

ORAL ABSTRACT IMAGE TRANSMISSION OF A SPANISH-EUROPEAN MUSICAL TRADITION TO CENTRAL AMERICA DURING THE 16TH TO 18TH CENTURIES¹

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In this article I will be dealing with the transmission of the Spanish villancico from the mainland of Europe to an island, and hence from there to another continent. We will look at the way in which this exchange has taken place, as well as at the importance of an oral transfer of cultural traditions in our society. Finally, we shall dwell on changes which came about in villancico style because of cross-cultural influences, and the ways in which the social and cultural contexts that it generated are reflected.

Juan José Carreras has stated that: «The villancico was one of the most composed and widespread musico-literary genres in early modern Europe (and, by extension, in the colonial culture of the New World).»² In 1998, Manuel Carlos de Brito reminded us that: «From its origins as a musico-literary genre, the villancico served a dual function, both sacred and secular [...] though its function became increasingly allied to the celebration of religious events, and this allowed both the rapid absorption of the most up to date musical trends and the incorporation of elements from popular culture.»³

1. DEFINING THE TERM *VILLANCICO*

«A term first applied in the late 15th Century to a Spanish musical and poetic form consisting of several stanzas (coplas) linked by a refrain (estribillo)», still seems

1. This is a reworking of a paper read at the Internationales Symposion, *Spanien und die europäische Musik des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts*, at Regensburg on 7 May 1999.

2. Miguel Angel MARIN and Geoffrey BAKER, *International Conference. Secular Genres in Sacred Contexts?: the Villancico and the Cantata in the Iberian World, 1400-1800*, London, Senate House, Institute of Romance Studies, 1 - 4 July 1998, p. 15.

3. Miguel Angel MARIN and Geoffrey BAKER, *International Conference...*, p. 2.

an appropriate definition as given in the New Grove⁴..., continuing with «the villancico was extensively cultivated in secular polyphonic music of the late 15th and 16th Centuries. In the second half of the 16th Century devotional and religious themes gained in importance and the form became used increasingly for sacred compositions in the vernacular which were introduced into the liturgy on feast days. In the 17th Century it replaced the Latin motet as an occasional piece, and although its artistic quality rapidly declined in the 18th and 19th Centuries it remained popular in both Spain and Latin America. Since then, ‘villancico’ has come to mean simply ‘Christmas carol’.»

Our discussion will mainly focus on the works in this genre of the 17th Century, looking at possible transmutations between the old and the new world of the refrains involved. To quote Alberto Montaner of the Universidad de Zaragoza: «The refrain of the villancico...is usually a piece of traditional lyric and hence it obeys the basic principle of traditional transmission, its ‘living in variants’ or continuous transformation.»⁵

2. TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Throughout many centuries Europe has been conditioned to the transmission of cultural traditions, with perhaps the salient example being the powerful influence of the Roman Empire between 27 BC until the 12th Century.⁶ Roman cultural expansion undoubtedly served as a role model for other European empires and powers to follow. Most often these traditions were conveyed by oral means when applied to a less formal, popular aspect in the cultivation of a «so called» more refined and enhanced society. In later years, when the authority of the church in these matters became of the utmost importance, the chapel masters and missionaries played decisive roles as conveyors of many of these cultural goods.

Spanish and Portuguese expansion into the New World was but one facet of their dynamic national policies from 1492 to c. 1790. In Spain, the leadership of Ferdinand and Isabella, the «Catholic Monarchs,» transformed the country into a national state marked by growing royal power and centralised administration. They kindled a wave of nationalist and religious fervour that eventually led to the expulsion of the Moors and Jews and carried Spaniards beyond the peninsula. Soon Spanish troops were fighting in Italy, the Netherlands, and central Europe to secure the domains of Charles I and Philip II and to contain Protestantism. Overseas, Spain fought to enlarge its domain and to convert the heathen Indian. An ardent, revived religious and nationalistic spirit, a drive for trade and land, a military caste seeking adventure and rewards, monarchs desirous of expanding and unifying their realms, all contributed to the Iberian conquest of the New World.

4. Isabel POPE, «Villancico», *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musician*, vol. 19, London, Macmillan, 1980, p. 767.

5. *International Conference...*, p. 9.

6. Dorothy STANNARD (ed.), *Insight Guide Rome*, London, APA Publications, 1998, p. 18.

To say that «gold, glory, and gospel» were the major motivations of the Iberians is a misleading oversimplification. The Iberians, throughout their 325 years of dominion, left an indelible impression upon the culture and life of the lands that they occupied. They established the church of their faith and converted millions to Christianity. The evils of the Iberian conquest cannot be overlooked, but they were the horrors common to all European colonial systems.⁷

From the 16th Century onwards, many missionaries departed from the Balearic island of Majorca to the New World, and in particular Mexico,⁸ not only as preachers of the gospel, but also as carriers and representatives of Spanish culture. Through their experience they often had a musical background, or were musically trained, and were thus able to establish a music tradition as part of their parochial duties. Music also served as a means to approach, draw and incorporate the local communities into the religious activities of the church. Friars or monks, who at the beginning came from an elite group, converted prodigious numbers of natives, and in Mexico the Franciscans claimed to have converted more than one million by 1531. During this period a serious conflict was waged between the secular and regular clergy. Finally, a royal decree of 1583 stated the principle that secular clergy were to be preferred to friars in all appointments to parishes.⁹ Thus, through the musical efforts of the clergy, not only the more formalized musical traditions of the Spanish Catholic church, but also the more informal elements like the villancico, were introduced in Mexico. To enable one to fully grasp and understand the transplantation of this popular genre to a new continent, it will be necessary to return to the roots of villancico production in Mallorca.

