

East - West South - North: the villancico as carrier of visual, tonal and cultural art forms¹

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The article deals with the origins and background of the villancico, explaining its role in the transfer and assimilation of cultures between continents. It deals with the resultant metamorphosis and "otherness" of the genre, leading towards fusion and cross fertilization between often unrelated cultures. Attention is also paid to the relationship between text and music in the villancico, as well as dissemination between the two forms. The colonial character of the cultures of reference manages to enhance the imaginary cultural continuum created by this musical and literary art form in Latin America. The bridging of the gap between human and divine through a false dichotomy of "sacred" and "secular" is an inherent feature of the genre.

Oos - Wes Suid - Noord: die Villancico as draer van visuele, tonale en kulturele kunsvorme

Die artikel gaan oor die oorsprong en agtergrond van die villancico en verduidelik sy rol tydens die oordrag en assimilasië van kulture tussen kontinente. Dit handel oor die gevolglike metamorfose en "andersheid" van die genre, wat lei na samesmelting en kruisbestuiwing tussen dikwels nie-verwante kulture. Aandag word ook bestee aan die verhouding tussen teks en musiek in die villancico, asook vorme van disseminasië tussen die twee vormsoorte. Die koloniale kenmerke van die kulture waarna verwys word beklemtoon die denkbeeldige kulturele kontinuum wat deur hierdie musikale en literêre kunsvorm in Latyns Amerika geskep is. Die oorbrugging van die gaping tussen die menslike en geestelike deur middel van 'n valse tweespalt tussen "heilig" en "sekulêr", vorm 'n inherente kenmerk van die genre.

In Spanish one could say, *el arte y la mirada del otro*, in translation meaning "art gazing in amazement at the others". Who, where and what then are the "others"? Herewith we enter the realm and confines of established cultural categories. This includes the notion of "Western" cultural ideologies, contributing to a world-wide dichotomizing strategy that juxtaposes the West versus "the Rest". These ideologies are then often categorized as "own" and "other". The process of considering otherness raises fundamental questions. The overall simultaneous presence of the self, inclusive of its ideational fundamental, is thereby challenged. When one raises the question regarding "otherness", foundational questions are raised, e.g.: What is art?; What can art be?; or What can an art mean?

Western culture has taken, and at times even forced, the assumption that scholarly authority lies in the written text. Implied further is a notion that such authority is in some sense distinct from the art-making process, meaning then not a knowledge "of, but "on" or "about" art, being directed to a constituency of knowledge-seekers. Recently in our so-called Western art world the development of a critical artistry is beginning to reshape the scope of its artistic output toward a dehegemonized pluralism that opens space for "difference", leading to other influences coming from the expansion of pop art and culture studies.² Thus studies of art are challenged to expand its elite focus beyond "art" art. These moves toward acknowledging others within the discipline also manages to bring closer conceptually arts of cultural, social, and racial others.

Regarding the first part of our title, the question could be posed as to: What and where is West, or East? Should your vantage point be Mexico, Europe could for example be regarded as East, and China as West, which means that for our established norms West becomes East and East becomes West. South - North, with the poles and the Equator as fixed points, is much more geographically orientated. These differences are intensified by the generalized contrasting concepts of rich, Northern, and poor, Southern hemisphere populations. Considering the villancico, as our theme, to be a carrier of visual, tonal and cultural art forms between different

continents and countries from the 17th century onwards, it will be necessary according to circumstances to define a vantage point, be it East gazing towards West or West gazing towards East.

In our discussion we will be dealing with the origins and background of the villancico, explaining its role in the transfer and assimilation of cultures between continents. We will be dealing with the resultant metamorphosis and "otherness" of the genre, leading towards fusion and cross fertilization between often unrelated cultures. Attention will be paid to the relationship between text and music in the villancico, as well as disseminations between the two forms. The colonial character of the cultures of reference enhanced the imaginary cultural continuum created by this musical and literary art form in Latin America. The bridging of the gap between human and divine through a false dichotomy of "sacred" and "secular" is an inherent feature of the genre.



Figure 1

Courtly love as depicted in an etching from the book by Juan del Encina (1496).

