

Benedicto Sáenz' *Libera Me* and the Silence of Guatemalan Nineteenth-Century Choral Music

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Since musicologist Robert Stevenson began unearthing sacred music from Latin America in the 1960s, the study of this subject has flourished. Researchers have produced catalogues of manuscript and published scores, compiled musical anthologies, traced stylistic lineages and chronicled the development of specific genres, written critical and performance editions, historicized music within social and political contexts in monographs, and produced performances and sound recordings.¹ These developments in musicological scholarship and musical practice face particular challenges when compared to the study of European music, including making a case for the historical significance of the American repertoires.² At times, researchers and performers have relied implicitly or explicitly on notions of exoticism and nationalism to justify the study this music. Ironically such approaches, while advancing research in some regards, also marginalize it. Consequently, contemporary musicologists who pursue more nuanced approaches find themselves in the position of responding to nationalist and exoticist trends, all while finding ways to communicate the historical significance of their work. As a result of their efforts on several fronts, the field of musicology has made significant progress in the study of colonial music in the New World.

But while Latin Americanist musicologists continue to boldly challenge historiographical biases and to investigate colonial repertoires from a culturally relativistic perspective, few have extended such efforts into the nineteenth century. Certainly, nineteenth-century choral music from the region appears on a few reference surveys, but compared to studies of European or colonial American repertoire, the choral music of the nineteenth century seems neglected. Central American music constitutes an extreme example of this historiographical lacuna. Consider for example the recent anthology of essays *Nineteenth Century Choral Music* edited by

¹ E. g. Lucero Enríquez, Drew Edward Davies, and Analía Cheriñavsky, eds., *Catálogo de obras de música del Archivo del Cabildo Catedral Metropolitano de México* (México, D.F: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2014), Suzanne Spicer Tiemstra, *The Choral Music of Latin America: A Guide to Compositions and Research* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), Drew Edward Davies, “The Italianized Frontier: Music at Durango Cathedral, Español Culture, and the Aesthetics of Devotion in Eighteenth-Century New Spain” (Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 2006), Dianne Marie Lehmann Goldman, “The Matins Responsory at Mexico City Cathedral, 1575-1815” (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 2014), Pedro Bermúdez, *Missa De Bomba a 4: Guatemala, Siglo XVI*, ed. Omar Morales et al. (Guatemala: s.n, 2001), Aurelio Tello, Omar Morales Abril, and Bárbara Pérez Ruíz, eds., *Humor, pericia y devoción: villancicos en la Nueva España, Ritual sonoro catedralicio: Variation: Ritual sonoro catedralicio*, (México, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), 2013), Jesús A. Ramos-Kittrell, *Playing in the Cathedral: Music, Race, and Status in NewSpain* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), Ricardo Bernardes (conductor) and Américantiga Coro e Orquestra de Câmara, *Brasil XVIII-XIX. Vol. 1. Música em São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais em fins do século XVIII*. ([Brazil]: [publisher not identified], 2009).

² I use the word “American” in the broad sense of the word, meaning “from the Americas,” rather than referring only to the United States of America.

Donna M. Di Grazia.³ In it, the Central American repertoire occupies three short paragraphs, while individual European composers such as Berlioz and Mendelssohn occupy several chapters. Even so, the three paragraphs represent an improvement over the comparable entry in Nick Strimple's book *Choral Music in the Nineteenth Century*, where the two paragraphs on Central America—mentioning one Costa Rican and two Guatemalan composers—fit into an eight-line footnote here.⁴ I do not fault the respective authors of these entries for such minimal coverage. Quite the contrary, despite limited sources Walter Clark and Nick Strimple made an effort to include Central America in their surveys of the choral music from the region. As Walter Clark explains, historical events such as the Napoleonic wars in Europe and independence movements in the New World caused a great loss of musical sources.⁵

