

Basso Continuo in New Spain

Music in the kingdom of New Spain had a clear and very close relationship to the musical tradition of Spain, and that is how the basso continuo tradition reached the New World. Just as in Spain, basso continuo practices are poorly documented until the beginning of the eighteenth century. It is most probable that this tradition was taught orally and with the utilization of manuscripts which did not survive over time (just as in the Spanish tradition) by Spanish musicians who came to New Spain.

On the other hand, valuable information and evidence of the importance of the organ as an accompanying instrument is to be found in cathedral and church records. A good example of this is the acquisition of an organ for the Mexico City Cathedral as early as 1530, only nine years after the fall of Tenochtitlán, the old capital of the Aztec empire. The organ was used to accompany and support the choir, according to the records. In fact, a small Indian choir trained in Pedro de Gante's (a famous Flemish missionary) school for natives sang every Sunday and at feast-days in the newly established Mexico City Cathedral, their ambitious part-singing supported by an organ recently brought from Seville. There are records of the same practice in other important cities such as Durango, Morelia, Puebla, Oaxaca and Mérida.

Even though we know that the organ was used to accompany and support voices for the religious services in many of the most important cities throughout New Spain, there is almost no tangible proof giving us a specific idea of how figured bass was played. The place where at least some information about basso continuo practice is to be found is the Mexico City Cathedral, where a Colegio de Infantes (a music school for young boys which belonged to the church) was founded in 1725. Musical activities in the Cathedral of Mexico City were guided by the chapel master, who was a highly-trained and skilled musician. In addition to the composition of music and directing the music chapel, the chapel master presided over the instruction of the musicians. This included the important task of instructing the choirboys of the Colegio de Infantes in canto figurado, that is to say polyphonic music. It is at the Colegio de Infantes that we find some of the few surviving examples of eighteenth-century basso continuo practice: three basso continuo exercises from the first half of the century, which were found in loose leaves in the Cathedral archive. There are no specific details surrounding these examples, however, Ruben Valenzuela suggests that they could have been part of a figured bass and continuo lesson for a young musician of the music chapel, working under the guidance of a cathedral organist.

Joseph de Torres' *Reglas Generales de Acompañar* was the most important continuo treatise produced in Spain, and circulated widely among Spanish musicians. Even though there is not concrete proof of its existence in the New Spain, it is highly probable that novohispanic musicians would have known and used this method as an instructive tool for basso continuo. There are other facts that support this theory: musicologist Alejandro Vera, who has researched Santiago de Murcia's music in Mexico, documents that in 1704 Joseph de Torres sent to Cartagena and Mexico four chests with his Masses and treatises which included his *Reglas Generales*.³⁴ In 1703 a priest named Juan de Escobar also brought various books by Torres on chant and

polyphony to New Spain, which may have also included the Reglas. Another important piece of evidence concerning basso continuo practices in New Spain is a text by Spanish musician Ricardo de la Main dating from 1747. This text was an index and introduction to what would have been a two-part music treatise; according to De la Main's own words, the text was written in a very understandable manner so that it could be used in the teaching of the orphan girls at the San Miguel convent in Mexico City. While the first part of this work was mainly focused on plainchant, the second is completely concerned with the art of accompanying. In the very first paragraph, the author speaks of the orthodox consonances and warns the players to be extremely aware of them. De la Main states that the rule for knowing when to place the third, the fifth or the octave above the bass is the one "principal for composition, and also for the art of accompanying, and he who does not know this rule is like a parrot which talks, but does not understand what he is saying". The author also mentions that in the second volume of the work, he will include some basses by modern composers such as Corelli, Locatelli, Bassani, and Hasse, and that he will add a written out accompaniment to serve as examples.³⁷ However, due to unclear political circumstances this treatise was never printed; unfortunately the manuscript is lost.

Another example of continuo practice in New Spain is a treatise for guitar from 1776, which was found in Chicago in 1974. This work was written by Juan Antonio Vargas y Guzman, a person of whom little is known apart from the fact that he was a guitar teacher in the city of Veracruz. In 1989 another manuscript copy of this treatise was found in the city of Oviedo, Spain; in this version the front page of the manuscript shows the year 1773 and mentions the fact that Juan Antonio Vargas y Guzman was a living in the city of Cádiz. This shows quite clearly that Vargas y Guzman was one of the many Spanish musicians who traveled to America, bringing with him the European musical tradition.

Mexico City's National Library also contains further examples of novohispanic guitar tablature, among them MS 1560, containing repertoire from the first half of the eighteenth century. A substantial portion of the material in this source is notated as figured bass, including a version of the well-known La Folia in the style of Corelli.

Conclusions

Concerning the continuo techniques used to accompany this music, it may be stated that continuo practices in New Spain had a close relation to those of Spain, with Joseph de Torres's Reglas generales de acompañar being particularly influential on both continents. When observing the existing basso continuo exercises from the Colegio de Infantes, similarities may be noted in the way that the upper voices are treated in relation to the movement of the bass line. This is not surprising, when we consider that New Spain as well as Spain kept an early continuo tradition until well into the eighteenth century, a tradition in which the movement of the voices had a highly strict treatment (at least theoretically).

Regarding the instrumentation for the basso, a couple of surviving musical examples can help us to create an idea of the continuo section used to accompany this music. Though the bajón (dulcian) was an instrument which was mostly used to support the voices in the so-

called *música de facistol* (which was a capella) there are many manuscripts in which the use of this instrument is specified. The violón is also mentioned in some villancico manuscripts. Looking at the available evidence, we may see quite clearly that the favorite accompaniment instrument for religious music was the organ; both portable and large organs were used to accompany music inside the church. The harpsichord's role in the church is quite specific in the chapter acts (see chapter 3.4), and it is mentioned as accompaniment only for arias, recitativos and symphonies, however in the world of secular music the instrument may have been used for villancicos, although at present there is not proof to confirm this. Therefore, an "ideal" continuo section for religious music based on the historical evidence would include the following instruments: organ, harp, guitar, violón and/or bajón. For the secular music, a harpsichord might be included in the list.