

Missa Mexicana: A Tale of Three Cultures

by Carlo Vitali

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BOLOGNA, Italy -- To the audience assembled on May 12 in the basilica of San Domenico, Bologna, for a much anticipated lap of Andrew Lawrence-King's latest world tour, the announcement of a 'Mexican Mass' may have evoked straightforward exoticism, possibly in the guise of *mariachi* folk ensembles, with lots of guitars, ethnic dance rhythms and percussion. Guitars and percussion were actually there, alongside period instruments familiar to any early music fan, such as a small organ, a harp and a sackbut. What fewer did expect was the centerpiece of the performance: a beautiful late-Renaissance Mass (called *Missa Ego flos campi*) for two choirs of four voices each, occasionally combining in genuine eight-part writing, like one may easily associate with the period's best practices at Rome, Venice, Munich or Seville. Though commonplace among scholars, evidence that early in the 17th century -- much ahead of Dvorak's *Symphony from the New World* -- colonial America could already enjoy, perform and produce masterpieces in the most complex languages of mainstream European music is an astonishing novelty to the average concert-goer on either side of the Atlantic.

Yet, since the main landmark of Mexico City is characteristically named *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (Three Cultures' Square), it is no wonder that a survey of the history of music in the same country reveals a multicultural melting pot involving European, Indio and African elements. The dark side of Spanish colonization in Latin America is widely known: pillage of natural resources, religious conversion forced on the natives, slavery, massacres. Less exposed is the bright side of the coin, including the Jesuits' missions in Paraguay (subject for a fortunate Hollywood movie in the 1990s) or the case of Puebla, Mexico, where the enlightened rule of bishop Juan Palafox y Mendoza brought during the early 17th century to a comparatively well-off social situation and a general flourishing of all the arts, music included.

Music played indeed a major role in the process, as shown by the output of the Spanish-born composer Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, who emigrated to Mexico in 1620, became the choir director of the Cathedral in Puebla 9 years later, and died there in 1664. Besides composing Masses and motets in Counter-Reformation style, he taught singing and playing to the Indio natives, and managed an instrument-making workshop, selling *bajónes* (bass dulcians) and *chirimías* (shawms) across the country. He also cultivated popular genres such as *xácará* (a street dance with strong erotic undertones) or *negrilla* (dance song of the African slaves from Guinea), reshaping their texts in vernacular Spanish, as well as their syncopated rhythms and irregular scales, to fit into the devotional practices of the Catholic church. Interactions among all those languages emerge most spectacularly in the performance, as the Mass movements are sandwiched between diverse works by the same Padilla and other roughly contemporary composers, whose lives and procedures reflect comparable exposure to the three cultures of colonial Mexico.

In fact, according to Lawrence-King's claims, his program is not a reconstruction of any particular liturgy; rather a 'musical exploration' bringing together dance-like

religious settings with their original *bailes*, the actual dances that inspired them. One never knows how his next concert will sound like in the details, insofar the large repository of his sources and the improvising skills of his performers enable him to turn each event into a regular Baroque jam session, often trespassing the billboard's announcements by means of last minute additions, substitutions and encores. Equally volatile is the staff of his Harp Consort, whose multinational roots reflect his own activity as a conductor in such diverse environments as Italy, Britain, Denmark, and Finland. The most striking personality in the current group is perhaps the London-born guitarist Steve Player, who also ventures into long and dangerously acrobatic passages of *zapateado* dancing; but the Finnish alto Vera Railio, the Italian bass Alfredo Grandini and the percussionist Ricardo Padilla, among others, show no less entertaining showmanship. A namesake of the starring composer and boasting Latin-American family roots, Padilla may have given the audience a thrill of ethnic authenticity, had not the press-office warned in advance that he, too, was born and educated in Finland. It's a small world indeed, just the way it used to be in the 17th century.