Without invalidating this verifiable explanation, in this paper I peer beyond it to discern other challenges that contribute to the slow scholarly engagement with nineteenth century repertoires from Latin America, and Central America specifically. I approach the problem through the lens of postcolonial theories, which posit that historical silences manifest power dynamics inherent in the construction of historical narratives. Accordingly, the neglect of scholarship and performance of 19th-century choral music from the Americas, surpasses archival lacunae; it reflects the ideological trends in the nineteenth century that undermined the value of such music, and represents the present-day orientation of musical research. To probe these issues, I analyze the unpublished manuscript *Libera Me*, a funerary responsory for choir and orchestra by Guatemalan composer Benedicto Sáenz. Relating the stylistic elements of the *Libera Me* to sociopolitical changes in Guatemala (independence and liberalism), changing notions of music as art, and postcolonial cultural critiques, I argue that although Guatemalan 19th-century sacred music does not fit the exoticist conceptions of the past or nationalist ideologies of the 20th century, it still constitutes a musical legacy that can enrich our understanding of the trajectories and transformations of European repertoires and their related genres in the Americas.

Postcolonialism and Historical Silences

In the 1980s English-speaking critical theory experienced the transformative convergence of three major currents that had been accruing importance in Europe and the so-called Third World for some time. I will call these currents “theoretical posts”: post-structuralism, post-modernism, and postcolonialism. The timing when postcolonialism made a splash in the English-speaking academy, far from coincidental, corresponded with the experiences of many British colonies achieving independence in the middle and late twentieth century, and the coming of age of their intellectual figures who mastered the language of the colonial academy (English), all while maintaining an acute awareness of colonial legacies in their homelands. Thus, we find

³ Donna Marie Di Grazia, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Choral Music*, Routledge Studies in Musical Genres (New York ; London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ Nick Strimple, *Choral Music in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Amadeus, 2008). The entry on Central America (pages 219-220) consist of the following: “In Costa Rica, Alejandro Monestel Zamora (1865-?) was the first composer to incorporate folk elements into his music. He founded the Escuela Música de Santa Cecilia in 1894 and served as chapel master at San José Cathedral from 1884 to 1902, before he moved to the United States. Works composed in Costa Rica include a Mass and a Requiem, both for mixed chorus, and five cantatas on the life of Jesus, for mixed chorus and orchestra. [¶] In Guatemala, Vicente Sáenz (1756-1841) and Benedicto Sáenz (1815-1857) were active as composers of liturgical music in the Eurocentric classical style.”

⁵ Walter Aaron Clark, “The Philippines, Latin America, and Spain,” in *Nineteenth-Century Choral Music*, ed. Donna M. Di Grazia (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 449–50.

many scholars from India (Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha), the British-controlled Palestine (Edward Said), and Africa and its diaspora (Paul Gilroy, Kofi Agawu) contributing to emergence of “the postcolonial moment.”

While acknowledging the significant interventions of intellectuals from the former British colonies in the deconstruction of long-held assumptions about European and non-European cultures, Australian cultural critic Bill Aschroft reminds us that Latin America was “modernity’s first-born” through its early and sustained colonization.⁶ Consequently, the engagement of Latin American intellectuals with postcolonial issues far preceded the postcolonial moment of the 1980s.⁷ Drawing from the postcolonial moment, however, historians, cultural scholars, philosophers, and other thinkers from the region—including Walter Mignolo (Argentina), Aníbal Quijano (Peru), Santiago Castro-Gómez (Colombia), Michel Rolf Trouillot (Haiti) and many others—have since offered incisive postcolonial critiques based on the long historical trajectory of colonialism in Latin America. Their intimate knowledge of the region, their meticulous attention to historical narratives and corresponding epistemological biases, and their sensitivity to the power dynamics inherent to the creation and dissemination of cultural practices can help transcend the issue of archival lacunae as the *prima facie* explanation for the neglect of historical repertoires in Latin America.

