

nius, and that Spain—which never went through feudalism—may have provided a context, then unique in Europe, for a woman to exert leadership. Born in 1451, she was the contemporary of Christopher Columbus (b. 1451) and Leonardo da Vinci (b. 1452). When one thinks of these titans reaching their still-youthful maturity as 40-year-olds in 1492, one has a fitting sense of the Golden Age that many believed was dawning, in the midst of an apocalyptic crisis in Europe.

Her strategic vision, guided by an increasing conviction that she was the instrument of Divine Providence, changed the face of the world, and was decisive in the wondrous process of evangelization of the Americas that unfolded after 1492. Isabella's role, before and after her death in 1504, was as important as the navigational genius and determination of Christopher Columbus, or the military and political acumen of Hernán Cortés. It was surely under her lasting inspiration that such men as the dedicated missionary Pedro de Gante, the city-builder Viceroy Antonio Mendoza, and other figures imbued with the spirit of the Renaissance in the wake of Erasmus, Thomas More, and Cardinal Cisneros, made their enduring contributions to the civilization of New Spain.

Under Ferdinand and Isabella, a garland of new universities sprang up in Spain in the 1480s and 1490s, setting the example for the universities that would be founded in the

Americas in the next century. The Italian and Flemish Renaissances in art and music were imported into Spain with staggering speed.

Most astonishing, for this reviewer, are Rubin's accounts of Isabella's role in the military efforts of the Reconquista. She was the quartermaster of the Spanish Army; it was she who expedited the "army corps of engineers." She created Europe's first military field hospitals. She organized the supplies of matériel, food, and other necessities, and guaranteed the supply lines that made the victories possible. No wonder her mere appearance in camp was seen by Christian troops and Moorish enemy alike, as a harbinger of Castilian victory.

Although not written in a "scholarly" style, the book is footnoted and indexed, and has a bibliography and an excellent black and white picture section. Those so inclined, can check out Mrs. Rubin's sources; there is plenty of room for disagreement with some of her judgments. Especially questionable is the impression she seeks to give, that it was all downhill after Isabella died, which she blames on the Hapsburg side of the Spanish dynasty. Yet the overall effect of the book is bound to be that of increasing respect and knowledge for the Golden Age of Spain among English-speaking readers. I recommend it as a gift for young people, and as reading for all students of the Renaissance.

Isabelline music: a sample

"From a Spanish Palace Songbook: Music from the Time of Christopher Columbus," is the enticing name of a compact disc released by Hyperion (CDA 66454), featuring a British group: alto Margaret Philpot, with Shirley Rumsey and Christopher Wilson on an assortment of soft-voiced Renaissance string instruments (lutes, vihuelas).

The 25 pieces include nine by Juan del Encina—a pivotal figure in music, drama, and verse in late 15th-century Castile—and composers variously Italian-named or Spanish, plus six anonymous ones. All come from the *Cancionero del Palacio* or Palace Songbook, still preserved after nearly 500 years in the royal palace in Madrid. It is a repository of polyphonic song, compiled over four decades, most probably in the repertory of the court of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Encina dedicated several prose works to Prince Juan, Isabella's only son, whose early death in 1497 was the biggest single tragedy in the queen's life. Juan, an accomplished singer, liked to hold *a cappella* performances of such music during siesta-time, with one voice to a part or several boy singers on the top line. Alfredo Mendoza's "Schola Cantorum" of Mexico City performs Encina's

songs in this way today. The present CD exploits different (to my ear, less satisfying) modes, solo song accompanied by vihuela, lute or harp; or a purely instrumental rendition. While all the songs are notated for vocal polyphony, they were often performed in all these ways.

The music's appeal does not arise from its complexity. Lush counterpoint was brought to Spain later, by Isabella's grandson, Charles V, from Flanders. These songs, close to their folk origins, are mostly simple and repetitive. It is only the syncopated rhythms, ornamentation, and ironic twists that save them from monotony. The language, still in flux, is far enough from today's to force even a native speaker of Castilian to follow the printed text; some songs are a crazy-quilt mixture ranging from Catalan to Italian. Much Arabic influence is also evident, both in vocabulary and type.

What a pity that the alto soloist insists on using a "blank" sound with no vibrato, especially where it is most needed, on held notes. The British school of Renaissance performance insists that this is authentic. But vibrato was known as an aspect of beautiful singing since antiquity. Looking at the CD jacket, adorned by a painting by Leonardo da Vinci's closest Iberian follower, one wonders how anyone could imagine that Leonardo's *sfumato* painting technique was adopted in Spain, and its vocal equivalent, vibrato, excluded!—*Nora Hamerman*