

## **Sacred Music in Early Colonial Mexico: Context, Style, and Performance**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most exciting aspects of performing historical music today is the potential it allows for an enrichment of the palette of performance techniques familiar to performers and audiences. A critical exploration of the performance traditions and environments responsible for the creation of a given body of surviving repertoire is, arguably, a crucial pursuit in the preparation of that music for performance, regardless of the place and time of its origin.

It is our intent in this paper to facilitate such an exploration of the musical background and performance traditions of Hispanic-influenced vocal music in early colonial Mexico. We hope that it will provide a point of departure for further consideration of the musical contexts and inspire experimentation with the surviving repertoire. This is not a survey of Mexican repertoire, but rather a study of some of the music-making traditions and other contextual information that may help us better understand the music today as both interpreters and listeners. We also hope that this brief study will help indirectly to put the role of the score in its proper place as a skeletal framework and a tool used chiefly to facilitate coordination between musicians. Recognizing the score for what it is will help us to be more critical, proactive, and ultimately informed interpreters of the music.

### **Music and Christianization**

The arrival of Hernán Cortés to Nahua territory in 1519 brought together two cultures, both of which enjoyed a rich and vibrant musical tradition. Music, thus, came to play an important role in establishing ties between the two cultures whereby a new tradition comprising a heterogeneous mixture of Nahua and Spanish elements developed (Stevenson, 1952).

Despite the brutality of the imposition of Spanish rule in Nahua territory, the conquest may be seen, in some ways, as one of persuasion. Propaganda by various media, including the arts, played a definite role in facilitating Spanish domination. Religious orders such as the Franciscans, Augustinians, and later the Jesuits—all of

whom had a strong presence in Mexico—recognized the potential of the arts in enticing people into the church (Guzmán-Bravo, 1978). The arrival of the first missionaries to Mexico in 1523, marked the beginning of an initiative of Carlos V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, to convert—as he understood it—the indigenous civilization to Christianity (Cañeque, 1996).

From the very beginning, the Franciscans naturally incorporated music as an important tool in their attempts to acculturate and indoctrinate the Nahua. As in New France, articles of faith and prayers were translated into native languages, including Nahuatl, and set to simple melodies that aided memorization. Building on Nahua tradition, singing continued to play an important part in religious education after the founding of the first of many schools for the indigenous population in 1523 by the Franciscans (Barwick, 1949).

It seems that the Nahua responded well to European music. The central role of music in Nahua daily life, as well as the emphasis on technical perfection amongst their musicians, may account for the speed with which Nahua students learnt the musical language imported from Spain. Instruction in singing and composition (*canto llano* and *canto de órgano*) became a means of integrating the more talented students as active participants in the Christian Church as choristers and instrumentalists. Those who mastered the polyphonic compositional style of the *siglo de oro* were promoted to high positions within the Church, including *maestri de capilla*, which were formerly assigned exclusively to composers brought over from Spain (Barwick, 1949).

In their attempts to acculturate the Nahua into the newly imposed system, the Spanish missionaries relaxed some of the ritual norms in order to accommodate indigenous practices into Catholic worship, reflecting the approach taken by many of the teaching religious orders during the Counter-Reformation. Several contemporary sources, for example, cite the incorporation of native dancing and singing, as well as the throwing of flowers, during the popular Corpus Christi processions.<sup>1</sup>

### Indigenous and Spanish Traditions in Early Colonial Settlements

#### Music in Nahua culture

##### *Religious observance*

In Nahua culture, music was intrinsically bound to religious observance and practice. The skill and artistry with which native performers united song, dance,

gesture, and instrumental music into their worship clearly impressed sixteenth century Spanish observers. The Europeans seemed to have been particularly impressed by the dancers' excellent sense of rhythm, which was undoubtedly reflected in the music accompanying the dance. The Franciscan Fray Toribio de Motolinía (1490?-1569) comments:

More remarkable yet was the fact that not only their feet, but the entire body, head, arms, and hands, moved together in their dances.... Following their leaders in the singing and drumming, everyone changed position at the same instant, and with such precision that the best Spanish dancers marveled upon seeing them in action, and greatly admired the dances of these people (Quoted in Stevenson, 1952, p. 22).

