

Yo Me Soy La Morenica

A setting and performance of a 16th century Spanish villancico de navidad

- Lady Teleri the Well-Prepared

Abstract

Yo me soy la morenica is a Spanish villancico de navidad (Christmas carol) for four voices, published in Venice in 1556. I have adapted it for solo performance with voice and harp. There were rhythmic, instrumentation, accompaniment, and language/translation issues to address. I have tried to make good choices based on current scholarship in the early music community, tempered with a desire for an SCA-friendly performance that is within my technical skills. The result is a fairly effective, if simple, musical setting that highlights the melody of the original and offers an “in-line” translation of the text for the audience.

Introduction

I was introduced to medieval Spanish music via *Song of David*, an early music recording by the ensemble La Rondinella together with Sephardic composer and performer Flory Jagoda. One of the songs on the CD was *Yo me soy la morenica*, performed by Ms. Jagoda as a monophonic song. I liked the tune and the meaning of the song and determined to learn it by ear.

Later, I wanted to perform the song with harp accompaniment. This required some additional research on my part, and I learned some things about both the song itself and the ways in which I might accompany it with my harp. Some of the things I might wish to do are, at present, beyond my technical abilities as a harper; these will be discussed at the end as potential Future Work.

The Song

The song comes from the Cancionero de Upsala [sic], a songbook whose actual title runs “Villancicos by various composers, in two, three, four and five parts, now newly corrected. There are also eight tonos in plainchant and eight tonos in polyphony, which may be used by those learning to sing.” It was printed in Venice in 1556 by Jeronimo Scotto, a music printer. It somehow reached the Uppsala University Library in Sweden, where it lay unnoticed until a diplomat and musicologist named Rafael Mitjana discovered it there in the early 20th century. It contains 55 villancicos of various types, mostly anonymous, and the 16 tonos mentioned in its title. The songs are arranged by type and by number of parts; *Yo me soy la morenica* is found in the section for villancicos de navidad (Christmas carols) for four voices.

At first glance, there is nothing especially Christmas about the song’s lyrics, which run:

Refrain:
Yo me soy la morenica
Yo me soy la morena

Lo moreno bien mirado
Fue la culpa del pecado
Que en me nunca fue hallado
Ni jamas se hallara

Soy la sin espina rosa
Que Salomon canta y glosa
Nigra sum, sed formosa
Y por mi se cantara

Soy la mata inflamada
Ardiendo sin ser quemada
Ni de aquel fuego tocada
Que a los otros tocara

Refrain:
I am the dark girl
I am the dark one

The dark handsome man
Was guilty of that sin
Which I never was
Nor ever will be

I am the rose without thorns
Of which Solomon writes and sings
Black I am, but beautiful
For me they will sing

I am the flaming bush
Burning without being consumed
The fire will not touch me
That will touch all of the others

The imagery seems to draw more on the Song of Solomon and the Old Testament than the New. The morenica of the refrain sounds like the lover of the Song of Solomon, and the second verse also seems to recall that poem. Indeed, “nigra sum sed formosa” is the Latin translation of the Song of Songs 1:4 (Vulgate). The first verse recalls the story of Susannah (although the judges in that story were hardly “bien mirado”). The burning bush, of course, is in Exodus.

It seems likely that this song was either associated with Christmas although not about it (much like *Good King Wenceslas* is for us today), or else the morenica is meant to be the Virgin Mary – certain guilty of no sins, and often associated with roses (along with lilies). That she is dark seems exceptional, and one wonders if there is any connection to the Black Madonnas found in some places in Europe, including Montserrat in Spain, from which that earlier Spanish songbook, the *Llibre Vermell*, comes.

I initially learned the song from a recording in which it was sung monophonically. I had no idea that it was set for four voices until some time later. The ChoralWiki contains two arrangements for four voices for this piece, by Anders Stenberg and by Fernando Jacome. They are identical. Until I am able to access a facsimile of the original composition or else a canonical transcription, I am willing to assume that the arrangements are the same because they are accurate transcriptions of the original. It is a later period work, and its notation is more regular, making transcription less contentious (see the Rhythm and Tempo section). I have appended Stenberg’s score as a Appendix B.



