

## INSTRUMENT OF EVANGELIZATION: BAROQUE MEXICAN CHURCH MUSIC

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In 1521 CORTEZ conquered Mexico and within two years there arrived a Franciscan friar, PEDRO DE GANTE, who would be the first teacher of western music in America. A noble FLEMMING educated at Louvain, within months of his arrival he opened a school for the education of the sons of Aztec chiefs. FREY PEDRO quickly discovered that music was the royal road to the conversion of the Aztecs. Music had been central to the Aztec cult and beside each Aztec temple had stood a school of music, training both singers and instrumentalists. Music proved an extraordinary nexus between the conquerors and the conquered and, in what must be dubbed a rare and extraordinary cultural transformation, the Aztecs gave up their traditional music and not only accepted but also became proficient in the Spanish music. Besides singing and the playing of musical instruments, FREY PEDRO's school (by 1527 removed from Vera Cruz to Mexico City) taught reading (Latin), writing and the practical arts of carpentry, masonry and painting. Once adept at plainchant, the students were sent to small churches in the villages to teach other natives. Peer teaching proved most effective. Thus was the linguistic and cultural barrier pierced, and Christianity and Spanish baroque music diffused throughout Mexico.

It is said that no village of a hundred inhabitants lacked singers for daily Mass and vespers and reed players as well. The customary instruments in the early part of the sixteenth century were flutes, flagelots, Alpine horns, guitars played with a bow, cornets, bassoons, trombones, and kettledrums. The Indians became proficient at playing every European instrument and, under the supervision of their Spanish teachers, quickly began the manufacture of instruments as well. It appears that FREY PEDRO's school by 1527 had built an organ, which was played by Indians. In was not long, moreover, before the pupils, once adept at plainchant, were writing four-part polyphonic carols, Masses and other works. Their quality was said to be on par with the church music of Seville in Spain, to which the see of Mexico City (erected in 1528) was suffragan.

Within an extraordinarily short span of time the entire elaborate round of services of a European cathedral had become indigenous in the New World. Canon ARNALDO DE BASATZIO taught Latin to the Indians in the service of the cathedral in Mexico City so that they might sing with understanding. In 1530 Canon ALSOSO LOPEZ reported that the services in the two-year old cathedral included prime, terce, Mass, sext, none, vespers, and compline in plainchant, while on Sundays Mass and vespers were sung in polyphony. The following year BISHOP ZUMARRAGA of Mexico City described the scene more succinctly to the Council of the Indies, the body which oversaw the Spanish colonial empire. The Indians, the Bishop declared, "bene legere, scribere, canere, et punctuare sciunt", they read, write, sing, and play well.

In the cathedral of Mexico City a chapter, consisting of a dean and six canons, was erected. One of the canon's stalls was occupied by the precentor who had charge of the cathedral's music. He was assisted by a succentor upon whom much of the musical training-especially in plainchant-devolved. There was also a chapelmaster who needed extensive musical training, for he taught polyphony and conducted the rehearsals for the elaborate music on great feast days. Nevertheless, despite the aid of these assistants, the cathedral's statutes laid down that the precentor must be a doctor, or at least expert, in music. Clearly it was not intended that the precentorship of the Mexico City cathedral be a sinecure.



Mexico City adopted the Mozarabic chant in use by her mother church of Seville, and to compensate for the small size of the chapter of canons, BISHOP ZUMARRAGA had an organ installed in the cathedral. This estimable prelate, Mexico's first bishop, died in 1548, having only the previous year been advanced to the rank of metropolitan.

Something of the level of the musical culture expected of ecclesiastics in New Spain can be gleaned from the decrees of the third provincial council of Mexico City, celebrated in 1585. Those decrees, pronounced in a land which only a half-century before had been virgin mission territory, enjoined that no man be ordained to minor orders who lacked the rudiments of plainchant. More importantly, no man was to be advanced to major orders (i.e., ordained subdeacon) unless he was musically proficient.

