

PROGRAM NOTES

Resonancias de África en el Nuevo Mundo, the subtitle of this program, highlights the African presence in baroque music of the New World, based on research by Guatemalan musicologist Omar Morales Abril.

With the Portuguese expeditions to the west coast of Africa in the middle of the fifteenth century and the founding of the lucrative *Casa dos escravos* in Lisbon in 1486, the image of *el negro* in the urban society of the Iberian peninsula became one of an exotic and mythical giant, an image that spread progressively to the West Indies with the expanding slave trade, which brought a great number of African captives to work in the fields, workshops, and mines following the decimation of the indigenous population at the hands of the European colonials.

This African image and presence on both sides of the Atlantic coincided with the Golden Age of Hispanic literature and contributed to the gradual absorption of popular expression into the existing cultural fabric as court poets and musicians adopted forms and rhythms of the streets. Correspondingly, poetry and music of tradition in the new world simply absorbed the cultural expression of the Africans and their descendants. Although set in the form of the European cantata, the *villancico* with its *estribillo* and *coplas* (verse and refrain) came directly from what was being sung in the pueblos. This integration of African culture into the Spanish and Portuguese society opened the way to a variety of stereotyped languages such as *hablo de negro* and *guineo*, literary dialects created to mimic the African ones. These were simply deformed versions of Spanish and Portuguese with some invented words whose sounds caricatured African speech. Certainly the form in which this was most evident was the *villancico religioso*. During the 16th century it became increasingly common in the Hispanic churches to introduce *chanzoetas* in the vernacular during the office of Matins on the most popular feasts of the liturgical year. These were often in the form of villancicos, which became more and more requested as the next century advanced. During the year, on each feast and in nearly every church in the Portuguese and Spanish dominions, eight or nine villancicos would be performed based on the theme of the feast, particularly at Christmas. The tone was always comic and very theatrical; the examples which have survived are often in the form of a dialogue, a story as introduction followed by a discussion between two or more personages. These were, of course, normally the stereotypical *negros* from the popular theaters, and the favored elements were songs and dances with drums. The titles were *cumbé*, *zumbé*, *paracumbé*, *zarambeque*, *quivirigay*, an infinite variety, recognizable as *guineos*, meant to mimic African speech rhythms and sounds.

These villancicos portray the Africans strictly through the vision of poets and musicians in the service of a colonial power. However, despite the somewhat patronizing slant, they richly manifest not only the human dimension of the slaves but also the cultural riches of the black population of Spanish America, its rhythms, its fantasy, its ways of celebrating, its extroverted joy, and vital energy. All this was done, however, without portraying directly the voices or sounds of a people but only their resonance within another tradition.

—Sebastian Zubieta