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Musical Conquests: Encounters in Music Cultures of Aztec and Early Colonial Times

Summary

This paper explores the socio-political and religious dimensions of sound and music making by comparing two culturally distinct but intimately connected time periods related to the same place: the Valley of Mexico. First, Aztec practices of musical domination and control over conquered societies in the Late Postclassic period of Mesoamerica (1325 to 1521 CE) are revised. Then the Hispanic strategies of musical domination and control over the conquered Aztecs in the Early Colonial times (1521 to 1600) are reviewed and compared with the Aztec model. The paper asks which differences are present and whether there are structural similarities in musical conquests.

Keywords: sonic warfare; musical conquest; Aztecs; proselytization

Dieser Artikel untersucht die sozio-politischen und religiösen Dimensionen des Musizierens und Klangerzeugens über den Vergleich zweier kulturell unterschiedlicher, aber nah beieinander liegenden Zeitabschnitte an ein und demselben Ort: dem Tal von Mexiko. Zunächst werden die Praktiken der Azteken zur Ausübung musikalischer Dominanz und Kontrolle über die von ihnen eroberten Gesellschaften der späten post-klassischen Periode Mesoamerikas (1325 bis 1521 n. Chr.) untersucht. Darauf folgend werden die spanischen Strategien der musikalischen Dominanz und Kontrolle über die eroberten Azteken der frühen Kolonialzeit (1521 bis 1600) beleuchtet und dem aztekischen Modell gegenübergestellt. Der Artikel fragt nach den Unterschieden und strukturellen Ähnlichkeiten in der musikalischen Eroberung.

Keywords: klangliche Kriegsführung; musikalische Eroberung; Azteken; Missionierung

Ricardo Eichmann, Mark Howell, Graeme Lawson (eds.) | Music and Politics in the Ancient World | Berlin Studies of the Ancient World 65 (ISBN 978-3-9819685-3-8; DOI 10.17171/3-65) | www.edition-topoi.org

1 Introduction

In this short essay I will explore issues of political space and political condition embodied in the production of sound and music in situations of conflict. I will consider how the sounds and musics of conflicting states and cultures might have served in defining their identities and as tools in negotiating political change, including conquest and resistance, taking as my example two culturally distinct but intimately connected populations coinciding at a specific place and time: in the Valley of Mexico immediately before and after the Conquest. In the first part, Aztec practices of musical domination and control over conquered societies will be reviewed. Roughly speaking, this will cover the era dominated by the Aztec 'Triple Alliance', a league of three Nahua city-states under the leadership of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, which persisted from 1428 CE until its defeat by the Spanish Conquistadores and their native allies in 1521.[1] Once established, the Triple Alliance waged wars of conquest, which resulted in a rapid expansion of its empire throughout most of central Mexico, as well as large coastal areas along the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific. I will ask which roles sound and music making may have played among the Aztecs in the specific context of their expansion.

In the second part, I will discuss the part music played during Colonial times in Hispanic strategies designed to achieve domination and control over the conquered Aztecs. I will focus on the Early Colonial period of Mexico, from 1521 to around 1600, a period characterized by consolidation of Spanish holdings in the Americas. During this time the pre-existing tribute system of Aztec political control was replaced by a feudal system in the manner of medieval Europe, the so-called *encomienda*. The Council of the Indies and mendicant religious orders together laboured both on behalf of the crown of Spain and to convert the native populations to Christianity. In spite of the Catholic character of that mission, during this period a process of religious syncretism evolved in which native pre-Columbian traditions became combined with Spanish ones. I will ask what role music may have played in this process, and will compare Spanish and Aztec strategies of spiritual conquest involving music. The differences between the distinct cultures will be explored, together with any structural similarities.

1 Nahua is a name for the indigenous Nahuatl-speaking peoples living in central Mexico at the time of the conquest. It is used interchangeably with the more common term Aztec.

