



PLAYING in the CATHEDRAL



MUSIC, RACE, and STATUS in NEW SPAIN



Jesús A. Ramos-Kittrell

Playing in the Cathedral

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*To the memory of María Elena Martínez and Robert Murrell Stevenson.
This book rests on their shoulders.*

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Playing in the Cathedral

Introduction

With the permission of your lordship and of the entire music chapel, as its most senior member, I would like to address two points:

The first one is that the administrator of the chapel should not contract more than two events [for the chapel to perform in them], which can be covered without a problem. However, wishing to contract three or four, the administrator calls musicians from outside [to fill in] who are not our equals. They might be very good men, but not *decent* to so many white men and cleric gentlemen in the chapel (see appendix 1.1).¹

Ignacio Pedroza, trumpet player, had joined the music chapel of the cathedral of Mexico in 1736 and by the time he wrote this letter he had been affiliated with the cathedral for close to thirty-two years.² The cathedral was one of the most important institutions in New Spain, and arguably the most important church in Spanish America. Its *cabildo* (chapter) made an effort to employ the most skilled and versatile musicians in the music chapel, as playing at this church was prestigious for a musician's social position. In the context of the racial *casta* (or caste) system that organized social and political life in the New World, membership within Spanish institutions certainly gave people advantages. One could claim benefits over other non-affiliated individuals dedicated to the same activity (especially if they were of a different race), which in itself was a reflection of one's status. Pedroza's letter is in good measure influenced by this scenario where *race* was central to status claims. The allusion to race seems to be straightforward with the mention of "white men." However, Pedroza's focus on "decency" (in relation to the skin color of individuals and their institutional—clerical—professions) suggests that status relied on a more nuanced view of a person's public profile, and that perceptions of race might have related to this complex social construction as well.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, "decency" was not necessarily defined by attitudes or behaviors (i.e., being a good person of virtuous customs). While personal conduct was important to an extent, the meaning of the term was far removed from the ways in which we might use it today. In eighteenth-century Mexico

City “decency” was an attribute of *gente decente* (decent people), a group characterized by the Spanish lineage and social privileges of its members. Proof of having Spanish lineage was required to join Spanish institutions (e.g., the military, the royal administration, and of course, the church) in order to pursue careers. Years of institutional service enabled individuals to develop public profiles in relation to a series of attributes that reflected their *calidad* (literally translated as “social quality”): an overall impression of their social reputation, byproduct of their long-standing time of institutional service. *Calidad*, therefore, was defined by elements such as place of employment, time of service, rank, acquired knowledge, and most important, the benefits and privileges that a person claimed as a result. Due to their prominent social standing, and the prerogatives to which they were entitled, nobles comprised the ideal of *calidad* in New Spain. Not all Spaniards had the economic and political resources of nobles, however, which is why Spanish institutions became avenues to procure the social luster that careers and education could afford. For this reason, one could say that, more than skin color, it was the perception of *calidad* that informed views of “Spanishness” and what enabled individuals to define their social place.

As one might expect, “decency” encompassed a wide realm of social action where people of different *calidades* claimed this condition. The *calidad* of nobles certainly distanced them from “decent people,” although that does not mean that, as a social category, “nobility” was any less politicized. While there were titled nobles in New Spain, the crown also granted the privilege of noble treatment (that is, enjoying the benefit of noble prerogatives) to individuals in specific lines of service. To aspire to such distinction, individuals had to prove their merit by the type of service that they provided to the crown, their length of service, their institutional affiliation, and their social connections. Just as with “decency,” this aggregate of qualifications (i.e., *calidad*) made nobility a highly contested condition that defied strict definition. Employment in a Spanish institution was certainly an important factor, although a lot depended on the type of institution where a person worked, his knowledge and education, and his rank. Although there were indeed social differences in the designation of “decency” and “nobility,” both labels denoted dense fields of social contestation and relied on different attributes for an individual to claim a place in them. Status and identity were part of a single social *discourse* that individuals constructed, the reason why the word *discourse* appears extensively throughout this book. The Oxford English Dictionary defines discourse as a body of statements, analyses, and opinions relating to a particular domain of social activity, characterized by recurring themes, concepts or values. Moreover, discourse can also be a set of shared beliefs implied or expressed in such domain of social activity.³ In so far as it is related to narratives of status, discourse alludes, therefore, to personal modes of organizing knowledge, ideas, and experience in a specific historical

context. In this sense, one can say that in New Spain status was a fluid and highly discursive concept because it was based on subjective renderings of *calidad* that people claimed to secure a social place. Ultimately, it was the desire for privilege that informed the articulation of *calidad* among individuals, and that prompted them to envision ways of engaging with a social perception of what it meant to be “Spanish.”

