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BENEATH THE CHURCH BELLS

HISPANIC INFLUENCE IN PHILIPPINE MUSIC

Upon their arrival in the Philippines in 1521, the Spaniards discovered a singing race, blessed with a natural affinity for music. The natives played gongs and bamboo instruments, sang epic tales and lullabies, aside from songs about work, feasts, life and death. This was how the first chroniclers of the islands such as Antonio de Pigafetta (1521), Pedro Chirino (1604), Antonio de Morga (1609) and Pedro Murillo-Velarde (1749) described those rich, spontaneous expressions of music so intimately associated with daily life. After almost four centuries of Spanish rule, our music has acquired an indelible and far-reaching Hispanic imprint. It was Spain that introduced us to the Western tonal system and its concomitant forms, therefore bringing to us a new musical language and the creation of novel and hybrid genres as a result of the unique marriage between the Hispanic and the indigenous, greatly redesigning our musical landscape. The adjective “Hispanic” is used in this essay to denote not only influences from Spain and Mexico but also those from other Hispanic countries as well as from certain areas in Europe which were assimilated by Spain and thus acquiring them as her own.

All this was achieved literally “beneath the church bells” through the evangelization program of Spain. The Spanish colonial period in the Philippines (1565–1898) distinguished itself with the pealing of church bells in each community to mark all important religious, secular and socio-civic occasions such as the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the proclamation of Isabel II in 1834, the safe arrival of a galleon from Acapulco or that of a new Governor General. The sound of the bells indeed constituted a distinct category of music, which resonated profoundly in the social and religious life of the people.

LITURGICAL MUSIC

The very first strains of Western music heard by the natives originated from rites of the Catholic Church: mass, Gregorian chant, hymn, motet, Hail Mary, funeral hymn, Hail Holy Queen, Te Deum, litany, couplet, sung rosary, supplication, etc. Various religious orders would take in children to train them to serve in the liturgy, while the friar teachers would give lessons of solfeggio and vocalization to the more musically-inclined or prepare them to sing in the *coros de tiples* (boy sopranos' choir), play the organ along with orchestral instruments and compose music conforming to new concepts of tonality, rhythm and harmony. The San Agustin Church and the Cathedral in Intramuros stood out in this endeavor, the latter having its own School for Boy Sopranos whose curriculum followed that of the Madrid Conservatory¹. The noted composer Marcelo Adonay (1848-1928) of Pakil, Laguna was a product of San Agustin and was lauded for his *Pequeña Misa Solemne* which showed influences of the Gregorian chant.

In this way, sacred music resounded in each community. The famous bamboo organ, a one-of-a kind cultural gem, resonated in Las Piñas, where it was constructed in 1818 by the Augustinian friar Diego Cera. Without doubt, the rhythms, meters and melodies of the liturgy sunk into the consciousness of the natives, thereby contributing to the shaping of the character of our own popular and folk songs. It was music that facilitated Christianization, largely due to the natives' innate musicality, which according to Horacio de la Costa S.J. was the "logical point of insertion"¹—the easy, natural way into the Filipino soul.

EXTRA-LITURGICAL MUSIC

As Christianity spread, a plethora of musical forms linked to rites outside of the liturgy sprang forth with distinct Hispanic influence. Used in the context of many diverse festivities celebrated by the community, most were lively and merry, while others were solemn and dramatic, demonstrating a quasi-secular character. Songs based on popular Hispanic melodies, accompanied by a simple band of flutes, guitars, violins and drums manifested dance rhythms such as the *valse* or Austrian waltz and the *habanera* from Cuba, adopted by Spain in her theater, songs and classical music. Examples of these forms still being practiced today are the *Panunuluyan*, a Nativity play derived from the Mexican *Las Posadas* and *Los Pastores* (The Shepherds), a version of the Christ mas story; *Flores de Mayo* (Flowers of May) honoring the Virgin Mary and *Santacruzán*, held during the month of May in honor of the Holy Cross; and *Salubong* (Meeting) on Easter Sunday. Distinctly more indigenous in flavor are the *Subli* of Batangas, which is a homage to the Holy Cross, and the *Pabasa* (chanted verses of Christ's Passion), with Gaspar Aquino de Belen's work being the earliest printed version dating back to 1703. Carols, songs of praise, hymn, psalm, sung rosary and antiphons could also be heard on the streets before makeshift altars and even inside the church alongside new hybrid forms such as the *dalit* and *tagulaylay* (sacred lamentations).

