

Tess Knighton and Álvaro Torrente, eds. 2007. *Devotional Music in the Iberian World, 1450–1800: The Villancico and Related Genres*. Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

Reviewed by Elisabeth Le Guin

This lively collection of sixteen essays plus an Introduction is the fruit of an international conference, *Secular Genres in Sacred Contexts? The Villancico and Cantata in the Iberian World, 1400–1800*, held in London in July 1998. The editors point out that to their knowledge this was the only conference ever to have been dedicated to this topic; and even ten years later, this is still only the second published book in English dedicated to the villancico. (Paul R. Laird's *Towards a History of the Spanish Villancico* appeared shortly before the conference, in 1997.)¹

“Villancico” is a baggy term for an enormous range of related practices and genres, and as such, a good analogy to the equally baggy term “cantata.” Indeed, there was for a time a certain amount of crossover or fusion between the two terms in Spanish-speaking lands, as Juan José Carreras has pointed out.² The huge range of time during which things called villancicos were produced (the 1450–1800 of the title is only the period of greatest flourishing), the large number of communities in which they appeared, and the great variety of purposes that they therefore came to serve, all make it both urgent and impossible to define “the villancico.” Only partial definitions, hedged about with qualifiers, can ever aspire to any accuracy, and the term is subject to infinite amounts of contestation. It is a necessary peculiarity of this collection, therefore, that every single contribution defines its object of inquiry differently, while the Introduction makes a heroic effort to find some kind of center to it all. The editors have restricted themselves chronologically to three and a half centuries and six countries (the “Iberian World” of the title includes Spain, Portugal, south-western France, the Philippines, Mexico, and Bolivia), and they offer a set of interlocking working definitions:

On the one hand, villancico is used to refer to compositions distinguished by formal traits—particularly the combination of *estribillo* [refrain] and *coplas* [verses]—disregarding poetic content, musical style and function; this formal meaning of villancico is dominant in the 15th and 16th centuries. On the other hand, villancico is used generically to denote all learned songs in the vernacular performed in a sacred context; this meaning is predominant from the late 16th to around the mid-19th century. (3)

Current Musicology

This double “form-vs-genre” definition, devised by Álvaro Torrente, is cited by a number of the volume’s contributors as being useful, and probably comes about as close as anything can to defining the villancico. However, the editors are quick to offer a counter-definition from one of their own contributors, Bernardo Illari, who uses the term “metagenre” to explode any too-tidy, too-concrete idea of genre: “the villancico seems to result from what we can call a metageneric attitude, of writing part songs with references to other kinds of songs (especially, popular references), adapted for different social and aesthetic functions, and through different means and procedures” (2001:140).

So: a sprawling mess, a conundrum, an endlessly rich fund of musical practices and products, mingling devotional and secular, learned and popular, official and indigenous, complexities overt and covert—the villancico is a genre emblematic of the impossible historical and cultural diversity of the Iberian Empires. It includes some of the most bewitchingly beautiful, intellectually interesting, and culturally representative music of the Early Modern period in all Western (or Westernized) culture. Yet try telling your colleague down the hall that you are “interested in the villancico.” Unless they, too, are a Hispanist (and how fortunate the music department that has more than one!), their response will probably be, “The what?” By any standard, it is high time that this marvelous hippogriff of a genre be brought more squarely into the Anglophone field of vision, and this book makes a fair bid to do so. The editors are very conscious of this as their mission, and they make no bones about scolding Richard Taruskin and other historians of encyclopedic bent who have overlooked the villancico.³ They also provide an invaluable critical review of extant scholarship on and editing of villancicos (up to about 2005), which for my money forms one of the most useful parts of this book. I found myself wishing that a similar review might be made of recordings of villancicos, perhaps as a website or Wiki due to the ever-changing landscape of recorded music.