2 Aztec strategies of musical conquest

2.1 Spanish experience of the sounds of Aztec warfare

On 21st April 1519, Hernán Cortés reached the coast of what is now Veracruz with an expeditionary force consisting of eleven ships, carrying about a hundred sailors, six hundred soldiers and a few hundred Cuban and African slaves. The indigenous coastal cultures, among them the powerful city states of the Totonac people, had been subject to Aztec attacks since the mid-15th century, and had continuously rebelled against the Aztecs. The Totonac capital, Cempoala, with an estimated population of around 80 000, was the first pre-Columbian city-state of importance visited by Cortés. As a counter to Aztec oppression, the Totonac ruler Tlacochcalcatl welcomed Cortés, and after an exchange of presents an alliance between the parties was formed. Tlacochcalcatl went so far as to offer the support of his warrior élite against the Aztec Emperor Motecuhzuma II. With this addition Cortés' expedition now included about a thousand Totonac warriors led by forty warrior chiefs, and a body of two hundred commoners whose task would be to drag the Spanish cannons and carry the supplies, as related by arguably the most important chronicler of the conquest, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1490–1584), in his *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (1568).[2] Although this initial cross-cultural encounter includes no descriptions of soundmaking I will shortly describe first-hand accounts which show the important role that music played.

Two weeks later the combined expeditionary force set off for the Aztec capital and soon entered foreign territories with deep valleys forming part of the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre mountains. Here the expedition came under surprise attack from an advance party of six thousand warriors from the kingdom of Tlaxcala, an independent enclave almost completely surrounded by the Aztec Empire (subsequently, Tlaxcala would also join forces with Cortés against Motecuhzuma). For the Spaniards this was probably the heaviest attack since traversing the coastal areas of the Yucatán peninsula, and further along the Gulf Coast, where encounters between the expedition and local indigenous groups had led to fighting. The Tlaxcallan attacks and later attacks by the Aztecs generally followed the same pattern, with battles carried out by means of ambuscade. In these carefully prepared stealth attacks, silence would suddenly be interrupted by a frightening 'wall of sound', produced by the ambushing warriors on all kinds of portable instruments: mainly drums and trumpets, shell horns and ceramic whistles. The instrumental noise was accompanied by ear-splitting trills, which the eyewitness Bernal Díaz later describes onomatopoetically as "alala, alala". In astonishingly vivid accounts from his *Historia*, the old soldier records the fear and panic that such sounds induced in the

2 For Díaz's account see Carrasco 2008.

Spanish ranks during these attacks.[3] To Díaz, the sound they produced was nothing less than an infernal outbreak of noise, absolutely strange and intimidating to the unaccustomed ears of a 16th-century European.

Bernal Díaz not only describes the sounds of indigenous signals used to announce an attack, but also states that during such battles the instrumental noise never ceased. And as relayed in Friar Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*,[4] Aztec warriers employed chanting to animate themselves, and each other (similar to Díaz's exemplary account of the conquest is Sahagún's (1490–1584) post-Conquest description of Aztec life). In addition to the functions of chanting as described by Sahagún, are those ascribed to the drums, whistles, and specifically shell horns, which were used for long-distance communication, especially to convey tactical signals during hostilities. Probably, the instruments used for this latter purpose were carried by the chiefs of the 'Eagles' and the 'Jaguars,' the two Aztec warrior societies; but the sources on this topic are not clear. Indeed, one passage in Díaz's work indicates that the last Aztec ruler, Cauhtemoc, gave orders himself, with his own shell horn. In the *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*, a 17th-century manuscript, the ruler Nezahualcoyotl is shown with a blue-painted war drum with gold ornamentation, which usually formed part of the dance and battle costume of the Aztec rulers and their allies, demonstrating the importance of the drum in relation to war.[5] The so-called 'gold drum' (*teocuitlahuehuetl*) appears to have been a token or insignia which was sent to the Aztec allies as a call to war.