Figure 2: From the Cantigas de Santa Maria

The noteheads in Figure 1 (empty and filled) give clear indication of the relative note lengths, while the C-like figure at the start of several lines is an indication of tempo. The text underlay is moderately straightforward. Compare to Figure 2. The neume shapes do give some indication of relative value, but there is no indication of tempo and the text underlay is not as even. Fewer editorial decisions are needed to transcribe the later music than the earlier music.

If every note were given precisely the same value and emphasis, this song – which is not melodically all that complex – would quickly become fairly boring. Experts vary wildly in their recommendations for the rhythms that should be used for early music, but there is a general consensus that the meter was freer than we are used to today (Aubrey 106). Especially as a solo performer (without polyphonic partners with whom I must keep time), I can vary the meter somewhat, giving some notes slightly longer or shorter durations as the meter of the poetry indicates.

The tempo should be somewhat fast. Typically, the breve (quarter note, roughly) should be equal to something like the pulse of a man at rest (McGee 42). For a song with no subdivisions faster than a semibreve, McGee recommends a slightly faster tempo, but quotes authorities from the 16th and early 17th centuries as saying that the “spirit of the music” should ultimately be the arbiter of the speed selected (43).

Instrumentation

After rhythm, possibly the most contentious issue in early music performance practice is the use of instruments. We have evidence that voice and instruments were used together, but how and for which kinds of songs is less clear. For the earlier Middle Ages (twelfth

and thirteenth centuries), opinion seems to be that the “high style” courtly songs would have been sung unaccompanied, while the “low style” dance and stanzaic songs may have had instrumental accompaniment (Aubrey 110, Ferreira 155). Carols are of this “low style,” so I can feel somewhat confident that the harp is not inappropriate.

Harps were popular instruments throughout our period, and were used for all kinds of music, and especially played together with lute or voice (McGee 64). There is no reason I can see that it would be incorrect to use a harp to accompany this song, although a vielle, lute, or other instrument would be an equally good choice.

My harp is a modern folk harp, 25 nylon strings and no bray pins. An authentic harp of the period would have the “high headed” Gothic shape, gut strings, and bray pins. Extant instruments of the time have 24-26 strings (although other numbers of strings are illustrated as well), so at least in range it is accurate (Meyers 334).

I have a non-replica wire-strung harp, which is more similar to the wire harps of the period than my folk harp is to the gut-strung harps, but the wire-strung harp is more suitable for music from the British Isles (Ireland and Scotland especially, and perhaps Wales). I have another small-bodied nylon-strung harp, modeled after an 8th century Pictish stone carving, but that is far too early for the piece I am playing. (And the small-bodied harp is exceptionally quiet.) Of the instruments that I own, the big folk harp seemed to be the best match.

The harp should use Pythagorean tempering (Fulton 350), but my ear is not good enough to achieve that, and my electronic tuner only tunes to modern equal temperament.

Accompaniment

Were instruments used to substitute for polyphonic voices in polyphonic music? That is an open question in early music. We do not know if it would be appropriate or not if I were to play the alto or tenor lines on my harp while I sang the soprano line. It is certainly a possibility... except that I am not a strong parts singer. If I were to play another line in the work, I would start singing that line, or at least go horribly flat on the melody line.

One suggestion with the weight of authority behind it is to simply repeat the melody line, or certain important notes from the melody (Aubrey 110, Tindemans 468). This suits the work quite well – it gives me something to play during the monophonic verses as well as during the polyphonic refrain. But it also seems redundant and places a lot of emphasis on a simple melody.

The classic advice to musicians setting out to accompany monophony on an instrument is to use octaves, fifths, and occasionally fourths set against the melody. I do this, using the polyphonic lines as a guide. For example, the song begins on scale degree 3, but I do not play 3 an octave down together with 7. The polyphony clearly sketches out a 1-3-5 I chord, so I play the fifth there, the interval from 1 to 5.

In the third ‘measure,’ the melody note is scale degree 6 in discantus and the alto lines; it is set against notes which are scale degree 4 in the tenor and bass. We are normally told to avoid the third in early music, but here it is.

