Musical “Conquest”: The Spanish Use of Music in the Spiritual Conquest of the Nahua Peoples of Sixteenth-Century Mexico

John Richardson

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
MUSICAL “CONQUEST”: THE SPANISH USE OF MUSIC IN THE SPIRITUAL CONQUEST OF THE NAHUA PEOPLES OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MEXICO

by
John Richardson

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

History Department
Brigham Young University
June, 2021

Advisor: Mark Christensen
Honors Coordinator: Stewart Anderson
ABSTRACT

MUSICAL “CONQUEST”: THE SPANISH USE OF MUSIC IN THE SPIRITUAL CONQUEST OF THE NAHUA PEOPLES OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MEXICO

Historians have grown more interested in Spanish Conquest and colonialism in the last century. While earlier historians saw the conquest through a more euro-centric lens, recent historians have tried to take a more nuanced approach to understanding the conquest. Within this research, historians are questioning traditional narratives of the "spiritual conquest," or the conversion of native peoples to Christianity. Scholars have shown that "conquest" is not the best term for this process, as there was much more give and take at play.

My research seeks to strengthen this narrative of religious accommodation through the lens of music. The transmission of European sacred music to the Mexican natives was complicated. I demonstrate these complexities of accommodation by first comparing and contrasting the two musical traditions that existed before first contact. I then describe musical impressions given and felt by both parties on first contact. The thesis then moves to a description of the Spanish methods in teaching European music to the native people and how the music spread over the country. It then describes the ways in which the music was accepted, rejected and accommodated. These observations in the musical development of Christian Mexico adds greater depth to the research of conversion in the New World.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title..................................................................................................................1
Abstract..........................................................................................................2
Table of Contents..........................................................................................3

I.    Introduction...............................................................................................4
II.   Music of Pre-Conquest Spain.................................................................8
III.  Pre-Conquest Aztec Music......................................................................9
IV.   Music Instruction in Colonial Mexico......................................................14
V.    Nahua Reception and Adaptation............................................................18
VI.   Conclusion...............................................................................................23
Works Cited..................................................................................................25
The 1986 film *The Mission* depicts an eighteenth-century Jesuit priest named Father Gabriel traveling to Paraguay with hopes to convert the native Guaraní peoples to Christianity. Gabriel had his first contact with a native tribe while he played his oboe in the jungle. Guaraní men were intrigued by the sound of this unique music they had not heard before. One of the men, wary of what Gabriel was up to, snatched the oboe and broke it in half. The other men, however, found the music entrancing enough to allow Gabriel to not only keep his life, but to live among them and teach them his religion. It is after this moment that the film’s narrator claimed that if Gabriel could sway that tribe with his oboe, the whole continent could have been brought to Christianity with an orchestra.

Although this scene from *The Mission* is a fictional moment, the sentiment is rooted in reality. European missionaries had been employing the same tactic for centuries. In the case of the Americas under Spanish Colonial rule, missionaries used music as a central tool from the very start. This thesis seeks to highlight the implementation of western music in the New World. It will show the techniques which Spanish friars employed to teach western music as well as the Nahua reception, and at times rejection, of that music.

Along with an exposition of liturgical music in Colonial Latin America, this thesis also reinforces this statement by Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton: “Where church and mission

---

historians of an earlier generation often sided with what they saw as a totalizing enterprise of conversion – with the takeover of human identity, imagination and consciousness – most scholars now resist such understandings.” I have used the word conquest in the title in order to hearken to the general perception of the militaristic and religious efforts by the Spanish in the Americas: the popularized idea of conquest. While my title attempts to steer one’s mind to the theme of this thesis, the thesis itself will, in fact, challenge the common-held idea of conquest. Just as historians have argued in recent years that it was not a spiritual conquest, I will argue that it was not a musical conquest, either. I will use the missionary music efforts in Colonial Mexico as another talking point in the discussion of religious adaptation. The thesis will demonstrate that the Spanish missionaries were not able to conquer the Nahua’s music. As the Nahua retained their own musical tradition and culture, the priests were forced to adapt their methods if they wanted their central message to continue to thrive.

