Small-town Spain

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Whereas Harper is concerned with strophic song-verse, Judith Aikin’s book traces the efforts to develop alternative verse forms for German opera. As she explains, around 1600 most German poets used sing-song metres that were ‘a clumsy and ineffective vehicle for conveying emotional content’. What was needed was a flexible yet structured form of verse that established ‘a specifically German rhythmic structure’ for recitative (pp.20–22). This was a challenge that taxed many intellectuals, poets and musicians of the day, including Heinrich Schütz. In tracing the development of such verse-forms, Aikin takes us on a tour of numerous little-known music dramas from German courts. Many of these survive only as librettos, but often Aikin’s analysis of the verse suggests what the music might have been like, as with her discussion of Die Bußfertige Magdalena (pp.66–77). Metrics and rhyme are not the easiest topics to explain with clarity, and Aikin does not write as deftly as Harper; yet her book helps us understand how poets and composers of the Baroque created a counterpoint between metrical accent and the sense of the words. And although her focus is firmly on the metrics, she also discusses in passing the plots and dramatic potential of the librettos, and includes many intriguing facsimiles of text-booklets and stage designs.

Both Aikin and Harper stress that they are not musicians and do not aim to offer technical insights into musical matters. Yet Aikin still manages to offer a sophisticated account of early German monody and its relationship with older styles such as ecclesiastical chant (pp.39–44). Harper’s book, by contrast, would have benefited from editing by a musician: it contains several howlers, notably a reference to ‘piano compositions’ of the time (p.119). A more fundamental criticism is that neither book offers translations of the German quotations. Such an omission is greatly to be regretted, because the original German can be hard for even an expert to read. A non-specialist is likely to skip over the excerpts, even though they are at the heart of both authors’ arguments.

Yet both books are invaluable in introducing English speakers to the richness of German secular music. I hope they might encourage performers to explore the secular repertories where notated music survives, such as Albert’s Arien or the 1644 opera Seelewig. Above all, Aikin and Harper show us how poetry and music stood in a close and mutually enriching relationship. As the Nuremberg organist Johann Löhner explained in his Geistlichen Erquick-Stunden of 1673: ‘Without a tune a lyric is dead, and without words a melody is an empty voice; thus one gives life to the other.’

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Miguel Ángel Marín, Music on the margin: urban musical life in 18th-century Jaca (Spain) (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2002)

The study of music in urban settings is as old as musicology itself; however, a more self-reflexive consideration of the relationship between such settings and musical practice is a more recent development. Building on recent approaches to urban musicology such as Fiona Kisby’s edited volume Music and musicians in Renaissance cities and towns (2001), Miguel Ángel Marín’s Music on the margin brings the ‘background’ to the fore through a detailed exploration of the distinctive urban environment of Jaca, a small town in north-eastern Spain, as a constitutive element of local musical life. He uncovers the ways in which the interactions between institutions and individuals characteristic of a small-town setting encouraged collaborative music-making and a marked localism in professional recruitment patterns; yet by showing Jaca’s participation in the national and international circulation of music, he avoids characterizing the provincial setting as backward. Indeed, Marín’s achievement is to reveal a richness and complexity of musical life that one would hardly suspect in a small border town.

At the centre of his picture is the music chapel of Jaca Cathedral. However, unlike previous generations of Spanish scholars, he focuses on the blurred boundaries and heterogeneous nature of this capilla de música, and devotes considerable attention to the social, professional and economic context of its members, and to their networks of family, colleagues and friends. By examining residence patterns, he concludes that musicians were not a distinctive group, but were part of the larger community of cathedral personnel. Data from musicians’ wills shows that, while musical positions in the cathedral were avidly sought, they did not provide incumbents with improved living conditions, suggesting that the status attached to musical posts was their primary attraction. The close connections between musicians and other residents of Jaca, as well as the town’s peripheral location and low salaries at the cathedral, led to a static musical environment, challenging the prevailing view of high mobility among Spanish church musicians.

Marín also insists upon the important contribution of other institutions to the urban soundscape, drawing atten-
tion to the musical activities of convents, monasteries and the town’s Scolopian college. He draws a picture of collaboration and mutual interdependency between institutions—close links that were fostered by the town’s small size—rather than the total dependency on the cathedral capilla de música that has often been assumed. Confraternities, too, assume a prominent position in this account of urban music, with over 40 such corporations in a town of just over 3,000 inhabitants. Indeed, the author argues for a broader reconsideration of the contribution of confraternities to European musical life in the light of his findings. As well as promoting musical activities, these corporations also provided opportunities for members to forge personal contacts with musicians, which may have influenced recruitment procedures and allowed new or prospective musicians to integrate themselves with established members of the profession. A final institution that comes under scrutiny is the town’s citadel, whose soldiers played a part in local musical life through performances in processions, and even occasionally occupied musical posts in the cathedral.

The picture that Marín paints is one of musical and social consensus within the town. Future research might focus on the kinds of sources that could provide a ‘view from below’, such as notarial documents and records of court cases, in order to test this consensual model and explore music’s role as a focus for social tensions, rivalry and subversion. The ‘local’ is often a contested territory, the site of competing discourses; there may have been social fractures and contradictions that are largely silenced in the kinds of sources on which this study is based.

In turning his attention to the cathedral music archive, a collection which illustrates the musical life of the town as a whole, Marín focuses on processes of continuity and change in the local repertory. Local chapelmasters recopied the works of their predecessors for decades after their composition, creating a sense of local tradition and historical awareness, yet they also brought in new music and compositional styles from elsewhere. Thus the ‘Italianization’ of Spanish music in the 18th century, when viewed through the lens of Jaca, can be seen as a gradual process of adoption and adaptation rather than the swamping of local styles by foreign imports, as it has sometimes been characterized. By examining the reception of Corelli and of Italian opera arias, Marín illuminates the local incorporation of international repertory, revealing that Jaca’s peripheral location and provincial status did not prevent local musicians from participating in the transnational circulation of music and styles. He also explores the links between the music in the cathedral archive and a number of Jaca’s churches and confraternities, illuminating the musical networks that connected these urban institutions. From the point of view of the present-day researcher, small-town archives can be particularly revealing, as the central role of the cathedral music chapel is reflected in heterogeneous archives which are quite different from those of city cathedrals, where secular repertory has often been lost.

Among the many strengths of this accessible book are the frequent references to other urban settings throughout Europe, putting Marín’s findings into wider perspective. Another type of comparison that might prove fruitful in exploring the specific characteristics of urban music-making would be an examination of the non-urban, or rural, setting to which the urban is implicitly contrasted. Nevertheless, Marín’s approach will appeal to anyone interested in music in towns; his sure handling of a wide range of documentary sources allows him to paint a fascinating and convincing portrait of the rich musical life of a small town on the geographical, if not cultural, margin.

David Irving

Early America and Cuba

Richard Cullen Rath, How early America sounded
(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), £32.50/$19.50

Alejo Carpentier, Music in Cuba, ed. Timothy Brennan, trans. Alan West-Durán (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), £29

With the growing interest in early music beyond Europe, several fine studies have appeared of the musical history of European colonies, particularly those of the Americas. Many have focused on the transplantation of Old World musical traditions, their subsequent developments and the phenomenon of cultural reciprocity; others have examined music in cities and institutions, and the cultural interchange between immigrant and indigenous populations. The two books reviewed here explore British and Spanish colonies respectively, and also represent two contrasting approaches to scholarship. The first is a recent study by an American historian, and the second is a pioneering narrative originally published in 1946 by a Cuban polymath, now appearing for the first time in English.