The Spanish experience of Aztec battle sounds is far from unique, it seems. Throughout documented history, the psychological power of sound has been exploited as a military device. Its use to distract the individual from his or her own anxiety, while at the same time introducing fear in the mind of the opponent, appears to be a constant in violent human interactions. Numerous music-archaeological and ethnomusicological examples can be counted, but we need go no further back than the time we live in for a demonstration. In his book *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Steve Goodman explores sound manipulation as a tactic of irritation, of intimidation, even inflicting permanent psychological harm, in contemporary situations of conflict.[6] Among the examples he cites are oscillators that have been employed as sonic weapons because they are capable of causing damage to the eardrum, even leading to deafness; and sound systems capable of excessive volume levels, which have been used not only in warfare but also in anti-riot policing. All such devices today transmit noise that is considered by

3 For a discussion see Moreno 1961.

4 For Sahagún's text see Anderson and Dibble 1950–1982, vol. 12, chapter 34.

5 See for picture of Nezahualcoyotl, the ruler of Tetzcoco, in military dress, from the Codex Ixtlilxochitl, folio 106 recto. Manuscript. Mexico, early 17th century CE: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nezahualcoyotl_(tlatoani)#/media/File:Nezahualcoyotl.jpg (visited on 19/07/2019).

6 Goodman 2009.

those who are subjected to them to be extremely disturbing and disorientating. Might we infer that analogous techniques were known to the Aztecs?

2.2 The power of sound: accounts of Aztec warrior dances

While Aztec invasions of foreign territories were in progress, wooden slit-drums were played all day and night in the temples of Tenochtitlan in order to spiritually strengthen the power of the warriors abroad. And even before warriors departed on an expedition, processions and dances of the warrior societies would be held within the sacred temple precinct of Tenochtitlan. A Spanish account relates that several hundred warriors of the Eagle and Jaguar societies gathered in a great circle dance lasting several hours, and that during this dance the warriors constantly played their shrill-sounding whistles. Through aurally-induced stimulation, and ecstatic dance movements, it seems a state of trance was achieved that could make dancers lose control. Such dancing warriors received close attention from accompanying guards since, left to their own devices, they might harm themselves and even their fellow warriors. In fact, the account relates that the mood in these dances could become so aggressive that resultant casualties were not uncommon. We may already have enough information to justify a proposition that acoustic stimulation played a part in the preparation of Aztec warriors for battle. For examples of this technique, again, numerous historical and recent accounts can be found.[7]

2.3 Music as tribute: incorporating the strange

Aztec rule over conquered societies can best be described as 'hegemonic' or 'indirect'. Rulers of conquered city states were left in power as long as they agreed to pay tribute and to provide military support in wars with enemy states. Once a city was conquered, its main temple, the socio-political and socio-religious centre, would be looted and set on fire. This was a powerful symbol and signal of Aztec victory, yet usually no further destruction followed. According to Sahagún and the Dominican friar Diego Durán (1537–1588),[8] the principle statues of the local gods were 'captured' and brought to Tenochtitlan, where they were stored in the "Temple of the Serpent", *Coacalco* or *Coateocalli*. Also meaning "Temple of Many Gods", this building functioned expressly as a place of imprisonment for the foreign gods. Conceivably, in a similar way, the songs of conquered societies may have been considered part of the loot, to be performed at the Aztec court by specific court musicians familiar with foreign languages.

7 Goodman 2009.

8 For Sahagún see Anderson and Dibble 1950–1982, vol. 2; for Durán see Heyden 1994, ch. 58.

Thus, in addition to songs composed to commemorate battles and victorious conquests, the Aztecs applied strategies to incorporate the strange or 'exotic' through a process of musical assimilation and adoption, which became a symbol of Aztec hegemony not only of the material but also of the spiritual world. Unfortunately, we do not yet know enough about these practices, since accounts of them are scarce. Similarly, it is not known if these so-called 'captured' songs, which once formed part of the Aztecs' loot, were subsequently forbidden or could still be performed in the lands of their origins.