Interest in conquest history had its initial spark from William Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843). The events surrounding the Spanish Conquistadors have been examined and reexamined from a variety of angles since that point. A growing area of interest is the “spiritual conquest,” which has its beginnings with Robert Ricard’s work *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique* (1933), published in English in 1966. Ricard’s work gives an excellent overview of the evangelization efforts amongst the native Nahua population of Mexico; however, it takes a rather Eurocentric view in describing the simple task for the Spanish to convert a malleable native population. Since Ricard, a number of prominent scholars have looked at the spiritual conquest, analyzing how the Spaniards attempted to Christianize the indigenous peoples of America. Some, like Louise Burkhart in her work *The Slippery Earth*...
(1989), disagree with Ricard’s observation that the Nahua were spiritually conquered. Burkhart provides a more nuanced look at Nahua understanding of religion and how they made Christianity their own. As John Schwaller explains, Ricard’s “description conjures up images of heavy-handed friars and other religious personnel literally beating the Indian neophytes into submission to the Christian God.”

Current historians of Colonial Latin America focus on the exchange that occurred between the cultures and the cultural tools the Spaniards employed to spark Nahua interest in Christianity. Burkhart (2011) speaks of the Spaniard’s use of religious plays as an aid to conversion in her Aztecs on Stage. Mark Christensen’s Nahua and Maya Catholicisms (2013) and Jonathan Truitt’s Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan (2018) both shed more light on the daily activities of both the clergy and the people in the colonial period.

Throughout this literature, historians and sources frequently mention music as a means employed by Spaniards for converting the native people. The sources agree that the Nahuas had a love for music, making it one of the key elements of Spanish conversion efforts, and yet Ricard, Burkhart and others have given it no more than a passing glance. The most significant look into music within the context of conversion is found in Truitt (2018), who gives more detailed attention to a number of religious pedagogies within Colonial Mexico, one of which was music. Although historians have paused to note its importance, none have looked at music in significant depth.

Along with adding to the historical scholarship of Colonial Latin America, this thesis also adds to the historiography of religious adaptation. Scholars like Kenneth Mills, Anthony Grafton,

---

3 John F. Schwaller, “Conversion, Engagement, and Extirpation: Three Phases of the Evangelization of New Spain, 1524-1650” in Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas eds. Calvin B. Kendall et. al. (Minneapolis: Center for Early Modern History), 260.
and Calvin Kendall have shown how religion was forced to adapt to new cultures and regions if it hoped to survive and grow. Lewis Rambo explained that religious adaptation must happen regardless of religion or time. Some historians, like Stuart Schwartz, have focus on this religious adaptation specifically in regards to Catholics in the New World. This thesis demonstrates the larger trend of Spanish religious leaders’ adaptations by shining a light on the adaptation happening in music specifically. As will be shown later, the Spanish were not able to simply force their musical tradition on the natives and expect the Nahua’s traditions to disappear. Sahagún’s *Psalmodia Christiana* is a prime example that will be discussed in how the friars were required to change if they were to win over the Nahua.

To accomplish these goals of emphasizing music’s role and its need to adapt, I will discuss the tradition of music in both Spain and Mexico before the conquest. Rambo, explains that “congruence – the degree to which elements of a new religion mesh with existing macro- and microcontextual factors – is another important determinant of whether conversion will occur.”⁴ Seeing the congruence of the preconquest music of both the Spanish and the Nahua are understood, we may understand the way the Spaniards used music in their attempted conquest, as well as the way the Nahua responded. The thesis then examines the manner in which the Nahua embraced and accepted Spanish music and how this aided in their further conversion to Catholicism. Each of the highlighted aspects of Spanish and Aztec music have been chosen because of their convergence or divergence during the Colonial Period in Mexico. Both the Aztecs and Spaniards valued the importance of making music for God, and music became an invaluable tool to both groups during the colonial period.