The boat leaves shore riding a stiff wind: Pepe Rey’s “Weaving Ensaladas,” treating related genres and sacred-secular crossover practices at the early end of the villancico’s history, is erudite, passionate, and breakneck, jammed with Church history, cultural criticism (Bakhtinian Carnival), and the kind of insights into music that can only come from hands-on experience. It leaves one rather breathless, unsure whether there was actually a thesis to it all, but desiring more: a fine choice for an opening essay, and a refreshingly brisk angle on academic prose style.

The essays are arranged in rough chronological order, with Rey, Knighton, and Alberto del Río covering the period to about 1600; Torrente, Andrea Bombi, Pablo-L. Rodríguez, Rui Cabral Lopes, Janet Hathaway, and

Alain Bègue, the seventeenth century; Pilar Ramos López, Michel Benoît, and María Gembero Ustárrroz, the eighteenth; and then—abandoning the chronological for the geographical in a spatio-temporal switcheroo very familiar to scholars of colonial cultures—the last three essays, by David Irving, Geoffrey Baker, and Bernardo Illari, concern non-European villancicos.

In her “Song Migrations,” Knighton offers a meticulous reading of several different settings of the late-fifteenth-century villancico “Adorámoste, señor.” She teases out nice little descriptions of likely performance scenarios and possible situational meanings from these textual correspondences, serenely ignoring one of the current supposed “fault-lines” within musicology: this is a deceptively easy-going demonstration of how good textual scholarship can lead naturally to considerations of performance. As one of the editors, Knighton’s methodological influence in this regard is quiet but pervasive; it can be felt in most of the volume’s contributions, which tend to follow her lead of mingling close readings of texts with close descriptions of contexts, making this an exemplary book in yet another way. This style is also fundamental to Álvaro Torrente’s long piece, “Function and Liturgical Context of the Villancico in Salamanca Cathedral,” a meticulous account of specific contexts for villancico performances, based on the cathedral’s *Libro de ceremonias*, a book of norms and prescriptions for the mounting of festivals and processions around 1700. Torrente’s stated aim here is to show that “the [villancico] genre was cultivated more extensively than has traditionally been thought” (100); and he is able to show that there were no fewer than forty-nine villancico performances (with some re-use of works) in three festive periods in the period of one year—Christmastide, Corpus Christi, and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. By hewing closely to his source, strategically supplementing it with key information such as cathedral architecture, and maintaining a clear prose style, Torrente at times manages to elevate close description to a kind of visionary status: with such a wealth of data at hand, one begins to envision what it might have been like to be there. To “fill in the picture” on the sonic end, only some recordings of the works involved—villancicos by Antonio Yanguas and Tomás de Miciezes—are needed.

Between these two essays comes Alberto del Río’s “The Villancico in the Works of Early Castilian Playwrights,” approaching sixteenth-century villancicos from the theatrical point of view. The villancico is one fruit of what del Río calls “the close bond between religious ceremony and dramatic representation” (81). His essay is exciting and thought-provoking for the numerous parallels it suggests among para-liturgical and para-dramatic genres like villancico, égloga, and auto sacramental, as well as their relationships to later theatrical practices; but it reads like a transcription of a brilliant

lecture delivered under time pressure, and is intermittently confusing for the sheer wealth of information it attempts to deliver in too short a space. Here, uniquely among the essays in this volume, I wished for a stronger editorial hand.

Andrea Bombi's "The Third Villancico was a Motet" tackles the genre question by means of references in literary *cancioneros* that clarify—and duly complicate—the receptive and patronage contexts in which villancicos were used in the period roughly comprising 1675–1725 in Valencia. As in Torrente's piece, the basic aim here is to show that things were more diverse and various than has generally been assumed, and that we should not be in a hurry to over-define "the" villancico. Bombi closes eloquently: "The only possible conclusion, at this point, is that analysis of this repertory does not allow for simplification and calls for a flexible approach, based on the sensitive application at different levels of the appropriate criteria" (162).

