

ELIZABETH G. ELM  
Williamstown (MA)

## CENTERING ORALITY IN THE MUSIC HISTORY CLASSROOM

What does the written record tell us? And what does it leave out? Considering questions such as these is fundamental to a clear and balanced inquiry into any historical period. And an investigation of music history, in particular, must address the sounding, ephemeral nature of the art form as a whole beyond its preservation in any kind of written form. Yet, the narrative of music history before the age of recording most often told in European and North American classrooms typically centers the most elite of written media – precious manuscripts, printed books, and scores – to the near exclusion of all else.

Music scholarship and pedagogy have historically privileged the written record for obvious reasons. Although music itself is an ephemeral art, our work as historians, teachers, and performers necessitates precise documentation. Without writing, and especially without musical notation, we would lack the ability to hear and perform the musics of the past, however imperfect those performances might be. Due to this privileging of notation and performance, however, courses on medieval and early modern music have tended to focus primarily on the most precisely notated and beautifully adorned written evidence – on what was extraordinary rather than representative. In and outside the classroom, sources like the interpolated Roman de Fauvel manuscript, the illuminated Squarcialupi codex, and the graphic scores of the Chantilly codex present a rich portrait of the aesthetic care and sheer economic power that could be harnessed by elite groups in the written preservation of music.<sup>1</sup> There is much to be learned from such objects – about the history of notation, intertextuality, music's cultural value, its role in politics, and the visualization of the musical score. But, as the products of some of the most powerful communities of the day, they also represent only a small fraction of the rich and varied musical cultures that once existed, and even when properly contextualized, our focus on them creates a problematic and limited understanding of the past.

For some time now, scholarship on musics of the medieval and early modern periods has brought attention to a wide variety of musical traditions, many of which eschew the fixity of writing while representing a much broader cross-section of society. Starting in the twentieth century, scholars such as Nino Pirrotta and Leo Treitler brought new light to the study of oral musical practices in Italian song and plainchant respectively by considering the numerous variants

---

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, f. fr. 146; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Med. Pal. 87; and Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 564.

in written sources of music and text as a way of understanding an imperfect translation and transformation from oral to written musical practice.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, drawing from the field of literary studies, Paul Zumthor's concepts of *mouvance* and *oralité mixte* have become fundamental in musicological scholarship surrounding the composition, transmission, and performance cultures of Occitanian troubadours, Florentine *laudesi* companies, and Italian *canterini*.<sup>3</sup> Such foundational work may seem obvious to us today, but scholars like Pirrotta, Treitler, and Zumthor (among others) laid the groundwork for more recent research dealing with a range of oral and improvised musical practices from improvised counterpoint to various genres of medieval song to dance and instrumental music.

Yet, in music history pedagogy, this change has been slower to take effect, and many music scholars still struggle with the study of oral musical practices for which no notation survives. In describing their foray into the study of medieval Persian music, for example, the IMS working group "Future Histories of Music Theory" described it as "an unsettling, un-notated experience".<sup>4</sup> And, although Alice Clark advocates in her essay "Uncovering a Diverse Early Music" that we "give more space in our surveys to unwritten musics",<sup>5</sup> this call to break "our normative pedagogical focus on the composer and on notated music"<sup>6</sup> is followed up by numerous pedagogical examples that rely heavily on musical notation, oftentimes with attributed composers. Even so, Clark's call to center the music appearing "in the margins [...] of the written record"<sup>7</sup> in order to give a more nuanced and realistic picture of the diverse musical voices in the medieval and early modern world is an important one. Indeed, in the words of David Irving, "a great deal of music lies beyond the boundaries of normativity we have constructed around our largely score-based understandings of Western Art

---

<sup>2</sup> N. PIRROTTA, "The Oral and Written Traditions of Music", in ID., *Music and Culture in Italy from Medieval to Baroque: A Collection of Essays*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984, pp. 72-79; and L. TREITLER, *With Voice and Pen: Coming to Know Medieval Song and How It Was Made*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> P. ZUMTHOR, *La lettre et la voix: De la 'littérature' médiévale*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, esp. pp. 8, 160-168. On some selected applications of Zumthor's work, see also A. VAN VLECK, *Memory and Re-creation in Troubadour Lyric*, Berkeley, Berkeley University Press, 1991, p. 71; and B. WILSON, "Canterino and Improvvisatore: Oral Poetry and Performance", in *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music*, ed. by A. M. Busse Berger and J. Rodin, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 292-310: 295.