### Transmission

There is no residual body of repertoire, in the Western art sense, of Nahua music from this time, as notation was not a part of the culture's musical tradition. Our knowledge of the music, therefore, is based on organological sources and written documents. Though it was an aural (oral) tradition, there was a defined collection of pieces used in rituals based around the religious calendar, and there is evidence to suggest that these pieces were ontologically detailed and precise. According to the sixteenth century historian Bernardino de Sahagún, a "strong memory" was required to be a successful singer (quoted in Stevenson, 1952, p. 25).<sup>2</sup> A high value was placed on perfection in performances during rituals to the extent that there were harsh penalties, including death, for mistakes in performance since these were thought to "offend rather than to appease the gods (Stevenson, 1952, p. 18)." Sahagún wrote in his *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* that:

If one of the singers made a mistake in singing, or if one of the drummers [teponaztli players] erred in the execution of his part, or if one of the leaders who indicated the dance routine made a mistake, immediately the chieftain ordered him seized, and the next day had him summarily executed (Quoted in Stevenson, 1968, p. 104).

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Consequently, for musicians to have a chance to live to see old-age, there existed a highly structured, rigorous and mandatory training program for those entering the profession.

### Performance issues

#### Voice types

The timbre of the original voices, as well as the choice of pitch for Mexican polyphony have important ramifications for modern editors and performers since these affect the sound ideal of the performance. Contemporary documents, such as the *Códice Franciscano*, refer to the weak sound of individual native voices, as perceived by Europeans, and the related habit of singing in groups:

In each choir there are usually fifteen or sixteen Indians, which is the minimum necessary, for they have weak voices and do not sound well if there is not a group.... However, with attention given them by the friars, the Mass and Divine Office are sung both in plain song and polyphonic song with very good effect (Quoted in Ray, 1953, p. 60).<sup>3</sup>

In terms of tuning, singers should be aware of some of the challenges with singing music from this period. Covey-Crump (1992) has noted that:

for players of instruments that permit flexibility of tuning, and for unaccompanied singers, intonation is far harder to define than other parameters of performance since it is at best a blend of good aural training, sound technique and a knowledge of temperament, and, at worst, a total lack of blend, resulting from poor technique and ignorance of tuning systems (p. 317).

He also draws attention to the problem of addressing issues related to vowel colour—issues that may affect the pitch produced by the singer. He gives the example of the word “Alleluia” where he notes that certain syllables may sound sharper or flatter because of the vowel shape.<sup>4</sup> Of course, such questions are also linked closely to issues of pronunciation, which will be discussed later.

As with all musical traditions existing before the invention of sound recording, vocal technique and production remain lingering questions. In the case of instruments, at least, there usually exist specimens dating from the period; in other cases, there is the possibility of reconstructing instruments based on instructions in historical treatises. The information gleaned from historical instruments and their copies can often be applied to vocal idioms. This is especially true for the sixteenth century Nahua in that singing and instrumental music, along with dance formed a unified field of artistic expression; whenever one element was present, invariably the other two were also present. Such an intimate connection between singing, instrumental music, and dancing, would have inevitably engendered a complex weave of crossover influences between the three art forms. For example, the types of instruments used in Nahua music-making from this period—some of which survive today—might offer some clues about voice production. More specifically, the notable absence of chordophones from Nahua music would have influenced the vocal idiom, which in turn may influence modern performances (Stevenson, 1952).

There is convincing evidence of a perceived discrepancy between the voice types of European singers and their religious counterparts. A list of instructions, dating from 1688, for the building of a new organ in Mexico City Cathedral suggests a difference in pitch preference. The author of the list requests that the two divisions of the organ be tuned at two different pitches separated by a whole step. The higher pitch was based on the normal pitch used in Spain and would serve to accompany instrumentalists; the lower pitch was required to accompany indigenous singers "because in New Spain there are no voices that can sing with the natural ranges (*cuerdas*) of Spain (Fesperman, 1979, p. 92).<sup>5</sup>" The impact that this discrepancy may have had on vocal timbre as well as the way in which instruments are incorporated into performances of vocal music (due to the difference in pitch) is something that modern performers may want to consider when preparing the music.