The limitations of this presentation’s format do not allow me to apply many pertinent insights from Latin American postcolonial theorists to the study Central American choral music. In this paper I therefore focus on a low-hanging fruit: the idea of “silencing the past” advanced by Michel Rolf Trouillot to critique the historiography on the Haitian revolution, the Holocaust, and the attributions of meaning to Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the Americas.⁸ Trouillot explained that the many silences that comprise historical narratives

enter the process of historical production at four moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of the *source*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of the *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).⁹

In this sense, Trouillot recognizes that the creation of history is never really about the past, but the present. Adding to his observation, I propose using the term “present” in its plural form: the presents of the source creation, of archival assembly, of archival research, and of historiographical reflection. Viewing history as the multifaceted process where all these presents and their silencing moments interact with one another—as opposed to viewing history as a product, or even as a linear process where each of these presents correspond to a single moment along a chronological axis—allows us to transcend the source, the archive, and the professional historian (or musicologist) as the only authoritative constructors of historical narratives. In the case of Central American choral music, what other agents may have played or play a role today

⁶ Bill Aschroft, “Modernity’s First-Born: Latin America and Post-Colonial Transformation,” in *El Debate De La Postcolonialidad En Latinoamérica: Una Postmodernidad Periférica O Cambio De Paradigma En El Pensamiento Latinoamericano*, eds. Alfonso de Toro and Fernando de Toro, (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1999).

⁷ Alfonso de Toro and Fernando de Toro, eds., *El Debate De La Postcolonialidad En Latinoamérica: Una Postmodernidad Periférica O Cambio De Paradigma En El Pensamiento Latinoamericano* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1999).

⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26. Original emphasis.

in silencing the past? What are some silencing presents, and how may they be addressed? Saenz's *Libera Me* offers a few clues.

Silences and the *Libera Me* manuscript

I first encountered the *Libera Me* manuscript at the Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno Carlos Mérida, in Guatemala City in 2009. The museum does not typically curate music. They specialize in painting, sculpture, to some extent photography. I would not have thought to look for music there had local musicologist Igor de Gandarias not referred me to this unlikely musical repository. The museum staff, under the direction of architect José Mario Maza Ponce cordially granted me access to the musical scores, catalogued under *números de registro* (archival call numbers). Each item had a reference sheet (*ficha de registro*) containing basic information: name of author/composer (if known), title of the piece, call number, and other such data. Beyond cataloguing their holdings alphabetically by the composer's last name, the museum staff did not know how to handle these sources. One day, as I was photographing the music, taking notes, and correcting errors in reference sheets, a curator approached me and asked: "Are these scores valuable, you think?" "Absolutely!" I answered. Then I asked the question that intrigued me, which relates to Trouillot's silences of fact assembly: "How did you get these scores into your collection anyway?"

Long story. This museum belonged to a larger governmental fine arts institution a long time ago, which curated music, visual arts, and other things. When that institution split into smaller more specialized units, this museum was created as one of them. At that moment we inherited some of their holdings, mostly the art, but also these music scores. But no one here has any musical training. Maestro Igor de Gandarias and yourself are the only ones to consult the scores and know what to make of them.¹⁰

The curator thus illustrated a historical silence introduced in the moments of archival creation: the lack of musical expertise to curate musical sources into repositories where they can be properly catalogued and accessed.

Although the issue of lack of musical expertise in Latin America in relation to the colonial legacy goes deeper than I can explore in this paper, I mention it because it also extends to the silences in fact creation (or making of the sources). For instance, the *Libera Me*, presents an authorship problem that can best addressed through more extensive cataloguing and correlation of sources, as well as musical analysis and biographical information on local composers. Apart from the work of Igor de Gandarias, these aspects of musicological research have been largely neglected.

As de Gandarias notes, the Sáenz family produced several musicians and composers in Guatemala, including two sharing the name Benedicto Sáenz: the father (1781-1831), and the son (1807-1857). In the first volume of his dictionary on Guatemalan music, de Gandarias attributes the responsory in question to the Sáenz junior.¹¹ Given its characteristic galant style (more on that later) and no other published sources besides de Gandarias' dictionary referencing this composition, it may not be unreasonable to attribute the *Libera Me* to Benedicto Sáenz

¹⁰ Personal communication, 2009.