<sup>4</sup> "Going Global, In Theory: Future Histories of Music Theory", *IMS Musicological Brainfood*, 2019, III, n. 1, <https://brainfood.musicology.org/vol-3-no-1-2019/going-global-in-theory/> (last access to this link and to the others in this essay 15.10.2024).

<sup>5</sup> A. V. CLARK, "Uncovering a Diverse Early Music", *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, 2021, XI, n. 1, pp. 1-21: 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Music”.<sup>8</sup> These, he argues, are the result of a largely 19<sup>th</sup>-century perspective in defining the musical work, and breaking from this perspective is no easy task.

How, then, do we center a primarily oral practice in a course focusing on music of the historical past? What can we do if there is no (or only limited) musical notation to help us in analyzing, performing, and “hearing” some version of the music in question alongside our students? The first step, I would argue, is in accepting as a pedagogical goal the study of a given musical practice without being able to reproduce it perfectly in performance. Once we free ourselves of the need to present a series of canonical works in pristine (if anachronistic) modern notation, we can focus on the true historical circumstances and values that circumscribed various facets of musical life, and we can begin to consider areas of society that lacked the means or inclination to preserve their music in a lasting notated form.

Having established such goals with the students from the outset, the next step is to consider a series of possible methods (to be used individually or in combination) in bringing oral musical practices into the classroom. These might include the following points:

1. Read historical descriptions, letters, or chronicles, such as the wide range of surviving missionary texts describing indigenous musicians in the Americas or in other parts of the world. In doing so, however, it is important to approach these texts with a clear critical perspective, thinking carefully about the context, goals, and audience for a given text even as we engage with it as a key source of musical information.

2. Analyze iconographic evidence, including manuscript illuminations, sculptures, drawings, paintings, and other artistic representations of musical instruments and creative activity. The illustrations of instrumental music and musicians in illuminated manuscripts such as the *codice rico* copy of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (El Escorial MS T.j.I, known as “E2”), for example, provide telling information relating to instrumentation and socio-cultural context for the collection as a whole. But, again, each one must be analyzed with a critical eye toward the goals of each manuscript’s compilers and the symbolic nature of the illustrations themselves, which seldom benefit from a literal reading.

3. Use existing musical notation to reconstruct a song that would otherwise have been lost. For example, one might use a cantus firmus mass like Juan Cornago’s *Missa Ayo visto lo mappamundi* to reconstruct the original tune of the Sicilian seafarer’s song *Aggio visto lo mappamundi*,<sup>9</sup> or use of *cantasi come* indications

---

<sup>8</sup> D. R. M. IRVING, “Rethinking Early Modern ‘Western Art Music’: A Global History Manifesto”, *IMS Musicological Brainfood*, 2019, III, n. 1, <https://brainfood.musicology.org/vol-3-no-1-2019/rethinking-early-modern-western-art-music/>.

<sup>9</sup> See J. CORNAGO, *Complete Works*, ed. by R. Gerber, Madison, WI, A-R Editions, 1984, pp. viii-x; and A. W. ATLAS, “Aggio visto lo mappamondo: A New

in Florentine *lauda* collections to recreate a notated musical setting for a range of polyphonic *laude*.<sup>10</sup>

4. Consider critically with students the distance between existing notation and what might have been the sounding reality in the historical past. For example, one might analyze surviving troubadour melodies, which were copied centuries after the lives of those who wrote the songs and present a high number of significant variants from one source to the next.<sup>11</sup>

5. Attempt to recreate a specific oral or improvised musical practice based on descriptions in theoretical treatises. For example, following the work of Barnabé Janin, Philippe Canguilhem, and Peter Schubert, one might ask students to experiment with improvised counterpoint or *cantare super librum*.<sup>12</sup>