## Music Traditions Imported from Spain

### Composition Traditions

#### *Spain and the Franco-Flemish school*

The sacred music of Spain around the time of the conquest was essentially an outgrowth of the Franco-Flemish school. The music of composers such as Johannes

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Urreda and Ockeghem—both of whom spent time in Spain—as well as Josquin shaped the compositional technique of several generations of native Spanish composers (Stevenson and Gómez, 2001). Evidence that European contrapuntalism permeated the New World is found through the numerous publications and manuscripts discovered in Mexican churches and cathedrals containing works by Morales, Guerrero, Lobo, and Palestrina among others (Ray Catalyne,<sup>6</sup> 1966). The style was soon imitated by native Mexican composers like Lienas and López Capillas.

### *Villancico*

In addition to settings of Latin texts, such as Masses, psalms, and Magnificats, *villancicos*—popular devotional songs with vernacular lyrics—were often incorporated into religious celebrations where they often functioned as substitutes for the responsories designated for Matins, particularly for Christmas and Corpus Christi. These metric compositions abound with references to popular culture and frequently adopt the structure of a dialogue between a number of stock characters used to represent ethnic stereotypes. The integration of the parodied dialects of these groups results in a fascinating linguistic conglomeration and, along with dance, contributes to an unusual rhythmic vocabulary, mirroring the natural accentuation of speech patterns of the various dialects (Greening, 1996; Laird & Martinez, 1994). Hill (2005) has commented on the possible link between the often folklike quality of the *villancico* and the folk art *crèches* that emerged during the seventeenth century and which have retained their popularity in Mexico.

In both Spain and New Spain, the *villancico* held immense popular appeal, encouraging the attendance and participation of the more reluctant at religious ceremonies. *Villancicos* were tolerated by church authorities, despite their characteristic exuberance and profane—even erotic—allusions because of their ability to entice people into the church. Pedro Cerone gives a better sense of the popular appeal of *villancicos* in a somewhat facetious description from his seventeenth century treatise *El Melopeo y Maestro*:

There are some people so lacking in piety that they attend church but once a year, and miss all the Masses of Obligation, because they are too lazy to get up out of bed. But let it be known that there will be *villancicos*, and there is no one more devout in the whole place, none more vigilant than these people, for there is no church, oratory, or

shrine that they will not visit, nor do they mind getting up in the middle of the night in the freezing cold, just to hear them (tr. A. Lawrence-King, 2002, p. 8).

In the New World, the villancico was harnessed as an integral part of the Church's public relations arsenal, encouraging Christian conversion (as well as loyal church attendance), among the indigenous population. Along with other persuasive art forms and displays, it embodies the evangelical spirit of the Counter-Reformation, drawing on popular elements as a means towards conversion.

### **Performance Practices**

Although the language of Spanish sacred music uses a pan-European contrapuntal style as its basis, there are deep-rooted differences that set the Spanish style apart from other European musical languages. In most cases, these are the sort of differences that cannot be represented in musical notation and, thus, tend to be underestimated or misunderstood by modern performers.

#### **Approaching the music**

One of the major challenges of performing early colonial Mexican music today, as with other historical repertoires, is to avoid the conservatory-induced, score-centric approach to the music and, instead, base decisions on multiple forms of information (historical accounts, iconography, organology, theoretical sources, archival records) about performance motivations, contexts, and practices. Such an approach tends to require a deeper level of thinking about the music and is likely to result in more effective, convincing performances.

