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Cantigas de Santa Maria

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Cantigas de Santa Maria

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Introduction

The *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, or Songs of (or for) the Virgin Mary, are a collection of 420 poems with musical notation, the largest collection of their kind. The poems offer praise to Mary, telling of her beauty, kindness, and mercy, and describe a wide variety of her miracles. Her abilities to heal her followers from myriad illnesses, even to revive the dead, to punish those who seek to scorn her or do good Christians harm, and to reward the faithful for their devotion comprise the bulk of these fables.

The *Cantigas* and Alfonso X

The *Cantigas* were compiled by Alfonso X (1221–84), ruler of the kingdoms of Castile and León and called “El Sabio”—The Learned. They survive in four manuscripts, two of which are lavishly illustrated with images of Alfonso and his court, which was quite cosmopolitan. While militantly Christian, some Jews and Muslims were permitted to hold important positions and contributed widely to the intellectual and cultural communities in his kingdom. Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all featured in the *Cantigas*, though not always in a favorable light.¹ One set of illuminations is of particular musical interest, as they depict dozens of musicians playing thirteenth-century instruments. The *Cantigas* thus arouse the interest not just of musicologists and performers, but of art historians, iconographers, organologists, and scholars of religious, political, and cultural history, in the medieval period in general and in the Iberian Peninsula.

Alfonso earned his sobriquet “The Learned” both from the highly educated, literary and scientific nature of his court and his own intellectual pursuits. He was well versed in classical literature himself, and the members of his Royal Scriptorium, under his own supervision, sought out and translated works from Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, and a host of other languages into the local vernacular, Castilian.² The *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, however, were written in Galician-Portuguese, which became the language most closely associated with lyric poetry due to the influx of Provençal troubadours who came to northern Spain for political reasons or to make the famous pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Almost two hundred troubadours authored *cantigas de amor*, *de amigo*, and *de escárnio*—songs of love, of the lover, and of scorn or satire—in this language, although only six by [Martin Codax](#) (fl. c1240–70) and seven by Alfonso’s grandson, the Portuguese King [Dom Dinis](#) (Eng. Denis, 1261–1325) survive with

¹ The four manuscripts are: San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Biblioteca del Real Monasterio, T.I.1, Códice Rico (“Rich Codex”); San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Biblioteca del Real Monasterio, b.I.2 (also known as J.b.2); Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, B.R.20 (no musical notation); and Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, 10069 (formerly Toledo).

² See Robert R. Anderson, “Alfonso X el Sabio and the Renaissance in Spain,” *Hispania* 44:3 (September 1961): 448–53.

music.³ However, songs of the devotional nature exhibited in the *Cantigas*, while popular, were written in Latin, with a few later devotional songs written in Castilian. The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* are thus a rare and priceless repertory, for not only do they constitute almost the entirety of the known thirteenth-century Galician-Portuguese musical repertory, they unusually link the praise of the Virgin Mary to this language of courtly love and lyric poetry. Given the popularity of Galician-Portuguese in Alfonso's court and his own interests in both literature and music, amply demonstrated by the fact that he founded a chair of composition at the University of Salamanca, it is likely that Alfonso authored or composed a number of the *Cantigas* himself (in particular the ones in the first person); the rest were compiled under his watchful eye.⁴ A number of them are known to be *contrafacts*, or songs in which the melody remains the same but the text is changed, often from a secular one to a sacred one, or vice versa. This was a popular poetic or compositional technique, and it might have been used in the *Cantigas* in order to borrow well-known or useful melodies for newly composed devotional texts. *Cantiga* 340, for example, borrowed its melody from the *alba* "S'anc fui belha ni prezada" by the troubadour [Cadenet](#) (c.1160–c.1235), itself based upon the earlier *alba* "Reis glorios" by [Giraut de Bornelh](#) (c.1140–c.1200).⁵

Modern Editions of the *Cantigas*

While the Galician-Portuguese language is one of the most characteristic features of the *Cantigas*, it may also have kept them from being better known in music scholarship. Only in 2000 was the first comprehensive English translation published.⁶ Adding to difficulties in analyzing or performing this repertory is its notation. While pitch in the collection is fairly precise, rhythm and meter are vague at best, perhaps reflecting an emphasis on the rhetoric and structure built into each song individually. Manuel Pedro Ferreira explains that it is unclear

³ On this topic see Graça Videira Lopes, "Galician-Portuguese as a Literary Language in the Middle Ages," in *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula, Vol. 1*, edited by Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín Gonzalez, and César Domínguez, 396–412 (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2010), especially 399.