6. Compare one or more of the historical sources and methods listed above to an attempted reconstruction of a song practice in modern recordings. To use an example highlighted by Alice Clark, one could consider the ensemble Altramar's recording *Iberian Garden*, which reconstructs Andalusian *zajal* and *muwashshah* forms based on a combination of medieval texts and historical descriptions with the style of existing oral traditions in modern-day northern Africa.<sup>13</sup>

The example I'd like to present in more detail here – a class on the *Náhuatl flower songs* of sixteenth-century New Spain, Fig. 1 – combines a number of these methods, mixing historical and iconographic evidence with an unusual form of drumming notation and an attempted reconstruction in a modern recording by the San Antonio Vocal Arts Ensemble.

---

Reconstruction”, in *Studies in Musical Sources and Style: Essays in Honor of Jan LaRue*, ed. by E. K. Wolf and E. H. Roesner, Madison, WI, A-R Editions, 1990, pp. 109-120.

<sup>10</sup> See B. WILSON, *Singing Poetry in Renaissance Florence: The “Cantasi Come” Tradition (1375–1550)*, Florence, Olschki, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, CLARK, “Uncovering a Diverse Early Music” cit., p. 7, suggests a similar analysis activity based on variant copies of Bernart de Ventadorn's *Can vei la lauzeta*.

<sup>12</sup> See P. CANGUILHEM, *L'Improvisation Polyphonique à La Renaissance*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2010; B. JANIN, *Chanter Sur Le Livre: Manuel Pratique d'Improvisation Polyphonique de La Renaissance (XVe et XVIe Siècles)*, Lyon, Symétrie, 2014; and P. SCHUBERT, *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Altramar, *Iberian Garden: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Music in Medieval Spain*, vol. 1 (Dorian Discovery DIS-80151, 1997, CD) and vol. 2 (CD, Dorian Discovery DIS-80158, 1998, CD). See also CLARK, “Uncovering a Diverse Early Music” cit., pp. 11-12.

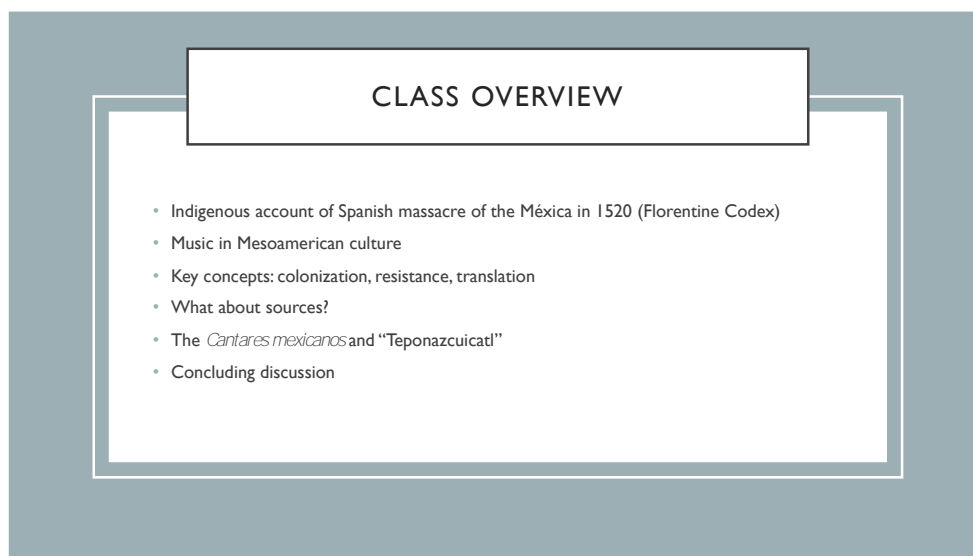


FIGURE 1 – Class Overview on *Náhuatl Flower Songs* of Sixteenth-Century New Spain.