In "Religiosity, Power and Aspects of Social Representation in the Villancicos of the Portuguese Royal Chapel," Rui Cabral Lopes points out that the villancico is "a special conduit for understanding the cultural panorama and *mentalités* of the Ancien Régime," but that "the focus of research has been limited to the gathering and inventorying of the texts and music . . ." (203). Attempting a corrective to this limitation, Cabral emphasizes the familiar, reassuring nature of devotional music in the vernacular—scarcely a new observation—and discusses the proliferation of character types and stereotypes in these works, from the shepherds we would expect in a Christmas-oriented repertory, to the "local color" of gypsies, Galicians, sailors, princes, and negros. He makes a brave start at a typology of these "social representations," and his exegeses of them as "conduits for understanding" are sensitive, but as yet rather rudimentary. The treatment of the *villancicos de negro* in particular is tentative, and it comes up hard against Geoffrey Baker's extremely acute handling of this topic later on in the volume.

Janet Hathaway's "'Music Charms the Senses . . .': Devotional Music in the *Triunfos festivos* of San Ginés, Madrid, 1656" is very similar in approach to Torrente's essay: another exercise in close reading of a descriptive/prescriptive text in order to build up a picture of villancico practice in a given time and place. The visionary effect of Torrente's piece, however, is much more subdued here. This may be due in part to Hathaway's rather diffident style, but it must also have to do with the fact that none of the music described in Hathaway's text, the *Triunfos festivos*, is known to survive. That she does not reveal this crucial detail until halfway through her essay, and then in a footnote, left me feeling shortchanged. Certainly we need not always have "the music itself" before us in order to glean vital information about its function, its meaning, and its nature—and indeed, only a minority of the

essays in this volume actually provide score examples—but contextual accounts of a music no longer extant are in an epistemological class of their own, demanding very special treatment.

The contribution of Alain Bègue, “A Literary and Typological Study of the Late 17th-century Villancico,” is as concrete and well-put-together a realization of its title as one could hope to find. Bègue, who along with Bombi and del Río forms the “literary contingent” among this book’s authors, bases his typology upon 206 surviving villancico texts by José Pérez de Montoro (1627–94). Despite the author’s protestations that “the polymorphism of the villancico of this period . . . makes any attempt at categorization difficult” (232), he arrives at an elegant, well-thought-out typology based on structural, dramatic, and topical features of these works, flexible enough to permit its application to works by other poets, and indeed, in some measure, to works in other genres altogether. I can see myself returning to this essay more than once as a model of how to think about large bodies of material.

The elegance of Bègue’s presentation is unfortunately not equaled by the graphic presentation of his essay, which suffers from a large number of blank half-pages and a generally awkward, clunky look, a result (I assume) of difficulties in formatting the large number of double-column poetic text extracts that he supplies. Elegance of typesetting is not this book’s strong suit in general, but it is on the whole serviceable, with only occasional oddities. Only here did I find that the formatting problems became really obtrusive.

Pilar Ramos López focuses on a single sub-genre in “*Pastorelas* and the Pastoral Tradition in 18th-century Spanish Villancicos,” bringing together a useful breadth of materials and perspectives to help define a surprisingly elusive network of terms. One of her essay’s greatest strengths is not even adumbrated in its title: she offers a refreshingly direct approach to some fundamental questions about gender in the performance of villancicos. She asks, “Why did a piece usually written by a priest to be performed by a male choir in a liturgical context involve the pretence of being sung by girls? And what was the effect of this ‘feminine’ singing in a church where womens’ singing was forbidden?” (296).

As the tale of the Emperor’s New Clothes reminds us, a well-placed question may be worth a thousand explanations. We postmoderns are prone to forget the peculiar gender landscape of the villancico—certainly I had allowed myself to forget it, until I ran straight into Ramos’s apparently artless queries. Furthermore, she has the wit not to try too hard to answer her own questions, offering instead the interesting observation that devotional singing in church exactly reversed Spanish stage practice of the period, where

women did the great bulk of the singing; and suggesting that these reversals may relate to differing ideas of “representation” in each context. She ends this short but memorable excursion into gender analysis with yet another ingenuous question: “Might it . . . have offered an attraction to the public?” (297). This is an exceptionally deft handling of a topic too often (one must excuse the expression here) manhandled.