⁴ Higini Anglés. *La música de las Cantigas de Santa María del Rey Alfonso el Sabio*. (Barcelona: Diputación provincial, Biblioteca central, 1943–64), 106. Several scholars mention passages in the *Cantigas* as a clue to Alfonso's involvement in their creation or compilation; the prologue says that "Alfonso ... composed this book," and an illustration in the Rich Codex shows Alfonso reading to six copyists from a scroll that says "Por que trobar e cousa en que iaz entendimiento"—"Because to compose is a thing in which lies understanding." See Connie Scarborough's introduction to Kathleen Kulp-Hill, trans., *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, The Wise*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000, xxiv–xxv, esp. fn 7, and Manuel Pedro Ferreira, "Alfonso X, compositor," *Alcanate. Revista de Estudios Alfonsíes* 5 (2006-2007): 117–37.

⁵ Alison D. Campbell, "Words and Music in the Cantigas de Santa Maria: The Cantigas as Song," MLitt. Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011, 64; Israel J. Katz, "Alfonso X, El Sabio, King of Castile and León, Music of Cantigas," in *Medieval Iberia: An Encyclopedia*, edited by E. Michael Gerli, 69–70 (New York: Routledge, 2013); for a more thorough understanding of the ways that this *Cantiga* emulates Cadenet beyond contrafact, see also Manuel Pedro Ferreira, "Parody and Music. Iberian Examples," in *Parodies courtoises, parodies de la courtoisie*, edited by Margarida Madureira, Carlos Carreto and Ana Paiva Morais, 197–220. (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016).

⁶ Kulp-Hill, trans., *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, The Wise*.

whether the notation in the sources of the *Cantigas* indicates a modal, mensural, or other rhythmic interpretation; there is no theoretical treatise that explains this particular repertory, and because the songs are all monophonic, proper rhythms cannot be determined using rules of harmony or counterpoint, where dissonant intervals might suggest that particular rhythms be adjusted to create consonances instead.⁷ Furthermore, the notation differs between sources. For these reasons, editions past and present often have divergent rhythmic and metric interpretations.

The earliest modern studies of the *Cantigas* were undertaken, not surprisingly, by Iberian scholars. Leopoldo Augusto de Cueto López de Ortega, Marqués de Valmar, published the earliest edition in 1889, although his was a literary and philological study. Still, his work paved the way for later musical inquiries. Felipe Pedrell was among the first to transcribe the *Cantigas*, although his approach to rhythm and his harmonizations in the style of Spanish folk songs met with later disapproval.⁸ A similar fate befell the next large study of the *Cantigas* by Julián Ribera y Tarragó, who proposed that the *Cantigas* were largely based on Arabic music heard by Alfonso in his youth.⁹ Both editors were heavily critiqued by Higiní Anglés, who in several subsequent publications proposed an approach to the rhythmic aspects of the *Cantigas* that was based upon a combination of close analysis of the notation in the sources and interpretation of contemporary Iberian music theory such as that of late thirteenth-century theorist Juan Gil (Johannes Egidius) de Zamora. To that end, Anglés suggested a mix of modal and mensural rhythms, and his landmark 1943 edition was undoubtedly responsible for bringing the *Cantigas* to a much wider international audience, especially as the primary source on which most recordings have relied.¹⁰ That edition is no longer up to modern scholarly standards; not only has subsequent scholarship cast doubt on some of his decisions in transcription, he also only provided the text of the refrain and first stanza for each *Cantiga*. Furthermore, the texts he used at the time have also been subsequently updated and improved. No complete edition has as yet been created that supersedes it; with that said, however, numerous scholars have critiqued, updated, and built upon Anglés' work, most prolifically Manuel Pedro Ferreira. In addition to the bibliography here, both Joseph Snow's critical bibliography on Alfonso X and the online research database for the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* at Oxford University are excellent, thorough resources for locating further material.

Features of the *Cantigas*

Setting aside the problematic issues of rhythm and meter, the *Cantigas* have many other fascinating and more clearly ascertainable features. With regard to pitch, they operate within the

⁷ Manuel Pedro Ferreira, "Editing the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*: Notational Decisions," *Revista Portuguesa de Musicologia*, nova série 1, no. 1 (2014): 33–52.

⁸ See Felipe Pedrell, *Seis cantigas, transcritas y armonizadas con acompañamiento de órgano o harmonio. Textos originales y versiones en castellano* (Barcelona: Vidal Llimona y Boceta, 1905–19??); *Cancionero musical popular español*, vols. 1–3 (Barcelona: Editorial Valls, 1918–1922).

⁹ Julián Ribera y Tarragó, *La música de las cantigas: estudio sobre su origen y naturaleza con reproducciones fotográficas del texto y transcripción moderna* (Madrid: RAE, 1922); republished and abridged as *Music in Ancient Arabia and Spain* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1929).

