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Musical life
in Portuguese Benedictine
and Clarisse Convents through
the study of the reports of Visits
from the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries

by Elisa Maria Maia da Silva Lessa*

The regulation of the musical practice in the Portuguese female monasteries comes from a set of rules of the monastic daily routine, which are part of the Rules and Constitutions of several Orders. Through the reports made by the Visitors, appointed by the church hierarchy, it is known that the nuns did not always obey the rules. The Visitors attempted to control the modus vivendi of the nuns pointing what they considered contrary to the stated rules. The daily life was marked by the office. The musician nuns must have spent their days, besides their time in the choral recitation, doing the general duties: internal assigments, prayer, reading, and the practice of vocal polyphony and instruments such as organ, harp, harpsichord and even other instruments. Beyond mass and office, however the ritual in which nuns established their social and spiritual identity was essential, and the nuns of north of Portugal provided the most “luxuriante” exemple.

The first Clarissas monastery in Portugal was founded during Afonso III Kingdom, in 1258, at Lamego city. In the 13th century the Royal Monastery of Santa Clara at Coimbra (1286) and the Santa Clara Monastery at Lisbon (1288) were established. In 1427, D. João I founded the Royal Monastery of Santa Clara at Porto. In the 16th century more than forty female monasteries

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Abbreviations (Répertoire International des Sources Musicales - RISM-A): P-BR - Portugal, Braga, Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital; P-C - Portugal, Coimbra, Biblioteca Geral da Universidade; P-L - Portugal, Lisboa, Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo.
following the Santa Clara Rule appeared in the country. The text of the general Constitutions of this order would be approved and added during the 17th century. According to this Constitutions the Divine Office should be sung in simple and uniform plainchant except the psalms that could be sung in polyphony. The provincial Minister’s recommendations appealing for the fulfillment of the Rules and Constitutions, also mentioned the prohibition to reach “Musics, fiddles and other instruments”. The considerations there included concerning the celebration of saint festivities refer to the scandal proved by “musics, villancicos and romances” at St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist festivities. Moreover and according to the same text, these songs didn’t contribute for edification, but were prohibited as well as the expenses with wax for the candles in the churches or those transported in the processions by the nuns themselves were cut down and even the disguises in the choir were banned. All the measures confirm the nuns use of interpreting romances and villancicos dressing the same way as the personages themselves⁵. The prohibitions were extended to the interpretation of Comedias, Autos and Intermezzi even if they were bound with a spiritual meaning⁶.

In spite of the prohibition so clear set down in the writings of the Rules and Visits of playing vernacular or religious music-theatrical performances, it is known than nuns from Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Convent, which was founded at the city of Braga in 1625, used to play secular comedies and for those performances they dresses either like males or like secular women. The Autos, with their scenic performances, villancicos, dances and intermezzi were played by the female

¹ P.-L. Ans, Regra Segunda da Ordem de Santa Clara dada pelo Papa Urbano IV, acrescentada pelas Constituições Gerais.
musicians of the convent. The performances, as it already was mentioned, were not tolerated by the order hierarchy, having been prohibited through the ages. However, the constant and steady prohibitions and remarks included in the documents worked out by the Archbishops, provincial Ministers and Visitors of the 17th and 18th centuries, clearly show evidence that this type of manifestations always survived within the monastic communities. This apparent contradiction seems to fit the picture that says that there is no rule without exception. In fact, some data suggest that such exceptions really did exist and were located in some convents of the north. For instance, in 1620 the Archbishop of Braga, Dom Afonso Furtado de Mendonça (1619-1627), prohibited the playing of Autos at Convento dos Remédios even if they were of religious content, as well as the utilization of drums and other popular instruments: "[...] Item prohibit under penalty of major excommunication ipso facto incurrere that no religious, represent any auto, or comedia, or colóquo, though it is dedicated to the divine, nor play in the choir drum, tambourine, or any other instrument that do not use in the church, and the Mother Abbess consents not make any of the things aforesaid under the same punishment [...]."

However, Manuel Carlos de Brito referring to a set of 17th century musical manuscripts, most of them anonymous and belonging to the Convento de Santa Cruz at Coimbra, points out that they were constituted by Romances and Villancicos and...
that some of them were addresses to Porto and Braga. Among other data that show the influence of the Portuguese northern convents, are manuscripts like the Tonos e Chansonetas de Natal which include several Romances, Lous and Comedias referred to the city of Braga. Also the manuscript Chansonetas de Natal include Romances and Folias with the indication of Remédios, Braga, which suggest they may have been addressed to the nuns of Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Convent. In the benedictine nun’s convents there was also the habit of playing chansonetas. The Manuscripts of Santa Cruz mentioned above, have some compositions dedicated to the S. Salvador benedictin convent at Braga and to the Semide Convent near Coimbra. In 1620, like in many other convents, the nuns of S. Salvador were also forbidden of playing Autos and Comedias in the choir, as well as of using drums, tamborines or any other similar instrument. As it was stated by Carlos de Brito, some pieces of these manuscripts are secular. Nevertheless, in some cases it is difficult to classify them since their lovely images, typical of the barroque style, were applied to the divine love. The following table presents in summary the characteristics of these compositions.