In “The *noël à grand chœur* of South-western France and the Iberian Villancico: A Comparison,” Benoît Michel presents a straight-forward parallel between two contemporary genres coexisting on either side of the Pyrenees. The entire essay leads toward the hypothesis with which it ends: “[I]t is tempting to think that these sources, so closely alike physically, are evidence for a common line of development . . .” (320). By “physically” I take Michel to mean, in terms of ecclesiastical and social function, general subject matter, and multi-partite, para-dramatic musical structure. Indeed it is tempting; the parallels, as presented here, are both clear and compelling; it only remains for someone to take this intriguing hypothetical bull by the horns and wrestle it to the ground.

“*De rosas cercada*: Music by Francisco de la Huerta for the Nuns of Santa Ana de Ávila (1767–78),” by María Gembero Ustárroz, treats the only place where the gender questions raised by Ramos in her essay would not apply: villancicos performed by and for nuns in convents. Careful, methodical, and concise, this essay offers not only a detailed description of the matter of its title, but a useful treatment of key aspects of musical life in a Spanish convent during the late-eighteenth century. The story is a familiar one, of course: a woman of ordinary means with musical gifts could brave social contempt and excommunication by performing on the stage, or she could retire from the world and pursue music from behind the veil. With a couple of well-chosen examples, Gembero manages to suggest that retirement did not have to mean giving up the latest in musical fashion: the villancicos supplied to this convent by de la Huerta were up-to-the-minute *galant*, requiring notable skill to execute. Gembero ties this neatly to the special status of certain novices admitted to the community specifically on the strength of their musical skills.

The title of David Irving’s essay, “Historical and Literary Vestiges of the Villancico in the Early Modern Philippines,” adumbrates (as Hathaway’s does not) the central absence at the heart of its account: very, very little in the way of decipherable, complete musical scores survives from the early years of Spanish colonies in the Philippines. (It came as a shock to learn that a great many of them were destroyed, not in some ancient upheaval, but in the bombings of 1945.) Scholars like Irving exercise heroic powers of creative inference to recreate what most of us take for granted; this essay, a dense, informative synthesis of what must be a huge amount of research, is

a model performance of this rather tragic mode of musicology. Its *terminus ad quem*, I think, can be one of two things, each of them painful for utterly different reasons: egregious para-musicological re-creative efforts, or the aching silence with which Gary Tomlinson's recent work on Aztec music culminates (2007).

Geoffrey Baker and Bernardo Illari, taken together, end this volume with a bang: these are by far the most politically engaged and strongly worded essays of the bunch. Baker, in "The 'Ethnic Villancico' and Racial Politics in 17th-century Mexico," argues forcefully that "the apparent valorization and inclusion of Negroes and their cultural activities in the villancicos *de negros* is illusory" (400), and that these works in fact served to reinscribe the vicious and enduring oppression of the *negros* by the *peninsulares*. Departing from José Maravall's dark view of the Baroque as systematic cultural coercion, Baker makes a strong, indeed an irrefutable case. What he does not do, and I wish he had, is to address what we are to do today with the villancicos *de negros*, which by their rhythmic complexity, their declamatory brilliance and vivacity, present to the innocent (or denying) ear one of the most engaging corners of the villancico repertory. One wants to hear them or participate in them; they are, on the purely auditory level, utterly delightful. That they represent in tones a particularly shameful corner of Spanish colonial behavior is a cruel irony indeed, one which it seems can be neither evaded nor rectified. Should we therefore stop performing them?