There is equally little information as to whether the conquered societies went on to adopt musical and dance practices from their conquerors. However, some Zapotec song texts of the early 18th century were discovered in the *Archivo General de las Indias* (General Archive of the Indies, Seville), employing syllabic notation to represent drum patterns.[9] These turn out to be basically the same as the syllabic drum notation recorded in the *Cantares Mexicanos*, a 16th-century manuscript compendium of Aztec songs. As the syllables given in the Zapotec songs derive from Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, some measure of assimilation of Aztec syllabic codification is clearly indicated. This assimilation must have taken place after the Aztec conquest of Zapotec territories during the second half of the 15th century, and apparently it was still preserved in Oaxaca until the beginning of the 18th century. Instead of demonstrating a mnemotechnical notation device for drum patterns, which was native to the people of several pre-Columbian cultural areas, as Gary Tomlinson has proposed in *The Singing of the New World*,[10] it seems increasingly likely that the system originated in Central Mexico and was introduced in Oaxaca as a result of the late 15th-century Aztec military expansion and cultural domination of the area.

3 Spanish strategies of musical conquest

3.1 Sixteenth-century military music

It is disappointing that there are no modern studies on Spanish military music of the 16th century. No scores of Spanish military music are preserved, and the only sources that can be brought to bear are iconographical. The best known images show the procession of a triumphant army entering a city, or the arrival of the king. Usually, small musical ensembles with three valve-less trumpets, one kettle drum, and a fife or a bagpipe may be depicted. The only score of which I am aware that can give us some musical clues to this is a piece by the 16th-century composer Mateo Flecha (1481 to 1553) called

9 Tavárez 2005.

10 Tomlinson 2007, 92.

La Guerra ("The War"), in which he evokes the sounds of a battle through the use of march-like drum rhythms and flute melodies.

Compared to Aztec practices, the Spaniards in Mexico seem to have employed sound expressly as a means to frighten and confuse, particularly the loud and explosive sounds produced by cannons and small firearms which were unknown to the indigenous people of the Americas before the arrival of the Conquistadores. In his *Historia verdadera*, Díaz mentions use of fife and drum to control the pace of marching, and possibly to relay orders. If kettle drums were also used during battles to transmit orders, this use is unclear. One passage in Sahagún's *Historia general* indicates that in one of the battles of Tenochtitlan the Spaniards preceded their attack by playing trumpets and beating drums.[11]

3.2 Higher education: teaching music and composition

Shortly after the Conquest, the Aztecs' education system was abolished and replaced by a church education based on convent schools. These schools followed the Franciscan model which, as a rule, included the teaching of music and instrument making along with doctrinal and grammatical instruction. This inclusion of music in the curriculum was based on the experience of other religious orders, which had already demonstrated that music was a very valuable medium for religious conversion. Like the *calmecac*, the former Aztec school for talented youths, the convent schools could be described as places of 'advanced studies'. Comparable processes took place further south, in the conquered kingdom of the Incas in Peru.

In 1524, only three years after the Conquest, some sons of the Aztec nobility, who would later receive the status of Spanish noblemen, entered the first school founded by the Franciscan friar Pedro de Gante in the city of Texcoco. Shortly afterwards, another school, the Colegio de San José de los Naturales, was founded in Mexico-Tlatelolco. First, a group of about a hundred ten- to twelve-year-old boys was selected from Tenochtitlan and the principle neighbouring cities in and around the Valley of Mexico. At its height in the 1530s, the Colegio de San José de los Naturales had between five hundred and six hundred pupils. All day they performed a procession from the Colegio to the Capilla de San Jose, which was situated atop the former Aztec sacred precinct near the Great Temple, already being demolished, to obtain building material for the new cathedral.