SECULAR MUSIC

All throughout the islands, our indigenous music began to assimilate Hispanic tendencies such as the *composo* (narrative) of Panay, *kumintang* (lamentation or war song) of Batangas and *balitaw* (courtship dance and song) of the Visayas. Accompanied by simple chords and in semi-meter, they would generally mix together vocal styles and movement. In time, the indigenous forms would be based on European models and a representative example is the *kundiman*, a lyrical, melancholic song in ternary meter, combining Spanish and Tagalog verses.

The spread of Hispanic influence in Philippine music is largely due to foreign performances such as operas from Italy and zarzuelas from Spain. They certainly awakened and stimulated the taste and appreciation of the Filipinos for these theatrical genres and music. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 paved the way for the entry of more foreign theater companies which performed all over Manila. As a consequence, Philippine music was further enriched with the various dance rhythms heard in theaters: the *fandango* (pandango), *jota*, which gave rise to many regional adaptation such as the *jota batangueña* and *jota caviteña*, *pasodoble* and *polka* on whose rhythm are based many of our Christmas carols and folksongs, *valse* which gives distinctive mark to our songs and instrumental works and the *habanera* (*danza filipina*).

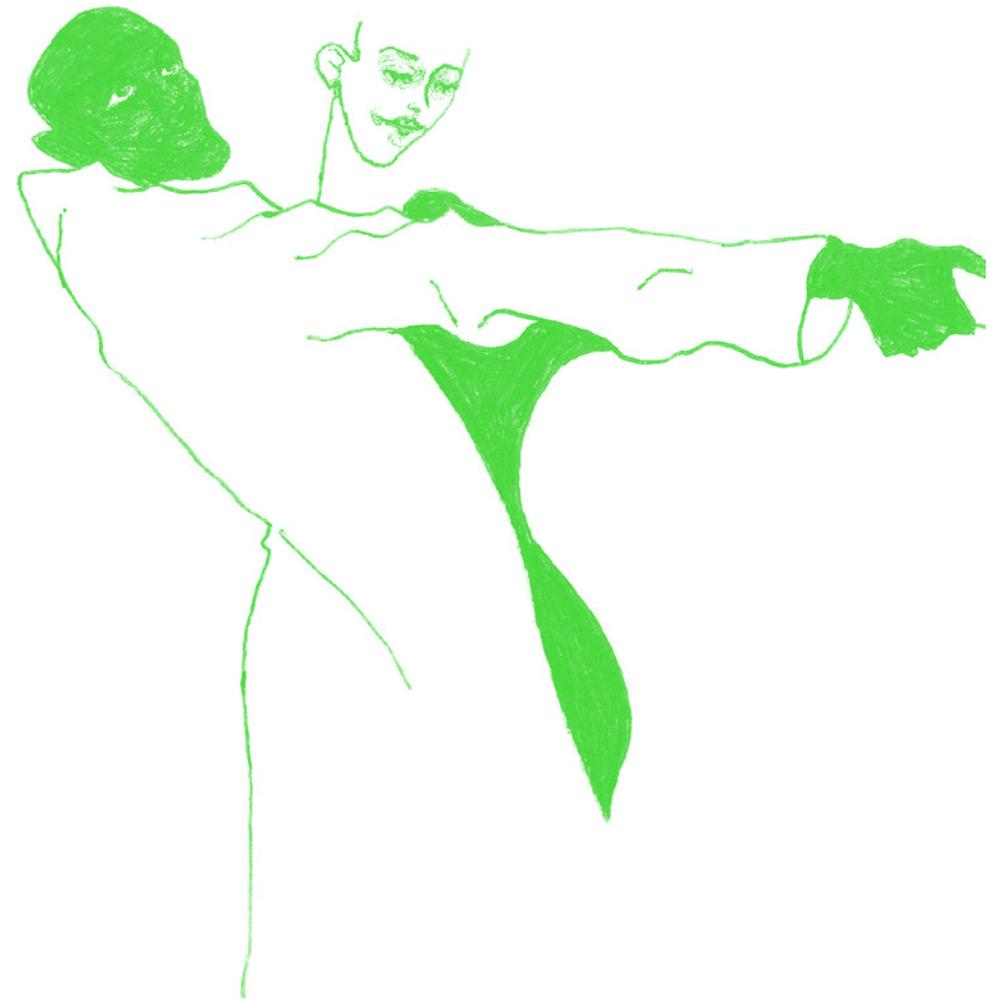
As we survey our musical landscape since the arrival of the Spaniards, we see that it was not a simple process of taking or imitating the Hispanic in our music. It was not a matter of simply adopting and assimilating foreign elements, but at the same time adjusting and accommodating them to fit the Filipino sensibility, thereby rendering the Hispanic as truly and uniquely ours. Throughout the history of music, wherever different cultures converge, a system such as this was put into action. Let us take the *habanera* as an example. Its dotted quarter rhythm based on the Argentinian tango proved so sensually attractive to the Filipinos so much so that we claimed it and transformed it into our very own *danza filipina*, now uniquely melodiously, gracefully, tropically Filipino. In *habanera* form are the Ilocano folk song *Ti Ayat ti Meysa nga Ubing*, the *hariana* (serenade) *O Ilaw*, the kundiman *Bituing Marikit* of Nicanor Abelardo, the movie theme song *Maalaala Mo Kaya* of Constandio de Guzman, and the piano works *La Flor de Manila* by Dolores Paterno and *Recuerdos de Capiz* by Julio Nakpil.

