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Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Journal."

THE AFRICAN INFLUENCE on Colonial Latin American Music

By Enrique Arias

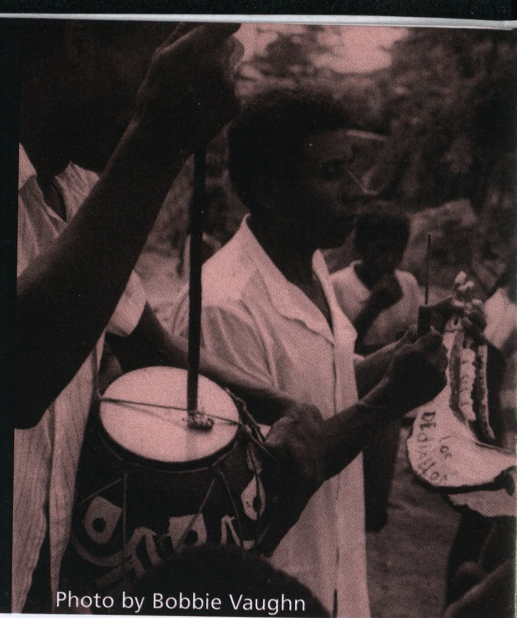


Photo by Bobbie Vaughn

The African influence on music of our hemisphere is often thought to begin with ragtime, jazz, and blues. Although these great musical phenomena of the late 19th and 20th centuries surely reveal the profound impact of African rhythm, melodic forms, and general musical atmosphere, they are by no means the first to do so. Composers working in the "western" tradition in colonial Mexico and Guatemala already composed music that resonate African traditions. During the course of the present article I will consider some fascinating examples of this influence on music written during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Vivacious examples of the impact of African music on Hispanic composers appear as early as the middle 16th century. For example, Mateu Fletxa (1481-1553), a Catalan composer, wrote an *ensalada* (an extended vocal type with dramatic implication) entitled "La Negrina." This composition highlights rhythms alternating groups of two and three beats, call and response patterns, and musical onomatopoeia. Although these are traits common to many Spanish secular vocal compositions of the later Renaissance, "La Negrina" has a text that relates to Africa.

But now let us turn more specifically to vocal works from the colonial period, or roughly the 16th and 17th centuries.

THE VILLANCICO

The term "villancico" is derived from the Spanish word for "rustic" and was first applied to poetry of the mid-fifteenth century. During the sixteenth century, the *villancico* became a favorite song for many voices. Its text was joyful and frequently referred to Christmas. The *villancicos* of this period are usually popular in style and rhythmically energetic; their musical form often reflects the poetic structure of their text. Their middle sections called *coplas*,

feature contrasts between solo and ensemble passages and thinner textures. One of the best-known villancicos of this type is "*Riu, riu, chiu*," which comes from the *Cancionero de Upsala*, a collection of songs published in Venice in 1556.

In addition to this example, the *villancicos* of Gaspar Fernandez (c.1566-1629) should be mentioned. Fernandez was born in Portugal, but spent most of his career in Guatemala, and, after 1606, at the Puebla cathedral in Mexico, one of the most important centers for liturgical music in the hemisphere. While in Puebla he composed over 250 *villancicos* in Spanish or in various combinations of indigenous languages or African dialect. These *villancicos* (now housed at the cathedral of Oaxaca in Mexico) have begun to attract performers and scholars because of their intriguing texts and lovely music, but they also attest to the exuberant diversity of cultures in Mexico in the period.

THE NEGRITO

During the seventeenth century a particular type of *villancico*—variously called *negro*, *negrito*, *guineo*, or *negrilla*—appeared in large numbers in Latin America. As these names imply, this type of *villancico* is special because the texts mix Spanish and dialect, with frequent references to Africa. Many of these *villancicos* were composed for Christmas, and most feature such African-derived elements as call and response patterns and intricate oscillations between duple and triple rhythmic groupings. The *negrito* grows out of the tradition of *cofradía*, or a brotherhood formed to fulfill particular religious and benevolent purposes. Many of these brotherhoods had exclusively Black membership and provided the participants an opportunity to socialize and do good works. These brotherhoods often put on colorful pageants for the Christmas and Corpus Christi events that *villancicos* marked.

Music played a central role in these religious events by highlighting the meaning of the particular occasion as well as by giving the members a chance to perform. Because of the nature of such confraternities, lively *villancicos* rather than complex liturgical polyphony were apropos.

The *negrito* provides background on the membership of these *cofradías* because of the specific references to persons of African descent. Some *negritos* tell of a young Black man giving a gift to Christ, which leads to a charming account of the gift's origins or the reason for its presentation. Occasionally, texts are nostalgic, implying that the speaker, although apparently content with his new surroundings, has not forgotten the place from which he came. Many songs make specific references to African dances and the use of percussion, thus providing invaluable information about African music and dance as they came to Latin America.

In conclusion, vocal music must be considered as a complex of words, culture, and musical sounds. Viewed from this standpoint, the *negrito*, although it shares many musical traits of the *villancico* as a genre, reveals the powerful influence of Africa on Mexican religious and musical practices of the later colonial period. Composers of Nueva España quickly understood the musical possibilities of this genre and accordingly composed music of expressivity, charm, and energy.

For those interested in listening to the works considered in this article, I suggest the following CDs: Nueva España: Close Encounters in the New World, 1590-1690, Erato, 2292-45977-2. Madrigals and Ensaladas: Brudieu, "Vila" and Fletxa, Accent, ACC 94103 D.