---

And moreover, for greater solemnity... and for the relief of the pains that the king’s soul was enduring, all the chaplains, singers, and altar boys of his royal chapel stood there all day and night continuously while the royal body lay in the great hall where they had left it, singing in counterpoint in the way they were accustomed to sing in the king’s chapel while he lived.\(^5\)

King Juan II of Aragón loved music. Two weeks before his death, he remained awake through the night listening to the sung masses of Christmas. For eleven consecutive days after his death, masses were sung for his soul. That same year, 1479, his son Ferdinand took the throne, set on bringing greater glory to Spain. Music in Spain under Ferdinand’s rule was in a pivotal time of transition. Over the next century, Spain would produce some of the finest composers in its history: Cristobal de Morales, Francisco Guerrero and Tomás Luis de Victoria.\(^6\) Throughout Europe, composers were moving towards what is now referred to as High Renaissance style. The simple plainchant of the past centuries was gradually replaced with polyphony, a blend of several overlapping melodies and harmonies. This trend had reached Spain by Juan II’s rule, as the singers were “singing in counterpoint” during the days following his death. Whether this counterpoint music had come from Spanish sources is unclear, as very little exists of sacred music written in Spain during that time. What scholars do know, however, is that it was coming soon. Thus the reader may understand that the Spaniards who would arrive in the Americas half a century later would bring with them this music which incorporated traditional plainchant while also including . The prevalence of plainchant would persist for another hundred or more years while polyphonic singing continued to rise in popularity.

---

The rules regarding music and musicians were rigid in this time period. The Catholic Church heavily regulated what could be performed in a chapel or cathedral, as well as who was permitted to perform said music. Since Pope Leo IV, music-writing and -making had been strictly a masculine art. Men sung all parts of polyphonic music, which ranged from two to six parts. The high parts we know as soprano and alto were sung by boys and men with high voices.

The organ was another new development during this time of transition in the 15th century. The first permanent large church organ had only been built the previous century, and organ stops, the control given to modern organs, were not even available until the mid-15th century. It was this exciting new technology and sound that gave the organ its nickname “the king of instruments.” The modern organ became a staple of sacred music throughout Europe, including Spain, and would be an interesting element in the music of colonial Mexico.

PRE-CONQUEST AZTEC MUSIC

Among the things of which the Indians of New Spain were very careful, one was the worship of their gods, who were many and to whom in various ways they paid honor and also [sang] praises extolling them in the temples and oratories day and night, singing hymns and forming choruses and dances in their presence.

The only substantial information scholars have concerning pre-Columbian music in the Aztec territory is given through sources written after the conquest, the majority of which written by Spanish Conquistadors. Those few sources written by Nahua were inscribed under Spanish supervision, and thus the reader must understand the biases that come along with these sources. The lack of Nahua sources on the subject is due to their lack of written language and music

---

9 Bernadino de Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana (Christian Psalmody)* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 7.
notation prior to Cortez’ arrival. The chroniclers of the conquest explained Nahua music to their own people, so using comparisons to the Spanish music previously mentioned is the best way to reach conclusions about how Aztec music sounded and operated.

Like Spain, pre-contact Mexico used music mainly for religious purposes. Although there are mentions of music for entertainment, such as in Moctezuma’s court, which had “jesters… who told him witty sayings, and others who sang and danced, for Moctezuma was fond of pleasure and song,” the majority of references about Aztec music at the time of conquest are in a religious setting.

Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta comments that the Nahua would perform “abominable ceremonies and murders… having first sung songs and played kettle drums…” Along with religious ceremonies, music accompanied other important events which had religious significance, such as when they “had gained victory in war, or there was a new lord, or when the lord married a noble woman, or for any important event, the composers wrote new songs.”

