



## Review

Cesar D. Favila. *Immaculate Sounds: The Musical Lives of Nuns in New Spain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

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Music in the Spanish and Latin American convents have increasingly received attention in the last four decades. In the Spanish territory, to the pioneering work by Alfonso de Vicente, Collen Baade, and the author of these lines, has been recently added Ascensión Mazuela-Anguita's monograph on the music in convent life in the city of Barcelona (Routledge, 2023).

Likewise, Cesar Favila's *Immaculate sounds* is the first monograph on the musical lives of nuns in New Spain, and an indispensable reading for anyone interested in understanding the cultural system of Latin American cloistered convents. It builds on previous research in this area by cultural historians such as Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto, making it a valuable addition to the innovating *Currents in Latin American and Iberian Music* series established by the esteemed Hispanist Walter Aaron Clark.

Considering the large number of convents and female monasteries in the Spanish territories during the early modern period, it might seem surprising that this monograph is being published nearly three decades after the release of the two foundational volumes on music making in Italian convents, *Celestial Sirens* by Robert Kendrick (Clarendon Press, 1996) and Craig Monson's *Disembodied voices* (University of California Press, 1995). However, as Favila explains in his introduction, the difficulty in accessing the archives, along with the scarcity of preserved music, has made the task a challenging and lengthy one.

Favila's book offers a comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of being a cloistered nun in Early Modern New Spain, focusing on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and nun's musical practices, specifically singing. In this context, the author emphasizes the idea of cloistered nuns as co-redeemers, interceding for salvation through their singing voices. To support this argument, Favila combines musical fragments, religious and devotional literature, rulebooks of religious orders, ceremonial texts, and visual arts. Some excerpts of these sources are reproduced in the appendices.

The author introduces the book by describing a visit to the founding convent of the Conceptionists in Toledo, Spain, the birthplace of the Order of the Immaculate Conception. The protocol for visitors is similar in most enclosed Catholic convents: visitors are received in the "locutorio" (parlor), separated from the nuns by a grill or grate. The conversation begins with the opening salute formula "Ave María purísima" (Hail purest Mary) and the response "sin pecado concebida" (conceived without sin). Favila underlines the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as a central element in his narrative. According to this doctrine, Mary was conceived without original sin and is considered a major figure in interceding for salvation. The doctrine of the Immaculate

Conception has been a subject of important debate among theologians since the Middle Ages. It was accepted by the Council of Trent and proclaimed a dogma of the Church by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854. In 1613, Sevilla became a battleground between supporters of the Maculist and Immaculist factions. Immaculism became a matter of state and a symbol for the Spanish Monarchy of the Austrias in the subsequent years, as cities like Écija, Jerez de la Frontera, and Granada pledged their support to the concepcionist cause. The hymn “Todo el mundo en general” became the anthem of the Immaculists and was included as a series of organ variations by Francisco Correa de Arauxo in his *Facultad Orgánica* (1626).

Favila organizes the book in a non-linear, chronological manner, connecting the histories of nuns from diverse times while drawing from Stefan Tanaka’s philosophy of history. In this vein, the text examines the musical practices of Early modern nuns in New Spain convents establishing connections with liturgical cycles, mysticism, doctrinal constructs, and the transformative role of music in these experiences. The book is divided into two parts, *Acousmatic Discipline* (Chapters 1-3) and *Unity* (Chapters 4-5). Chapter titles are presented as questions on the identity of individual nuns, serving as a metaphor to unveil these women from their historical obscurity. In each chapter, a case study is presented. These include the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception explored through a case at the Convent of la Encarnación; a discussion on music making in the main space of the convent, that is the church choir and the associated liturgy; an examination of the engagement process for nun-musicians including dowry exemptions, rules, and racial restrictions; the music related to the sacrament of Eucharist along with associated devotional literature; and finally, female mysticism based on nuns’ biographies and monastic rules.

Convents in New Spain mainly followed the rules and daily practices of their founding houses on the Spanish peninsula but adapted to the American circumstances. As an example, Favila examines the rhetoric found in convent portraiture, with a specific focus on the “Monjas coronadas” (Crowned Nuns) topic. These portraits were commissioned by the nun’s family to commemorate the day nuns took their professional vows, which was and still is nowadays, a major event in convent life. A description of the profession ceremony and the music accompanying to it is examined through the few extant choir books and notated ceremonials issued from convents in Mexico City, Puebla and Oaxaca. An analysis of the modes used in those hymns is provided by the author based on Pablo Nassarre’s theory of modal affective associations in his treatise *Escuela Música* (1724). To the colorful and earthly Crowned Nuns portraits, Favila opposes the ascetic depictions of Crucified Nuns to assert the order’s austere lifestyle and mystical union with Christ.

*Immaculate Sounds* offers a new approach to the significance of devotional music performance by creating synergy between music, literature and visual arts in the context of New Spanish convents. The book is generously illustrated with pictures, musical examples, and tables that guide the reader through a unique journey inside the resonant cloisters of New Spain.

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