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REVIEW: RECORDING

Archivo de Guatemala: Music from the Guatemala City Cathedral Archive

El Mundo / Richard Savino (director)
Naxos 8.574295, 2021; one disc, 74 minutes

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The musical corpus of the old cathedral in Antigua Guatemala, which was heavily damaged by an earthquake in 1773, was moved to the country's new capital city in 1779 and is preserved there in the Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano Francisco de Paula García Peláez (frequently referred to as the Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano de Guatemala). It is one of the most important in Latin America. According to Omar Morales Abril ('Teatralización de villancicos paralitúrgicos del siglo XVII' (PhD dissertation, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2021)), this corpus is divided into three large sections: plainchant choir books, polyphonic books and 'music papers' or parts. The last of these alone comprises about three thousand records of mainly manuscript pieces, two thousand of which are villancicos, that is, music with poetic texts in the vernacular. Along with local repertory, the collection includes music from various places in the Hispanic world, such as Mexico City, Puebla, Lima, Madrid, Toledo and Seville. In addition, it contains hundreds of works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, unlike other Spanish-American cathedral archives, which mostly preserve music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is therefore one of Latin America's largest and oldest musical collections.

For this reason, a new recording dedicated to the music of the Guatemalan Cathedral during the colonial period can only be welcomed, especially an album such as this, performed by the experienced musicians of El Mundo under the able directorship of Richard Savino. Among the many options that this extensive corpus offers to performers, Savino has chosen to focus on the 'music papers' and, more particularly, on the villancico. The characteristics of this genre, which combines features of sacred and secular music (the latter mainly from theatre and dance), fit well with Savino's idea of Latin American music of the time. As he expresses it in the booklet, this repertory would have been influenced by 'folk music', and its performers would have used percussion instruments, giving rise to a unique sound that would then persist to the present day. I leave for the end some reflections on this matter.

Among the selected composers, the chief protagonist is the Guatemalan Rafael Antonio Castellanos (died 1791), chapel master of the cathedral in the second half of the eighteenth century, to whom six of the seventeen recorded pieces belong (tracks 1, 2, 4, 6, 8 and 16). The other local composer on the album is his predecessor, Manuel José de Quirós (died 1765), who is represented by two works (tracks 12 and 15). Savino also includes villancicos by composers who never visited the New World but whose work has been preserved in the Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano de Guatemala: Sebastián Durón (1660–1716) (tracks 7 and 10) and José de Torres (*c*1670–1738) (track 11). This decision seems reasonable because it reflects the musical life of the time, characterized by the coexistence of local and peninsular repertory, particularly of composers linked to the Royal Chapel of Madrid. But Savino goes one step further and includes pieces preserved in Mexico City: two anonymous 'Violin Sonatas' (track 5) and a villancico by Juan García de

Zéspedes (1619–1678) entitled *Convidando está la noche*, presumably composed in Puebla Cathedral, where Zéspedes was chapel master (track 17). This is probably the most frequently recorded piece of the Spanish-American colonial repertory: according to Drew Edward Davies ('"Convidando está la noche" y la grabación del Latin Baroque', *Cuadernos del Seminario de Música en la Nueva España y el México Independiente* 8 (2017), 16–31), it appears in at least twenty-four professional recordings. *Convidando está la noche* is, furthermore, the only piece not transcribed or arranged by Savino – as indicated in the booklet, its execution is based on the transcription by Robert Stevenson (in *Inter-American Music Review* 7/1 (1985), 47–48). The two sonatas by Juan Antonio de Vargas y Guzmán (*fl. c*1770) (tracks 13 and 14) can also be considered to originate from New Spain, since, as Savino points out in his notes, the manuscript that contains them is dated 1776 and originates from the Mexican city and port of Veracruz. The inclusion of these pieces finds historical support based on the many connections that existed between the Spanish-American cathedrals of the time, as evidenced by the musical works preserved in the Archivo Histórico Arquidiocesano.

The album is completed with some 'Folías' taken from the *Instruccion de musica sobre la guitarra española* by Gaspar Sanz (1640–*c*1710), published in several volumes from 1674 onwards (track 3), and a 'Ciacona' taken from a sonata by Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) published in 1685 (track 9). Although both are pieces that were printed in Spain and Italy, their circulation in the New World is well documented. In short, the album offers a varied and attractive sample of the vernacular and instrumental repertory cultivated in colonial Spanish America, both local and foreign.

