

Silent Music—Medieval Song and the Construction of History in Eighteenth-Century Spain

Review Number:

1294

Publish date:

Thursday, 26 July, 2012

Author:

Susan Boynton

ISBN:

9780199754595

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£27.50

Pages:

240pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

New York, NY

Reviewer:

Michael Noone

In his early 20th-century anti-clerical novel *La Catedral*, Vicente Blasco Ibáñez follows his protagonist into Toledo Cathedral's Mozarabic Chapel for the daily celebration of what Richard Ford, in the 19th century, called 'this peculiar ritual': 'As Gabriel listened to the monotonous singing of the Mozarabic priests he remembered the quarrels during the time of Alfonso VI between the Roman liturgy and that of Toledo – the foreign worship and the national one. The believers, to end the eternal disputes, appealed to the "Judgment of God". The king named the Roman champion, and the Toledans confided the defense of their Gothic rite to the sword of Juan Ruiz, a nobleman from the borders of Pisuerga. The champion of the Gothic breviary remained triumphant in the fight, demonstrating its superiority with magnificent sword thrusts, but, in spite of the will of God having been manifested in this warlike way, the Roman rite by slow degrees became master of the situation, till at last the Mozarabic ritual was relegated to this small chapel as a curious relic of the past'.⁽¹⁾

The origins of Susan Boynton's impressively wide-ranging monograph (whose title only obliquely hints at its subject matter) lie in a chance discovery: in October 2001 the author identified a Mozarabic liturgical manuscript now in the library of the Hispanic Society of America in New York as an early-11th century book of saints' offices that had been missing from the archive of the Spanish primatial Cathedral in Toledo since the late 19th century.⁽²⁾ When the novelist Vicente Blasco, less than two decades after the publication of *La Catedral*, accepted an invitation to New York from the founder of the Hispanic Society, Archer Milton Huntington (1807–1855), he pronounced words that are now inscribed on a pillar of the Society's museum, to the effect that even if some cataclysm were to befall the peninsula, Spain would continue to exist here in

the Hispanic Society. As an assessment of the quality and quantity of the museum's cultural treasures, Blasco's words rank as only slight exaggeration, for the holdings of the Hispanic Society are, indeed, impressive. The circumstances that assured the certainty of Boynton's identification of her unexpected discovery are themselves extraordinary and in following the trail of these circumstances, Boynton has given us a study whose conclusions reach far beyond the disciplinary bailiwick of the liturgist, the medievalist or the musicologist. Fortuitously, the distinctive musical notation of the lost manuscript had been copied by hand in a 1965 Columbia University doctoral dissertation from an exemplar held in Madrid's National Library, an exemplar that itself had been painstakingly copied by hand in the 18th century. Recognizing the musical notation in the New York manuscript as the same as that copied in the dissertation, Boynton was able to verify the New York manuscript's identity by comparing it with the Madrid copy.⁽³⁾ Made in 1752 by the Jesuit polymath Andrés Marcos Burriel (1719–62), the Madrid copy is familiar to most scholars of the Old Hispanic chant yet Boynton seems to have been the first to seriously interrogate Burriel's motives and to study his *modus operandi*.

In 1749, Spain's second Bourbon monarch, Ferdinand VI (1746–59) founded a Royal Commission on the Archives, and the Jesuit Burriel was appointed its director. The Royal Commission's primary objectives were clear and political: they were to locate and transcribe documents in ecclesiastical archives that would strengthen royal control (the so-called *patronato real*) over ecclesiastical benefices and property at a time of continuing negotiations with the Vatican. Since the 16th century the *patronato real* had allowed Spanish monarchs to appoint bishops without regard to the curia's wishes, and the original documents turned up by the Royal Commission would demonstrate the antiquity of the Spanish monarchy's claims. Yet these objectives were an expression of a larger and more subtle project that would anchor the Bourbon dynasty's claims to legitimacy in a transhistorical *hispanismo*. Burriel's role in this larger vision was explicitly laid out in a letter addressed to the dean and chapter of Toledo cathedral by the secretary of state José de Carvajal y Lancaster (1698–1754). While Burriel's brief was described as nothing less than the construction of a new ecclesiastical history of Spain, the Mozarabic rite was only mentioned as a footnote in Carvajal's letter of introduction.

