

Huehuetenango

Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones?

Walter Benjamin; “On the concept of history”

The Latin American Music Library at Indiana University houses a unique 15-volume collection of polyphonic music and Gregorian chant from the Department of Huehuetenango in northern Guatemala, compiled between 1582 and 1635. These rare books shed light on the musical traditions of a secluded community surrounded by Central America's highest mountain ranges, at a great distance from the colonial urban centers with their grand cathedrals and scriptoria.

The Huehuetenango archive is the result of several interruptions: the European invasion interrupts the history of the original inhabitants, while their own artistic production interrupts the European monopoly on Renaissance musical history. Eventually, the Missions themselves are interrupted and the function of these manuscripts changes completely, reaching us as remnants of a musical culture whose dimension and variety can only be intuited. The quantity and quality of pieces represented in this collection - more than 350 works - make it an unavoidable repertoire for anyone interested not only in understanding the circulation of printed and handwritten music in colonial America, but also the complex and mysterious way through which European music making manifested through native minds, hands, and voices.

Indeed, the Guatemalan manuscripts contain much of the music in vogue in the mid-sixteenth century in Spain, France, and Italy. Manuscript number 8 contains a selection of Parisian chansons and Florentine madrigals repurposed perhaps for instrumental or liturgical use. Manuscript number 1 includes three Masses, two by renowned Spanish composers Ceballos and Morales, among many others possibly by Guatemalan composers. Polyphonic settings of psalms for Vespers and Compline, Gregorian antiphons, hymns, and all sorts of short responses for various celebrations can be found in most of the choir books in the collection. Manuscript number 7 stands out for its original vernacular repertoire, featuring works by Tomás Pascual, considered the first preserved native composer. Several *villancicos* by peninsular composers like Juan Vásquez and Mateo Flecha can also be found scattered throughout the archive, alongside Spanish motets from the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

Despite the collection's significance, only a few projects showcase its music. While previous interpretations focused on Spanish and Nahuatl works from Manuscript 7, our project aims to present a comprehensive view of the community's sound universe. We understand these codices not so much as a mere compilation or thoughtless imitation of all the music that came into their hands, but as privileged testimonies of an aesthetic taste and creativity, whose only record exists thanks to these manuscripts. We are guided by a different vision than that prevailing in the discussion about this archive, which tends to grant European authorship to those anonymous and unique pieces that are considered the most musically sophisticated. We believe that such a stance limits the ability of these objects to reveal the historical potential of the communities that created them, the sophistication, and the artistic and intellectual curiosity that emerges from these documents.

Our project aims to unveil the invisible connections in the music they chose to copy, combining local and foreign works of diverse scales and functions. Drawing inspiration from fifteenth and sixteenth-century court songbooks and vihuela and voice publications, we highlight the archive's equal relevance compared to more explored ones, celebrating the sensitivity of its composers and compilers: their ability to not only receive knowledge and to safeguard it - which is no small feat - but also to contribute creations of great value to the musical context of their time.

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