How about the flamenco, we may ask: what similarities exist between this fascinating Hispanic form and Philippine music? First, flamenco melodies were primarily *fandangos*, *seguidillas* and *boleros* adopted in Spanish theater genres such as the *tonadilla*, *entremés*, *sainete* and *zarzuela* which also formed a large part of the Filipino musical consciousness. Second, flamenco is distinctly melancholy and passionate, being rooted in poverty and persecution, which may resonate with the lamenting, melancholic passion of the *kundiman* or *pabasa*. And third, flamenco took roots in the southern Spanish region of Andalusia, cradle of the gypsies since the 15th century and melting-pot of diverse musical traditions in the Mediterranean, just as the Philippines was – and continues to be so – a hub for vibrant mix of cultures during pre-Spanish times.

THE RICH MUSIC SCENE

In the mid-19th-century, the Philippines gradually began to shine in the Orient as a land of musical excellence in the Hispanic and Western traditions. The suburbs of Manila became known for their respective music qualities: Intramuros, its splendid church music; Quiapo, opera and zarzuela at its theaters and the music of the Black Nazarene's rites; Sta. Cruz, economic center and together with San Miguel and Quiapo, site of *bailes* and *tertulias* in private homes; and Pandacan, which housed the famous *Orquesta Femenina de Pandacan*, and perhaps what may have been the first all-Filipino opera troupe led by maestro Ladislao Bonus. It was Spain that brought us the *ron-dalla*, plucked-string ensemble which evolved from the *murza* (street musicians) and the *estudiantina* (student groups); and the *banda*, a vital component at fiestas and socio-civic occasions. We also inherited from Spain the tradition of domestic music-making, with the rise of a Filipino salon society and its access to the piano, harp, flute, violin and the classical repertory of the West.

To conclude, Spain's presence in the Philippines is indeed an ancient chapter in history books, but the definite and inextinguishable reality is that we live and breathe her influence in many ways in today's music. The Hispanic has truly enriched our lives as Christians. We appropriated the Hispanic as an essential ingredient of our identity, blended it with our own local Asian roots to produce music that is distinctly, absolutely and proudly nothing else but Filipino.



1- De la Costa, Horacio. 1961. *The Jesuits in the Philippines 1581-1768*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.