

Transatlantic Voyages: 18th-Century Galant Music in the Americas and Europe

Program notes

The eighteenth century marked a new cosmopolitan age in European history, a time when mobility increased, minds opened, and science blossomed. Whereas interaction with the New World had been transforming Europe since the late fifteenth century, it was in the eighteenth century that the Spanish American viceroyalties became aligned economically and culturally with southern Europe. This concert explores one aspect of transatlantic cultural flow in the mid-eighteenth century, namely the international galant style of music as practiced on the Italian peninsula and then disseminated to New Spain (Mexico).

The galant style, the dominant style of art music practiced between 1720 and 1780, sought clear textures and lyrical melodies. It originated in Naples, was vociferously taught at the Italian conservatories, and ended up being cultivated throughout Europe and its overseas possessions by the mid century. Unlike older baroque music, galant music was stylistically consistent – meaning it sounded basically the same – whether it was written for the opera house, the church, or the home, and thus composers could produce or even reuse large quantities of music for a variety of venues employing conventional formulas. Virtuoso singers, especially castrati, thrived on galant music, which tends to showcase the voice and invite creative improvisatory ornamentation. That said, the instrumental genres that would later define classicism, the symphony and the string quartet, emerged during this period. Often marginalized by music histories as “pre-classical” or lighter than later eighteenth-century music, galant music fuses expressive power with craftsmanship and functionality, resulting in a truly international and pleasing aesthetic.

Sinfonia to *Lo frate 'nnamorato*

Opera overture, 1732

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736)

Each half of tonight’s concert opens with a galant opera overture or sinfonia, genres essentially identical at the mid century in terms of form and character. The typical galant sinfonia is cast in three movements, fast-slow-fast, is written for either strings alone or with the addition of horns, and lasts less than ten minutes. Early sinfonias and opera overtures, which rarely include counterpoint or other complex musical structures, often incorporate dramatic gestures typical of theatre music in the first movement, songlike melodies in the second, and dance music in the third. Pergolesi’s short D major sinfonia, written for a comic opera in Neapolitan dialect performed at the Teatro dei Fiorentini in Naples, exemplifies the simplicity and the humor of the new galant style. The second movement, in G minor, is almost like a wordless aria for violin, whereas the other movements build upon sequences of gestural motives that give the work a sense of light energy. Known today for his stunning religious music, Pergolesi should be considered one of the most progressive innovators of comic opera in the early 1730s.

“Pallido il sole” from *Artaserse*

Opera seria aria, 1730

Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783)

One of the operatic hits of the eighteenth century, “Pallido il sole” hails from the serious opera *Artaserse*, Johann Adolf Hasse’s masterpiece on a libretto of Pietro Metastasio written for Venice in 1730. Although a native of Hamburg, Hasse achieved great international renown in his day for progressive music, especially serious opera, and many of his female roles were conceived for his wife, the soprano Faustina Bordoni, to sing. “Pallido il sole” quickly became one of the showpieces in the castrato singer Farinelli’s repertoire and was frequently performed outside the context of the full opera. In fact, it is said to be one of the pieces Farinelli sang nightly for King Philip V of Spain during the later 1730s. At this point in the plot, Artabano, the character who sings “Pallido,” is expressing fear and remorse because his scheme to usurp the Persian throne from its rightful heir, Artaserse, has been exposed. To convey Artabano’s internal fear of being executed, the violins restlessly accompany the perpetual sixteenth notes and the vocal melody consists of short, breathless fragments that elicit a sense of nervousness.

En su concepción

Aria for the Immaculate Conception, c1750

Santiago Billoni (c1700-c1763)

Santiago Billoni counts as one of the most important composers to have worked in New Spain. His music, notable for its harmonic experimentation and virtuosic violin writing, conveys a unique and erudite voice within the New Spanish repertoire. A native of Rome, Billoni spent most of his life working as a violinist at the cathedrals of Guadalajara, Valladolid-Morelia, and Durango, where he served as chapelmaster between 1749 and 1755. In fact, Billoni was the first of only two Italians to ascend to a cathedral chapelmaster position in New Spain, the other being Ignacio Jerusalem, who held the position at Mexico City from 1750 until 1769. He was the only European to work at Durango in the remote northern region of New Spain, and thus directly served as a catalyst for the modernization of musical style on the colonial frontier. His complete works, edited by Northwestern musicologist Drew Edward Davies, who first recognized the existence and importance of Billoni’s music, is available from A-R Editions <www.areditions.com>. It is the only complete works edition available of an eighteenth-century composer from colonial Latin America.

En su concepción, a simple and joyous aria for tenor solo with strings, sounds almost Handelian in its musical figuration. Written on the theme of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the patron of Durango Cathedral, the aria obscures religious symbolism in its structure. For example, Billoni repeats the phrase “es excepción de la regla” twelve times in the aria, representing the *Stellarium*, or the twelve stars that surround Mary’s head in visual art. Meditation on these stars formed an important personal devotion in eighteenth-century Catholicism. This aria’s catchy

and memorable melody serves the church's prerogative of reinforcing religious doctrine with music pleasing to the listener.

Cristal bello

Aria for Christmas with obbligato flute, c1760

Ignacio Jerusalem (1707-1769)

The most prolific composer in eighteenth-century New Spain, Ignacio Jerusalem should be considered one of the masters of the galant style, an estimation becoming increasingly apparent as research and performance reveals the quality of his work. A native of Lecce, Puglia (in the heel of the Italian peninsula) who emigrated to Mexico City via Naples and Cádiz, Spain, Jerusalem overhauled the musical style practiced in Mexico City by writing idiomatically for string-dominated ensembles in up-to-date genres such as the symphony and the responsory. Unlike other New Spanish composers of his period, Jerusalem, a cellist, wrote several religious works with obbligato instruments, including *Cristal bello*, an aria from the collection at Mexico City Cathedral for soprano with a solo flute part. The solo flute helps evoke the pastoralism of the Christmas story and beautifully dialogues with the both the voice and the first violin, playfully swapping ornamental passages that illustrate the rhythmic variety yet harmonic clarity characteristic of the galant style.