In the event, Burriel, the philologist Francisco Pérez Bayer, and their team had, within a year, largely completed the tasks of making transcriptions, copies, and inventories of the privileges relating to the *patronato real* from the Toledo Cathedral archive. In the autumn of 1751, then, Burriel's team set to work on a wider pool of medieval manuscripts preserved in the extraordinarily rich archives of this extraordinarily rich cathedral. In addition to manuscripts of literature, patristics, theology, and canon law, the Toledo archive boasts the finest collection of Mozarabic liturgical manuscripts in any single location. In turning his attentions to this documentary treasure trove, Burriel's task was immeasurably aided by the collaboration of a number of amanuenses, chief among whom were the young and astonishingly talented Toledan calligrapher Francisco Santiago y Palomares (1728–96) and his brother. All five of the scribes employed by Burriel were capable of transcribing Visigothic script; he corrected, annotated and approved their copies before each transcription was bound as a separate volume. The exemplar for one of these volumes – indeed one of the first to be copied – was the early-11th century book of saints' offices that Boynton identified in the Hispanic Society of America. Burriel's surprisingly modern employment of a comparative method led him to a coherent set of liturgical books from the 16th century that owe their existence to Cardinal Cisneros.

In 1501 Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, the statesman and reforming archbishop of Toledo (1495–1517) ordered the foundation and endowment of the splendidly decorated chapel in which Blasco's fictional Gabriel attended the Mozarabic liturgy. Although construction was to last a quarter of a century, and the chapel was not consecrated until 1511, celebration of the Mozarabic rite began in 1502 in a chapel situated off the cloister. Cisneros appointed a commission to publish new editions of the Mozarabic missal (1500) and breviary (1502) and, between 1502 and 1508, the copying of four choirbooks (*cantoriales*) that would contain almost 400 monophonic chants for the mass and the office.⁽⁴⁾ In fact, the Mozarabic rite had become all but extinct and Cisneros's project involved a good deal of invention and anachronistic editorial work. Boynton wisely, therefore, refers to Cisneros's books as 'neo-Mozarabic'. Nevertheless, the very weight of these seemingly authoritative products of a seemingly 'scholarly' project has cast a long shadow over all

subsequent understanding of the rite. Noticing the enormous disparities between Toledo cathedral's medieval manuscripts of the Old Hispanic liturgy and Cisneros's books, Burriel resolved to copy entire codices in preparation for the publication of editions, both scholarly and practical, of the Mozarabic Missal and Breviary. These plans, like many of Burriel's ambitious projects, were thwarted when the loss of support from the court and anti-Jesuit sentiment led to the confiscation of his papers; notwithstanding, he managed to retain the majority of his papers until his death.

Be that as it may, Burriel, as Boynton immediately realized, was the first scholar to apply the modern techniques of historical and textual criticism to Toledo cathedral's Old Hispanic liturgical sources. Yet if Burriel's pioneering application of such modern critical methodologies as paleographic analysis brought him closer to an understanding of Toledo cathedral's Old Hispanic liturgical books, and even the Mozarabic community who were defined by the liturgical practices that were prescribed in those books, it did nothing to insulate him from the Bourbon court's nationalist cultural discourse. In fact Burriel's letters of 1752 radiate with a passionately held conviction that Spanish Catholicism was uniquely authentic and that the documentary evidence for this primacy was to be found in the archive of Toledo Cathedral. Here, in the liturgical books, was the documentary evidence that would provide an intellectual underpinning for Ferdinand VI's *hispanismo* project. Boynton's fascination with the tension between Burriel's desire, on the one hand, to understand the diversity of Spanish liturgical practice through close scrutiny of the sources and, on the other, to affirm the continuity of an essential Spanishness leads her to sharpen the focus on Burriel, his comparative method, and his historiographical practice.