These decrees presupposed a considerable system of church music education. They were, moreover, reinforced by more detailed norms. Chapelmasters (who taught polyphony) were not to teach at an hour conflicting with the succentor's lessons in plainchant. Polyphony was *required* for Easter. The verses of the *Benedictus* (at Lauds) were ordered sung, as in Spain, alternately in plainchant and polyphony. Chapelmasters were forbidden to confine their choirs to singing only their own compositions. Instead, the treasury of works of the great masters was to be cultivated as well.

It would appear that this in fact was done. The choral library of the Mexico City cathedral in 1589 included the works of GUERRERO, MORALES, VICTORIA besides those of ORLANDO DI LASSO and PALESTRINA. Indeed, it is a fine tribute to the rapid trans-Atlantic diffusion of musical culture that in 1559 the Mexico City cathedral choir could sing at a memorial service for the Emperor CHARLES V MORALES' *Exsultemus* and *Parce mihi* only a few years after they were first known in Spain.

The level of musical culture in Mexico City was truly remarkable. Besides the organ, the musical instruments in use at the cathedral included shawns, sackbutts, and flutes. The chapelmaster was selected at a public competition and had to be both conductor and composer. Small wonder that FRANCISCO LOPEZ CAPILLOS (c. 1612-1674), who became *maestro di capilla* at Mexico City in 1654, could in a *tour de force* compose four different Masses for four choirs for the consecration of the cathedral in 1656.<sup>1</sup>

But even grander than Mexico City was the sacred music at Puebla. The cathedral of Puebla was consecrated in 1649 and it was so luxurious that it was dubbed "il templo de plata", the silver temple. Some 1200 clergy - from as far as Manila - attended the service of consecration, which rivalled in musical brilliance the consecration of the cathedral of Salzburg in 1628. The service of consecration was itself the climax of a fortnight of sacred music.

The *maestro di capilla* et Puebla then was JUAN GUTIERREZ DE PADILLA. A native of Malaga, after service as *maestro di capilla* at the collegiate church at Jerez de la Frontera and the cathedral of Cadiz in Spain, he emigrated to the New World. In 1622 he became coadjutor chapelmaster at Puebla. There he remained as chapelmaster until his death in 1664, composing Masses, motets, Marian antiphons, responsories, hymns, a Saint Matthew passion, though no *Magnificats*. Most of his works are for double choir, which became a Puebla tradition. During his forty-two year tenure every Sunday and holy day Mass was celebrated polyphonically. Not surprisingly, the music budget at

<sup>1</sup> LOTA M. SPELL, *The First Teacher in European Music in America*, in: *Catholic Historical Review* IV, pp. 373, 376 (1922) and *Music in the Cathedral of Mexico in the Sixteenth Century*, in: *Hispanic American Historical Review* XXVI, pp. 293, 295, 297, 298, 303, 317 (1946); ROBERT STEVENSON, *Mexico City Cathedral Music, 1600-1750*, in: *The Americas* XXI, pp. 111, 117, 121 (1964).



Puebla was enormous. It was 14,000 pesos annually, which was perhaps a comfortable middle class income multiplied thirty fold. By contrast, the music budget at Mexico City was but 5,500 pesos a year.<sup>2</sup>

But there was more to church music in baroque New Spain than the Olympian heights reached by the great metropolitan cathedrals. In 1568 the Council of the Indies sent an inspector to the New World. He reported that in each small town with a resident cleric there was generally music provided by two choirs of fifteen Indians, each of which alternated singing Mass and the divine office for a week. "They sing plainchant and polyphony with agreeable skill", he reported. Only a generation after the advent of their first teacher, Frey Pedro de Gante, the inspector could report that in some centers the Mexican singers were on a par with those of the great Spanish cathedrals. As for musical instruments, flutes and shawns were common and sometimes lutes and viols were seen. Organs, on occasion, were encountered as well. A century after the Cortesian conquest, another observer could claim that every town of a hundred people had singers proficient in plainchant and polyphony. Instrumentalists, it was claimed, were ubiquitous. Even the smallest hamlets, he averred, had three or four Indians to sing daily in church.