Thus, this book explores how musicians at the cathedral of Mexico claimed social status and privilege during the eighteenth century. In the tensions that brewed within the racial caste (*casta*) system of the time, low- and middle-class *criollos* (i.e., individuals of Spanish descent born locally) struggled to define their social position. This was not only because they ranked below Iberians but also because people of mixed race increasingly competed for the benefits of Spaniards. Amid these tensions, *criollos* claimed “decency” or “nobility” as attributes that, in the Spanish imagination, distinguished people with academic education, institutional memberships, and careers, among other things. Race was inextricable from these two imaginaries and many people in the low and middle classes strived to prove being Spanish so that they could have access to institutions, and thus, to opportunities for social mobility. Music—as an activity—was a key strategy for participating in this process, and affiliation with the cathedral was an important asset. While choir chaplains aspired to noble status, people in the music chapel (even non-Spaniards) used their membership with this institution to invoke “decency” as an attribute of their public images. Above all, musicians considered themselves to be *hombres decentes* (decent men), members of a Spanish body surrogate to the cathedral clergy, which was made up of individuals of proven Spanish lineage. In light of the social and political ferment that existed in eighteenth-century Mexico City, “decency” was an attribute that, just like nobility, enabled musicians to claim merit and privilege primarily based on race. This study addresses these cases by exploring how cathedral musicians constructed racialized perceptions of their status, the importance that institutional affiliation had in such constructions, and how music served as a strategy to articulate this phenomenon.

I first encountered cases related to decency and nobility in cathedral records while doing archival research on a different topic for my doctoral dissertation in 2004. Since then I have grown intrigued about how these labels intersected with music practices and how these specific cases connect with scholarly narratives of social status in relation to race. Considering that the structure of colonial society hinged on the administration of institutions by a Spanish political class, it is not surprising that the relationship between race and status has been studied through the lives of socially notable Spaniards, where decency and nobility surface as elite traits. Nevertheless, studies in history and cultural anthropology point out that race alone was not a marker of elite status, and that an aggregate of

elements (e.g., personal connections, accomplishments, and institutional affiliation, among others) largely informed perceptions of an individual's social place (Kicza 1983, Cope 1994, Fisher and O'Hara 2009). These authors have shown that this was the case among wealthy people who wished to enter and remain in the circle of notable Spaniards in New Spain. Yet studies showing how people in the low and middle classes engaged with this process are in the minority. These types of analyses are important to understand how processes of status construction worked for these individuals. On a more ontological level, these studies can illustrate how those who were not Spanish (yet worked in Spanish institutions) benefited from these racialized claims relying on activities (e.g., music) steeped in processes of "Spanish" identity construction.

Due to their discursivity, decency and nobility are elusive social categories: the phenomenon of status construction remains one of the most cumbersome terrains of inquiry in New Spanish history. Aware of this challenge, the present study frames the cases related to decency and nobility of cathedral musicians within a larger spectrum of status claims in these two categories prevalent in eighteenth-century Mexico City. As a consequence, this framework decenters the position of these labels from the activity of Spaniards in the upper classes and thus questions any attempt to overgeneralize the Spanish race-status relationship. More important, the book positions music as a central element in the construction of social profiles, lifelong projects of professional development through which individuals wrought their personal desires and carved a social niche.

The role that music played in these efforts carried some aesthetic overtones. This is why contrapuntal music in the so-called *stilo antico* (the style of composers such as Francisco Guerrero, Tomás Luis de Victoria, and Alonso Lobo, for example) was important in cathedral music education for much of the eighteenth century. The acquisition of the theoretical underpinnings in this music enabled individuals to advance in a chain of ministries devoted to music and ritual. It was after years of service that individuals developed careers as cathedral ministers, which enabled them to claim different status discourses depending on their credentials (either as members of the music chapel or as chaplains). It should not be surprising, then, that music in this style possessed institutional and social value, and that the incursion of musicians proficient in new music trends (the *estilo moderno*, as it was called) initially created political frictions. Although these tensions have been recognized in musicological studies (Dietz 2000, Davies 2006), little has been done to shed light on their ideological and political underpinnings. For the most part, historical musicologists have addressed these reactions as anachronisms, older biased Spanish views out of tune with the aesthetic sensibility and musical taste of modernity. These assessments have overlooked these reactions and their social valence in favor of judgments of musical value. It is

possible that for this reason Spanish music culture of the eighteenth century has been approached in terms of the stylistic changes that influenced music practices in this period (Carreras 1998, Davies 2011).