(© Patrimonio Nacional de Espana)

Origins of and background to the villancico

The term "villancico" was first applied by Renaissance writers to a refrain taken from or modelled on a rustic or popular song, and then to a number of "closed" poetic and musical forms based on a refrain. In the late 15th century the term was used for a Spanish vernacular musical and poetic form consisting of several stanzas (*coplas*) framed by a refrain (*estribillo*) at the beginning and end, giving an overall *ABA* structure. The first description of the villancico is in Juan del Encina's "Arte de poesia castellana" from his *Cancionero* of 1496. His comments suggest that the villancico had no specific poetic form and was not necessarily based on traditional verse, though he might have taken for granted the use of a traditional melody. He says:

If the refrain has two lines we may call it a *mote* [motto] or a villancico or a *letra* usually of the poet's invention. ... If it has three complete lines and one half-line, it will likewise be called a villancico or *letra* of the poet's invention. ... And if it has four lines, it may be called a *cancion* and sometimes a *copla* [stanza].³

The texts of the villancicos in his *Cancionero* have up to twelve stanzas of six or seven lines each.⁴ Characteristic of the villancico and of the popular song in general during this period

was its flexibility. Even when Diaz Rengifo almost a century later, in his *Artepoética* of 1592, attempted a precise definition, this flexibility of the genre came to the fore. He emphasised that it was a song, not just a poem, that it was comparable to the Italian ballata, and that it had a "head" (refrain) joined in a variety of ways to the "feet" (the *mudanzas* with their *vuelta* forming the strophe).

During the second half of the 16th century devotional and religious themes gained in importance. 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. 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'."



Figure 2
Extract from a 15th century painting, portraying courtly music making.
(© Obispado de Salamanca)

Perhaps the best illustration of what is meant by a villancico is to pay attention to an example of one of Encina's works in this genre. In his villancico, *ICucu, cucu, cucucu!*, Juan del Encina makes use in the musical setting of an uncomplicated anonymous text, thus allowing expression in the music of a principal idea, including segments that show primacy of textual meaning over purely musical concerns. I refer you to example 1, a copy of the original manuscript in the *Cancionero Musical de Palacio*, and a transcription of the same in example 2. Word painting is quite obvious with the imitation in the music of the song of the Cuckoo bird in early spring, with a clever and expressive use of the strong accent on the second syllable of cu-cu.

What strikes most prominently when hearing the villancicos of Juan del Encina, apart from their specifically Spanish character, is the harmony, which exists between the poem and its musical translation. Each inflection of the musical text gives rise to a melodic and rhythmic invention, which shows a great mastery by the composer of the means to achieve expression.⁵ In this mostly septasyllabic, in contrast to the usual octosyllabic, verse by an anonymous poet, a rather naughty humorous text is skilfully set by Encina for witty and realistic effect, without doubt to the amusement of an aristocratic environment. The text reads as follows:

Cucu, cucu, cucucu!
Make sure that you are not the one.

Good fellow, you should know
That even the best of women
Will sell her soul for a kiss,
Give her all yours that you can.

Good fellow, you should watch out
That you are never hoodwinked;
Should your woman go for a pee,
Go along with her yourself.

Transfer and assimilation of cultures between continents

Why and how would the villancico have been a carrier of visual, tonal, and cultural art forms? The practice of the villancico was transplanted into Latin America and for the sake of our interest, Mexico, as part of the colonial culture. Certainly the religious villancico existed as a genre between popular cultures and the rites of the Roman Catholic Church, with some performances belonging to the popular world by their own right, while others stood as representations of the popular in the context of a learned church culture.⁶ This essential ambivalence at the heart of the villancico, reflecting the social and cultural contexts that engendered it, has in spite of its representation of Spanish practices and identities, provided an outlet for the development of local identities. Taking the attitude of the Mexican Maya or Aztec population, their world-view and philosophy into consideration, it is understandable that they perhaps allowed the villancico, which served a dual function of both sacred and secular, to fuse into and be integrated within their local culture more easily. Not all the ethnic groups had the same outlook and philosophy that what happened to them had been predestined, being more averse to the adoption of unrelated cultures. Therefore the villancico tradition remained for example to the Indian population a Spanish practice that presented Spanish identities. Because of the prevailing circumstances and social pressures, many changes occurred in the music of the Indians during the 16th century conforming to Catholic dogma and adjusting to changes in function. In the process it did not however completely lose its native identity. Thus today, for researchers, the villancico still remains an important source of information regarding the 17th -century Indian rural dance rhythms. Documentary evidence by Juan de Torquemada in his *Monarquía Indiana*,⁷ points to remarkable accomplishments among the Indian populations, whereby for example the role of theatrical presentation and ritual, which played an important part in their own ethnic music, should not be overlooked. The flexibility of the villancico as an art form allowed an openness for more influences of traditional lyric in the performance. This resulted in a practice of traditional transmission, a principle of "living in variants", which could also be described as a state of transformation and metamorphosis.