From a musical point of view, I find many virtues to highlight in this album. The instrumental ensemble is sober and historically plausible: the two inescapable violins, cello or viola da gamba for the instrumental bass, and harpsichord and plucked string instruments for the harmonic accompaniment – typically guitar and harp, but also lute and theorbo in some cases. Also historically plausible is the fact that the vocal ensemble performs with one singer per voice, as seems to have been done in many Spanish-American cathedrals of the time. They do so in tune and exhibit remarkable technical command, as do the instrumentalists. All of them are capable of recreating or suggesting different sound environments: in some works festive, as in the villancicos *Pastores alegres* and *Gitanillas vienen* (tracks 1 and 2), both by Castellanos; in others, more contemplative, as in the villancicos *Ángeles del cielo* by Castellanos and *Jesús y lo que subes* by Quirós (tracks 4 and 15); and in others elegant, as in the anonymous 'sonatas' of Mexican origin (track 5).

My only reservations have to do with the use of the lute, perhaps excessive compared to its somewhat sporadic appearances in colonial documents, and with the performance of the villancico *Ay de mí, que el llanto y tristeza* by Durón (track 7). Although the bass singer succeeds in conveying the lamenting character of this piece, he also has some intonation difficulties and problems sustaining the phrasing, in both cases especially in the lower notes. In addition, the solo singing makes more apparent some diction problems that in the performance of the other pieces are non-existent or at least barely perceptible.

Apart from that, I have some comments from a more properly musicological point of view. A very concrete one has to do with the anonymous 'Sonata' movements. As the recently deceased musicologist Juan Francisco Sans demonstrated some years ago, they are neither sonata movements nor anonymous, but two of the solfeggi that the Italian composer Leonardo Leo (1694–1744) wrote in the first half of the eighteenth century ('Ni son anónimas, ni son instrumentales, ni están inéditas: las "sonatas" del Archivo de Música de la Catedral de México', *Heterofonía* 138–139 (2008), 131–153). Several of them have been preserved in the Mexican cathedral, and some were at the residence of Dr José Ignacio Bartolache in Mexico City around 1790, along with other music scores and books, according to the inventory published by Francisco Javier Rodríguez-Erdmann (*Tesoros del AGN: dos inventarios musicales novohispanos* (Mexico City: Archivo General de la Nación, 2013)). Even so, they sound beautiful performed as instrumental

sonatas, which explains why they were considered so by all musicologists and performers before Sans correctly identified them.

Another specific comment concerns the guitar pieces in the album (tracks 3, 13 and 14). I have already noted that including repertory from Spain and colonial Mexico seems reasonable in an album focused thematically on Guatemala. However, it is no less true that pieces for five-course guitar and other plucked string instruments appear in the Guatemalan archive, as can be seen, among others, in the scholarship of Juan Pablo Pira (for instance, 'El Cuaderno de Manuel Álvarez: una fuente de música para guitarra de la época colonial en Guatemala', *Cultura de Guatemala* 23/3 (2002), 67–103). The inclusion of such pieces in this album would have been welcome.

One last comment, this time broader, has to do with the 'popular' character that predominates in most of the pieces performed and the narrative that accompanies it. This is not the place to give a full account of the discussions on the subject that have abounded in the musicological literature of recent years, especially concerning 'black villancicos' or 'negrillas', a genre scarcely represented in this recording – *Negros de Guaranganá* by Castellanos (track 16) is the only one. However, we have seen Savino himself attributing influences of 'folk music' to the pieces recorded and pointing out that some of their supposed performance practices – such as the use of percussion instruments – would have lasted until our day. The resulting performance style, especially in the case of villancicos, has predominated in recordings of Spanish-American colonial music of the last twenty or thirty years and is characterized by its closeness to present-day popular and traditional music. In general, this trend is viewed with suspicion by musicology. Davies, in his article already cited, and Geoffrey Baker ('Latin American Baroque: Performance as a Post-Colonial Act?', *Early Music* 36/3 (2008), 441–448), among others, state that the evidence for the use of percussion instruments to accompany villancicos is virtually nil, and that this performing style relates more to present-day World Music and crossover than to past practices. For this reason, Davies uses the label 'Latin Baroque' to designate it, in clear analogy with 'Latin Jazz'. While this criticism points to this style's questionable validity in historical terms, another one concerns the tendency of 'Latin Baroque' to reproduce stereotypes about Latin American culture as a mixture of party and exoticism.

