

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: YSABEL SARTE

Una música de pajaritos y angeles:
Music and the Female Mystics of Early Modern Spain
(research director: Jonathan Glixon)

Spain in the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century served as a striking foil against the increasingly humanistic and intellectual spirit that overtook much of Europe during the time. In northern Europe--in particular, Holland, France, and England--advancements in science and technology began playing a larger role in cultural and social development, while matters supernatural and unknowable were more frequently questioned and viewed with skepticism. With the Counter-Reformation and the Inquisition as a firm backdrop, however, Spain remained a stalwart of orthodoxy and repression; indeed, at a time when the rest of Europe was celebrating new discoveries, and ushering in what would eventually become a new Age of Reason, Spain remained a bastion of mystical and spiritual thinking. This may serve to explain why, historically, Hispanic musicology has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the “mystical nature” of Spanish music, whatever that description may entail. However, this juxtaposition of cultural leanings and spirituality between Spain and the rest of Europe is just one dimension of a complex and fascinating prism through which to view the mystical world of Renaissance Spain. The role of women--specifically, religious women--offers a further dimension. This work will be a study of the female mystics of Early Modern Spain, through a musicological lens. By removing oneself from the musical score--at least as a primary or sole focus--we can turn instead towards the writing tradition of the female mystics as an equally important resource from which to glean valuable knowledge about music in Renaissance Spain, particularly sacred music and what it meant to these mystical figures.

By researching the relationship between female mystics in Renaissance Spain and the music associated with, surrounding, and related to them, I hope to discover new facets of musical mysticism in Early Modern Spain and expand upon a body of scholarship that is sizeable, yet leaves much to be gleaned. Questions to be addressed include: What was the relationship of these female mystics with music? What did they have to say/write about music and their experiences with music? What is the nature of the music they were specifically involved with, either as writers or performers? Were there musical compositions that were inspired by or even written by these female mystics? What else can be learned about the music that took place within the convent walls? What was the meaning of music--whether real or “silent”--to these cloistered nuns? Exploring the female mystics and their writings through a musical lens also opens the door for potentially delving into a number of other pertinent peripheral or connected topics, such as politics, feminism and gender studies, sexuality, power and agency, literature, philosophy, metaphor, and other social/cultural/religious topics. In this vein, we can hope to uncover deeper dimensions of music, life, and culture in Early Modern Spain.