Proof of the exchange that took place, as well as the dissemination of villancico texts through different origins, cultures and traditions can be seen in the distribution of the music manuscripts and their composers in for example the Cathedral archive of Oaxaca, a city 250 km towards the south of Mexico. Obviously there were many composers of Iberian origin like Francisco Martínez de la Costa, Joseph de Torres and a possible manuscript contribution by Tomas Luis de Victoria. Other nationalities participated, should one go by names of Italian origin like Pietro Generali and Enrico Lombardi, or those of Portuguese descent like Gaspar Fernández with his vast collection of 301 manuscripts. Finally composers and *maestros de capilla* who had been born in the *Nueva España* like Francisco López y Capilla, Antonio de Salazar and the very famous Manuel de Sumaya were also presented.⁸ It is a pity that in this collection there appears no manuscript of the first ever-Indian *maestro de capilla* of Zapotec origin, Juan Mat[h]ias, who was attached to the Cathedral of Oaxaca from 1655 to 1667."

Metamorphosis of the genre

Mexico, after the Iberian conquest, presented an ideal breeding ground for fusions between unrelated cultures, as well as in certain instances the adoption of completely different cultures.



Example 1
 Juan del Encina, Villancico, *Cucú, cucú cucucú* (original manuscript).

The villancico lent itself perfectly to a metamorphosis of different elements inherent of the art form, often resulting in a change of character of the medium. Probably the biggest changes that took place regarding villancico production in Mexico were the relationships between this genre and theatre. Both genres represented being extremely flexible ways of expression, simultaneously serving as a distinguishing feature of sacred theatre. Herewith a distinctive signal was given to the audience as well as to 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.¹⁰ Remnants of artefacts used in the theatrical productions of villancicos in the churches over the centuries can still be found in museums in Mexico. Here for instance the exhibitions in *El Centro Cultural de los Pueblos Mayas* in Mérida, show and give proof of the many influences of the local populations on the art form. The villancico was thus not only an abstract tonal medium, where the music represented a certain sound character incorporating timbre, rhythm, instrumentation and melody. It had to be re-created in another cultural context, making it more difficult to pinpoint outside influences. Many important visual aspects were included, allowing easier access by the population to relate and associate with the genre. Incorporated here would be the musical score or text as calligraphic material, representing an applied art form of its own. Consult example 1 where the absolute necessity of clarity in the calligraphic representation of the artistic work text is reflected. It should be kept in mind that musical notation is not the art work in itself, but only an outline or framework of the work of art that has to be re-created, although it might have been in many instances the only medium through which the genre could have been transferred between continents and cultures. Stylistic elements of interpretation, however, needed a more human hand, often relying on being transmitted by musicians, artists, clergy or even slaves.

1. [6] Cu - cú, cu - cú, cu - cu - cú! Guar - da no lo se - as

tú. 2. Con - pa - dre, de - bes sa - ber 3. que la más bue - na mu - ger 4. rra - bia sien - pre por hlo - der). 5. Har - ta bien la tu - ya tú.

[Fine] Compadre, as de guardar para nunca encornudar; si tu muger sale a mear, sal junto con ella tú. [D.C. al Fine]

Example 3
Juan del Encina, Villancico, *Cucú, cucú cucucú* (transcription).

"Otherness" of the genre

Returning to one of our fundamental questions of "what can an art mean?", one should realise that the words, pictures or calligraphic representations we use to try to make music concrete are always, at their very best, mere approximations, intimations, fumbling in the semantic darkness. These are only humble attempts to translate a medium whose ultimate power and mystery lie in the paradox that it is completely untranslatable, while at the same time capable of speaking to us so deeply. It seems then that there are almost insurmountable barriers between painting and music. Long before abstractism in the visual arts had been practised, music was an abstract art, and for that matter might always have been an abstract art. Music's incorporeal nature, the impression that it almost "floats on air", had always allowed the medium a special freedom from the burdens so often experienced by optical correspondence in the visual arts. The 20th century composer, Arnold Schoenberg has quite correctly put it; one can say everything in music without giving away one's secrets.¹¹

There is, however, yet another "otherness" in the villancico genre, namely the poetic text on which the music was set by the composer. Another dimension and perspective is thereby brought into being in the art form as a text-music relationship. Text-music relationships, in the end, remain the most convincing hard evidence of cultural exchanges and transformations that took place in the transmission process of the villancico between different continents from the

16th century onwards. We usually have the pre-empted idea in our minds that the process was a one-way affair, with artistic material only coming from the mother land, and the recipients in the new land only "gazing" in amazement. The whole procedure becomes even more fascinating and relevant when one realises that the reverse happened as well, as Robert Stevenson¹² points out to us 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 poetic texts have already been summed up in the 16th century when so great an authority as Juan Diaz Rengifo¹³ 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 a 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. To the extreme, a subject traditionally associated with certain types of music, could be embodied in a totally new composition.

