

Who were the Organists of the Oaxaca Cathedral?

Ryszard Rodys

Over the course of several years, the Instituto de Órganos Históricos de Oaxaca (IOHIO) has supported research in various local archives, a project which has led to the discovery of valuable information about the organs and the people who built and played them as well as an insight into a most interesting period in the history of Oaxacan music. Although the IOHIO has published various references to the organs, only one of them has focused on the people who played them.¹ In the hopes of learning more about this little-known sector of Oaxacan society, our research began to concentrate on the organists specifically associated with the Oaxaca Cathedral, because the extensive collection of documents in the Cathedral Archives (Archivo Histórico de la Arquidiócesis de Antequera-Oaxaca or AHAAO) would have registered activities and expenses related to the organs. The information which has come to light has corroborated the importance of the Oaxaca Cathedral, not only as the most important religious center in the area, but also as a backdrop for the activities of daily life in the city. Above all, it has revealed the development over the course of centuries of a particularly interesting professional group in Oaxacan society: the church organists.

The position of the Cathedral organist

The diocese of Oaxaca was founded in 1535 and a year later, the position of Cathedral organist was officially established. Due to a lack of documentation, the names of the first organists are unknown, and this is also true for the period between 1605 and 1646. The first reference to an organist dates from 1584, Juan Ponce, who was active in the Cathedral until 1586. From then on until 1980, when the position was abolished, a total of 34 musicians held the post. At the beginning of the 18th century a position was created for a second organist and this lasted until 1842. In the 1770's the Cathedral actually had four organists: the titular organist, a helper for him, and two second organists. From 1862 to 1865 in the face of political and economic problems, the position of organist was temporarily suspended, then reinstated until 1980. Over the course of time, at least 50 organists were employed in the Oaxaca Cathedral.

The organist's salary

The musicians of the Oaxaca Cathedral were included among the city's cultural elite, but within this group organists had a special place in keeping with the importance of their position. Only the music directors (*maestros de capilla*) and the choir directors (*sochantres*) garnered more respect and of course earned a higher salary than the organists.

The first salary an organist was set in 1536 at 16 pesos a year. Over the course of the 16th century, payments gradually increased, arriving at the sum of between 40 and 60

¹ See IOHIO Newsletter No. 14, pp. 14-19 for the publication about the Oaxacan nun Sor María Clara del Santísima Sacramento, organist in the Conceptionist convent of Regina Coeli.

pesos during the last decade. A century later, the organist earned 100 pesos a year and by 1711 the payment had doubled. In 1789 Maestro Juan Martínez (1786 - 1795)² was paid 300 pesos a year, the highest salary ever for an organist. It should be noted that organists often held down other jobs, such as cantor, harpist, violinist, music teacher for children, or organ tuner, in order to supplement their income. Juan Martínez was able to earn 150 pesos more for other work. Forty years later, Fray Ignacio Bohórguez (1826 - 1834) received 500 pesos a year for the following services: 250 pesos as an organist, 100 pesos as a singer, 100 pesos as a children's instructor, and 50 pesos as a tuner. During the Reform Period (1857-1861), the organist's salary was drastically reduced to 8 pesos a month or 96 pesos a year. At the end of the 19th century, the salary was approximately 15 pesos a month and by the first decades of the 20th century, it had increased to 30 pesos a month.³

The responsibilities of the job

The organist was theoretically obligated to comply with the general regulations of the church, but in practice each one worked out a personal arrangement with the Chapter (*Cabildo* or ruling council of the Cathedral) in defining his specific obligations and responsibilities. In 1536 by decree of the bishop, the organist was obligated to *"play the organs on feast days and at other times, as the prelate and the chapter decide"*. The contracts of Tomás de Cárdenas (1647 - after 1650) and Domingo de Herrera (1664 - 1709), who were both singers and organists, stated their obligation to name a substitute to play the organ when they had to sing. Another interesting case is that of Lucas José Morales (1796 - 1823, 1826 - 1827) who was also *"obligated to sing and play an instrument other than those he knew whenever necessary, according to the decision of the music director"*.

At that time, the first organist was obligated to play 730 times a year, while the second had to *"be present at all important events and substitute for the first organist whenever he was sick"*. In 1823, two new organists were appointed, Feliciano Suárez and Juan Alcayde (both of whom maintained the position for only a few months), and the Chapter emphasized that *"it wanted an exact fulfillment of their respective obligations"*. As of 1897 it was determined that the organist had *"the obligation to play the organ (...) and to make sure that the organ is always up to date"*.

Number of years of service

Many organists served the Oaxaca Cathedral for most of their professional lives, until they were granted retirement *"for being old and tired"*. Worthy of mention are Manuel de Aguilar (1716 - 1761) for a total of 44 years and 8 months of service, Domingo de Herrera for 44 years and nearly 2 months, and Guadalupe Ortiz (1868 - 1911) for 41 years. Also noteworthy is the number of years of service of the last organist in the Cathedral, Heriberto Sánchez Tovar (1968 - 1980). Even though he was the organist in the Cathedral for only 13 years, he then was named organist in the Basílica de la Soledad,

The dates refer to the organist's years of service in the Cathedral.

This is a symbolic comparison, since the real value of currency varied over time.

where he continues as titular organist until the present day. His total number of years of service to the church in the city of Oaxaca is 57 years. There were also organists who lasted a short time in the Cathedral, such as Feliciano Suárez for 2 months and 6 days and Santiago de Chapultepec (1716) for only 1 month and 19 days.