Bernardo Illari's powerhouse essay, "The Popular, the Sacred, the Colonial, and the Local: the Performance of Identities in the Villancicos from Sucre (Bolivia)," is also out to demolish a few excessively comfortable assumptions, chief among them the idea that Latin American art is somehow intrinsically "different" simply by virtue of being Latin American; and the idea that the inclusion of popular idioms and characters in villancicos represents some sort of irruption of folk practices, much less a pure-hearted inclusionary maneuver on the part of the Church. Illari is a thinker and writer capable of conveying complexity, and here he oscillates skillfully between minute details and occasionally breathtaking overviews (his notion of meta-genre, mentioned above, is only one of several he proffers in this essay). Here he investigates the work of three composers, each representing a principal type in the society of the day—the *peninsular* Juan de Araujo, the *criollo* Roque de Chavarría, and, rarest of the rare, an anonymous presumed indigene, composer of a villancico entitled "Una pobre serranita." Illari's musical and cultural analyses are equally sensitive; and, uniquely among the authors of this collection, he has dedicated considerable time to recording projects connected with his scholarship, so that he can refer the glad reader to some (very well-executed) sound examples.

Every reader will of course chart a somewhat different course through this collection, depending on their needs and their predilections. This is the nature of edited collections, and it is also their great virtue—something I feel needs saying in these days when academic presses, under growing financial pressure, look increasingly askance at this way of putting together a scholarly book. It is certainly true that not all edited collections are as good as this one is; it owes its excellence in part to the topic at hand, which is just too rich to be usefully subsumed under single theses or points of view—and yet sorely in need of being treated as comprehensively as possible, in order for the villancico to achieve something like canonical status.⁴

This is a noble mission, and a necessary one, and brings with it a very important question about hegemonies within our discipline, or, to put it more colloquially, the question of who gets to tell whose story. The whole set-up of this book in English on an indelibly Hispanic topic makes very plain that the “center” of our discipline, once squarely Germanic, remains Anglo-Saxon; and it suggests that something cannot be considered fully canonic (and thus, in an inescapable sense, valid) *unless it is known and studied in English*. Leaving aside for now the question of linguistic imperialism, it is strange that this should be taking place exactly when a good many Anglophones are busy trying to unmake, for once and for all, the very idea of canonicity. Possibly at a certain point the anti-canonic strain in current musicology will “meet up” with some of the more adventurous efforts represented by this collection, and the field will abruptly find itself a good deal larger. A consummation devoutly to be wished.

Notes

1. There have been a number of monographs in Spanish, including Ripollés (1935), Sánchez Romeralo (1969), Tejerizo Robles (1989), Capdepón (1993), Villanueva (1994), and Suárez-Pajares (1997). In addition, over the last twenty-some years, there have been a number of dissertations in which the villancico has figured more or less centrally: the editors cite Laird (University of North Carolina, 1986), Villanueva (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 1988), Sánchez Siscart (Universidad de Zaragoza, 1991), Capdepón (Universität Hamburg, 1991), Rifé (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 1992), Caballero (Universidad de Valladolid, 1994), Ezquerro (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 1996), Torrente (University of Cambridge, 1997), Cabero Pueyo (Ludwig Maximilians Universität, 1997), Lambea (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 1998) and Bombi (Universidad de Zaragoza, 2002). To this might be added Martín Quiñones (1997, Universidad de Granada), Davies (University of Chicago, 2006), Hathaway (New York University, 2005), and King (University of Toronto, 2004).

2. “Villancicos and *tonos* reflect the close adherence of 17th-century Iberian composers to strophic songs (*coplas*) with refrain (*estribillo*). In the late 17th century this repertory began occasionally to include recitative and aria sections as well, and this gradual transformation of the villancico and the *tono* makes it difficult to draw a clear line between the older genres and the new cantata—a distinction that it is nevertheless desirable to make . . .” See Juan

José Carreras, "Cantata, \$V: The Spanish Cantata to 1800, 1. Terminology and Context," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online*, edited by L. Macy, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/book/omo_gmo (accessed October 1, 2008).

3. "No single reference to this web of devotional genres is found in the 3.500 pages of Taruskin's Titanic contribution to recent music historiography, *The Oxford History of Western Music* [2005], which perpetuates its historical oblivion already evident in the volumes edited by Abraham [1968] and Lewis and Fortune [1975] . . ." (7).

4. In this light, it was a particular pleasure to see this collection win the Robert Stevenson Award for outstanding scholarship in Iberian music at the annual meeting of the AMS in Nashville, November 2008.

References

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