3. ORAL TRADITIONS AS A MEANS OF TRANSMISSION

By its very functional nature the villancico was more than often used as an occasional piece, written for special major feasts of the liturgical year, whether annual, as at Christmas and Epiphany, or at one-off events such as the consecration of a cathedral or a royal entry, and thus not utilized again and again as a standard repertoire work. In contrast to this stood the formal ecclesiastical music, such as the masses, regarded as sacred works of art, neatly copied or printed and bound in leather, and together with the Bible transported to other regions as representation of the highest liturgical order. The villancico thus lent itself to a form of oral transmission, often as an abstract aural image in the mind of the composer on his extended journey under the new circumstances of its recreation.

The missionaries who left Majorca for Mexico did not necessarily transmit a musico-literary genre like the villancico, destined to be an isolated form originating from

7. Philip W. GOETZ (ed.), «The History of Latin America. The colonial period», *Macropaedia. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1986, p. 815-816.

8. Fr. Joan Paret i Serra, Sineu, Majorca. Personal communication during interview, 10 January 1999.

9. *Macropaedia. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, p. 824.

a small island in the Mediterranean sea, but rather as a style representative of the Valencian region on the nearby Iberian mainland which influenced the Mallorcan villancico production to a large extent. It is therefore worthwhile to delve into the roots of the matter by having a closer look at the «tonada» of a Villancico Negro of the Valenciana composer, Juan Bautista Comes (1582? - 1643), *Si vais vos a la Abeleyn*.¹⁰

EXAMPLE 1.

Juan Bautista Comes, *Villancicos a la Natividad*, Villancico Negro, *Si vais vos a la Abeleyn*. Leg. IX-28, transcr. José Climent, Instituto Valenciano de Musicología.

Si vais vos a la Abeleyn

Villancico Negro

Leg. IX-28

Trans: J. Climent

Tonada

Tenor Solo

Si vais vos a la Abeleyn, mu - ci -
 qui - ño tan - chey e can - tay que u vos pa - ga - ray a un por - tu - gue -
 ci - ño que cho - ran - do es - tay, que cho - ran - do es - tay, mas na on can -
 tèis ni en tan - chays pa - ray, pa - ray, que us lo fa -
 ray con sus - pi - ros, sus - pi - ros, ay, ay, ay, que me
 mo - rro, ay, que me mo - rro, ay, que me mo - rro, ay, de a -
 mor de mi ni - no, que me mo - rro, ay, de a - mor de mi ni - no.

10. Juan Bautista COMES, *Si vais vos a la Abeleyn*. *Villancicos a la Natividad*. *Obras en Lengua Romance*, Valencia, Instituto Valenciano de Musicología, 1978, p. 84 (transcr. Jose Climent).

This is an excellent example of the «seconda prattica» compositional aesthetic «where textual meaning becomes a primary concern in vocal music. Melodic and harmonic direction, rhythmic motion, texture and other musical elements depend, at least in part, on the progression of ideas in the text, allowing in the music what some might call compositional crudities», and «the Spanish villancico often included segments that show this primacy of textual meaning over purely musical concerns. To be sure, there are many villancicos from throughout the [17th] Century where the only importance of text in the compositional process is the concern for text accent, but many Spanish *maestros* [like Comes] shared their century's fondness for word-painting... The 'seconda prattica' finds fuller expression in *Si vais vos a la Abeleyn...*», where the composer revels in the text, «[...] writing effective musical reactions to a number of words and phrases.»¹¹

4. ESTABLISHMENT AND MUTATION OF THE VILLANCICO IN MEXICO

Bernado Illari of the University of Chicago¹² reminds us that: «The religious villancico in the 16th-19th Centuries existed in between popular cultures and Roman Catholic rites, within Spanish and Spanish-colonial communities. While some performances belong to the popular world by their own right, others stand as representations of the popular in the context of a learned church culture, therefore appropriating the former in terms of the sacred. By negotiating a place in between these two poles, villancico performance metaphorically creates an imaginary continuum», while the cultural «[...] interpretation of the villancico in Latin America is made even more complex by the colonial character of the cultures of reference. The practice of the villancico was transplanted into Latin America as part of the colonial culture. If it sometimes provided an outlet for the development of local identities, it more often than not remained a Spanish practice that represented Spanish identities.»

