

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



The Jouyssance Early Music Ensemble performs "Convidando esta la noche," the closing song for "Spirit Child." (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Matthew Ian Welch)



by Gustavo Arellano

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

January 10, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The Christmas season just ended, which means my wife is finally setting aside her holiday playlist.

It's hundreds of tunes long, with the classics (the soundtrack to "A Charlie Brown Christmas," of course), the novelty (ever heard the Christmas album by Jamaican dancehall legend Yellowman? You should!) and the overlooked gems (everyone loves "Islands in the Stream," but not enough people know about Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers' 1984 album "Once Upon a Christmas").

My entries include bluegrass, soul and zydeco contributions, along with Latin American *navideño* classics such as "El Burrito de Belén" and "Peces en el Río." This past December, though, I added tracks from a recital I participated in with Christmas music few people have ever heard.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Catholic composers in Latin America fused European, African and Indigenous musical styles to create Nativity choral works that reflected the meeting of cultures at a momentous time in world history.

I first heard those works at a music store listening station decades ago, and remember being immediately impressed by everything about them. The use of medieval Spanish and Indigenous languages. Melodies better suited for a medieval castle supported by rhythms straight from a *pachanga* — a party. Pieces that simultaneously sounded ancient and contemporary — a metaphor for the Latin American condition then and now.

You can find examples of them on Spotify, but live performances are exceedingly rare in an era where audiences would rather attend the umpteenth rendition of "The Nutcracker" or Yuletide school pageants instead of something new.

Advertisement

That's why I was thrilled when I got a Slack message about that music from Steve Padilla. My Los Angeles Times colleague is a features editor who transforms the rough copy of us writers into diamonds. We also love his cheery disposition and limber tenor. He puts the latter to good use as a member of [Jouyssance Early Music Ensemble](#), a Southern California-based vocal group that brings pre-Baroque songs to modern-day audiences.

A decade ago, the group commissioned "[Spirit Child](#)," a performance based on the works of [Bernardino de Sahagún](#), the Franciscan most famous for his account of the conquest of Mexico. Lesser known are his hundreds of psalms for every day of the liturgical calendar and his own version of the Nativity using Aztec imagery like quetzal birds and jewels to better resonate with Indigenous neophytes.

Jouyssance turned Sahagún's work into a *pastorela* — a Christmastime shepherd's play performed in Mexico and the American Southwest that focuses not on the Holy Family but the kind-but-clumsy shepherds on their way to visit them.

Steve told me he updated "Spirit Child" for Jouyssance's current season and planned to play Bartolo, the Homer Simpson of the genre. Would I be willing to narrate?

He sent me a script along with YouTube links to the titles that "Spirit Child" would perform. The music sounded incredible, but I still didn't know what to expect when we had our dress rehearsal at Church of the Angels Sanctuary in Pasadena, just a day before our two-night run.

The opening number was "[Hanacpachap Cussicuinin](#)" ("Heaven's Joy"), a 1631 processional hymn to Mary written in Quechua, the language of the Incas. I stood at a raised pulpit near the altar as the Jouyssance singers walked toward me while following artistic director Nicole Baker, who played a recorder while someone else banged slowly on a drum. They spread out before the altar, then unleashed a polyphony of voices that immediately warmed the chilly chapel.

This anonymous Incan Quechua hymn, "Hanacpachap Cussicuinin" ("Heaven's Joy"), is considered to be the first published polyphonic work in the New World. (YouTube/Matthew Ian Welch)

I couldn't understand all the lyrics — the Spanish was centuries old, and my family lost our Indigenous language long, long ago. But over the next two hours of practice, I lived in an aural and philosophical time warp. The euphoric Jouyssance members evoked not just the birth of Christ, but the birth of Mexico itself.

The country of my parents is one where violence is unfortunately our baptismal font, whether the conquest, the War of Independence, the Mexican Revolution or the troubles of today. What has maintained many Mexicans all this time is faith in God and the good that surrounds him — most famously through our veneration for the Virgin of Guadalupe, but also in the possibility of creating beauty from trauma.

That mixing — *mestizaje* — is the founding myth of the Mexican people, and I felt it in every stanza Jouyssance belted out.

There were Nahuatl lullabies, mestizo versions of the Magnificat, and invitations to celebrate the newborn Emmanuel in Afro-Portuguese. My favorite piece was "Al establo más dichoso" ("To the Happiest Barn") by [Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla](#), a Spaniard who composed in 17th-century Mexico. Accompanied by a 10-string Baroque guitar and a hand drum, the undulating rhythms and powerful vocals reminded me of a *son*, the foundational style of most Mexican music and veered between soloists, duets and chants.

The composers of that era — the anonymous author of "Hanacpachap Cussicuinin," Padilla, his protégé [Juan García de Zéspedes](#), whose stirring "[Convidando esta la noche](#)" was the closer for "Spirit Child" — knew that they living in a new era, and looked to a manger in the Holy Land for guidance on how to manage.

This quintessentially Mexican villancico "Convidando esta la noche" is by Juan García de Zéspedes (1619-78), who spent much of his career at the cathedral in his native Puebla, Mexico. (YouTube/Matthew Ian Welch)

Indigenous Catholics were just a few generations removed from the gods of their ancestors and had to deal with the indignity of living under an empire that felt that their old customs had no place in this new world. The pieces Jouyssance performed were an affirmation of who the new faithful were, as Catholics and as humans. Every word, every line was full of tension, excitement and awe — emotions we should all keep in our heart during the Christmas season.

Jouyssance performed at Holy Nativity Parish in the LA neighborhood of Westchester and St. Luke's in the suburb of Monrovia. (Both are Episcopalian parishes, along with the Church of the Angels; God bless our Anglican cousins!) Both nights were packed. I dutifully narrated the shepherd's journey to Bethlehem and got laughs for also playing the devil who unsuccessfully tried to lead them astray. A short clip I uploaded to Instagram drew dozens of remarks from followers who wished they were there.

Friends of mine who did attend said they had never heard devotional music like this before and asked when "Spirit Child" would happen again. I'm not sure — Jouyssance isn't a one-trick pony, after all. But at least I'll be able to play these treasures at my wife's store next December, bringing wonders of the past to a present that needs it.