Faith, Hearing, and the Power of Music in Devotional Music of the Spanish Empire

Andrew A. Cashner

# Listening for Unhearable Music

## “Voices of the Chapel Choir” and the “Unspeaking Word” (Gutiérrez de Padilla)

In the setting of *Voces, las de la capilla* by Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, the first of two choruses in the polychoral ensemble begins with this admonition:

“Voices of the chapel choir, keep count with what is sung, for the King is a musician, and takes note of even the most venial dissonances, after the manner of David the monarch, just as in the manner of Jesus the infant prince.”

As the voices declaim these words together like a solemn choral recitative, breaking the chordal texture only for a mild dissonant suspension of the words *light dissonances*, the other chorus is literally counting twenty-seven measures of rests until their entrance.

Thus begins a tour-de-force of music about music, in which the composer and his ensemble take a verbal discourse about music and turn it into a musical discourse about music. Moreover, even as this discourse is referrring through music to the music that is currently being performed and heard, this discourse is not only about sounding music or *musica instrumentalis*.

### Christ as Music in the Poem

Any consideration of this complex piece should begin with a careful reading of the poetic text and listening to the musical setting (even better, singing or playing it).[[1]](#footnote-24) It will probably be readily apparent that this is a different type of villancico entirely from the comic villancicos more commonly heard in recent performances and recordings. The poem, whose author is unknown, is so elaborately contrived that it may seem completely unintelligible at the first encounter. There is, indeed, no simple way to approach the text: anywhere one starts one immediately becomes tangled in a thicket of ambiguous references and cryptic phrases, and it is not possible to understand the text fully without reading it as the distillation of tropes and doctrines developed through centuries of theological literature and liturgy. The piece demands a high level of intellectual engagement to tease out the intricate conceit, and may thus be compared with what Bernardo Illari describes as “enigma” villancicos.[[2]](#footnote-25)

Part of its difficulty comes from the widespread influence of the poetry of Luis de Góngora, who played a similar role for Spanish literature on both sides of the Atlantic to that of Giambattista Marino in Italian letters, as the originator of a new aesthetic (referred to as *barroco* by Spanish literary scholars) that emphasized learned artifice and highly wraught dramatic effects. Gongoresque poets like the author of *Voces* reveled in arcane plays on words, contorted Latinate syntax, and multiple levels of meanings.[[3]](#footnote-26)

To begin simply, though, this poem represents the tradition of Spanish *conceptismo*, in which the poet creates a sustained analogy between at least two different things such that the understanding of each one informs the other. Here the two elements are music—specifically choral singing—and the Incarnate Christ at his birth.

# Bibliography

Cashner, Andrew A. “Faith, Hearing, and the Power of Music in Hispanic Villancicos, 1600–1700.” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015.

Gaylord, Mary Malcolm. “The Making of Baroque Poetry.” In *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, edited by David Gies, 222–37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Illari, Bernardo. “Polychoral Culture: Cathedral Music in La Plata (Bolivia), 1680–1730.” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2001.

Valbuena Prat, Ángel. *Historia de La Literatura Española*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1946.

1. Andrew A. Cashner, “Faith, Hearing, and the Power of Music in Hispanic Villancicos, 1600–1700” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
2. Bernardo Illari, “Polychoral Culture: Cathedral Music in La Plata (Bolivia), 1680–1730” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2001), vols. 2, 304–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
3. Mary Malcolm Gaylord, “The Making of Baroque Poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. David Gies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222–37, 222–237; Ángel Valbuena Prat, *Historia de La Literatura Española*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1946), vol. 1, 1014–1061 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)