#### ***Instruments and improvisation***

The ethnic diversity of Spain, stemming from its geographical position as a bridge between European and Arab worlds, enriched the palette of musical instruments available to Spanish musicians. Spain acted as a gateway for a number of instruments that would later become important in European culture. The European dissemination of the lute, guitar, rebec, and timpani, for example, originated in Spain during the Moorish occupation. The variety and use of musical instruments in Spain has no parallel

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anywhere else in Europe (Stevenson and Gómez, 2001). The strong presence of instruments and instrumental music in Spain had a tangible impact on vocal music, affecting the vocal timbre and constitution of the sound, as well as affecting rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic aspects, making it less homogeneous than, for example, the English cathedral sound—often regarded as the model for the performance of Renaissance polyphony. References to instruments such as vihuelas, violas da gamba, harps, shawms, cornettos, bassoons, brass instruments (in large quantities), and drums are often found in relation to sacred music, performed both during mass and at popular outdoor processions for important feast days such as Corpus Christi (Robledo, 1994). This obsession with instruments was imported to New Spain where it was nourished further by the Nahua penchant for instruments. According to the *Código Franciscano*, substantial numbers of native musicians were employed to accompany polyphonic settings within the liturgy. A cornucopia of instruments was used in Mexican church settings: trumpets, clarions, *chirimías*, sackbuts, flutes, cornets, dulzainas, fifes, viols, and rebecs (Ray, 1953; Guzmán-Bravo, 1978).<sup>7</sup>

Savall (1992) has commented upon the importance of improvisation in Spanish music – something that has been a hallmark of his own instrument-rich ensemble, Hespèrion XXI—and which follows in the Arab-Andalusian tradition of the *cantigas*. Savall refers to the ensemble's performances as a "sort of aleatory music which had a basic structure but with an element of chance (p. 650)." This emancipation of the music from the constraints of the score reveals an approach fundamentally different from that often taken by classically trained performers.

There is considerable evidence in both Spanish and Mexican sources that instruments were used not only to double voices, but also to substitute and embellish the vocal lines within polyphonic sacred music. In a document written by the Spanish composer Francisco Guerrero in 1586, the writer refers specifically to the expectation that cathedral instrumentalists not only play along with the voices, but that they embellish the melodic lines. The implication is that much of this music is based on a heterophonic texture where one performer would play the melody, while the other instrumentalist embellished that melody (Savall, 1992). It is this type of improvisatory approach to performance practice that distinguishes much Hispanic music from that of European polyphonic music from this period.

In some excellent recent recordings of Mexican early colonial sacred music, performers have taken different approaches to the question of including instrumental lines. For example, a recording by Westminster Cathedral Choir does not adopt instrumental doubling, preferring instead the a cappella sound; recordings by the Harp



Consort (2002), Ex Cathedra (2003), and Hespèrion XXI (2003) draw on instruments to double, substitute, and embellish the vocal lines found on the score. The use of percussion instruments and plucked string instruments, such as the harp and guitar, contribute enormously to the Spanish flavour—and the evidence is there for such additions to the score. After some experimentation performing with instruments, modern singers will soon discover the far-reaching impact of the instruments, not only on the colour, but also on the rhythmic vitality of the music.

### Architecture and Polyphony

Another distinct feature of sixteenth century Spanish music that was imported and developed in the New World is the proliferation of polychoral textures. This predilection for antiphonal music can be explained in part by the positioning of the choir in Spanish and Mexican cathedrals. The choir, situated within a precinct enclosed by railings in the nave, was physically divided in half by the placement of the choir stalls—an arrangement referred to as the “Herrera tradition.” The two halves, in opposition to each other, were naturally positioned for musical dialogue in an optimal acoustical placement near the middle of the church. It is, thus, unsurprising that Spanish and Mexican composers exploited this inherent characteristic of their choirs, especially bearing in mind also that the verses of the psalms, Magnificats, and other scripture-based poetical texts are paired into two balancing halves, resulting in a large-scale duple rhythm—a feature that is also exploited in other traditions, including Anglican chant (Stevenson, 1952; Guzmán-Bravo, 1978; Reitz, 1987). As the Herrera tradition was continued at the cathedrals in Mexico City and Puebla, it was natural that the Spanish polychoralism of Morales and Guererro be continued in the New World by composers like Franco, Padilla, and López Capillas, all of whom held the post of *maestro de capilla* at either Mexico City Cathedral or Puebla Cathedral (or both, in the case of Padilla).