Perhaps the most famous poet of this period in the new world was the Mexican woman poet, Sor Juan de la Cruz, whose villancico verse reflected an unsurpassed sparkle and genius. Many of the poetic texts, though, are from anonymous authors, but the themes dealt with often disclose their background and origins. It is known, for example, that many slaves from Africa were deported to the *Nueva España*, some of them even arriving from Angola, which country lies on the south-western coast of the continent of Africa. Herewith we have our South - North connection and exchange. Interestingly enough this meant a cultural influence in the songs that was not western or mother country orientated. In the library of the Vatican I came across a most fascinating anonymous villancico text, in which the origins of the poet are unmistakably revealed:

Example 4: Anonymous villancico text: Vatican Library

Manuscript R.G.Lett.est. IV.3892 (3)

Gugurugù, gurugù de Angola,
que lleuan la gala Ziolo, y Ziola.
Dala tura la gente de Angola
zà Niño llorando,
y aunque zà derramando diamantes
no cueztanbalatos...¹⁴

Black slaves and free blacks who hailing from as far away as Angola could with their music and texts influence the colonial art-music of Latin America, which music then again influenced the music and performance practice in the European mother countries. The numerous black musicians retained in the annals of the music histories, whether composers or performers, obviously did and could not cultivate particular musical styles that related very much to sub-Saharan Africa. It is however the system of *cofradías* and *hermandades/lirmandades* (confraternities and brotherhoods) inherited from the Iberian Peninsula and implanted in Hispanic America and Brazil throughout the colonial period, which contributed in preserving some aspects of black, as well as local identities.¹⁵ Musically, the only genre performed in churches that could retain some aspect of these identities was the villancico. We are still not sure, though, whether these works perhaps had to be performed in the courtyard of the church, as the indigenous people were taking part in it. It was not strange to find versions of these villancicos, which were very popular

among cathedral chapel masters from Mexico to Bolivia, being performed amazingly soon in Spain and Portugal. In all these countries, this type of villancico based on pseudo-dialects, and known under names like *negro*, *guineo*, *negrilla* and *negrita*, were even cultivated anew by renowned composers. Thus, through cross-cultural fertilisation, as well as the importance of text-and-music relationships, a new style of villancico and performing practice was achieved.

Conclusion

The transfer of the villancico between different continents and cultures, often from so-called "exotic" places, led to explicit mutations mostly caused by cross-cultural influences being allowed in this multi-faceted artistic genre. Mexicans adopted elements of another culture which portrayed a radical difference and otherness of unknown identities, but could through their own artistic input also contribute to the enrichment of an important historical musical style, made possible by means of the portability, flexibility and multi functional nature of the villancico.

Notes

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| <p>1 This is a re-working of a paper read at a congress for Art Historians, <i>Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte: Orientes-Occidentales</i>, held from 9-14 November 2003 in Veracruz, Mexico.</p> <p>2 Regula Burckhardt Quereshi. 1999. <i>Other Musicologies: Exploring Issues and Confronting Practice in India</i>, in: <i>Rethinking Music</i> (Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 311-316.</p> <p>3 Juan del Encina. 1496. <i>Cancionero de las obras de [...] : con otras cosas nuevamente anadidas</i>. Salamanca, s.i., 1496, 20 de Julho.</p> <p>4 Isabel Pope. 2001. Villancico. Origins to 1600. <i>The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians</i>. Vol. 26, p. 621.</p> <p>5 Michel Bernstein. 1999. <i>Commentary : Juan del Enzina, Romances & villancicos</i>, Hesperion XX, dir. Jordi Savall. France: CD Auvidis ES 9925, p. 19.</p> <p>6 Bernardo Illari. 1998. The popular, the sacred... <i>International Conference. Secular Genres...</i> London: Senate House, 1-4 July.</p> | <p>7 Juan de Torquemada. 1615. <i>Monarquia Indiana</i>. Sevilla.</p> <p>8 Aurelio Tello. 1990. <i>Catalogo: Archivo Musical de la Catedral de Oaxaca</i>. Mexico: CENIDIM, pp. 17-20.</p> <p>9 Robert M Stevenson. 1997. Mexiko. III. Kunstmusik. 1. Vizekönigliches Mexiko (1553-1821). <i>Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i>, Vol. 6, p. 250.</p> <p>10 <i>Ibid.</i>, p.231.</p> <p>11 Jeremy Eichler. Modernist Prophets of Disparate Arts. <i>New York Times</i>, 24 October 2003.</p> <p>12 Robert Stevenson. 1974. <i>Christmas. Christmas music from Baroque Mexico</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 77.</p> <p>13 Juan Diaz Rengifo. 1592. <i>Arte Poética Española</i>. First published in Salamanca.</p> <p>14 Vatican Library, Manuscript R.G. Lett.est. IV 3892(3).</p> <p>15 Gerard Béhague. 2001. Latin America, §111, 2: Afro-American Music: South America. <i>The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians</i>. Vol. 14, p. 348.</p> |
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