From Bernal Díaz’s account we can surmise that the Spaniards were not particularly fond of Aztec music. On having been ambushed by Aztec soldiers, Diaz explained this scene:

Again there was sounded the dismal drum of Huichilobos and many other shells and horns and things like trumpets and the sound of them all was terrifying, and we all looked towards the lofty Cue where they were being sounded, and saw that our comrades whom they had captured when they defeated Cortés were being carried by force up the steps, and they were taking them to be sacrificed.

---

One can easily imagine that witnessing one’s comrades sacrificed to death would not be a pleasant experience. In writings about that occurrence, the musical accompaniment and other details were described as “dismal” and “terrifying.” Likely it was the combination of an unpleasant experience plus such unfamiliar sounds that would lead Diaz to think so poorly of the music. But even Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, who had a much higher opinion of the Nahua people, still described the Aztec music at conquest as “infernal music” when he heard them play “bones… turtle shells… trumpets…” and “sang a certain song” during a funeral procession.¹⁴ Archeological finds of these instruments and their modern recreations show that the Aztec ideas of tonality were different than European ones. The sounds of the chichtli (whistle flute) and the çoçolectli (wooden flute) were not pleasing to a trained western ear.

The sources regarding singing in pre-conquest Aztec society are of particular note, one of the most significant being the Florentine Codex. Written by Nahua, in Nahuatl, under the direction of Bernardino de Sahagún, the codex was an effort to catalog the various facets of

---

¹⁴ Mendieta, Historia Eclesiástica, 297.
Nahua life and language. Sahagún’s work, which in today’s academic world is considered an ethnography, strives to accurately represent Nahua life, rather than the Spaniard notions of what Nahua life should have been. Despite these efforts, the codex was written more than twenty-five years after the Spanish had arrived in Mexico, and thus still has Spanish influence in its pages.

Figure 2: “Musicians”, Florentine Codex, Book 9

Sahagún and his team recorded some excellent details regarding Nahua musical life. Listed under “The People,” the codex describes the job of a singer (see fig.1). It states, “The Singer is one who cries out, who utters clear sounds. He sings in full voice, in falsetto; one who holds a note, who raises the voice, who lowers it; who composes, who sets to music, originates songs, gives them form.”¹⁵

This description, and the accompanying illustration, beg two questions. On describing the form of singing, is the Codex referring to “clear sound” and “full voice” in the way the Nahua understood it, or as the Spanish did? Some Spanish friars were not very impressed with the Nahua vocal style upon arriving. They “laughed and mocked at those that were being taught [to sing], and others bothered them saying that they would not accomplish it, because they seemed

---

¹⁵ Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the things of New Spain (Florentine Codex)* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1982), 28.
out of tune as they appeared to have weak voices.”\textsuperscript{16} The second inquiry relates to the first, and deals with the image of the singer found in the codex. Understanding this image best comes with a comparison to another illustration found in Sahagún’s codex. Figure 2, “Musicians,” illustrates dancers and singers performing music for a pre-contact religious ritual. The reader may note the sharp comparison between both the clothing and the surroundings in the two illustrations. While the musicians are dressed in the traditional garb of Aztec worship, the singers in Figure 1 don a European style. The archway in “The Singer” also demonstrates the European influence. This discrepancy may exist for a variety of reasons. Perhaps there were simply two different artists who chose to illustrate in a different style. Or perhaps one could infer that the Nahua took great pride in their post-colonial singing abilities, and thus an artist illustrates him so. The music of the Aztec rituals was shown as something of the past, while singing was shown as a current pursuit in colonial culture. Whatever the case, it may be inferred that despite the Florentine Codex description, pre-contact Aztec choral technique was not pleasing to western ears and thus must have been quite distinct from a European style.