However, these suggestions are more suitable for earlier medieval music. McGee suggests that drones went out of style by the 1500s – 1600s, and that the basic no-fail medieval accompaniment of fifths and octaves also became unpopular. Filled chords became preferred as more polyphonic songs and instruments became popular (McGee 50). This suggests that the triads (rolled or not) so beloved of folk harpers everywhere might not, in this case, be a bad choice.

In his transcription (Appendix B), Stenberg provides chordal suggestions over the melody. In general, these reflect the chords constructed by the four voices. Looking at the first chord of each ‘measure,’ (Stenberg sensibly does not mandate measures but suggests them) we see the I chord, the V chord, and then two IV chords. The final note is predictably accompanied by a triumphant I chord. Playing these, I find that I agree with all of them except possibly the final IV chord. The voices are actually singing scale degrees 2, 6 and 4, while the IV chord contains scale degrees 4, 6 and 1. The interval of a second between scale degree 1 (in the chord) and scale degree 2 (in the melody) is a second, and it is dissonant. It is a well-known technique to introduce such a dissonance just before resolving it at the final cadence; however, I am not entirely sure what the justification for the IV chord here is.

I have not been able, in the practice time I’ve had before this event, to replace my older, less appropriate intervals with these filled chords.

Preludes and Postludes

Another suggestion for the use of instruments in early vocal music is to provide preludes, postludes and interludes. I will be using some very simple interludes for the translation (see below). The purpose of the prelude is to introduce the mode of the song and perhaps some of its melodic, rhythmic or other important characteristics; I intend to improvise one for each performance. The performance does not seem to require a postlude; the final repetition of the refrain is enough.

Translation

I have not yet been able to create a satisfactory rhymed translation that preserves the meter of the original, so performing it in translation was not an option. Providing the audience with programs containing translations, as recommended by early music authorities, does not really work in an SCA context. But I wanted the audience to know what I was saying, since a common complaint against early music is that the audience does not understand it.

I have opted to speak a prose translation of the words while plucking open fifths on the harp, using the drone sequence as a base. While it arguably interrupts the flow of the song, and while there certainly is no medieval precedent for providing such a translation, I choose to keep it to address the needs of the audience.

The 13th century French chante-fable (literally, “sung story) *Aucassin and Nicolette* suggests by the name of its genre the possibility of intermixing song (or music) and prose. The romance itself is formed of mixed sections of prose and poetry. There is no evidence at all as to how it may have been performed, and it is three centuries too early and in the wrong country to apply directly to the work I am performing. I mention it only as a suggestive illustration that prose accompanied by music may not be entirely inappropriate.

Results

I have not had time to write out a score for my performance, so the performance itself is the result.

Conclusions

I was surprised at how modern this composition was in many respects. The use of the folk chord staples I, IV, V and VI in its primary harmonic structure in particular caught me off guard; I have always thought this sort of construction to be a much later development. The song itself is in “Ionian mode,” which corresponds to the major scale. My research into Renaissance music isn’t as deep as my research into medieval music, and I’m not sure if it’s more correct to say that this song is composed in a mode or in a scale.

I am working on class notes for “How to Write a Medieval Song,” and this serves to remind me that our period is quite long. The rules for composition in 1200 are very different from those in 1556. The closer we get to 1600, the nearer we come to the Baroque era and music we begin to call “modern.” It should not be so surprising, then, that we find the seeds of Baroque style and structure in Renaissance music.

Future Work

Changing the primary accompaniment from the open intervals to the filled chords is my next order of business. I would like to try simultaneously playing two parts of the song on the harp, perhaps the soprano and tenor or soprano and bass lines. While I doubt I could also sing at that point, the more complex instrumentation might make a most effective postlude.

I am still interested in a rhymed, metrical English translation, to be presented after or instead of the original Spanish lyrics. (Master Efenwealt Whistle uses such a technique to fine effect on his *Minstrel by Trade* recording with the trouvère song *E, Dame Jolie*. He sings it first in Old French and then in an English translation.)

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Discography

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