Boynton's third chapter is a concise study of a remarkable and exquisitely beautiful artifact and the role that it played in Burriel's historiography. In 1752, at Burriel's request, Palomares made a full-colour, hand copied, parchment facsimile of a book of masses and offices (that Burriel dated to ca. 1085) together with a transcription of the source into modern script.⁽⁵⁾ Fascinatingly, Palomares, who had no musical training himself, was aware that the medieval musical notation he had so faithfully reproduced was no longer intelligible – the 'silent music' of Boynton's title. His observation, rarely acknowledged before the 20th century, was tantamount to a declaration that no unbroken connection between the neo-Mozarabic liturgy transmitted by Cisneros's books and the medieval Mozarabic liturgy existed. Three years later Burriel presented the magnificent facsimile to Ferdinand VI via the Duke of Alba, supplying a preface that places the meticulously accurate reproduction of the manuscript into a much wider historiographical context. 'The facsimile', Boynton observes, 'created a seductive fantasy of historical continuity.' And in its preface, Burriel sought to convince the King that the manuscript represented incontrovertible evidence of the essential continuity of Christian practice in Spain from the period of the Visigoths, into the Moorish period, through the Mozarabic parishes of Toledo and the Primatial Cathedral, and into the present. Indeed, the pre-Roman-rite liturgical manuscripts of Toledo cathedral established for Burriel and his royal patron the link between the Visigothic prince Hermengild and Ferdinand VI. 'By invoking the Visigoths as the ritual and national predecessors of the Bourbons', Boynton observes in one of many perspicacious distillations, 'Burriel rewrote history, establishing a fictive parallelism that inherently reinforced the authority of both'. On the face of it, a relationship between the Visigoths and the Bourbons is as untenable as the idea of an unbroken liturgical continuity between the Middle Ages and the 18th century. Yet this was the persuasive twin burden borne by the sumptuous artifact that the facsimile undoubtedly is.

One of the many fascinating aspects of this enterprise is the enormous investment of time, energy, skill and materials in the creation of an astonishingly accurate facsimile of a manuscript whose text was in all likelihood all but unintelligible to its sole recipient. Ferdinand VI was interested in music, yet no one could interpret its notation (the 'silent music' of the title once again), and it is a stretch to imagine the monarch struggling with the script in which the Latin texts of the ancient Mozarabic liturgy were recorded. Yet the king had expressed a wish to actually see the manuscript and Burriel was keenly aware of the importance of royal support for his scholarly endeavours. And such a luxurious facsimile was the most eloquent testament to another venerable tradition, the tradition in which custodians of cultural treasures pass texts on from one generation to another in exquisitely-produced hand copies.

Boynton's fascination with Burriel's team and their methods, next leads her to an examination of Palomares

1755 copy of Toledo cathedral's manuscript of the iconic *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a 13th-century collection of sacred songs with texts in Galician-Portuguese and whose authorship (loosely-defined) is attributed to Alfonso the Wise. Although the copy was dedicated to Barbara de Braganza, it appears that it never reached her, and today it is housed in Madrid's Biblioteca nacional (6); yet like the Mozarabic chant book that did reach its dedicatee, this copy is characterized by a complete transcription of the text (in an 18th-century hand) and a painstakingly accurate reproduction of the exemplar's musical notation. Like its sibling, it is framed by a preface and a decorative iconographical scheme that firmly places the medieval manuscript, moreover one with a strong Marian theme, in an 18th-century context. Once again, it is precisely this context – the astonishingly accurate copying of a medieval music manuscript as a product of Enlightenment historicism – that interests our author. By applying to an 18th-century manuscript the methods of the kinds of interdisciplinary analysis that are more commonly marshalled in the study of medieval manuscripts, Boynton displaces the focus from the author as the source to the various scribes and compilers. The pattern is by now familiar: despite his ignorance of the musical notation, Palomares reproduced its graphic appearance with almost photographic accuracy, and a new title page and preface penned by Burriel embeds the *Cantigas* within the cultural program of the Spanish Bourbons. Once again, a carefully devised and newly-invented iconographical scheme traces a direct line between Alfonso X as a pious, artistically informed and legitimate ruler, and Ferdinand VI still in the first decade of his reign. While Alfonso X's exalted position in the constellation of great Spanish monarchs was anchored in granite, Ferdinand VI, the first Spanish-born member of the Bourbon dynasty to ascend to the Spanish throne, had yet to establish and consolidate his legacy.