Although both the instrumental and vocal music of the Nahua were distinctive enough from the Spanish to be found distasteful, a number of similarities existed between the two styles. As Mendieta describes the traditional festivals that the Nahua would continue to celebrate during the colonial period, another interesting comparison arises between the Spanish and Aztec societies. “Young men and boys, sons of nobles, went dancing, some seven and eight years old, others four or five, that sang and danced with their fathers, and as the young men sang the first part or treble, they graced the song.”\textsuperscript{17} It seems that the Nahua, as far as we can gather from these sparse Spanish sources, behaved similarly to the Spanish, not only in utilizing male singers, but

\textsuperscript{16} Mendieta, \textit{Historia Eclesiastica}, 75.
\textsuperscript{17} Mendieta, \textit{Historia Eclesiastica}, 265.
also in employing young boys to sing high “treble” parts. Perhaps women made music in pre-contact Mexico, but if they did, there is no record. Colonial sources hint that singing, and all manner of musicianship, was like it was in Spain, a masculine art.

**Music Instruction in Colonial Mexico**

> Since the time they were baptized efforts have been made to force them to abandon those old canticles of praise to their false gods and to sing only in praise of God and his saints, and to do so in the daytime in the festival seasons, on Sundays, and on the saints’ days of their churches.  

Upon Hernan Cortez’s arrival to Tenochtitlan, “he ordered an altar to be made as well as it could be done in the time, and Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo, who was a fine singer, chanted Mass…” Those living in Tenochtitlan, the seat of power in the empire, listened to a chanted Latin mass as one of their first experiences with the Spanish Conquistadors. From the very beginnings of the conquest, both Nahua and Spanish demonstrated to one another the importance of music in their religious ritual: a mass in the case of the Spanish, and a human sacrifice of Spanish soldiers in the case of the Nahua. While the Spanish abhorred both Nahua song and religion, the Nahua did not seem to reciprocate the feeling. Eleanor Wake argues, “Christianity was not understood to be either a new or a different religion.” To the Nahua, what mattered was that devotion be given to the gods. Truitt explains, “In many ways, Nahua’s support for Christianity is directly connected to their pre-Columbian religious responsibilities and their sense of obligation to the divine.”

---

18 Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*  
their cultural paradigm than it was for the Spanish. If the Spanish worshipped God by sung mass and organ, and the Nahua liked the sound and form of it, they were eager to participate. Likely the Nahua were so quick to take on Spanish forms of worship because it was similar enough to their own. Although the music itself was different, the form had enough similarities to allow for an easy transition, such as the shared culture of men and boys being the musicians and singers.22

The Spanish quickly took note of the interest the Nahua showed toward European music. Fray Pedro de Gante “said that in view of the fact that before their conversion the Indians were always dancing and singing during their religious ceremonies, ‘I have composed verses in which they can see how God made Himself man to save the world; how He was born of the Virgin Mary without sin; and in them they learn the Commandments of this God who saved them.’”23

Franciscans, the first monastic order to arrive in Mexico, were quick to set up schools to teach the children music and other arts jointly with their Catholic education. The Franciscans, apart from their rivals the Augustinians and Dominicans, were willing to go to nearly any length to convert as many native peoples as possible. This impetus came from the popular millenarian sentiments within the Franciscan order. Schwaller explains that the “millenarian inspiration of the Franciscans provided the friars with a burning desire to continue to evangelization with all due speed. Some of the friars very seriously considered that they were living in the end times; that once the Gospel had been preached to the last soul on earth, the Second coming would be at hand.”24 This attitude gave the Franciscans a willingness to participate in cultural exchange and adaptation. Whatever it took to convert these people, they were willing to do. The Franciscans

22 Truitt, Sustaining the Divine, 90-93.
24 John F. Schwaller, “Conversion, Engagement, and Extirpation: Three Phases of the Evangelization of New Spain, 1524-1650” in Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas eds. Calvin B. Kendall et. al. (Minneapolis: Center for Early Modern History), 264.
quickly learned the Nahua language and developed a latinized writing system for it. In addition, they taught the Nahua to read and write in Spanish and Latin. They also trained the Nahua in the arts. The friars were quite impressed by the speed in which the boys picked up these new skills. “…with much ease they learned to read, as well in Spanish as in Latin… and to write, which came to them easily, and they began to write in their own language and understand each other and write letters to one another…and there are among them very able singers and composers in the chapel.”