Celeste aurora hermosa

Aria for the Immaculate Conception, c1750

Santiago Billoni (c1700-c1763)

Like *En su concepción*, *Celeste aurora hermosa* is a *da capo* aria for tenor solo dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. In this piece, too, Billoni writes more difficult music for the first violin, the part he played himself in the cathedral ensemble at Durango Cathedral. The text of *Celeste aurora hermosa* contains an Italianism, the word "infelice" in place of the Spanish "infeliz," which is probably a reflection in the autograph manuscript of Billoni's Italian origin. For musical reasons, the word is preserved in performance. Billoni's works with Spanish texts – thirteen in all – are concise but busy pieces that show somewhat more counterpoint and academism than typical galant composers, an indication of his Roman rather than Neapolitan origin. The text uses religious symbolism to both praise the purity of the Virgin Mary and foreshadow the birth of Christ.

¿Por qué Pedro?

Duet for St. Peter, c1750

Santiago Billoni (c1700-c1763)

Although duets appear less frequently than arias in eighteenth-century serious opera, they were a favorite genre for composers of church music because of their rhetorical power. Religious duets function almost like miniature oratorios because they show the agency and internal thought processes of religious figures within a dramatic frame educational for listeners. In operatic duets, two characters often

sing from oppositional viewpoints, ironically arriving at the same verbal conclusion; in religious duets, however, both characters usually express the same side of an argument, sticking together against abstract ideas of sinfulness.

Billoni's *¿Por qué Pedro?* constitutes a duet between Jesus, a soprano, and St. Peter, a tenor, and dramatizes the moment of Jesus forgiving Peter's betrayal. A somber work, the duet features a sinewy solo violin part that, along with dissonant harmonies, adds emotional depth to the simple vocal lines. The texture, ranging from high baroque counterpoint to a prescient glimmer of classicism on the word "gloria," continually builds and relieves tension in this dramatic miniature. In the original context, the part of Jesus would have been sung by a male soprano, either a boy or a falsettist; there were no known castrato singers at Durango where the piece was written.

Sinfonia to *La Pipée*

Opera overture, 1756

Niccolò Jommelli (1714-1774)

Niccolò Jommelli, a progressive and unjustly overlooked composer, wrote more than eighty operas, some of which are considered important precursors to Mozart's. A native of Naples, Jommelli spent much of his career working for the Duke of Württemberg in Stuttgart, where his style was emulated by the "Mannheim School." Jommelli wrote this sinfonia as the overture to a two-act intermezzo, *La Pipée*, first performed in Paris, where it was originally published in a collection of sinfonias or opera overtures by Leonardo Leo, Vincenzo Ciampi and other Neapolitans, underscoring the cosmopolitanism of the repertoire. Like Pergolesi's sinfonia, this work is a typical galant instrumental piece in three short movements that makes use of theatrical gestures and clear textures. The addition of horn parts intensifies the texture in the outer movements.

Al combate

Ode for the coronation of King Charles III, c1760

Ignacio Jerusalem (1707-1769)

Perhaps the most exciting occasion marked by this concert is the modern-day premiere of Jerusalem's coronation ode, *Al combate*, a piece recently returned to the archive of Mexico City Cathedral and edited especially for this performance. It is one of only a handful of substantial secular works written during the mid-eighteenth century in New Spain that survives today. *Al combate* is a coronation ode for King Charles III of Spain (1716-1788), the Bourbon monarch who reigned from 1759 until his death, after serving as the Spanish Viceroy of Naples and Sicily between 1734 and his ascension to the Spanish throne. Although not a music lover, Charles III promoted science, medicine, university education and economic development in

a time of decreasing influence of the church, and thus exemplifies the reform minded Enlightenment monarch.

Al combate takes the form of a cantata, namely a succession of self-contained movements that includes choruses, recitatives, and arias. Scored for solo singers, strings, trumpets, horns, timpani and choir, the work opens with a substantial sinfonia not dissimilar to Jommelli's. Thereafter, Jerusalem frames two pairs of recitatives and arias – one for bass solo and the other for alto solo – between two celebratory choruses. Several years after composing this occasional work, it seems that Jerusalem rewrote the two arias as Latin responsories for the Virgin of Guadalupe, one of which, *Quae est ista*, was recorded by Chanticleer on their CD *Matins for the Virgin of Guadalupe, 1764*.

The text of *Al combate* shows the erudition of New Spanish literature in this period. The complicated poem, written in a literary style nearly a century out of date in 1760, uses classical mythology to show the academic elite of the University of Mexico – allegorized as the “Mexican Minerva” – swearing allegiance to Charles III by composing a poem in the style of, and with literary references to, works by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651-1695), the “tenth muse” and single most important colonial Latin American literary figure. The text also picks up on Charles's genealogy as his father, King Philip V of Spain (who listened to Farinelli sing “Pallido il sole” nightly), was born in France and his mother, Elisabeth Farnese, was Italian. The pure galant style of the music contrasts sharply with the text, which is deliberately archaic. The underlying message conveys that the university is up to date, yet proud of its tradition of literary erudition.

Audience members might be interested in visiting the website of the Seminario de Música en la Nueva España y el México Independiente <www.musicat.unam.mx>, an international group based in Mexico City that is actively cataloging, studying, and publishing scholarship about New Spanish repertoire such as *Al combate*.

Drew Edward Davies
Northwestern University