As shown in Fig. 1, I start the class with an indigenous historical account describing the Spanish massacre of the Méxica people under Hernán Cortés in 1520 from the Florentine Codex and follow this with a discussion of music in Mesoamerican culture before going on to talk about key historical concepts of colonization, political resistance, and cultural translation.<sup>14</sup> Histories of music in sixteenth-century Mesoamerican society emphasize repeatedly the centrality of music and song to cultural identity, memory, and ritual in the region.<sup>15</sup> I emphasize to students that even as we lack specific notated evidence of what these songs would have sounded like, it is imperative that we take a creative approach in learning about them. I then discuss with them the various types of sources we can consider in studying *Náhuatl flower songs*, their role in society at the time of Spanish colonization, and even some of the specific musical features they might have had.

<sup>14</sup> The Florentine Codex is a sixteenth-century chronicle and ethnographic study of Mesoamerican culture compiled by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún alongside a group of Nahua elders. It is currently held in three illuminated volumes in Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Palat. 218-220. The excerpt I would assign from this source is an Extract from Book Twelve in J. LOCKHART, *We People Here: Náhuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 132-137.

<sup>15</sup> K. MANN, *The Power of Song: Music and Dance in the Mission Communities of Northern New Spain, 1590-1810*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 21.

In order to do this, I focus on the *Cantares mexicanos*.<sup>16</sup> The *Cantares mexicanos* is a compilation of 91 *xochitl/cuicatl* (“flower songs”) in Náhuatl copied and compiled by a group of indigenous musician-historians between 1550 and 1580 in Mexico City. The songs preserved in this source provide a glimpse into the sixteenth-century Méxica spiritual worldview and its adaptation to Christianity under Spanish colonial rule.<sup>17</sup> The songs in the manuscript are copied with complete texts, each of which begins with a drumming pattern – a type of unusual notation made up of a series of vocables combining the syllables “ti,” “to,” “qui,” and “co” that indicates some aspect of what might have happened in performance but without the specificity or broader foundational knowledge needed to perform them today (see Fig. 2).

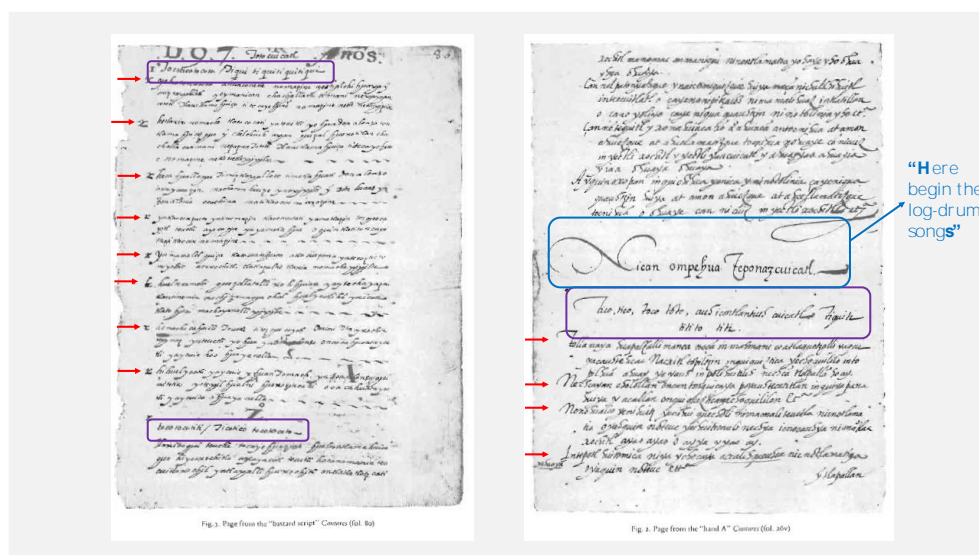


FIGURE 2 – Annotated Manuscript Facsimiles from the *Cantares Mexicanos*.<sup>18</sup>

After introducing the source, I ask students to engage with it on a deeper level. I have them spend a few minutes looking at facsimiles of two pages from the surviving manuscript and, without any background in paleography or manuscript analysis, to make a note of what stands out to them – about the page layout, the graphic presentation of text, and any symbols or other elements that might seem meaningful to them. As shown in Fig. 2, the main visual elements that I hope students will notice include the organization of the texts into individual stanzas (indicated with red arrows), the placement of the drumming

<sup>16</sup> The manuscript is held at Mexico City, Biblioteca nacional de México, Ms. 1628 bis.