Of the schools the Franciscans created to educate the Nahua, the Colegio in Texcoco, headed by Fray Pedro de Gante, was renowned for its musical education.

The first who taught them to sing, along with Fray Pedro de Gante, was the venerable old priest named Fray Juan Caro, who very freely and kindly shared with them, while not knowing a word of their language nor they any Spanish, he spent all day teaching them, talking to them and telling them the rules of romantic song, with much purpose and without shame, as if they were mere Spaniards. And the young boys looked at him with open mouths, listening very intently to see what he was trying to say.

The Franciscans believed that God was on their side when trying to teach the Nahua. Mendieta explains that “[the Lord] favored them working great works among that teacher and his students, that could little understand each other; but without an interpreter, in a short time they understood him, in such a fashion that they not only accomplished plain chant, but part singing as well.”

The sources suggest that the Franciscans were in constant amazement at how quickly the Nahua took to the new musical style. Motolinia claims that “what one of these natural Indians

---

26 Mendieta, Historia Eclesiastica, 384.
27 Mendieta, Historia Eclesiastica, 384.
could learn in two months, a Spaniard in Spain could not learn in two years...”  

It is crucial to remember that these letters written by the Franciscans were meant to be read by clergy and nobility in Spain. Perhaps the Nahua were not so incredibly skilled or so interested in music as the sources suggest, but instead the Franciscans strived to showcase the great success they supposedly enjoyed in Mexico. A student of the spiritual conquest is right to have this skepticism in mind when reading these Spanish sources. Yet, despite having a healthy skepticism, it would still be safe to assume that the Nahua were interested in and very able at the new music. Perhaps they did not “possess skills equivalent to those of Charles V’s personal chapel choir” as the Friars claimed, but it is reasonable to assume that based on their precontact affinity for music and the wide array of sources lauding their skill, the Nahua truly had a special love and talent for the Spanish music they were encountering.

The Spanish music taught and learned in the Franciscan schools quickly spread beyond the school walls. The entire territory of New Spain was smitten with the new music and wanted a part in it. “There is not a town of one hundred neighbors that does not have singers that officiate mass and vespers in part singing and with musical instruments. There is not a village, however small it may be, that does not have three or four Indians that sing each day in their church at the hour of Our Lady.”

Those who could not sing played musical instruments. Various types of instruments were brought over from Europe and shown to the Nahua by traveling minstrels, and the Nahua made their own copies. The first instruments to be copied by the Nahua were the flutes and oboes, often called chirimias. Considering the Nahua used wind instruments before the Spanish arrived,

---

it is no stretch to see that they would have taken to these instruments first and quickly mastered them, yet again showing the importance of pre-contact traditions influencing their colonial tendencies. Mendieta marvels, “One thing I can affirm in truth, that in all the kingdoms of Christianity there are not so many copies of flutes, chirimías, trombones, horns, trumpets and drums, as there are in this Kingdom of New Spain.”³²

There were also organs built in Mexico. The Nahua were especially stricken with these impressive instruments, although they could not copy them so easily as they could a flute. The Nahua “did not make them, but Spanish masters… and the Indians play them in our convents.”³³ As organs were expensive and complicated to build, they were not built in every church. Yet the Nahua made do with what they had in the organ-less churches. “In place of organs they have arranged flute music, and it sounds as if it were a pipe organ, because they are many flutes.”³⁴

**NahuA reception and adaptAtion**

...few years after they learned to sing, they began to compose, by their own genius, hymns in four voiced organa, and some masses and other works, which when shown to skilled Spanish singers, they said it must be from a choice source, and did not believe that it could be Indians.³⁵

The strongest sources that affirm the Nahua appreciation for Spanish music are the ones written by the Nahua themselves. Of these sources, the most important we have are wills. The writing of wills was much less regulated by Spanish oversight than other written materials, as it was simply a passing of property, and thus historians have a surer source as to what the Nahua themselves found important. Frequent in these wills throughout Mexico is the mention of music. For example, a wealthier citizen states in his will, “And I bought some chirimías. I am giving

---

them to my children the cantors; with them they are to serve my precious revered mother Guadalupe.”