Family relationships

It was common during the past for relatives to follow in the same profession and this is well documented by the various genealogical links among organists. The documents cite brothers: Manuel and Juan (1735 - 1746) de Aguilar; Mariano (1769 - 1775) and Juan Martínez, and Feliciano and Dionisio (1860 - 1862, 1865 - 1867) Suárez; fathers and sons: Manuel José (1769 -1786) and José Domingo Matos (1782 - 1794) and Juan and José Domingo Martínez (1794 - 1823, 1851 - 1852); father in law and son in law Lucas José Morales and Feliciano Suárez; grandfather and grandson: Manuel José y José María Matos (1823 - 1825, 1832 - 1833, 1841 - 1851); and uncle and nephew: José Domingo and José María Matos, and Mariano and José Domingo Martínez.

Place of origin and social status

Most of the organists of the Oaxaca Cathedral were from Oaxaca, with the exception of the first organists who came from Spain. Two organists were from Puebla, Melchor de Rojas y Sandoval (1662-1664) and Juan de Florentín (1751-1760) and one from Morelia, Heriberto Sánchez Tovar.

Organists represented the entire range of racial groups in New Spain. There were Spaniards: Juan de Florentín, Lorenzo Antonio Morales (1748 - 1750, 1760 - 1769, 1774 - 1775), Rafael Gris (1786 - 1794) and Marcelino Medina (1834 - 1841); indigenous: Alonso de Guzmán (1589-1596), Marcos de Arellano (1600 - after 1604), José Antonio de Salazar (1709 - 1716) and Lucas Morales; *mestizos*: the brothers Feliciano and Dionisio Suárez; *castizos*: the members of the Martínez family; *morisco*: José Bernardo Abella Grijalva (1776 - 1781); *mulatos*: the members of the Matos family; and one negro: Francisco de Rivera (? - 1662).

Among the organists one finds the rich, like Rafael Gris, member of an illustrious Spanish family, as well as the poor, like Francisco de Rivera who was the slave of the music director Juan de Rivera. Some organists were members of the clergy including the priests Melchor de Rojas y Sandoval, Domingo de Herrera, Santiago de Chapultepec, Margarito Álvarez (1911 - 1920), and an Augustinian friar, Ignacio Bohórquez.

Professional conduct

The Chapter was intent on having music of the best possible quality in the Cathedral, recognizing full well the importance of music in reinforcing the faith. The first organists, though unknown, were certainly Spaniards, and they took it upon themselves to train talented natives as musicians. By the end of the 16th century, indigenous Oaxacans had attained the requisite level to be able to play the organ in the Cathedral (Alonso de Guzmán and Marcos de Arellano). The golden age for music in the Oaxaca Cathedral spanned the century from the mid-17th to the mid- 18th centuries, and one can assume that the quality of the organ music was outstanding (and many were renowned for their

excellent work).

Several indigenous or low-status organists were recognized and rewarded. Francisco de Rivera was a slave, but because of his excellent work, earned the privilege of being buried in the Cathedral. This signified a major advance in his social status, even though this recognition took place after his death. Domingo de Herrera was granted a stipend for life because of his faithful fulfillment of his obligations. The indigenous José Antonio de Salazar received a huge salary increase, from 100 to 200 pesos. Manuel Aguilar started out as an apprentice and within four years was rewarded for his abilities with a salary of 200 pesos. Manuel José Matos and Juan Martínez were recognized for their punctuality, ability, and responsibility in carrying out the orders of the Chapter.

During the last years of the 18th century however, discipline problems seem to have arisen among the organists, because most of the references cite negative rather than positive behavior. In 1794 the second organist Rafael Gris simply said “*I don’t want to*” when asked to play the organ and was promptly fired. In 1809 Lucas Morales and José Domingo Martínez were reprimanded for continuous absences and habitual drunkenness. In 1817 one of the canon complained that “*Martínez doesn’t go, Morales is missing, and the liturgy is suffering*”. In spite of these complaints, the Chapter put up with them because they were such good musicians. The professional level reached its nadir in the second half of the 19th century when during the exam of 1855, the Chapter decided that the level of competence of the candidates was so low, that they had to name Bonifacio Hurtado (1853 - 1859) to the post because he was the only one who knew Gregorian chant. Later on, however, organists did appear to have the necessary skills for the job, because when the post was abolished in 1980, it was not for the lack of competence of the organist, but rather for the lack ofsomeone to pump the bellows.⁴

Conclusion

A study of the organists of the Oaxaca Cathedral touches on many aspects of the culture they were part of---history, economics, culture, religion, ethnicity, and family relationships. Although it focuses on only one profession, it reflects at the same time the overall historical activity of the city. And like the city, the profession of organist had its glorious moments of triumph and grandeur, as well as its painful moments of decadence and failure. It clearly reflects man as a creator as well as a creation of culture. The members of this group seem like an old Oaxacan family, whose roots go back to the 16th century, and whose talents allowed them to accompany the divine office with organ music for centuries.

Unfortunately the position of Cathedral organist has remained vacant for 29 years. Now it is up to the Oaxacan community to revive the traditions of their ancestors and reinstate the organ into the liturgy once again. Did the story of the Cathedral organists finish in 1980? That depends on us.

* This article is a summary of an extensive study about the organs, organ builders and organists in the Oaxaca Cathedral. To read the complete publication including specific archive references, please click [here](#).

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After the most recent intervention in the organ in 1997, an electric motor was installed which replaced the function of the person who pumped the bellows.