¹¹ Igor de Gandarias, *Diccionario de la música en Guatemala: Música popular y música popular tradicional* (II fase) (Guatemala City: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Dirección General de Investigación, Programa Universitario de Investigación (DIGI), Centro de Estudios Folklóricos (CEFOL), 2010), 137.

senior and thus place the work earlier in the nineteenth century. But could we also face a situation in nineteenth-century Guatemala similar to those described in eighteenth-century Lima and Mexico City: the coexistence of well-established styles that by then had become “traditional” with pieces featuring newer compositional trends? In other words, could Sáenz junior deliberately have chosen to write music in an older style, a practice not unheard of when it comes to sacred music? Greater knowledge of the output of Benedicto Sáenz senior and junior, and comparisons to larger trends in the composition of liturgical music through the nineteenth century could help answer these questions.

Given the current state of research on nineteenth-century Guatemalan music, the task of ascertaining stylistic trends in church music remains challenging, once again, for reasons beyond archival sources. For instance, we need to account for the changing roles of the Roman Catholic Church in nineteenth-century Central America. Since the seventeenth century, the region had enjoyed administrative autonomy from the viceroyalty of New Spain as a captaincy general. When ideas of revolution and independence spread over the continent in the early nineteenth century, Central Americans were divided. Torn between desires for independence (as manifested by local uprisings), the conservative longing for the “stability” of the established colonial order, and facing the uncertainty of Spain’s sovereignty, civic authorities could not agree on a course of action, even as Mexico launched its war of independence in 1810. As Central American independence became imminent, like elsewhere in Latin America, local ambivalence found expression in two emerging political factions. Conservatives, despite seeing themselves as independent from Spain, valued colonial governing style and institutions, especially the Church. Liberals, on the other hands, looked beyond Spain for cultural and political models. The ideals of the French Revolution and classical liberalism emphasizing separation of Church and State appealed to them.

The conflicts between these factions impacted the Church’s resources and influences in Central America over course of the nineteenth century. Liberals rose to power after independence in 1821, and severely curtailed Church resources, thus adding silencing moments to the history of sacred Central American choral music. When conservatives gained control in 1844, the Central American federation definitively disintegrated and Catholicism regained influence in the newly founded country (and former province) of Guatemala. Guatemala would not see another liberal government until the revolution of 1871. After this Liberal Revolution, the Church again lost resources and influence; its role, though significant to this day, would remain relatively diminished.

Silences by Emerging Eurocentric Aesthetics

Looking beyond Napoleonic wars, independence movements, and local politics as silencing agents, we must also look at the changing trends in aesthetic philosophy that advanced throughout the nineteenth century that undermine pieces such as the *Libera Me* responsory. We don’t know enough about the history of this composition to determine the performance context. It may have been composed for the death of a prominent individual, or perhaps more likely, for the observances of All Soul’s Day (November 2) in which all three nocturnes of the Matins of the Dead are traditionally performed. The piece requires a large instrumentation for a late eighteenth-century/early nineteenth century galant work: 4-part choir, violins 1 and 2, violas, cellos/basses, 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons and, 2 trumpets.

The *Libera Me* features several elements of the late galant style. The first section “Libera me” briefly uses a familiar opening, common to opera overtures and first movements of

symphonies. Opening chords are performed by the entire instrumental ensemble in homorhythm, even with a dotted rhythm (which appears on beat 2). The choir then enters imitating this gesture twice, the second time transposed, establishing the symmetry of paired phrases expected in galant compositions. As the piece moves forward, the vocal lines begin to show relative independence from each other in austere counterpoint. The figurations in the strings also evoke the galant style. In the “Libera me” section, the first violins accompany the word *Domine* articulating harmonic tones in measured tremolos (16th notes), and a few measures later the words *de morte aeterna* with ostinatos playing harmonic tones with passing and neighbor tones in between them. As Alejandro Vera and others have noted, Haydn significantly influenced the music of the New World. Many of his compositions circulated and were copied from Mexico to South America. We might speculate that his style influenced the Guatemalan music in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, the *Libera Me* differs from Haydn’s (and Mozart’s) style in its contrapuntal austerity. Occasionally staggered entrances occur, as do brief alternations between parts in a call-response fashion. In the middle of the section *tremens factus sunt ego*, the texture thins out so dramatically that I wondered if I had missed some measures in my transcription (I had not). For the most part, Sáenz favors homorhythm and simplicity in the vocal parts.