Other Nahua requested in their wills that a mass be sung on behalf of their soul after their passing, as a sung mass would have more power than a spoken mass. Bells prove to be an especially important musical element to the Nahua. Bells appear more frequently in their wills than any other instrument or mention of singing. Truitt explained that the Nahua had a particular love for the sound of bells.

One woman, Isabel María de Santa Clara Cozcatlan stated in her will, “And I say that the bells are to be rung for me in Santa Maria de 10s Angeles Huitzillan, San Juan Bautista, San Diego, and San Sebastian.” Pizzigoni explains that Isabel María must have been a wealthy woman, for ringing bells in so many cities was no small expense, yet of all the things she could have funneled her money into, she concluded that her death should be hailed through music. The wealthy Nahua were willing to spend their fortunes for music to be played when they died.

Along with these written sources, there are various visual clues that exist today throughout Mexico, created in the sixteenth-century, that demonstrate the importance of music to the Nahua’s form of Christian worship. John Koegel comments, “Visual arts often provide important clues to indigenous responses to the conversion effort, and a wide range of iconographical… objects attest to the role and importance of European music in vice-regal New Spain. Church murals, retablos, statues, embroidered vestments, manuscripts…” Many of these arts were produced by Nahua with a relative amount of artistic liberty. When they chose to

38 Truitt, Sustaining the Divine in Mexico, 91.
39 Pizzigoni, Testaments of Toluca, 60.
40 John Koegel, “Music and Christianization on the Northern Frontier of New Spain” in Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas eds. Calvin B. Kendall et. al. (Minneapolis: Center for Early Modern History), 295.
represent their Christianity through visual arts, they often depicted music’s central function in that religious experience.

Written music manuscripts also show the Nahua capacity for musical expression. At first, these compositions were simply copies written under the direction of the Franciscans in the colegios.

After [the Nahua] had learned to write, they then learned how to draw lines on paper and write music notes; they then made excellent copies both of plainsong and of polyphonic music in large letters suitable for use in choirs. Their copies were used by the friars as well as by themselves, and were beautifully done with illuminated letters throughout.⁴¹

As their proficiency with music increased and the Franciscan trust in their abilities and loyalties grew, these composers-in-training began to write their own songs. According to the Florentine codex, a singer not only “utters clear sounds” but he “composes, sets to music, originates

Within a century of the Spanish arriving in Mexico, Nahua composers were creating sacred music independent of Spanish oversight.

The Nahua composer Tomas Pascual was prolific in his sacred compositions. He wrote many original plainchants, which were compiled in 1635. These compositions show his proficiency and skill in music theory. Although the words to his chant are always in Latin, according to Catholic tradition, the instructions that he gives concerning the music are in Nahuatl. This sacred Catholic music was written by a Nahua for other Nahua.

Although the Nahua took quickly to Spanish music, and through it more readily accepted Christianity, there were many who did not give up their old ways while accepting the new Spanish teachings. This seeming variance away from the true religion came into sharp focus with the trail of Don Carlos Ometochtzin. Don Carlos, a member of the Nahua nobility, who had been instructed in one of the Franciscan Colegios. The Franciscans hoped that bringing the nobility into Christianity would accelerate the conversion process for the rest, a strategy called “Paths of

---

Don Carlos was the picture of a good Christian, until, in 1536, he was caught worshipping his pre-contact idols in his home. He was tried by the inquisition and sentenced to death. The Franciscans were disheartened by this lack of faith and began to lose the zeal they first possessed in 1524 about the converted state of the Nahua. Fray Pedro de Gante, the beloved music teacher, stated that “the commoners were like animals – unreasoning, unmanageable.”