The above statement, however, does not prevent us from observing and researching mutations and cross-cultural influences that did take place because of the transplantation of the villancico style into a different world, as well as the relation between the so-called «ethnic villancicos» in Latin America and the political, social and cultural context in which they were written. The folkloric colour and multicultural spirit in these works, including the presence of messages (for example in the texts of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz) which challenged the dominant racial ideologies, are well described in the literature on the subject.¹³ In Mexico,

11. Paul LAIRD, «The 'seconda prattica' in Spain: word-painting in the Seventeenth-century Iberian Villancico», *International Conference*, p. 10.

12. Bernado ILLARI, «The popular, the sacred, the colonial and the local. The performance of identities in some villancicos from Sucre», *International Conference*, p. 3.

13. Geoffrey BAKER, «The ethnic villancico and racial politics in Seventeenth-century Latin America», *International Conference*, p. 4.

where documentary evidence by Juan de Torquemada, in his *Monarquía Indiana*,¹⁴ points to remarkable accomplishments among the Indian populations, the role of theatrical presentation and ritual, which played an important part in their own ethnic music, should not be overlooked. Although Indian music did change rapidly during the 16th Century to conform with Catholic dogma and adjust to changes in function, it did not completely lose its native identity in the process. For example, the villancico still remains an important source of information on 17th Century rural dance.¹⁵

To my mind the biggest changes that took place regarding villancico production in Mexico were the relationships between this genre and theatre which, albeit extremely flexible, served as a distinguishing feature of sacred theatre. This served as a distinctive signal to the audience as well as the participants that they were witnessing and experiencing an event directly associated to the liturgy, enabling them to understand, relate and incorporate it closer to their own social and cultural context. Instrumentation with a predominance of flutes and drums, use of high-pitched falsetto in ceremonial song, costumes and masks made of paper, leather and feathers; props including stuffed animals; jingles, rattles and canes contributed to the dramatic exploitation.¹⁶

In the end, text-music relationships remain the most convincing hard evidence of transformations that did take place in the transmission process of the villancico. What makes the whole procedure even more fascinating is that the reverse also happened, whereby as Robert Stevenson¹⁷ points out that: «How quickly villancico texts sung at Puebla [Mexico] blew across the Atlantic can be proved from surviving printed texts of the villancicos sung in the Portuguese Royal Chapel [...]» However, the real value and role of the villancico texts had already been summed up in the 16th Century when so great an authority as Juan Díaz Rengifo¹⁸ in his *Arte Poética Española* (first published in Salamanca, 1592) prefaces his discussion of the villancico by saying categorically: «[...] the villancico is a species of couplet written for the sole purpose of being sung.» This allows and even begs for textual versatility, being furthermore increased when the villancico becomes a refrain, as the producer in his dual role of composer and author (preferably in collaboration with the poet) could change the text in order to fulfil his thematic or metrical requirements. The extent of these transformations was obviously not always the same, since it could range from minor changes, for example word order, to real rewriting such as the addition of several verses or the substitution of key words. In the extreme, a subject traditionally associated with certain types of music could be embodied in a totally new composition.

14. Juan de TORQUEMADA, *Monarquía indiana*, Sevilla, 1615.

15. Thomas STANFORD, «Mexico. Folk Music. The colonial period», *New Grove...*, vol. 12, p. 231.

16. Thomas STANFORD, «Mexico. Folk Music...», p. 231.

17. Robert STEVENSON, *Christmas. Christmas music from Baroque Mexico*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974, p. 77.

18. Juan Díaz RENGIFO, *Arte Poética Española*, first published in Salamanca, 1592.

Looking at our next and last music example, a *Negro a duo, de Navidad* by the Puebla and later Mexico City *maestro de Capilla*, Antonio de Salazar (born 1650, place unknown, and died in Mexico City c. 1715), one could describe his word painting, and setting of «Ta ra ra» as a way of creating a local identity by imitating the drums used in Indian music.

EXAMPLE 2.

Antonio de Salazar (1650 - c.1715), *Negro a duo, de Navidad. Tara ra tara ra...*, from: Robert Stevenson, *Christmas Music from Baroque Mexico*, Berkeley, University of California Press.



The quality of this poetry (as far as I could trace, anonymous) does not reflect the sparkle and genius of Sor Juan de la Cruz's villancico verse or the calibre of poetic standard utilized by Juan Bautista Comes in his *Villancicos a la Natividad*.

5. CONCLUSION

Regarding our dealings with oral abstract image transmission of a regional orientated Spanish-European villancico musical model, I hope you will agree with me that certain mutations and positive developments had taken place in its new environment, mostly because of cross-cultural influences and the possibilities offered by theatrical presentation of the genre in the church. Many millions of people from another continent and culture were thus allowed closer contact with and enhancement of their own enlightenment by means of a fertile and vivacious European musical heritage, but could also, on the other hand, contribute to the enrichment of an important historical musical style. All this was made possible because of the multi-functional nature of the villancico.

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