The type of musical training given at the convent schools was orientated towards enhancing the liturgy. Both plainsong and polyphony were taught, as well as the art of playing and of making various musical instruments. Friar Gerónimo de Mendieta (1525–1604) reported in his *Historia Eclesiastica Indiana* of 1596 that after only a few

11 For Sahagún's account see Anderson and Dibble 1950–1982, vol. XII, ch. 34.

years of education, Aztec pupils began to compose polyphonic carols, masses, and other works, which, when shown to accomplished Spanish singers, were taken to be by European experts and not possibly by Indians.[12] Thus, music became a prime aid in the task of conversion, just as it had a thousand or more years earlier in Europe.

The use of all kinds of musical instruments in church practice – which partly originated from the lack of organs during the first decades after the conquest – was supported primarily by the convent schools. Instruments mentioned are flutes, shawms, trumpets, lutes and bowed instruments. An account related by Friar Toribio de Benavente (1482–1568), better known as Motolonía, in his *Historia de los Indios* is interesting, because it indicates ensemble flute playing in church practice in order to imitate the organ.[13] In the beginning of the second half of the 16th century, the increasing number of indigenous musicians and increasing use of native instruments in church services finally became controversial and eventually anathema to the church, and restrictive rules were employed.

3.3 Idols behind the altars: the incorporation of pre-Columbian music and dance practices into Christian liturgies

Pedro de Gante (born Pieter van der Moere in 1480, and who died in 1572) was among the first friars to recognize the importance of music in the indigenous pre-Columbian societies and saw it as a potential aid in the work of conversion. In a letter to the Spanish king Philip II, dated 23rd June 1557, he wrote:

> We were here more than three years, as I told you, without ever being able to attract them. Instead they fled from us, and much more from the Spanish, like savages. But by the grace of Almighty God I began to perceive their mentality and to understand how they should be dealt with. Their whole worship had consisted in dancing and singing before their own gods. When the time came to make sacrifices for victory over their enemies or for the supplying of their daily wants, before killing the victims, they first must needs dance in front of the idol. Upon comprehending this and realizing that all their songs were composed to honour their gods, I composed a very elaborate one myself, but the subject-matter was God's law and our faith that Christ was born of the Holy and undefiled Virgin Mary. About two months before Christmas I also gave them some designs to paint on their dancing togs because they always danced and sung [*sic*] in costumes that bespoke happiness, sorrow, or victory.[14]

12 For Mendieta's text see Solano Perez-Lila 1973, IV, 14–15.

13 For Motolonía's remark see Lejarza 1970.

14 This translation is given in Stevenson 1968, 93.

As a result of these insights, which became widely acknowledged, the Spanish missionaries adopted de Gante's educational plan. Many prepared Christian texts in Nahuatl for musical performances composed in the native style. For a better understanding, crucial parts of the Bible were graphically expressed in the manner of pre-Columbian codices. One such manuscript which survives is a catechism by de Gante himself, dated around 1525. The introduction of Christian songs in the native style required some sort of research on the autochthonous music which still could be observed in public dances throughout the country. Specially designed for this purpose were large walled yards in front of churches, a prominent feature of early Colonial church architecture. These yards enabled church-centred community celebrations, in which dances with pre-Columbian-style costumes and Christian symbols were permitted. The church and its walled yard were frequently erected on top of the old sacred temple precincts, thereby establishing and emphasizing not only the spiritual but also a spatial continuity.

Throughout the 16th century, indigenous dances and music played on pre-Columbian and/or European musical instruments were still performed in non-religious festivities. In his *Historia de los Indios* Motolinía states that in 1530, during the foundation celebrations for the city of Puebla, large crowds of Indians entered the city dancing and singing with their flags, and playing little bells and drums.[15] After such festivities, the places of the dances were carefully cleaned, as they had been in pre-Columbian times when ritual cleaning of dance courts was part of the religious office.

Sources indicate that several friars, including Pedro de Gante and Diego Durán, collected native songs, but the collections have since been lost. Only two 16th-century compendia of Aztec songs, the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* have survived. During the 16th century and later, songs and dances in which pre-Columbian elements persisted, were then heavily suppressed and sometimes even forbidden. This was because such practices were considered too powerful an expression of pre-Columbian religious thought. Nevertheless, as an expression of cultural resistance, hidden from European eyes and ears and vigorously pursued by agents of the Spanish Inquisition, pre-Columbian music and dance practices were still widely performed in secret. They still survive among several indigenous groups in Mexico today.