Ricard’s ideas of a sweeping acceptance of Christianity do not show forth in the Friars’ writings during this period of growing distrust in the Nahua’s conversion. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún served as an interpreter during the Don Carlos trial, and he too began to lose trust in the Nahua’s conversion. His concerns included their music practice. He wrote:

But in other places – in most places – they persist in going back to singing their old canticles in their houses or their palaces (a circumstance that arouses a good deal of suspicion as to the sincerity of their Christian Faith); for in the old canticles mostly idolatrous things are sung in a style so obscure that none can understand them well except they themselves. And they use other canticles to persuade the population to do what they want, or about war or other matters that are not good; for they have canticles composed for these [purposes] that they refuse to abandon.

While the Nahua loved their new Spanish music, they continued to cling to their old music. The regular clergy in Mexico recognized the power that music held among the Nahua and they knew that the pagan Nahua practices would persist as long as the songs did. Some authorities sought to ban any Nahua from making music in a pre-contact style during the First Mexican Provincial

---

44 Ernesto de La Torre Villar, *Fray Pedro de Gante, maestro y civilizador de América* (Mexico: Seminario de Cultura Mexicana, 1973), 74.
Council. Sahagún arrived at a different conclusion. Instead of banning their music altogether, he looked to make all Nahua music based in Christianity. As Truitt explained, “Sahagún wrote (or more likely had Nahua students write) the canticles to encourage them to abandon the old songs they sang to their pre-contact deities. He wanted his songs, using familiar tunes but different words, to encourage the Nahua to exalt the Christian god and the saints.”

Thus, Sahagún writes, “In order easily to counteract this mischief, in this year, 1583, in this volume, called Christian Psalmody, these canticles have been printed in the Nahuatl language so that they will completely abandon the old canticles.” Shwaller states that these new canticles “retained some of the literary devices of the ancient poetry and song.” Sahagún was frustrated with the Nahua’s obstinacy in regard to their old traditions, and yet he recognized that fighting to destroy these traditions would be fruitless. Not only did he allow the Nahua to keep their tunes, but the new Christian words he wrote, in Nahuatl, followed a similar format and style of the old ones. The clergy in Sixteenth-Century New Spain would have loved for the conquered Nahua to give up their culture completely, but the Nahua did not. Thus Sahagún conceded to the Nahua’s desire to retain their old canticles, in hopes that his greater goal – their conversion to Jesus Christ – would be reached.

CONCLUSION

...there are always good chapels and some basses, altos, tenors and trebles that could compete with the select singers of the Cathedrals...
Music within the context of the Spanish conquest is a more complicated topic than at first glance. The music of pre-conquest Spain and Mexico were distinct enough to push each other away, while also sharing similarities that brought the two together. Some Nahua readily embraced the Spanish music, while others, as Sahagún expresses, were hesitant to move into that new culture and rebelled actively against it.

One thing, however, is sure. The musical “conquest” of the Nahua was not so much a conquest at all. The Nahua accepted the new music as a way to worship the divine, whether it was the Christian God or not. While accepting new musical traditions, they showed enough intent to hold onto their old traditions that Franciscans allowed them to keep their melodies, as long as they sang Christian words. They took what the Spanish gave them, added their own culture, and created their own music. Even when music in Mexico sounded European, it was likely written by Nahua. The Spanish did not conquer the Nahua musically or spiritually, but had to adapt their religious practice to win Nahua converts. In the case of liturgical music, Nahua won the day. They kept what they had and gained a lot more. If anyone was conquering music in Colonial Mexico, it was the Nahua.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Garrett-Gates Mesoamerican Manuscripts, no. 258, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.


Secondary Sources:


Kendall, Calvin B. et. al. eds. *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.* Minneapolis: Center for Early Modern History, 2009.


