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Hearing Faith: Music as Theology in the Spanish Empire

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Andrew A. Cashner

Hearing Faith: Music as Theology in the Spanish Empire

Leiden: Brill, 2020. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, 194.

ISBN: 9789004414976, xvi, 244pp.

Only music can express concepts for which words are not enough. Andrew Cashner's *Hearing Faith: Music as Theology in the Spanish Empire* explores how seventeenth-century Catholics in Spain and New Spain expressed religious beliefs regarding music by means of music itself. Cashner concentrates on a genre of devotional music known as villancico, which was typically sung in the vernacular in Hispanic churches at Matins on major feasts. His study draws on villancicos as sources for understanding the role of music in establishing connections between faith and hearing. In a series of case studies, focusing on Puebla de los Ángeles in Mexico, and Montserrat and Zaragoza in Spain, the book traces a lineage of villancicos whose central subject is heavenly music. The author argues that the composers carefully designed the musical structures of these pieces to train the believers to listen for a higher form of music explained in theological literature.

A concise and polished book with an interpretive approach to music, *Hearing Faith* will be especially appealing for experienced musicologists in the field of villancicos and for scholars interested more broadly in Latin American colonial music or curious about the fascinating intersections between music and religion. The book provides an insight into musical composition and performance as a way to enhance the faithful's understanding of theological notions and thus achieve spiritual transcendence. The book is organized into five chapters divided into two parts. Based on a global sample of

the repertoire, the first part shows that the villancico addresses musical concepts through music on several levels. It also posits that the more complex pieces required the listeners to acquire religious knowledge and aural training to interpret them. In this line, the study introduces suggestive terms, such as "metamusical villancicos" to refer to pieces that enact musical references through music, and "musical theology" to indicate a form of musical practice that goes beyond discourse about music, its purposes, and functions discussed in theological treatises (6).

The three chapters of the second part present detailed case studies of closely related villancicos that, in theory, challenged the listeners to surpass the level of audible music and rise to contemplate a divine type of music, which was supposed to be unhearable to the ear of the body. Chapters 3 and 4 examine villancicos focusing on Christ as singer and song, which supposedly invited the listeners to reflect on Christ's nature as the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). Chapter 5 argues that composers like Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla and Joan Cererols created musical imitations of heavenly music that might also be intended as acts of offering to God. Through their pieces, listeners were given the opportunity to offer themselves and experience an affective devotion for the Eucharist and Virgin Mary.

The villancico as a musical genre has been largely studied in the past decades. *Hearing Faith* proposes a fresh perspective on the intellectual and serious side of the repertoire, which has been less examined than its comic

or transgressive aspects. Among the book's strengths is that it brings attention to the relevance of hearing for Catholicism in the seventeenth century. It has been argued that hearing was the center of worship for Protestants, who favored songs, preaching, vocal prayers, and readings from the Bible. Instead, sight and touch were the privileged senses for Catholics, who preferred lavish religious paintings and sculptures, in addition to performative demonstrations of piety, over sound stimuli. *Hearing Faith* calls this assumption into question by offering a glimpse into the sophisticated aural culture of Spanish and colonial Mexican Catholics, which was firmly rooted in Christian Neoplatonic philosophy.

The author, nonetheless, is elusive in defining theology, which is the central point of the book's argument. Broadly speaking, theology consists in the systematic study of the nature of God and his disclosure to humankind from the perspective of philosophy. Cashner outlines theology as a creative search for new ways to connect revelation to experience (13). According to the author, for early modern Catholics, thinking theologically meant to build chains of associations among biblical narratives, theological writings, and liturgy to interpret or reinterpret any of these texts (13). I beg to differ. What the author identifies as theological thinking is the logical mechanism of the early modern way of thinking.¹ It involved linking through analogies all sorts of literary, visual, and musical sources of information. In the early modern period, the analogy was not only a linguistic expression or a rhetorical figure but a complex cognitive process of transferring meanings from a particular subject to another to bring out and finally grasp the true essence of things. Analogical

thinking, therefore, concerns a way of reasoning, understanding, and interpreting the world that permeates all the arts and unites them with other humanistic disciplines. It was not an exclusive process of theological reflection. Cashner uses Paul Ricoeur's theory of the metaphor to briefly explain analogical thinking, dismissing the value of *conceptismo* for this matter (13). Yet it was the seventeenth-century literary theorists, such as the Spaniard Baltasar Gracián and the Italian Emmanuele Tesauro, who more deeply tried to clarify the mechanism of such a process.² Their writings demonstrate that *conceptismo* was not a type of theological thinking, as Cashner states (14), but a way to put analogical thinking into practice by means of both sacred and secular literature. Moreover, the mechanisms of analogical thinking, which Baltasar Gracián names *ingenio*, or wit, and brilliantly expounds in *Agudeza y arte de ingenio*, may have correlates in musical composition techniques used for villancicos, as some authors have recently suggested.³

Discussions of *conceptismo* aside, it is worth noting that *Hearing Faith's* provocative analysis continues an important new pattern in the interpretation of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century villancicos. It has become impossible to explore the universe of this repertoire without understanding how its poems and music are interwoven with other textual and visual sources. Cashner's book offers a small but exciting selection of emblems and illustrations from music theory treatises that properly support its argument. Hopefully, *Hearing Faith* will inspire more work analyzing how villancicos engaged with other visual elements of religious culture. After observing the images and examining the musical examples, it remains to the reader to consider whether

the concept of “musical theology” truly condenses the Spanish and New Spanish composers’ intention to convey complex notions about the essence of God through music, or whether “metamusical villancicos” might have accomplished their purpose of increasing faith and conjuring more intimate encounters with celestial harmony. Even though heavenly music was clearly out of human reach, it was not altogether unlike the music the faithful would have listened to in the most important celebrations of their churches and cathedrals.

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NOTES

1 Brian Vickers, “Analogy versus Identity: The Rejection of Occult Symbolism, 1580–1680,” in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 95–163.

2 Baltasar Gracián, *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1996 [1642]). Emanuele Tesauro, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico* (Venice: GioFrancesco Valuasense, 1688).

3 Bernardo Illari, “Agudeza de villancico: los Plumajes de Torrejón,” in *El villancico en la encrucijada: Nuevas perspectivas en torno a un género poético y musical (siglos XV–XIX)*, ed. Esther Borrego Gutiérrez and Javier Marín López (Kassel: Reinchenberger, 2019), 477–515.