**Compositions aiming the monasteries of Braga and Semide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tonos e Chansonetas de Natal (P-Cug MM 227)</th>
<th>Chansonetas de Natal (P-cug MM 238)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eight voices / two choirs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treble clef and C clef in the first, second and third lines; (two choirs / soprano, contralto and tenor voices);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental bass / guião (the continuo part called guião is unfigured);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triple meter with frequent syncopation and hemiola;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different sections altern either a solo, duo or at four voices with choir and instrumental sections;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written texts with profane character transposed to the divine describe personages and constitute theatre-plays;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances played within a scenic representation, interchanging spoken with singing pieces accompanied with musical instruments, ritornelli and dances.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Library of Coimbra University

7 P-Cug MM 227

8 P-Cug MM 238.

The role of music had overcome its initial purpose of serving exclusively the divine praises. The strong influence of the secular music in the liturgical celebrations and its practice “inside walls” during the leisure time, reflected a personal expression of a need to balance the psychological equilibrium of those who lived under monastic restrictions. Even in the monasteries of the interior of Portugal, like Santa Escolástica Monastery, at Bragança, this influence could be found. In fact, in 1690, the Visitor of Santa Escolástica Monastery, at Bragança, representing the Miranda Bishop stated that “The music in the monasteries is intended to be for the divine praises and not for human entertainments”.

The Bragança nuns however, used to sing and dance close to the iron railings, dressing male and female secular clothes and playing in front of people attending outsider the monastery. One of the principles of the form and rule of life of the monastic daily life was to avoid the looseness of morals, a menace otherwise constant, having in account the resolutions included in the Rules and Visits. The nun’s reclusion as a basic principle of clarisses and benedictine nuns, that through the ages has always been much more rigid than the male’s, did imply not only a physical seclusion, but also a cutting of, that was supposed to be radical, with the outside world. The reclusion was not always respected and that some contacts with the outside world were being done at some extent in different situations.

In the 18th century the monastery daily life got a strong influence from the world outsider. The role of music had overcome its initial purpose of serving exclusively the divine praises. The strong influence of the profane music in the liturgical celebrations and its practice “inside walls” during the leisure time, reflected a personal expression of a need to balance the psychological equilibrium of those who lived under monastic restrictions. According to the reports of the Visits to S. Salvador benedictine convent of Braga, the choir attendance was weak and even a certain negligence was observed during the ceremonies. However, the musical activities were intense.

P-Lan, Bragança, S. Bento, caixa 1.
involving the lay people who not only used to teach the nuns to play, but also participated in the musical performance of some ceremonies. In the Visitation report made in 1743, it was laid that from that date on, the polyphonic choir and instrumental music wouldn’t be allowed in the convent and the nuns had to use exclusively the plainchant during the regular services and also at the most solemn celebrations. Only at Christmas and Passover the nuns could play some devout pieces if they were dressed with their habits. Even in the monasteries of the interior of Portugal, like Santa Escolástica Monastery, at Bragança, this influence could be found. In 1759 the Miranda Bishop complained in these terms: “[... ] The common enemy, not satisfied by transferring music from the profane theaters to the ecclesiastical choirs, even brought into the churches the aplauses which are only used at the bullfights, reacting either with spittles or handkerchiefs [ ... ]”

Later on, in 1768, D. Gaspar de Bragança, The Braga Archbishop from 1758 to 1769, prohibited in all convents of his Archdiocese, “the singing of portuguese and castilian pieces” which used to be sung during the most solemn days, mainly at Christmas and at Evangelist day for lacking solemnity and provoking laughing in the church. The Archbishop, classifying the music that was played then as “solmizations of strange composition and harmony which are more fitted for theater recreation than for the choral devotion of Christ’s sponses” transformed in edict the Visitors prohibitions, only permitting the plainchant and the use of organ in the female monastic churches. The presence


“[ ... ] Não satisfeito o inimigo comum de haver transferido aos choral clesiásticos a muzica dos teatros profanos ate introduziu nos mesmo choros e Igrejas os aplausos, que somente se praticão nas funções e festejos dos touros, dando aos pregadores escarradas e aplausos de lençinhos quando acabão os sermões [... ]”, P-Lan, Bragança, S. Bento, caixa 1, Livro 2, ff. 70-71.

