

UCLA Diversifying the Classics: Music and the Comedia



Elisabeth Le Guin performs during Women and Servants at the LA Escena Festival

From its earliest forms, the Hispanic theatrical tradition has always relied on music. Though the specific musical compositions for the plays have been lost (in part due to a 1734 fire that destroyed the royal library and music archive in Madrid), we know that music was central to the experience of early modern Spanish drama in performance. There would be musical entertainment before and after the play, and also between each of the three acts. Instruments such as harp, guitar, *vihuela* (an early Spanish string instrument), and viol were most common, though percussion and wind instruments such as tambourine and trumpet were also widely used.

The dramatic purpose of musical accompaniment was similar to today: to provide structure, set mood, or represent the situations of characters onstage. Specifically, music during a comedia would serve to frame the acts or beginnings and endings of plays, underscore the atmosphere, establish transitions for the audience (such as the transition from the between-act *entremeses* back to the comedia), and as part of the play action.

While 19th-century flamenco is often used anachronistically in English-language productions to suggest an exotic “Spanishness,” theater practitioners are no more bound to specifically Spanish music than directors of Shakespeare are to reproducing the sounds of Elizabethan—let alone Victorian—London. Music in contemporary productions can focus on dramatic impact more than fidelity to period or place.

For the 2008 production of Lope’s *Fuente Ovejuna* at the Stratford Festival, director Laurence Boswell worked with Canadian composer Ed Henderson to align the music with the action. One scene in each act of the play involved nearly the entire cast of characters onstage, singing and dancing to the accompaniment of guitar. In these scenes, some of Lope’s speeches were set to music and sung instead of spoken.

While Boswell’s production used English translations of the text, the 2018 staged reading of *Women and Servants* at the LA Escena Festival in Los Angeles made use of Lope’s original Spanish poetry. Musician and musicologist Elisabeth LeGuin (photo above) adapted the rhymed Spanish verse into song, which she performed onstage to frame the acts. LeGuin studies the continuity between early Spanish forms and contemporary Mexican folk music. Just as the main themes of the plays are relevant to our cultural concerns today, the sonic continuity she traces reminds us that these dramas are not as distant from us as they might at first seem.

The EFE Tres Theater Company from Ciudad de Mexico, also performers at LA Escena, use music for comic effect in their innovative adaptations of Cervantes's interludes and Lope's comedias. Their versions use guitar accompaniment or *a capella* song to provide variety and comedy for the audience. *El príncipe ynocente*, based on a Lope comedia, for instance, begins with two prisoners singing a bluesy duet about the injustice of their situation to acoustic guitar.

Dave Dalton's 2018 *Love's a Bitch*, adapted from Tirso's *Don Gil of the Green Breeches*, found musical inspiration in the trite love songs of the 70s and 80s, reminding the audience that our romantic ideas are culturally constructed. Teenagers in North America share their susceptibility to pop music, just as the women of early modern Madrid all go mad for Don Gil's green pants.

These productions highlight how theater practitioners can engage creatively with music in the comedia as we broaden the canon of classics and reimagine the rich and diverse traditions of Hispanic drama for the twenty-first century.

Resources:

EFE Tres performs *El príncipe ynocente*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftjPdcmiqg0>

EFE Tres performs *El merolico*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4oOIGsTzr4>

2017 Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico production based various Calderón works: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUHFgKdiszs>

Director Laurence Boswell discusses his production of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* and its music for the 2008 Stratford Festival: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmyRyraB390

Donald R. Larson, "Incidental Music and Its Role in Three English-Language Comedia Performances," *Comedia Performance* vol. 11, no. 1 (2014), pp. 54–84.