

When conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Nahua territory in 1519, there began a period of colonialism that, despite its brutality, involved the co-existence and cross-fertilisation of two cultures both with rich musical heritages. The cruelty of the Spanish to the native inhabitants of the New World was commented upon by many travellers, including Sir Francis Drake in his account of his circumnavigation of 1577 - 1580 (although impartiality was not his strongest point), but the conquerors also employed more subtle means of suppression through religious coercion and the use therein of the arts and music. The first missionaries arrived from Spain in 1523 and began to put into practice King Carlos V's plan of comprehensive conversion of the native peoples to the Roman faith and the annihilation of local religious practices. Articles of faith and prayers were soon translated into local languages and set to music for use in services. Franciscan schools for the dissemination of European culture and values were soon established and the Nahuatl love of singing, playing and dancing was enlisted as a proselytising tool. Native musicianship was commented upon favourably by the invaders. The Franciscan friar Toribio de Motolinía (c.1490 - 1569) tells us:

*“More remarkable yet the fact that not only their feet, but the entire body, head, arms, and hands, move together in their dances... following their leaders in the singing and drumming, everyone changed position at the same instant, and with such precision that the best Spanish dancers marvelled upon seeing them in action, and greatly admired the dances of these people.”*

But this high degree of skill was achieved at a substantial cost:

*“If one of the singers made a mistake in singing, or if one of the drummers erred in the execution of his part, or if one of the leaders who indicated the dance routine made a mistake, immediately the chieftain ordered him seized, and the next day had him summarily executed.”*

Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España - Bernardino de Sahagún, 1540 - 1585

From the 1520s Cortés ordered the construction of a church on the site of the Aztec temple to the god of war and principle deity, *Huitzilopochtli*, utilising stone left after the destruction of the temple (he may even have laid the first stone himself). This early church was replaced by the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, construction of which began in 1573, and which was finally dedicated on February 2nd, 1656. From early in the history of this, the first See of the New World, polyphonic sacred music was required to be sung at services and native singers were trained in its performance. The Spaniards were not always convinced of the quality of Nahuatl voices. The *Códice Franciscano*, a contemporary account, refers to the weak sound of individual native voices:

*“In each choir there are usually 15 or 16 Indians, which is the minimum necessary, for they have weak voices and do not sound well if there is not a group... With attention given them by the friars, the mass and divine office are sung both in plainsong and polyphonic song with very good effect.”*

Stylistically, music in the See of Mexico lagged behind that of European centres. In 1654, when the manuscript containing the *Missa Aufer a nobis* was presented to the cathedral, Italian opera was fast developing and unaccompanied polyphonic sacred music had for some while been considered “*Stile antico*” throughout Europe. Alongside Mexico Cathedral, the most important repository of early Mexican polyphony is the cathedral of Puebla de Los Angeles. Puebla, now a quiet city in the central highlands to the south east of Mexico City, began construction of its cathedral in 1575, shortly after that of Mexico, and it was consecrated earlier than its neighbour's in 1649. The splendour of the services in Puebla was widely known and music there was held in high esteem. Between the years 1629 and 1664, the *Maestro de Capilla* at the cathedral was Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, who was possibly the most important composer working in the New World throughout the 17th century. The archive of Puebla Cathedral contains extensive collections of works

by European composers, including Morales, Guerrero & Palestrina, as well as the largest corpus of works by native-born composers such as Francisco López y Capillas, Antonio Rodríguez de Mata and Juan de Lienás. Instrumental accompaniment of polyphonic music was a common practice in Spain and was enthusiastically adopted in New Spain. The use of the bass dulcian (bajón), doubling the bass of the choir and even accompanying plainchant, is well documented in Spain. Evidence for the popularity of the instrument in New Spain can be seen in a document from Puebla, an invoice for the sale of “ecclesiastical instruments” made in the workshop at Padilla’s own home, dated 1641. The inventory includes:

*“30 bajones grandes, 20 bajones tenores et 20 bajicos triples [soprano dulcians]”*

By all accounts, standards of performance were high (despite the reluctance of even the Spaniards to execute errant singers). In 1625, the English traveller to the New World, Thomas Gage, a Dominican, wrote of the religious music he had heard in Mexico City, declaring that

*“...the performances were so exquisite that he dare say people were drawn to their churches more for the delight of the music than for any delight in the service of God.”*

Francisco López Capillas (c.1608 - 1674) was born and died in Mexico City. Admitted to the choir of Mexico Cathedral around 1625, he would have studied under its *Maestro de Capilla*, Antonio Rodríguez de Mata. On December 17th 1641, López is named as assistant organist and dulcian player at Puebla Cathedral, serving under Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, where he received the degree of *Licenciado* from Mexico University. He was promoted to organist in 1647, but left the following year after a reduction in his salary. The next record of his whereabouts is six years later, when on 10th March 1654, he presented a choirbook of his works to Mexico Cathedral. Upon the death of the incumbent in Mexico, Fabián Ximeno (also a protégé of de Mata) in April of the same year, the Cathedral authorities announced a 40-day waiting period for the vacancy in order for applications to arrive. Despite this, López’s reputation was such that he was commissioned by the cathedral authorities to compose the Corpus Christi and numerous other works on the very day that the 40-day period was announced. He was duly hired for the post of *Maestro de Capilla* only ten days later, with an annual salary of 500 pesos. During most of his 20 years of service to the cathedral, he persistently petitioned the authorities to separate the posts of maestro de capilla and organist. It was not until 1668, six years before his death, that this was granted. By the end of his career, López was earning 1000 pesos a year, the largest salary ever received by a church musician in Mexico throughout the colonial period. The motet *Aufer a nobis* and the parody mass based on it, *Missa Aufer a nobis*, are still preserved in the cathedral’s archives, in the carefully illuminated volume presented by the composer in 1654. It contains three parody masses, each with the original parodied work. The edition for this BMEMF workshop has been prepared specifically for a recent performance by Border Voices in Leominster from this manuscript by David.