<sup>17</sup> See J. BIERHORST, *Cantares mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1985, pp. 3-122.

<sup>18</sup> Original plates drawn from *Imi*, pp. 10-11.

patterns at the start of each poetic text (circled in purple), and the use of larger script rubrics at the start of new sections within the larger collections (“Here begin the log-drum songs” in blue). By noticing these elements themselves, students take agency in the process of historical reconstruction, engaging directly with the primary source and learning both what it can teach us and what its limitations are.

Once we have looked at the manuscript itself, I pose a question to students: “what are the resources that modern-day musicians might have to reconstruct a song from this collection in performance? In short, what do they know and what might they have to add?”. Here students might bring in the following evidence:

- The stanzaic structure of the text implies a strophic musical setting;
- The drumming patterns give us a possible rhythmic profile for each song;
- As discussed earlier in the class, according to other historical documents and archaeological evidence from the period, the drums themselves (*teponaztli* and *huebuetl*) are tuned a fifth apart;<sup>19</sup> and
- There are specific groupings of songs such as the “Teponazcuicatl” or “log-drum songs”.

We follow this discussion with a listening activity based around the San Antonio Vocal Arts Ensemble’s reconstruction of the song “Teponazcuicatl” from the *Cantares Mexicanos* manuscript under the direction of Christopher Moroney.<sup>20</sup> Students listen in groups, each one focusing on individual elements of instrumentation, melody, rhythm, and formal structure. After a small group discussion, they then share with the whole class what their findings are regarding the reconstructed song, what elements came from the original manuscript, and what elements were added by the performers in a work of imaginative recreation. We then conclude the class with an explanation from Christopher Moroney himself, who emphasizes in a press release for the SAVAE recording his use of the original drumming patterns, pentatonic melodies based on the traditional clay flute known to have been used during this period, and strophic melodic repetitions in setting the text. In completing this work, he explains, “it felt as if we had ‘decoded’ part of a musical system that had been recorded for posterity by the Aztecs over 400 years ago”.<sup>21</sup> I conclude our class by asking the students

---

<sup>19</sup> These drums are pictured in the Florentine Codex illuminations presented earlier in class.

<sup>20</sup> *El Milagro de Guadalupe*, Christopher Moroney, dir., and San Antonio Vocal Arts Ensemble, Iago/Talking Taco Music, IAG OCD214, 1999, CD. On this reconstruction, see also S. THOMAS, “Music, Conquest, and Colonialism”, in *Musics of Latin America*, ed. by R. Moore and W. A. Clark, New York, W. W. Norton, 2012, pp. 31-35.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Covita Moroney, “SAVAE decodes lost Aztec music system to record Nahuatl and Aztec Indian music”, *LaMUSICAfé inside tracks* 2, <https://id34100.securedata.net/subud-sica/Sections/Inspire/Inspire03/Inside/Pages/MusicandPA/MMISavBody.html>.

how successful they felt Moroney and his colleagues were in doing this, and what ethical considerations they might consider necessary in engaging in this sort of historical reconstruction of an ephemeral, colonial musical past.

Bringing together these various approaches to historical descriptions, iconography and archaeological evidence, and the unusual *Cantares mexicanos* manuscript, students in this class are encouraged to read and analyze a range of primary sources through a critical lens while highlighting an important area of music history that might otherwise go overlooked. In addition, the listening activity centering on a modern reconstruction of a *Náhuatl flower song* encourages students to take an active role in considering the work of both historian and performer together. By centering an oral musical tradition in a class like this, we change the narrative from one that privileges named individuals in precisely notated scores to one that considers a much broader range of musical people, contexts, and cultures – from a variety of socioeconomic, political, and cultural backgrounds. In short, we substantially enrich our perspectives on medieval and early modern life beyond the elite musical culture of a circumscribed few.

*ege3@williams.edu*