Despite its large instrumentation suggesting an elaborate performance setting, the structure of the piece suggests another reason why it remains overlooked. Each section is short.¹² Additionally, the piece shows markings indicating repetitions and interruptions that prevent a linear reading; instead they indicate the liturgical order that the composition follows. The responsory is a complex liturgical form within the Office of the Matins that involves alternation of versicles sung by a cantor and responses by a choir. The short sections and repetition schemes (missing parts that may have been chanted) may prove an unsatisfying musical experience on the concert stage, the context in which we listen to this type of music today.

As sacred music in the nineteenth century entered the concert cannon, functionally liturgical pieces receded in the face of compositions written for less practical uses. Consider that Beethoven, ever the trend setter, premiered his *Missa Solemnis* in a public concert; the work was too long and too complex to function liturgically. By the time Brahms wrote his requiem, he did not even bother with liturgical texts at all. Whether explicitly or not, nineteenth-century composers followed the trend that privileged the Kantian aesthetic of “purposiveness without purpose,” by which music designed liturgically took second place to music designed for a contemplative artistic, though still spiritual, experience. As European “high culture” transferred spiritual spaces from the sanctuary to the concert hall, liturgical music became too utilitarian, too married to a particular creed or doctrine to transcend as autonomous “art.” In this respect, the neglect of Central American sacred music reflects a Eurocentric nineteenth-century view of art which continues into the present day as a silencing agent of past repertoires.

Conclusion

In summary, Clark correctly observed that Napoleonic wars in Europe and independence movements in Latin America contributed to the scarcity of musical sources from this period, but we should also observe that Napoleonic wars ended in 1815, and in the case of Central America, no independence war took place. Therefore, we should look for other reasons why research on nineteenth century sacred music has not advanced to the degree that research from other periods has. The *Libera Me* suggests possible reasons. The music is too galant to fit exoticist conceptions

¹² Each section ranges from 16 to 24 measures in length.

of the colonial past; but when compared to similar European traditions, it fails to meet aesthetic criteria defining nineteenth-century “art music” due to its liturgical design. Its ritual nature also posed problems for its preservation in Guatemala as part of a canonic repertoire. The piece demands relatively large performance forces, and yet under liberal regimes, the Church did not have enough resources to spend on musical performances of historical repertoires or for commissioning new compositions. Besides local conditions, changes in aesthetic priorities developing in the course of the nineteenth century also devalued the production and preservation of Guatemalan sacred music.

Postcolonial theories from Latin America invite us to understand that silences in historiography surpass lack of sources, and allow us to view these collection of circumstances, not as a series of unfortunate events, but as silences introduced at various moments in the construction of historical narratives by agents manifesting power dynamics entangled in colonial legacies. The scarcity of musicological expertise in Guatemala prevents us from devising better ways to curate, preserve, and access the few sources presently available, and to discover new ones. Additionally, the larger aesthetic trends and research priorities that elevate the exotic or distinctly “national” music in Latin America also allow these repertoires to be overlooked. Since the present musicological neglect occurs from the confluence of many factors—local and foreign, present and past—we must keep in mind that the internal colonialism carried out by local *Criollo* elites, including Guatemalan conservative and liberal factions, have also contributed to this oversight. Despite its current liturgical or artistic value in the views (or blind posts of) twenty-first-century musicologists, Sáenz's *Libera Me* most certainly discloses the silence of Guatemalan nineteenth century choral music, enriching our understanding of music and cultural history in the region.

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