As an appendix to her thorough and solidly documented study of the 18th-century historiographical context, Boynton devotes brief yet precious paragraphs to a consideration of the ways in which Burriel's comments on the Toledo *Cantigas* manuscript have influenced subsequent scholarship. Indeed Boynton demonstrates how Burriel's editorial decisions are themselves a continuation of the very process of revision in the *Cantigas* text that can be observed throughout the entire history of its transmission.

In the fifth and final chapter, Boynton turns her attention to Palomares and his contribution to the history of paleography. In 1764 Palomares completed a treatise entitled *Polygraphia Gothico-Española* that traced the history of Iberian writing from the late Roman cursive to the 12th century. The text, illustrated entirely by hand and preserved today in Madrid's Real Academia de la Historia (7), is largely focused on the history of the Old Hispanic rite and its fortunes in Toledo, viewed always through the lens of national identity. For Palomares, the introduction of the Roman rite in León and Castile through liturgical books written in Caroline miniscule, was seen as an unwelcome imposition of foreign ('French') culture upon Spanish culture. It was the process of liturgical 'reform', requiring the copying of new manuscripts in an imposed 'French' handwriting style that signalled the death of the ancient indigenous Spanish rite. In his preface, Palomares invokes a version of two anecdotal symbolic contests between the Old Hispanic and the Roman rites. One of the contests is the duel recounted above by Vicente Blasco in *La Catedral*, the other tells of a liturgical book of each of the contesting rites being hurled into a raging furnace. While the Mozarabic book resisted the flames without perishing, the Roman rite book escaped the bonfire by springing out of harm's way. The earliest known source for these anecdotes is the 12th-century Chronicle of Nájera; it situates both the duel and the ordeal by fire in Burgos in 1077. Palomares's version of the duel, however, takes place in Toledo and Boynton points, once again, to the centrality of Toledo to the narrative and 'the close association between liturgical reform and national identity'. Palomares additionally saw the assimilation of Caroline scripts in documents of the royal chancery as 'the most immediate paleographic evidence that the French had penetrated the inner circles of power'.

In the second part of her final chapter, Boynton guides us through a consideration Palomares's interest in Visigothic neumes, the graphic symbols that conveyed musical information before the widespread adoption of musical notes. Aware that 18th-century musicians were unable to understand the neumes, and without any specialist musical training himself, Palomares proposed an interpretation of the neumes as accent marks, thus anticipating a later theory – a theory now largely discredited – that saw early neumes emerging directly from the prosodic accents of late antiquity. Boynton then offers us perceptive commentaries on a selection of

the plates that appear in the *Polygraphia*. While the commentaries are full of insight and erudition, some readers will be disappointed by the quality of the reproductions. Indeed, in a study that is so fundamentally grounded in the reproduction of graphic symbols that are themselves the subject of serious scrutiny, it is a real obstacle for the reader to have to deal with images that are less than perfect.

