

Summary

Villancico as an example of secular Renaissance music of the countries of the Iberian Peninsula in the aspect of contemporary performance practice

Villancico is a characteristic song form that originated in the Iberian Peninsula. The genesis of this genre dates back to the Middle Ages. For nearly eight centuries, the Peninsula was under Muslim rule. The shaping of the characteristic features of the villancico was influenced by specific conditions, mainly related to the rich Arab heritage. The term “villancico” first appeared in the 15th century and meant a folk song sung in a vernacular language. As time, villancicos found their way to courts, where they gained great popularity. They have also become the most typical form practised by court poets and musicians. In their form, villancicos resembled songs derived from medieval poetry. Their development was influenced by leading European centers such as the Netherlands, France and Italy. The most famous villancicos composers are: Juan del Encina, Francisco de Peñalosa, Mateo Flecha, Juan Vasquez, Francisco Guerrero. However, many of the villancicos songs appearing in the manuscripts and first editions remain anonymous.

Villancicos, depending on the poetic form, were not uniform in size, structure, texture or subject matter. They usually had several stanzas (coplas) separated by a refrain (estribillo) that appeared at the beginning and at the end of the song. The lyrics of the songs were written in various languages and dialects of the Iberian Peninsula and their mixture is a characteristic feature of them.

The songs, full of folk, dancing character, illustrate everyday life and important events for the people of that time. They show human emotions and passions, tell about love, suffering or longing, but also about betrayal and even murder. A particular thematic section is represented by villancicos on Christmas and religious subjects, performed during church celebrations. The polyphonic secular forms of villancicos developed intensively in the 15th and 16th centuries. At the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, the religious-themed villancico became more popular, while the secular forms disappeared and were forgotten for many centuries. In the 17th century, religious villancicos took on a polychoral vocal-instrumental form, reminiscent of a vocal concert. They were performed during liturgies, solemn holidays or processions. In the 19th century, the villancicos lost their artistic quality, but still remained popular in Spain and Latin America as Christmas carols. The meaning of the name "villancico" was then limited to a Christmas carol and is associated as such today.

Contemporary performance of villancicos, like that of all early music, should be based on an analysis of the original sources and a knowledge of historical practice. During the performance of the repertoire there are many problems of interpretation which the conductor has to solve. They are related to the choice of an appropriate performing ensemble: vocal and instrumental, the size of the cast and the type of voices and instruments used, as well as tuning and transposition.

Further issues concern the interpretation of old musical notation, which differs significantly from the present one. Problems related to improvisation and ornamentation deserve special attention. An important element of performance is also the use of appropriate voice emission technique. Many historical guidelines concerning old conventions and styles can be found in Renaissance treatises and textbooks. Instructions on the methods of developing vocal and instrumental parts in Renaissance songs are helpful in arranging a selected repertoire of villancicos.

Villancico remains the most characteristic and recognisable musical form of the Iberian Peninsula. As it originates from folk music, which is full of vigour and excitement, it can be an interesting proposition for young people singing in chamber choirs and vocal ensembles.