitimate a vocal type for men as any other. Interestingly, the Cantata Editions publication of *Sei Cantate Spirituali* lists the vocal type as "alto," but Ulla has no problem with the range and technical demands of this music. His collaborators include organist Javier Jiménez, who has relatively little to do; and Fernando Reyes on theorbo, archlute, and Baroque guitar, who has a great deal to do and adds a lot to the musicality of the material. Miguel Ulla is a singer I'd definitely like to hear more of, hopefully next time in more interesting music than this. **Mark Gabrish Conlan**

This article originally appeared in Issue 50:1 (Sept/Oct 2026) of *Fanfare Magazine*.