There can be little doubt that the *estilo moderno* was one of the most important influences on approaches to music education, composition, and performance during the *Siglo de la Luces* (century of Enlightenment). To focus only on these changes, however, ignores aesthetic elements that, inherited from the time of Habsburg rule, also transpired in music practices until the middle of the century and that deeply shaped music culture. Musicianship (i.e., what it meant to “know” music) was one of such elements, and the rhetoric of traditional Spanish music theory treatises informed such a notion. This book shows that this theoretical grammar buttressed an understanding of musical knowledge similar to academic knowledge, which made cathedral musicians “erudite” in their profession, members of an important Spanish institution who defined their social place through these attributes. The disruption of this paradigm with the incursion of modern music, therefore, urges us to consider the eighteenth century in more complex terms: as a period of tension and negotiation, when cathedral musicians had to adapt to social and aesthetic transformations in order to retain their social position.

The fact that musicians could use their relationship with Spanish institutions to seek benefits has moved some scholars to look more closely at the Spanish race-power relationship. Quite recently, a few musicologists have sought not only to map the diverse social positionings that existed among musicians of different races and were marginalized in former studies of colonial music culture (Baker and Knighton 2011). They have also addressed the ways in which non-Spanish individuals engaged with a Spanish system of social and political order as a means of resistance (Irving 2010). These studies do not necessarily challenge the idea of Spanish hegemony as much as they highlight the ways in which individuals of different races interacted with it. The efforts of these scholars resonate with current views in social history, which stress the need to expand our understanding of how people related to the Spanish race-power ideology (Martínez 2012). Such interest becomes more pertinent if we consider the possibility that some individuals, who in the present are not perceived as Spaniards, might have considered themselves Spanish in the eighteenth century. For example, some people today refer to Manuel Sumaya (chapelmaster at the cathedral of Mexico from 1715 to 1738) as a Mestizo, even when he regarded himself as a Spaniard. Ignacio Jerusalem (chapelmaster from 1750 until 1769) is another interesting case: he was an Italian, but in all probability he wanted his children to be considered Spanish. That is possibly why he intended for his son, Salvador, to join the cathedral Colegio de Infantes (for which being Spaniard was required), and why his daughter, María Michaela, joined the Convent of Capuchin nuns.

Historian María Elena Martínez has raised important questions that relate to these cases: did the possibility that people could “pass” as Spaniards generate desires and political loyalties that were crucial to the maintenance of the hierarchical racial order? If so, how did the construction of “Spanishness” transpire in intimate domains of social life and experience for these people?

This book departs from these queries in order to assess “Spanishness” in relation to the activity of cathedral musicians. Although this might seem at first a case study about Spanish individuals (and therefore, not interested in the lives and doings of musicians of other races) its intentions are deeper. Considering that the operation of Spanish hegemony was connected to a hierarchical racial system, the study traces the lives of musicians who relied on Spanish perceptions of status to claim merit and privilege. The analysis might seem straightforward in the case of people who proved having Spanish blood, but the narrative becomes more politicized in the case of non-Spaniards; members of the music chapel (some of whom were either Italian or French) are a good example of this. They claimed status not as Spaniards but as “decent men” based on their membership in a Spanish institution, as well as their knowledge of music and their careers in the church. The possibility that these individuals could subscribe to decency (a trope of belonging in the Spanish imagination) prompts us to consider race in terms of its social dimensions and its cultural effects, and not necessarily its purported biological character. This study, therefore, approaches “Spanishness” as a highly fluid social construction and considers the act of making music as a vital strategy in the construction of its meaning. In this regard, the act of making music is resonant with Christopher Small’s notion of *musicking*. Musicking refers to taking part, in any capacity, in all activity connected to music performance (performing, listening, rehearsing, practicing, or composing). This concept recognizes that the social meanings of music-making do not necessarily have to be separated from the properties of sound, as both contribute to an overall understanding of music as an activity.⁴ This means that performance renders conceptual applications (e.g., learning music theory) relevant to musicking, especially if the latter is imbued with social meaning. Performance denotes a metaphor for the ways in which individuals present themselves and their activity to others. In this sense, musicking is a type of social performance that attempts to play with the elements that inform an impression of the performer in the public eye and relies on those elements to sustain the performance itself. The ultimate objective of the performer (or in this case, group of performers) is to sustain the social impression that their performance fosters.⁵

The notion of “playing” acquires a unique and liminal character in this context. On the one hand, it refers to the act of performing music, which enabled musicians to affiliate themselves with the most prominent ecclesiastical institution in Spanish America, and arguably with the leading music ensemble in