Without a doubt, *Silent Music* is a welcome and worthy addition to a series, *Currents in Latin American and Iberian Music*, which is already establishing itself as a venue for studies distinguished by their excellence. In this instance, however, the reader may find herself disappointed by three shortcomings. First, a painfully ironic observation in a book about books that have survived centuries of use and abuse: this one is poorly bound, and it didn't take long for the pages of my copy to part company with its spine. Second, with an index that barely fills four pages, is it any wonder we will search in vain for such terms as 'Hispanic Society of America?' Worse, however, is the number of incorrect page references supplied in this inadequate index. (If your quest is *villancico* or Barbara de Braganza, for instance, you'll be directed in each case to a phantom 'p. xii'.) Better no signpost at all than a signpost that points in the wrong direction. Finally, there is the thorny issue of illustrations, so often the victims of publishers' cost cutting. In the absence of actual size colour facsimiles, either on paper or online, the conscientious reader will be simultaneously intrigued and frustrated by the small, grainy illustrations. True, the two poorly indicated colour illustrations were a Godsend, yet they seem to duplicate the monochrome figures 3.1 and 3.2 that, nevertheless, are helpfully printed on facing pages. Even so, I found myself referring to Boynton's article on the *Cantigas* (8) for better reproductions of illustrations 4.1 and 4.2 and curious readers will likewise find themselves referring to Boynton's fascinating article 'Writing history with liturgy' for relevant illustrations not included in the present volume.(9)

Of the many admirable aspects of this superb study, it is perhaps Boynton's uncanny ability to single out the most apparently minute detail and to relate it to a much larger context that characterizes her work. Thus, seemingly unrelated threads are drawn together to form a coherent tapestry that accounts for what at first glance seem to be contradictions. Intriguingly, and perhaps teasingly, Boynton leaves us with two unsolved mysteries: the first concerns the precise date, and the way in which Toledo Cathedral's MS 33.2 travelled across the Atlantic to take up residence in New York and the second concerns the precise date and the way in which Toledo Cathedral acquired its manuscript of Alfonso X's *Cantigas*. There is, as ever, a great deal more to be learned.

Notes

1. Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *La Catedral* (Valencia, 1919). Excerpt from the English translation by Mrs. W. A. Gillespie, *The Shadow of the Cathedral* (New York, NY, 1919) p. 50.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. New York, Hispanic Society of America MS B2916 and Toledo, Biblioteca Capitulare MS 33.2.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Madrid, Biblioteca nacional MS 13060.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The long-awaited facsimile edition of the Cisneros *cantorales* has recently been published: *Los Cantorales Mozárabes de Cisneros. Catedral de Toledo*, ed. Ángel Fernández Collado, Alfredo Rodríguez González and Isidoro Castañeda Tordera (Toledo, 2011). See <<http://www.sedem.es/es/catalogo/producto.asp?id=197> [2]> [accessed 9 June 2012]. An *Apéndice gráfico* to volume two comprises almost 50 pages containing colour facsimiles of Toledo Cathedral's Mozarabic MSS 33.1, 33.3, 35.3, 35.4, 35.5, 35.6, 35.7 and 35.8. Unsignalled in the title, and apparently presented as an afterthought without commentary, the appendix is surely of enormous value to any scholar interested in these splendid manuscripts.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Toledo, Biblioteca Capitulare MS 35.7 and Madrid, Palacio real, biblioteca MS II/483.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Madrid, Biblioteca nacional MS 13055.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia MS 9/4752.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Susan Boynton, 'Reconsidering the Toledo Codex of the Cantigas de Santa Maria in the eighteenth century' in *Quomodo Cantabimus Canticum? Studies in Honor of Edward H. Roesner*, ed. Rena Charnin Mueller, John Nadas, David Cannata, and Gabriela Ilnitchi (Stuttgart, 2008), pp. 209–22, pp.

212 and 213.[Back to \(8\)](#)

9. Susan Boynton, 'Writing history with liturgy' in *Representing History, 900-1300: Art, Music, History*, ed. Robert A. Maxwell (University Park, PA, 2010), pp. 187–99.[Back to \(9\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept this review without any further comment.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1294>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/26283>

[2] <http://www.sedem.es/es/catalogo/producto.asp?id=197>