### Language: Implications for Today’s Musicians

In vocal music, the interwoven syntactic, phonetic, and semantic relationship between text and music affects various levels of performance. Articulation, phrasing, tuning, and rhythmic aspects of the music are all intimately related to the speech patterns in the text. A singer’s understanding of the language in which the text is written is, thus, a crucial variable in the successful merging of text and music. Some

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performers have gone further, suggesting that a singer's cultural background (including language) has a significant impact on the interpretation of music from the same, a related, or a different culture. This is a topic that has generated interesting discussions. For example, in Sherman's (1997) book, *Inside Early Music*, there is an article entitled "Singing like a native" in which the author interviews three early music performers, Alan Curtis, Rinaldo Alessandrini, and Anthony Rooley—all of whom have specialized in the performance of early Italian music—about their views on this contentious subject. Alessandrini argues that native singers have the advantage over non-native singers in their ability to declaim the text in a more powerful, natural, and convincing manner. This point of view is reaffirmed by Savall in the context of Spanish music. Well-known for his strongly held views, Savall (1992) stresses a need for intimate acquaintance with the sung language:

In music it is very important to base the musical idiom on the spoken language. Furthermore, the manner of speaking a language determines, at least to some extent, the way of singing it; the sounds, the inflexions, the articulation of the language all create important nuances, and these are almost impossible to re-create unless the language has been studied in depth and at first hand (p. 650).

Furthermore, in the realm of Hispanic music, Savall (1992) maintains that native Spanish singers can:

achieve a certain style, a colour and articulation or a particular sense of phrasing that touches on a very deep underlying continuity. It might not be impossible for, say, an English singer to re-create this, but it is extremely difficult for someone living outside a culture, say that of Latin or Mediterranean countries, to tap that culture: we're talking about things that cannot be read or learnt (p. 652).

Whether or not Spanish singers today can achieve this, singing repertoire created by Spaniards 400 years ago, is another issue.

With the exception of vernacular *villancicos*, the texts for most of the sacred repertoire of early colonial Mexico were written in Latin. These works raise a different

set of questions related to the vernacular pronunciation of Latin and reconstructed pronunciation. While modern singers may initially feel reluctant to explore this area of performance practice, the rewards outweigh the effort! Here, those considerations mentioned by Savall are equally important in attempts at vernacular pronunciations of Latin.<sup>8</sup> Pronunciation expert Wray (1992) describes Spanish Latin as "a language that demands a very forward, bright production (p. 292)." Modern performers would do well to give the far-reaching implications of pronunciation on their musical interpretation thorough consideration.

### Conclusions

The surviving repertoire of early Catholic Mexico is becoming increasingly accessible to performers and scholars through a growing number of editions. We encourage singers and choral conductors to take advantage of this gateway to explore the music with flexibility and an inquiring mind, while viewing the score more as a point of departure than as the terminal authority. Such deviation from the default, score-centric conservatory approach to interpretation can, indeed, be a liberating experience! The more vocal ensembles experiment with the music of early colonial Mexico, in its crystallized form of extant repertoire, the more likely it is that we will approach a better understanding of the culture's rich and distinct performance traditions, philosophy of music, and broader trends.

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## Endnotes

1. See, for example, the following description of a Corpus Christi procession, as observed in 1538 by the Franciscan Fray Toribio de Motolinia (1490?-1569):

In the procession was the Holy Sacrament and many crosses and litters with their saints; and the draping of the crosses and the decorations of the litters were all made of gold and embroidered feather-work, and on them the images were of the same work of gold and feathers.... There were many banners of saints. There were represented the twelve Apostles dressed in their insignias; many of those who accompanied the procession carried lighted candles in their hands. All the road was covered with cypress and reeds and flowers, and again there was always someone throwing roses and carnations. They had many kinds of dances which enlivened the procession.

