

JUAN MARTÍN**FLAMENCO ENSEMBLE**

The Bridgewater Hall,

Manchester. 4 February, 2009.

In the context of a dreary winter, a concert by Juan Martín's Flamenco Ensemble was exactly what we needed. A capacity audience of 1800 people attended what has become one of the most popular musical celebrations of Spanish culture. This was part of the Ensemble's extended tour covering venues from Edinburgh to Salisbury and back again to Birmingham, York, Keswick, Lincolnshire, Aberystwyth, etc., scheduled to culminate at the Barbican, London, on 21 May.

First came solos by Juan Martín, *Tarantas*, *Zambra mora*, and *Zapateado*, an intense and reflective opening with guitaristic fireworks provided towards the end of the set. Then the whole Ensemble moved on stage to accompany Raquel de Luna and Salvador Moreno (El Tigre) in *Sevillanas*. The supporting musicians were Manuel Jiménez (guitar, *cante*), Paul Fawcus (clarinet) and Chris Karam (percussion). Following this appetising taste of the *baile*, it was time for *Bulerías* as a guitar duo, performed with precision and great rhythmic energy.

The joyful dance of the *Alegrías* came next, Raquel de Luna having changed from a stunning red dress into an equally eye-catching red and white. With Manuel Jiménez singing, Raquel de Luna offered a dramatic routine, ending with sweat and make-up running down her face and the audience on its feet. It was one of those dances that continued in ever more energetic gyrations, drawing whistles and shouts from all corners of the hall. Next, El Tigre gave a superbly balletic and impassioned rendering of the *Farruca* (watched by Raquel now wearing a black dress as she accompanied with *palmas*). Juan Martín and Manuel Jiménez achieved an almost orchestral resonance in their accompaniment, the latter, though only in his early twenties, proving an ideal partner.

The first half concluded with *La Feria*, a gorgeous *rumba*, and a *Granadinas* leading into *Bulerías*, in which, apart from the abundance of precision and magnificence demonstrated here, the expressive *cante* of Manuel Jiménez was a particular pleasure.

After the interval, a change of mood and pace provided a reminder of the Arabic roots of flamenco, beginning with a *zambra* entitled *From Damascus to Córdoba* performed by guitar, clarinet and percussion. Prominent here was not only the subtle oriental intonations of the clarinet, but the remarkable drumming of Chris Karam, an Australian of Greek origin, who has performed in Juan Martín's ensembles for many years. Three Sephardic Songs *The Flowers in May*, *Come and Love Me*, and *I Fell in Love* by the same group followed, guitar and woodwind sharing the melodic line.

The flamenco mood resumed with *Rondeña*, Paul, Chris, El Tigre and Juan, evoking in impressive colours the city of Ronda. This led on to *Picasso Portrait* and a memory of the occasion when Juan Martín performed for the great artist and was told to re-create in music the feeling of Picasso's paintings as he thought best. For this item, Chris Karam produced wonderful rhythmic effects with the Brazilian percussion instrument, the *capasa*, aided and abetted by skilful use of high-hat and cymbal.

Tangos (Andalusian and not from Argentina), performed by Raquel, Manuel and Juan, came next, the dancer again demonstrating every elegant twist and turn, and receiving thunderous applause. This was matched by a *Solea*, where El Tigre, to the singing of Manuel Jiménez and the inventive guitar of Juan Martín, poured on episode after episode of dramatic movement, once more arousing the audience to prolonged acclamation.

The evening concluded with the entire Ensemble in *Bulerías*, Raquel and El Tigre giving us a rapturous display of skill, energy

and synchronised movement very beautiful to watch. There was no need for encores as every dance had been taken to its conclusion and beyond in terms of stamina and *bravura*. After many acknowledgements to the audience Juan Martín was escorted from the stage doing his own flamenco dance, surrounded by colleagues. The audience was by this time standing to offer its rapturous approval, for no other response would have been appropriate.

We have to thank Juan Martín whose zest and imagination brought about this brilliant demonstration of the vitality of Spanish music and dance. It is almost 40 years since I first heard him play and he has evolved into a national treasure, a master of the guitar, loved by supporters throughout the world and an artist of great sensitivity and charisma. The overall quality of the performance was that of a formidable team of virtuosic musicians and dancers who unstintingly communicated their enthusiasm with the audience. After such warmth and passion it was a shock to find an English winter was waiting for us outside the door for in our hearts we were still in Andalusia.

Graham Wade

XUEFEI YANG

Wigmore Hall, London

6 February 2009

Xuefei Yang's solo recital was well-attended despite the heavy snowfalls that had brought much of Britain to a standstill throughout the week. She established a serene atmosphere with her opening piece – John Dowland's *Praeludium* and *Pavane* from *Lachrimae* which was marred by a memory lapse, although she did manage to disguise it as much as possible. She followed this with J. S. Bach's *Lute Suite in E, BWV 1006a* played with great determination in the *Prelude* and then she relaxed in the *Loure* second movement. Her ornamentation was elegant and expressive and the *Gavotte en Rondeau* had a pleasing freshness of feeling each time the rondo theme returned. For the *Rêverie Nocturne, Op. 19* by