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Review of Clinton D. Young, Music Theater and Popular Nationalism in Spain, 1880-1930

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Young, Clinton D. *Music Theater and Popular Nationalism in Spain, 1880–1930*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. xiv and 238 pp.

Those who have been to Madrid will be familiar with the name of Chueca, who is remembered in a plaza, a subway station and the surrounding neighborhood that has become the heart of the city's gay community. However, not many people will know that Federico Chueca was a famous composer of *zarzuelas*. Just like Francisco Barbieri, Roberto Chapí and Amadeo Vives, he is saved from oblivion by Clinton D. Young, who in his *Music Theater and Popular Nationalism in Spain, 1880–1930* analyses the rise, heyday and demise of this genre in its international context.

Since Spain did not have a professional symphonic orchestra until 1910 and the operas at the Teatro Real were performed in Italian, a logical option for Spanish composers was to specialize in zarzuelas, a Spanish form of musical theater or 'operetta', in which musical numbers are combined with dialogue and dance. The zarzuela had its roots in the seventeenth century, but was revived in the 1850s. The so-called *zarzuela grande*, full-length works, mostly on a historical topic and strongly influenced by French light operas, quickly gained popularity. Its performers generally were actors rather than professional singers, which put limits on the technical complexity of the musical score. A few decades later some theaters began to develop a profitable system of *teatro por horas*, with four sessions per evening, successfully trying to reach a broader audience. The zarzuela was adapted to the new format as one-act *género chico* plays and thanks to masterpieces such as *La Gran Vía* of Chueca or *La verbena de la Paloma* by Tomás Breton, the *género chico* probably became the most popular form of mass entertainment in fin-de-siècle Spain. Only after about 1910 it was slowly surpassed by cinema, sports and jazz music.

In his monograph, which is based on his dissertation at the University of California in San Diego, Young focuses primarily on the political content of the zarzuelas by doing an in depth analysis of a number of the most representative plays that were staged in Madrid – the undisputable center of Spanish musical theatre – during the period between 1880 and the early 1930s. He not only explores the libretto, but also examines how the score reinforces the message of the songs, while showing how the *género chico*, although thoroughly Spanish, assimilated many of the newest musical trends from abroad. This is done in a very authoritative way.

Somewhat less convincing is the analysis of the political system of the Restoration and the Primo de Rivera Dictatorship. The author's interpretation of Spanish politics is rather negative and often primarily based on scholarly studies on the republican opponents of the *turno pacífico*, such as those of Álvarez Junco's classic study on Alejandro Lerroux or Enrique Sanabria's more recent book on anticlerical republicans. Moreover, contrary to the passages in which the author discusses musical developments, in the parts dealing with Spanish politics no attempt is made to situate it in a wider international context. This way, Spanish politics are implicitly presented as unique and backward, whereas at the time there were clear parallels for instance with the political systems in Italy and Portugal, while influencing electoral outcomes – although in a variety of ways – was a standard practice all over Europe and in the Americas. More problematic is that his interpretations are only based on the plays themselves. Young does not seriously corroborate his views with other types of evidence, such as the reception of the

plays in the press or biographical sources, to understand the political sympathies of the authors and composers at the time of writing. In the highly polarized climate of Restoration Spain this is not very difficult, since almost all newspapers were the mouthpiece of a particular political faction and friendships and business relations were often based on political affinities.

Another objective of the book is to analyze how the zarzuelas contributed to the creation of a Spanish imagined community. Young even argues that because of the weakness of a strong nation-building policy by the Spanish state, zarzuelas can make clear how “the Spanish people forged their own sense of national identity at a time of momentous historical change” (20). Although he claims that his monograph deals with ‘bottom-up nationalism’, the author only analyses the production process of the zarzuelas, not their consumption. So we learn a lot about the text of the songs, the nationalist appropriation of Andalusian folk songs and the Aragonese *jota* and the nationalist implications of the stories, but nothing is said about the reception of it by the public. Of course, this is much more difficult to study, but the public also voted with their feet by favoring some plays over others. Apart from a few side remarks, the book does not contain a systematic analysis of the composition of the audience, the diffusion of the *género chico* in the provinces or the role of zarzuelas in the daily life of the people. Nonetheless, one can convincingly argue that zarzuelas formed part of the nation-building efforts of a Madrid based intellectual elite. But if the composers and writers did this primarily out of an inner creative urge, an ideological drive to unify the nation, to gain their daily bread or as a response to a very specific demand for nationalist pieces by the audience remains unclear. Nevertheless, this monograph provides an updated and very readable introduction to a highly influential cultural trend, which unfortunately has been largely ignored in mainstream interpretations of the period.

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