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Recording Review of Spain in My Heart: Songs of the Spanish Civil War

Ted Olson

East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

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Comments

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Spain in My Heart: Songs of the Spanish Civil War. 2014. Written and compiled by Jürgen Schebera. Bear Family Records, book, CDs (7), DVD, BCD 16093.

TED OLSON

East Tennessee State University

“Remember the war against Franco? / That’s the kind where each of us belongs. / Though he may have won all the battles, / We had all the good songs.” This verse from “The Folk Song Army” (1965), satirist songwriter Tom Lehrer’s send-up of the urban folk music revival, recalls the passionate artistic reaction to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Such power struggles, while profoundly affecting the people whose lives were disrupted, are soon forgotten among those who have no direct exposure to the consequences of those struggles. But Americans remember the Spanish Civil War because many Americans chose to join the fight, literally or politically, on the side of the Spanish Republicans. The Spanish Civil War was both a true civil war (an internal struggle for power within a nation) and an international struggle between defenders of democracy and promoters of fascism; some historians have elevated the significance of this war as having been in some respects the first phase of World War II.

Lehrer was correct, of course. A million people—Spaniards and foreigners alike—joined the fight for the Spanish Republic against Francisco Franco’s nationalist forces, and the collective idealism of the left-wingers inspired hundreds of topical songs. Reflecting varied cultural perspectives of people from all the regions of Spain and from at least 53 countries, those songs reflected the shared belief that good would conquer evil and that singing was an effective weapon for achieving victory on the moral battlefield. The insurmountable problem for all those defenders of liberty was that the fights they faced on actual battlefields were anything but fairly fought—the Nationalist cause was augmented by technologically devastating war machinery provided by Italy and Germany, as evidenced during the April 27, 1937 Nazi bombing of Guernica, a city in Spain’s Basque region.

The leftists who assisted the Spanish Republicans—including communists, socialists, and

all manner of intellectuals and creative types—were unable to stem the tide of fascism in Spain, but their commitment to the cause of preserving a democratic society on Europe’s Iberian Peninsula left a powerful and lasting legacy of literature, visual art, and music. Memorable writings about the Spanish Civil War (including novels like Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; poetry by such Spanish-language masters as Federico García Lorca, Antonio Machado, and César Vallejo; and nonfictional works like George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*) have been widely read and studied for decades; while visual artwork representing the war, including such paintings as Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, photography by documentary masters like Robert Capa, and motion pictures ranging from the legendary 1937 propaganda film *The Spanish Earth* to Guillermo del Toro’s popular 2006 feature movie *Pan’s Labyrinth*, are among the truly iconic images produced in the Western world during the twentieth century.

The Spanish Civil War also inspired a dazzling array of songs written in several languages. Certainly soldiers with guitars on the frontlines in Spain, as well as their non-fighting supporters overseas, chronicled many aspects of the Spanish Civil War, but most of the songs composed in response to that war are not well known today within the English-speaking world. Previous compilations available in the United States have attempted to convey to American, and mostly uninitiated, listeners the historical contexts behind a relatively small canon of songs about the war. *Songs of the Spanish Civil War*, a 2014 single-CD anthology released on the Smithsonian Folkways label, contained material from the Folkways Records back catalog. That anthology included recordings by such familiar performers as Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Ernst Busch, and Bart van der Schelling; and *Spain in My Heart: Songs of the Spanish Civil War*, a 2003 release from Appleseed Records, featured contemporary artists such as Arlo Guthrie, John McCutcheon, and Laurie Lewis paying tribute to songs composed by respected artist-ideologues associated with that war.

This particular historical canon of music, though, is far more extensive and complex than what was represented on those single-CD an-

thologies. A new boxed set from Bear Family Records, produced by the noted German scholar Jürgen Schebera, offers a far fuller portrayal of that war and its broader cultural contexts. While bearing the same title as the Appleseed album, the Bear Family Records boxed set contains seven CDs that showcase over 120 historical recordings from well-known performers of that era, including Seeger, Guthrie, Busch, and Paul Robeson, to more recent recording artists (Tom Glazer, Dick Gaughan, and Arlo Guthrie), to performers who are completely unknown to most English-language audiences (such as Rolando Alarcón and Oscar Chávez). Many of the older recordings on this boxed set—whether by familiar or obscure musicians—were mastered with great clarity from rare shellac recordings by the Grammy-nominated sound engineer Christian Zwarg. The boxed set also includes a DVD of the 2008 film *300 Jews against Franco*, a documentary film made by Israeli director Eran Torbiner depicting Jewish volunteer soldiers who left their homes in British-controlled Palestine to join the pro-Republican International Brigades.

The boxed set also seeks to document the range of artistic responses to the Spanish Civil War. A 315-page hardcover book included in the set features many fascinating perspectives on that war, including a chronological time line of key events; excerpts from eyewitness accounts of the war written by two noted par-

ticipants in the International Brigades, Ernest Hemingway and Ludwig Renn; reproductions of over 40 posters that promoted the Republican cause in multiple languages (including, ironically, posters from Spain and Germany); a facsimile portfolio of 31 watercolors from 1938; a program book from the 1943 Paramount movie version of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; historical photos and illustrations; interpretive headnotes for all the songs, written in German, English, and Spanish; complete lyric transcriptions with translations; a bibliography; and a discography.

This Bear Family Records boxed set does not intend to provide an analytical narrative of this most complex story, with its multiple characters and groups, its various ideologies and passions, and its tragic as well as its heroic undertones. Anyone seeking to read a balanced, memorable general account of the Spanish Civil War should seek out the classic history by Hugh Thomas. Instead, the boxed set is like a scrapbook from the war, presenting through a diversity of cultural keepsakes from a tumultuous time period, the reminder that even the most harrowing of experiences can inspire intellectual, spiritual, and artistic nobility and creativity. It is probably not hyperbolic to say that this boxed set will bring us today as close as it is possible to get toward understanding a war that has been called “the last great cause.”