¹⁰ Higiní Anglés, *La Música de las Cantigas de Santa María del Rey Alfonso el Sabio* (Barcelona: Diputación Provincial de Barcelona, Biblioteca Central, 1943–64). See also Campbell, "Words and Music in the Cantigas de Santa Maria: The Cantigas as Song," 82ff.

confines of the medieval modes, most frequently modes 1 and 7 (Dorian and Mixolydian). The *Cantigas* were thoughtfully organized as a collection; each is appropriately numbered, and while almost all are “*cantigas de miragres*”—songs recounting miracles performed by Mary, every tenth song is a “*cantiga de loor*”—a hymn of praise. Structurally, the vast majority of the songs follow the form of the *virelai* (normally given as AbbaA, where A is the refrain), and most of the rest use a *rondeau* form. Manuel Pedro Ferreira explains that this latter form has regional variants, and that both the French and Andalusian *rondeau* forms appear in the *Cantigas*; the Andalusian version is, significantly, not found in other medieval Christian repertory.¹¹ Furthermore, these forms exhibit strong connections with the poetic song forms [muwashshah](#) and [zajal](#) (*zéjel*). Both terms were known as early as the twelfth century, the *muwashshah* in a treatise by Ibn Bassām and the *zajal* in the works of Ibn Quzmān; the former originated in ninth-century Spain, the latter possibly later in Muslim Spain, although according to Ferreira its exact origins are unclear. Both were certainly popular genres in Alfonso’s time and were ones with which he was personally acquainted.¹² In this respect, the *virelai* of the *Cantigas* is not quite what one might encounter in other, later places.

The *Cantigas* usually begin with a refrain, or *estribillo*, in which the narrator summarizes the story about to be told; each then continues into the story, which takes place over five or more strophes. Each strophe usually contains four verses of 14 syllables each, although occasionally other numbers of verses or syllables are present. At the end of the story, the narrator’s voice frequently returns to remind all listeners to also praise Mary for her deeds. [Cantiga 159: “Non sofre Santa Maria”](#) is a good example of the common form and structure of these songs. It begins with a refrain in which the narrator explains that Mary will not allow those performing a pilgrimage in her name to suffer. The narrator then recounts, over seven strophes of four 15-syllable verses each, a miracle that Mary performed for some pilgrims traveling to Rocamadour, wherein they found that while at prayer, the servant girl had stolen their meat for dinner. After once again beseeching Mary to help them, they find their missing chop hidden within a chest, and upon this discovery they call upon the townspeople to come bear witness, after which they hang the chop by a silken cord in front of her altar as a reminder of the miracles that she performs.¹³

Interpretations of the *Cantigas*

As the entire collection of *Cantigas* is monophonic, modern recordings have approached these songs with a number of creative approaches. Some performers have chosen to perform them monophonically, with no added accompaniment, whereas others have drawn inspiration from the beautiful illuminations of performers at Alfonso’s court within the manuscript sources as to the kinds of instruments that might have been used, as well as possible performance practices. Given

¹¹ Ferreira, “Rondeau and Virelai: The Music of Andalus, and the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.” *Plainsong & Medieval Music* 13:2 (2004): 127–140.

¹² Ferreira, “The Medieval Fate of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*: Iberian Politics Meets Song.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69:2 (2016): 295–353. See also Leo J. Plenckers, “The *Cantigas de Santa María* and the Moorish *Muwaššah*: Another Way of Comparing their Musical Structures.” *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 1 (1993): 354–57.

¹³ See Kulp-Hill, trans., *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, The Wise*, 194.

the multicultural nature of Alfonso's court, as well as the relationships that the *Cantigas* have with Arab- and Hebrew-inspired poetry and song, a number of recent recordings have also explored Middle Eastern and North African performance styles, with regard to both instrumentation and ornamentation of the vocal line.

In this respect, the *Cantigas*, as well as other Spanish music of the time, have occasionally been over-romanticized as musical representatives of Alfonso's tolerant kingdom. It is important to note again that, while many of the *Cantigas* portray women, Jews, and Moors or Muslims, they often draw on pre-existing stories that were strongly anti-Semitic and treat non-Christians as ignorant or even dangerous. Modern performers are certainly within their rights not to perform repertory that is offensive or inappropriate, and yet to select only those *Cantigas* that represent the open-mindedness we might wish to see in Alfonso's court is to present a one-dimensional portrait of the past. The Mary of the *Cantigas* protects those not of her faith and rewards them for faithful or respectful behavior, but she also saves Christians who suffer at the hands of Jews and Moors in a variety of colorful ways (see, for example, *Cantiga* 286, in which Mary collapses a portico onto several Jews who had laughed at a Christian man at prayer). The world depicted in the *Cantigas* is a vibrant, emotional, personal, sometimes contradictory one, one that is firmly situated within a particular historical context that deserves to be fully explored.

Conclusion

As one of the largest collections of monophonic song, as the largest collection of *Cantigas*, and as a repertory that demonstrates unique choices in language, poetic and literary structure, and subject matter, the *Cantigas* are an important body of musical works. They continue to offer challenges with regard to medieval notation, often thwarting the best of intentions for performance editions. They also continue to reflect broader musical, historical and cultural issues: the relationships between oral and written traditions; the development, even blending, of literary and musical practices in a multicultural society; and the modern interpretation of the past.

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Select Discography

A highly recommended comprehensive discography compiled for the *Cantigas* can be found online at this site: <http://www.medieval.org/emfaq/composers/cantigas.html>

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