Along the road there were chapels with their beautifully decorated altars, each having *retablos* [votive paintings on wood], and these were well arranged to provide places to rest. There were commonly nine child singers, singing and dancing in front of the Holy Sacrament (Quoted in Ray, 1953, p. 44).

The sixteenth century historian Fray Gerónimo Mendieta adds in his *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* that "there would come out a group of well-dressed children for a dance to the sound of some devotional verses or motets, which were sung in conjunction with the other instrumentalists (Quoted in Ray, 1953, p. 45)."

- 2 Bernardino de Sahagún in his *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, commented that:

The worthy singer has a clear mind and a strong memory. He composes songs himself and learns those of others, and is always ready to impart [what he knows] to the fellows of his craft. He sings with a well-trained voice, and is careful to practice in private before he appears in public. The unworthy singer, on the other hand, is ignorant and indolent.... What he learns he will not communicate to others. His voice is hoarse and untrained, and he is at once envious and boastful (Quoted in Stevenson, 1952, p. 25). "According to a seventeenth-century Augustinian source, the writer notes that the sacred music "was performed with fine pronunciation and usually memory, to the great admiration of all who heard them (Quoted in Ray, 1953, p. 62).

- 3 In his *Historia de los Indios*, Motolinía comments that:

It is undoubtedly true that they [the Indians] do not have voices as strong or as sweet as the Spaniards. Probably this comes about because they go barefooted, with unprotected chests, and eat food that is poor fare. But since there are so many of them to choose from, the Indian choirs are all reasonably good (Stevenson, 1952, p. 55).

- 4 "It is likely that 'Al-' and '-le' will sound flat on the note given; '-lu' will probably sound in tune, '-i-' will sound sharper; and the final '-a-' flat (Covey-Crump, 1992, p. 318)."

- 5 The anonymous document from 1688 includes a detailed commentary about the tuning of the new organ:

First, we request a large organ with its small organ (*cadereta*), *carcolas*, bass pipes (*contras*) or pedals (*pedales*); but it should be noted that the large main organ must be a pitch (*punto*) lower than the natural pitch in Spain, that is, that the "G" (*fa de Gesolreut*) which in Spain the bass notes (*baxones*) play all open in "G" (*Gesolreut*), must be "F" (*fefaut*) in the bass notes in the organ coming for the Cathedral, because in New Spain there are no voices that can sing with the natural ranges (*cuerdas*) of Spain.

And because it is also necessary to accompany musicians with their natural ranges, it would be good for the *cadereta* to come from Spain at its natural pitch, that is, a step (*punto*) higher than the large organ, all this so that it will not be necessary to force the organists to be always transposing (*estar tocando siempre accidentalmente, y fuera de sus cuerdas*). And so we ask that the organ come this way, because otherwise it will not be any good in this church for anything regarding the choir (Quoted in Fesperman, 1979, p. 92).

- 6 For the interest of readers, Alice Ray Catalyne has also written under the name Alice Ray.

- 7 Church councils became concerned with what was regarded by church authorities as an excessive use of instruments within the Mexican Catholic Church. In spite of the efforts of church authorities to curb the use of instruments other than the organ within the Church, instrumental music remained an integral part of Catholic worship throughout the period. A letter written by Philip II petitioning against the use of instruments in Mexican churches reveals an interest in instrumental colour, citing an "inordinate variety" of instruments:

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Because of the cost of maintaining the present excessive number of instrumentalists who consume their time playing trumpets, clarions, *chirimias*, sackbuts, flutes, cornets, dulzainas, fifes, viols, rebecs, and other kinds of instruments, an inordinate variety of which are now in use in the monasteries....we require a reduction in the number of Indians who shall be permitted to occupy themselves as musicians (Quoted in Stevenson, 1952, p. 65).

- 8 Not until the twentieth century was Latin pronunciation standardized by the Roman Catholic Church.