3.4 Legacies

To help in the process of conversion, some friars also employed pre-Columbian musical instruments in the church service. One source indicates that Pedro de Gante played the Aztec hand-rattle, *ayacachtli*, while the use of the popular slit-drum (*teponatzli*) could never be entirely prohibited. Indeed, in some rural towns, specimens from Colonial and

15 Lejarza 1970.

Fig. 1 Ceramic whistle and rattle from Michoacan. Mexico. Early Colonial times.

even pre-Columbian times are still guarded and played today. Nevertheless, by a strange twist, the large tripod skin-drum (*huehuetl*) was soon replaced by the European lute, although the Aztecs literally called it by their own name *mecahuehuetl* ("string drum"). It is possible that the tradition of the *Danzantes*, a syncretistic religious group based in and around the Valley of Mexico, in which lute ensembles play a prominent role in processions and circle dances, can be traced back to transformations of this kind.

Legacies of the retention and absorption of pre-Columbian music and dance practices in Early Colonial times can also be found in extant musical instruments, revealing true amalgamations of pre-Columbian and European music cultures. Objects from Michoacán include a whistle with the head of a Spaniard and a clay rattle in the form of a bell, the latter probably used in 16th-century church services (Fig. 1). Worth mentioning as a parallel are Peruvian whistling vessels with a chamber in the form of a Spaniard, and other extant specimens with glazed surfaces, a decorative technique introduced by the Europeans.[16] It seems that such instruments were produced for at least some decades after the Conquest.

4 Conclusions

A comparison between these two music cultures, pre-Columbian American and Colonial Spanish, which were so vastly different in regard to their historical backgrounds, reveals many points of contrast but also some striking structural similarities. In both societies music served as a means of achieving cultural domination. Sound as a weapon, a means to frighten and to confuse, was noted primarily for the Aztecs, while the intimidating sound of the Spanish gunfire was more a result of the fact that such weapons

16 Donnan 1992; Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera 2010.

were unknown in pre-Columbian times. The Aztecs also incorporated foreign musical styles and even texts, which were probably considered the spoils of war along with other, more material booty; and yet, in the Aztec case, prior to the Spanish Conquest foreign music was only performed in the milieu of the court and it seems to me unlikely that it was transmitted by them to other levels of society. Except for the possible adoption of an Aztec syllabic notation of drumming patterns among the Zapotecs, there is no evidence that the Aztecs 'exported' musical styles or knowledge. The fact that the same basic instrumentarium was shared among all pre-Columbian cultures adds additional difficulty to the study of such relations, at least through the material record.

On the other hand, we know that the Spanish friars introduced European music traditions and musical instruments. And as a means for better conversion they also combined pre-Columbian musical aesthetics of musical structure (rhythms, melody) and sound (instruments) with Christian textual content (song, some of it still sung in native languages). Beyond the short period of such cultural amalgamations in Early Colonial times, however, there was no adoption of any indigenous foreign musical songs or structures. Instead, music education became an important part of the curriculum of the convent schools, and educated Aztecs soon learned how to compose, play, and sing in European styles.

The first phase of musical encounter and amalgamation which I have described here came to its end during the second half of the 16th century. Both cultures were capable of borrowing elements from each other's repertoire, but because their agenda were very different they did so in different ways and to different degrees. For the Aztecs, music was a mechanism for cultural domination, initially their domination of other, non-Aztec peoples. In a sense this was true also for the Spanish friars, since for them it would prove a means to achieve cultural pre-eminence. Through their clever use and manipulation of music a lasting spiritual conquest would be achieved, and integration of native elements would only help to achieve this goal faster.

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1 Peter Crossley-Holland collection. Photo: Adje Both.

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