“[ ... ] Por quanto somos informados que nos mosteiros de religiosas da nossa obediência se vão absolutamente introduzindo o uso de solfas de exquizada composição e armonia que são mais próprias do recreio dos teatros que da devoção dos coros das espozas de cristo [... ] mandamos debaixo da
of strangers in the convent including music teachers was also prohibited, but it is known that some of the nuns were taught singing, harpsichord and organ by prestigious musicians, strict chaperoned (or may be not) by older nuns. The churchs officials prohibited certain types of musical expression as well as interaction between the nuns and male musicians. Sometimes the local communities used to invite outsider musicians for the celebration of some festivities and novices’ profession of faith. Christmas and Passover were naturally among the highest moments of Liturgical celebration with preachers, singers and other musicians especially invited for these events. However, according to the provincial minister Fr. Francisco de Santa Teresa Xavier, the presence of musicians and other lay people in the conventual churches brought "many offenses to God". In a remarkable letter he dispatched to the Order Monasteries, Abbesses were instructed to not authorize the presence of such people. Moreover, nuns were again forbidden of reading, representing or watching the performance of comedies, as well as, dressing like males or even like the common lay women. The appeal for seclusion and silence were constant and the leisure moments were also subjected to restriction. By contrast, music took over its fundamental role as a counter-balance of aceticism so allowing the behaving of senses and emotions. In the Santa Ana convent, founded in the beginning of 16th century at Viana do Castelo, the nuns didn’t always use to participate in the Lauds and Compline and the singers nuns were sometimes absent from several liturgical services. They were more interested in the Autos with scenic representations, vilancicos, dances, intermezi and great Te Deum. They liked take part and show liturgical pomp and musical ability. Santa Ana’s day was commemorated with a solemn festivity in the convent and some data show that a play dedicated to the Divine, the Oferecimento do Círio da
Gloriosa Santa Ana, was performed by the nuns at the dining room or at the chapter chamber, fearing that the secular people could be offended by looking at the choir performance where the Santa’s altar was located. Santa Ana and S. Bento’s day, as well as the twelfth night, were celebrated in the convent with a big festivity which included Drums, pipers and shawm players (Tambores, Gaiteiros and charanelas), in such a way that these festivities assumed a particular popular accent. Nevertheless, it was Christmas time where nuns used to get more involved in liturgic celebrations. The expenses with wax for the rehearsals of the Christmas chansonetas were registered by the monastery trasurer mothers in the first half of the 18th century, allowing to notice that a sum of money was given to the singer mother for her services with Christmas music. In fact, as a recognition to their servisse to the community, gifts and fondlings were distributed to the female musicians, singers and organ players.

The Constituições Municipaes of Santa Maria de Semide Convent from the 18th century, didn’t also allow the nuns of the monastery to sing polyphony, arguing that they were trying to please more men than God. Nevertheless, at Semide Convent, Vilancicos and Autos both of secular and religious content were played. So, neither the constant Visitor Prelates prohibitions, nor the norms mentioned in the first chapter of the Constitutions where such performances were forbidden, were really effective. Under the pretext of giving more splendor to the Christmas, St. John’s and other festivities, as well as intending to better explain the historical meaning of the eclesiastical solemnity, the nuns used to play the Saint’ lives, autos sacramentais and other representations. In general, these playings preceeded the liturgical ceremony and ended with the Te Deum or Magnificat. Despite the prohibitions in the church hierarchy registered by the Visitors, sometimes after the performance, there was a Mass with the nuns participation who were dressed according to the personages they had portrayed. Initially, these Autos were performed at the main chapel, later on they were successively

*P-Lan, Semide, Santa Maria, Livro n. 1.*
moved away to the choir, cloister and finally to the the cells of the abbesses, who used to invite outsider people to attend these playings with music⁹.

Coda

The Villancico genre performed by the Portuguese cloistered nuns in 17th century can be defined as a variegated set of pieces in the vernacular, basically musical, composed by Villancicos, Romances, Loas, Bailes and Folias. They were used on different proportions and according to the local situations, for religious purposes, either at sacred celebrations or at leisure time. This model of musical production was cultivated in Portugal and Spain and exported to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in America and Asia. Collected evidence under the form of the presented written testimonies, clearly demonstrate the theatrical nature of the Villancico genre. Data reveal evidence of a strong nun’s appeal for this type of music, leading to a creative transposition of the vernacular to the divine and to the utilization of that kind of repertory which was played in their convents along the 17th and 18th centuries. This kind of music, as an intangible mixture of profane and sacred, constituted a like bridge structure linking nuns with the outsider secular people. As it was already said, a secular influence invaded the traditional musical background of the female portugueses convents, and the acceptable degree of that influence was a constant dispute between nuns and the hierarchy. This situation did not happen only in Portuguese monasteries. As Kendrick says, referring to the musical life of the Milanese nuns, “[... ] the archbishops tried to restrict and to outlaw the social aspects of nun’s polyphony: intercourse (in every sense) with male teachers, the public character of nun’s music in the parlours and the playing of instruments. [...] The order’s ritual sumptuousness and accoutrements along with its partiality for obscure sanctoral feasts, appeared to at least

⁹ Unfortunately were not found until now musical sources of the Autos played by the Semide nuns.
one archbishop as overly secular and luxuriant. From sister's perspectives, however, this was simply a diferente kind of ritual expression […]".

The hierarchical pressure upon the Villancico genre and the theatrical representations Autos Sacramentais, under the form of successive prohibitions, was not succeedful and the most resistant nuns proved to be those of the northern convents.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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