Some less impressionistic evidence supports such general statements. After Pope Pius V promulgated the new Tridentine missal in 1570 by his bull *Quo primum*, it was necessary to print an amended *Graduale dominicale* so that church musicians would have the revised liturgical propers. In Mexico a thousand copies were printed. Since choirs averaged about eleven members, it would appear that there were about 10,000 choristers in New Spain at that time. Since there were only some 14,000 Spaniards in Mexico then, it is clear that knowledge of western church music had become widely diffused among the Indian population.

Reports, even from the frontier regions, confirm this. In 1678 a Jesuit visitor to the northern missions of Sonora and Sinaloa listed 51 musical choirs in that frontier mining region. He also listed fourteen different musical instruments in the various churches there. At Sonora he listed all fourteen, at Sinaloa twelve of the fourteen, at Durango only four of the fourteen; but there he noted an organ. Sinaloa's tradition of church music was quite extensive, in fact. A record of 1595 states that polyphonic Masses were performed there with flutes, shawns, and trumpets. A century later Jesuit relations were still attesting to the musical proficiency of the Indian musicians.<sup>3</sup>

So talented were these musicians that in 1715 the astonished bishop of Durango wrote to KING PHILIPP V singing their praises. He had visited the Jesuit mission of San Francisco de Satebo on the feast of Saint Ignatius and was much impressed that the new Indian converts could sing a pontifical solemn high Mass to the accompaniment of bassoon, viola, clarinet, harp and organ. Having visited eleven Jesuit missions in that remote northwestern part of Mexico, he declared to his king,

<sup>2</sup> ROBERT STEVENSON, *Puebla Chapelmasters and Organists: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in: *Inter-American Music Review* VI, pp. 29, 61, 70 (1984) and *The 'Distinguished Maestro' of New Spain: Juan Gutierrez de Padilla*, in: *Hispanic American Historical Review* XXXV, pp. 363, 365, 371 (1955).

<sup>3</sup> ROBERT STEVENSON, *Music in Mexico* (New York, 1952) pp. 61, 67, 80; ALFRED E. LEMMON, "Jesuits and Music in Mexico", in: *Archivium historicum societatis Iesu* XLVI, pp. 195, 197 (1977); CHARLES W. POLZER, *Rules and Precepts of the Jesuit Missions of Northwestern New Spain* (Tucson, 1976), p. 41.



"the Indians [are] of excellent training and education in both spiritual and temporal matters, as could be seen in the quality and decency of their churches and liturgical worship".<sup>4</sup>

But perhaps the final word should be left to the great Tyrolean Jesuit missionary to the region, EUSEBIO KINO, S. J. KINO wrote,

"The greatness of new missions will shine not only in the eternity of heaven, but also in the most desolate and remote regions of the world . . . It will reflect in the solemnities of the saints, in gay fiestas, and in the treats of religious banquets; it will be heard in music and the choirs of singers."<sup>5</sup>

And so it was. Baroque Mexican church music was by all accounts an extraordinarily successful missiological tool. It provided the cultural point of contact which enabled the missionary work of the Spaniards to be so unusually successful. Rarely have Christians been so successful in evangelizing such a culturally sophisticated people as those of Mexico. But besides being a glowing chapter in the history of missiology, the baroque period of music in Mexico can rightly claim to be a golden age of church music. Rarely was a church, clergy and people alike, so musically literate and so willing to give of their resources in quest of good church music as was the church in baroque Mexico. The level of baroque Mexico's expectations and of her achievements is nothing less than a challenge to the present age.

<sup>4</sup> POLZER, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> POLZER, p. 46.