

Bach's cello suites, kissed by flamenco

An evening full of magical beauty and profoundly moving music. The Bachgesellschaft invited the public to the 'Bach al Compás' at the St. Johann church.

By Sabine Bierich



Schaffhausen – Johann Sebastian Bach's cello suites belong to the most ambitious works for the violoncello. The suites are each made up of a prelude and different stylised dances of the period. Bach himself probably never thought that someone would really dance to it, especially not in flamenco style. It is nothing new that Ballet ensembles visualise Bach. Choreographer Heinz Spoerli has done this in Zurich again and again, with his wonderful 'In den Winden im Nichts' for example. The fact that flamenco is open to the musical world outside of its own, and is looking - through dance - for the dialogue and the emotional conflict with other styles of music, is predominantly thanks to Bettina Castaño. She has played violoncello since her youth. In 2002, she became acquainted with the renowned Bern-born cellist Thomas Demenga at the 'International Music Festival Davos'. That was the beginning of an inspiring and creative friendship between artists.

Flamenco and Bach

Prelude in white! Bettina Castaño slipped into many different flamenco dresses on this evening – full skirts, flowing fabrics, trailing trains. Thomas Demenga lulled the tones from his cello airily in the allemande of the 4. Suite. Bettina Castaño guided a turquoise scarf around her white dress, melted with the flow of the cello, the waves of the ocean, the whisper of the wind. Demenga played the subsequent Bourrée of the same suite as if floating, full of silent seduction, soft whispers and magnificent sounds using the length of the

bow. Castaño used the time to change into yet another dress. She appeared again in a black lace number for the Menuett of the 1. suite. She snapped her fingers, clapped, delicately stamped her feet, setting accents through her dance and giving the light Menuett an earthy element.

She perkily made use of a walking stick for the Sarabande and gigue, luring Bach with cabaret. The way flamenco's strict forms of expression harmonised with Bach's dances was astonishing. Demenga played the Sarabande, gavotte and courante in the breathtaking virtuosic 6. Suite with artistic elegance. Castaño increased the grace of the movements and the precision of the rhythms with a twist of her train or a hand movement. She drummed on her cajón and let her fans do the talking. She embraced Bach's music in the flowing movements of her scarf. She connected with his rhythms and quick steps, moulded them and made them transparent. You could see the arrangements between cellist and the dancer flicker to and fro with quick glances – these two artists work on the same wave length.

Castaño's body is music

Castaño's solo 'zapateado' further breathed the breath of Bach's music. The cello was silent. Bettina Castaño's counter worked overtime. A snap of the fingers, a snap of the tongue, a gentle thunderstorm of the feet, occasionally a rustle of fabric, a scrape, and her swinging hips. The rhythms were pulsating, the level of tension was varied, the volume too. Castaño's body was music, one could almost hear the melody between the strikes of her hands and feet. She wore a rebellious green dress for the gigue of the 3. Suite, and then the castanets came into play. The neck-breaking flow of the cello accompanied this, and Castaño provocatively began her game of seduction.

The way Demenga's cello playing and Castaño's dance interlock is virtuosic, precise and extremely sensual. The cello suites have seldom been heard so elegant and full of body.