New Spain. On the other hand, playing refers to a course of conduct and a social maneuver that cathedral musicians performed with this affiliation. Playing in the cathedral (of Mexico) meant more than just the act of music performance or the possibility of a salary for this service (although that was surely a motivation). It was in itself a social action, which implied the possibility of negotiating one's position upward in the colonial social hierarchy of Mexico City. Race was a central component of such a move, and in this regard "playing in the cathedral" refers to the creative ways in which individuals integrated this element into their social and political identities. Musicians, therefore, relied on music to "play" (to make a move, to maneuver) in the highly pageant and contested environment of eighteenth-century Mexico City.

Such an environment resonated with the creative ways that individuals used to construct their social positions in New Spain at large, where institutional affiliation and race were key elements in any attempts to advance socially. It is mainly for this reason that this book does not specify "eighteenth-century" or "Mexico City" in the second portion of its title. Doing so would restrict the relevance and operation the conceptual framework hereby presented, geographically and historically. The phenomenon of racial status construction in New Spain (from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth century) has been abundantly documented by historians such as María Elena Martínez and Rodolfo Aguirre Salvador, both of whom are cited extensively in this work. Perhaps the same cannot be said about analyses of music-making during the colonial period, and one study alone cannot account for such a large historical and geographical terrain. Cases studies by Omar Morales Abril and Alfredo Nava Sánchez, however (both cited in this book), give reason to believe that music did operate as a strategy to articulate racialized discourses of status beyond Mexico City and the eighteenth century, and the work of Geoffrey Baker in Cuzco, Peru, suggests the possibility that this conceptual framework might be extended beyond New Spain. The present book is the product of ten years of data collection and analysis. I hope that the historical and institutional specificity of this study will open avenues of inquiry among scholars interested in how other institutions and groups of individuals participated in this social phenomenon. More analyses of this type are still needed in Latin American colonial music studies.

Thus, the present book concerns itself with what was arguably the most important religious institution in New Spain during the period of highest social commotion in New Spanish history. Considering the transformations that occurred during the eighteenth century and the economic and political challenges that the increasing instability of the caste system produced, one must ask: how important was race to musicians in pursuit of social desires and ambitions? What were the racialized identities that these individuals were able to produce, and how did music participate in these processes? How was institutionalized musical

activity—and more important, ways of thinking about music—linked to these processes? How did new aesthetic trends in music intersect with this phenomenon and what changes did they generate? These are some of the questions that this book attempts to answer.

A few words regarding the genesis of this project are pertinent before delving into an account about the methodology used. Research work for this book began in the summer of 2003 during my first visit to the Archivo del Cabildo of the cathedral of Mexico. Although I cannot say that I was deeply influenced by the work of scholars like Robert Stevenson, Craig Russell, and Steven Barwick, I was, nonetheless, interested in contextualizing the substance of their scholarship regarding this important cathedral. At that time, I was particularly interested in learning about the liturgical and institutional backdrop of musical activity in this church. Which types of religious services called for music by the music chapel? How and when did services occur? How did the liturgical calendar (in the way that it was observed at this cathedral) structure the work of musicians, musical instruction, and musical texts? Which political and/or economic factors influenced or affected this arrangement? After all, was the music life of the most important cathedral in the New World really “splendorous” during the eighteenth century? These were the queries that fueled my initial visit to the archives while I looked for a theme for my doctoral dissertation.

It took close to six months to find a topic after searching through books of chapter acts, folders of miscellaneous documents without chronological order, boxes of payment records, service attendance, inventories, rosters, letters, and manuscript volumes describing cathedral ritual customs, religious endowments, and changes in musical and liturgical practices at the behest of private donors. After one and a half years of archival research I was ready to begin an in-depth analysis of the records that I had found before attempting any type of historical interpretation. Eventually, I had the chance to distance myself from the dissertation and to allow some ideas and concepts to mature. I also was able to pursue further research on themes that surfaced in some of the documents that I consulted, which I did not have the opportunity to approach initially. As a result, the present book is radically different from my doctoral research in significant ways. The topics explored in this study take into account the latest contributions in musicology and social history, and connect musical activity to a larger panorama of social life in colonial Mexico City. Moreover, the critique of some of my work (i.e., articles and the proposal for this book) by colleagues in musicology, history, and art history has expanded the breadth of the historical contextualization that the study aims to present. Finally, this case study is richly documented with archival references taken from a database that holds more than one thousand records at the moment (all inspected for this study, although not all are included) and that has grown after later visits to the archives.