

The great woman who backed Columbus

by Nora Hamerman

Isabella of Castile: The First Renaissance Queen

by Nancy Rubin

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This book is not perfect, but it has my warm recommendation for anyone who wants to learn about the monarchs who backed Columbus's voyage to the Americas in 1492: Isabella of Castile and her spouse Ferdinand of Aragon, the "Catholic Kings" who unified Spain, sponsored a successful national reform of the Church well before the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent, and created the first national Renaissance court, which awed Erasmus and set the model for France and England.

Nancy Rubin, clearly in love with her subject, makes the case that Isabella, who became queen of Castile in 1471, was a great woman. Isabella's personal story, written with the flair of a novel, is interwoven with the sweep of historical events that surrounded the joint monarchy of Aragon and Castile, the two major kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula, which were unified in the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella. Although all marriages of royalty were arranged from above, even at age 17 Isabella was strong-willed enough to resist efforts to wed her to the elderly King of Portugal and the unappealing Duke de Berry, and insisted on the match to the 16-year-old Ferdinand.

This historic alliance was also a love-match. Despite her own spotty education, Isabella took great pains to turn her four daughters and one son into Renaissance princes with the foundation in the classics, music, and natural science that could be provided by the new humanistic disciplines. Considering the harrowing conditions and many separations of the two decades after their wedding in 1469, it is remarkable that Ferdinand and Isabella had five children. More than one baby was stillborn, as Isabella would ride on horseback to the war front. They survived at least two near-assassinations.

At first the pair were busy defending their rule against rebellious nobles and an invasion from the King of Portugal, who was the uncle of the rival claimant to the throne of Castile, the young Juana, daughter of Isabella's half-brother, King Enrique. Later, when the Moorish king of Granada, the remaining enclave of Muslim rule in the peninsula, began

attacking towns in Castile, the Catholic Kings launched the Holy War to complete the Reconquest of the peninsula. This culminated with the successful siege of Granada in January 1492. That year, Isabella took her historic gamble on Christopher Columbus, the persistent navigator who had been asking her since 1486 to back him in his venture to sail west over the Ocean Sea and to reach the east.

The story intersects every great event on the stage of 15th-century European history. When in 1488 the Ottoman Turks were about to invade the Italian peninsula, Ferdinand's Castilian fleet harassed the Turks and forced them to withdraw. One long conflict was with France. The brilliant King Louis XI, who was then forging France into a modern nation, had occupied two provinces of Aragon, and only on his deathbed agreed to give them back.

Isabella's youngest child, Catherine of Aragon, was wed first to Arthur, Prince of Wales, and after his death to Henry VIII of England. Rubin says that Catherine was the most like her mother physically and spiritually of all the daughters. Later, she was at the center of the battle in Britain which led to Henry VIII's split with the Roman Catholic Church, when he failed to obtain papal approval to divorce her because she had failed to produce a male heir. In Spain, there was a formidable precedent for a daughter to become the monarch: Isabella herself!

Interwoven into the triumphs is the unfolding of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews. Rubin, like most historians today, largely absolves Isabella in this sad affair, presenting much evidence that the Catholic Kings resisted the pressures of an increasingly anti-Semitic population and protected the Jews and *conversos* (converted Jews) as long and as much as they could. The author paints a harsh picture of the Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada, as well as of the Hapsburg-Burgundian family into which two of Isabella's children married, and which produced the heir to the Spanish throne—Charles I of Spain (Emperor Charles V)—after Isabella's son Prince Juan tragically died. Rubin even labels Isabella's confessor Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, as a "fundamentalist." I am not prepared to defend Torquemada, but no portrayal of Cisneros is just, which omits his role as the patron of the University of Alcalá and the polyglot Bible, two of the jewels of the Spanish Renaissance and of humanism—as the word was understood in the 15th century, to mean the study of classical antiquity. This suggests a troubling bias on Rubin's part, who seems to prefer worldly prelates like Cardinal Mendoza and Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia (later Pope Alexander VI) to a reformer like Cisneros.

Nancy Rubin does make her case that Isabella was "the first Renaissance queen." While it could not be proved from this book that she was a saint, it can also not be refuted: Her devotion to Catholicism, her personal virtue, and the Spanish people's regard for her as "almost a second Virgin Mary," are all sympathetically documented.

What comes across even more is that Isabella was a ge-

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*