I think the criticisms above are well founded without their necessarily calling the performance style into question from an artistic viewpoint or denying its musical appeal. However, it is also possible to look at these articles with some reservations for assuming a priori that there are no elements of colonial music that survive today. According to their authors, the apparent links between colonial-era music and present-day styles could only be constructed, ahistorically, from the present. Is that so? Some people maintain the opposite. Guitarist Eloy Cruz and Tembembe Ensamble Continuo, for example, argue for the existence of clear links between genres such as the eighteenth-century fandango and the current *son jarocho* (see their website www.tembembe.org/trayectoria.html).

As sometimes happens with dichotomous positions, both may share the truth. Although there is a lack of detailed documentary studies that establish continuities between present and past musical genres, some obvious resemblances between them cannot be denied. There is, in fact, a common harmonic pattern between the eighteenth-century fandango and the Mexican *son jarocho*, as well as overlaps between the hemiolas so recurrent in traditional Latin American music and the vernacular repertory of the seventeenth century. These similarities – and not only the tendency to exoticize Latin America – partly explain the relationships that performers like Savino typically establish between the colonial repertory and current popular, traditional or 'folk' music.

Of course, all this leaves several unanswered questions. One is whether some features of the colonial repertory sound 'popular' because they already sounded so in that period or because they were subsequently popularized. In other words, we do not know whether the parallel thirds and sixths so frequent in the vocal duos of Quirós's and Castellanos's villancicos were extracted from the oral music of their time or whether later oral music was influenced by the villancico and other written genres (such as opera), which used these intervals in vocal duos. Or perhaps they influenced each

other in a circular relationship? Or are these simple coincidences that do not indicate a direct connection between them?

Savino and many other performers have a clear position on the matter: the villancicos and other genres of the Spanish-American colonial repertory were indeed influenced by the popular music of their time, and their forms of performance are still partly alive today. For this reason, performing them with percussion instruments such as maracas or castanets is not only musically attractive but also historically valid. In their favour, some will say that certain baroque villancicos indeed pick up elements of the popular world of the time. As explained by Leonardo Waisman ('Una aproximación al villancico-xácara', unpublished work, 1996), the literary text of the villancico 'Vaya de jácara amigos' by Castellanos (track 8) adopts the manners of illiterate and quarrelsome people. More specifically, it reproduces a confrontation between two rough-mannered neighbourhood men, who personify God and man after the latter disobeys the former by eating the forbidden fruit. Others, however, will argue the contrary, saying that not all villancicos have this character and that what was considered popular in colonial times was not necessarily the same as what we view as such today. And they will also state that if percussion instruments had been used so consistently to accompany villancicos, there would be evidence of this in the sources.

The matter becomes even more complicated if we consider that our own practices and perceptual codes change rapidly. Returning to the disc under review, Savino believes using the baroque guitar as an accompanying instrument to be a hallmark of Latin American music. However, the growing evidence of its usage in environments beyond the Hispanic world and its increasing use to accompany Italian and French repertories of the time may have diminished its capacity as a 'sonic marker' of Latin and Spanish culture. Perhaps for this reason, Savino's performance of Leo's 'Solfeggi' (track 5) and Corelli's 'Ciacona' (track 9) is not too different from other recordings of European baroque music that we usually listen to, despite the baroque guitar being part of the continuo. And so one wonders whether the performance practices were local only when playing villancicos or whether there were also particular ways of singing and playing other repertories, including Latin polyphony.

Beyond the questions it helps awaken, this album is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the dissemination of the musical repertory of colonial Latin America. Hearing it makes it possible to enjoy engaging performances of some of the villancicos and instrumental pieces cultivated in the New World and reflect on their meaning, both in their time and in ours.

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