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Golden Age *poesía de negros* and Orlando di Lasso's *moresche*: A possible connection

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The moresca is a literary-musical form that appeared in 16th-century Naples as an offshoot of a genre variously called canzone villanesca, villotta, villanella or napolitana, all of these describing a secular song in the Neapolitan dialect (Cardamone, 25-27; 155). The first known collection to consist entirely of moresche was published in 1555 (Cardamone, 21; 158-59). The genre, whose protagonists are African slaves, was short-lived and never achieved wide popularity. The musicologist Alfred Einstein describes its essence as follows: “it [the moresca] never has stanzaic form, but is rather a show piece for the entertainment of Neapolitan society and Venetian patricians. Musically speaking, it includes occasional parody of the madrigal, interspersed street ballads, African folklore, spoken gibberish (to add to the humorous element); the lewdness of the situation and the text is sometimes abysmal and diabolic” (Einstein, vol. 1, p. 373; cited in Cardamone, 158).

The immediate antecedents of the moresca are unknown. Cardamone (159) and Williams (24-26) have pointed to a possible connection between the moresca and a dance of the same name, also known as ballo alla maltese or ballo di sfessania, some of the characters of which are Moorish slaves. A connection with the commedia dell'arte and its stock characters has also been proposed (Williams 5; Katritzky 75-76). In this note, I suggest that the moresca may be connected to yet another source, namely, poesía de negros, which occupied a prominent place in the contemporary Spanish music, theater and letters.

In 1581 Orlando di Lasso, a famous Belgian-born composer, published a collection of songs he had reportedly written in his youth, Libro de villanelle, moresche, et altre canzoni a 4, 5, 6, et 8 voci (Erb, 18-19; Williams, 3; 7). The collection consists of twenty-three songs, fifteen of which are written in Neapolitan, one is a todesca imitating the broken Italian of German mercenaries (no. 12), one a padovana (no. 17), and the remaining six moresche imitating the language of African slaves (nos. 8, 13, 16, 18, 19, 20 and part of 23) (Reese, 444; Williams, 4). The moresca of immediate interest to the argument of this paper is Canta, Giorgia, which is no. 20 in this collection; its full text is reproduced in the Appendix to this note. Canta, Giorgia consists of three loosely connected parts, in the first of which a white master or mistress -- gente ianca -- asks an African slave, Giorgio, to sing (“Canta, Giorgia, canta”); which he refuses saying: “Giorgia non pote cantar!” In the second part, Giorgio talks to his sweetheart Lucia, and in the third part of this composition he sings a lewd song, accompanying himself on the lute.

The first part of Canta, Giorgia is strongly reminiscent of an old Spanish nursery rhyme (“un cantarcillo viejo, con que acallavan los niños”) quoted under “Argolla” in Covarrubias’s Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española:

Canta, Jorgico, canta,
no quere canta.
Canta Jorge por tu fe,
y verás que te daré:
una argolla para el pie,
y otra para la garganta;
no quere canta.

More significantly, Canta, Giorgia as a whole is reminiscent of the early 16th-century Verses of How a Lady Begg a Black Slave to Sing to Her, attributed to Rodrigo de Reinosa, that are based on the above nursery rhyme (Hill, 18). The fully descriptive title of the piece attributed to Reinosa is Coplas de como una dama ruega a vn negro que cante en manera de requiebro: y como el negro se dexa rogar en fin la señora vencida de su gracia le ofrece su persona (Rodríguez-Moñino, Diccionario, no. 824). The similarity between Canta, Giorgia and the above coplas goes beyond the merely textual correspondences (cf. “Canta, Jorgico, canta, / no quere canta.” with “Canta, Giorgio, canta” and “Giorgia non pote cantar!”) and includes the internal progression of each piece, in which the slave (Jorge or Giorgio), urged to sing by a female companion, at first refuses and then relents. Other characteristics of Canta, Giorgia are not specific to this piece but are shared by the other moresche; they include the intentionally comic effect of the distorted variety of the Romance language used by the characters, mimicking of the sound of musical instruments, and the use of theatrical improvisation. These characteristics make the moresca similar in both essence and form to Spanish poesía de negros, as it appears in the letters, theater and music of the Golden Age (Operstein; Santos).

The vogue for poesía de negros in Golden Age Spain was prompted by the presence in that country of a large population of African origin. According to some studies, the number of African slaves in mid-sixteenth-century Spain was the largest in Europe (Lawrance, 70), and the presence of the large African population was amply reflected in the contemporary literature, theater and music. Since at least the second half of the fifteenth century, the literary representations of black Africans began to reflect their imperfectly acquired Spanish in the form of a speech mode known to contemporaries as habla bozal or habla de negro. The earliest genre to assimilate the new element were secular songs, and the earliest known compositions of this type are two sets of coplas by Rodrigo de Reinosa, believed to have been written before the 16th century. Other contemporary genres to feature habla de negros include the theater, teatro menor and poesía a lo divino (Operstein, 38ff; Santos, 41ff). A combination of imitation and stereotyping, habla de negros was employed mainly for its humoristic effect, a fact underlined by such hilarious but improbable distortions as puta, Cagalina and cagayeros (for puerta, Catalina and caballero, respectively) (Lipski, 71-94; Santos, 232-233).

Given the numerous correspondences between the moresca and poesía de negros, it is legitimate to ask whether the brief vogue for the moresca in southern Italy may owe its origin to the corresponding phenomenon of 16th-century Spanish culture. That the direction of borrowing was from the Spanish cultural

scene to its counterpart in southern Italy, rather than vice versa, is suggested by the overall historical context of African slavery in Renaissance Europe, the short-lived popularity of the moresca by comparison with a much more entrenched tradition of representing African-sounding speech in the Hispanic letters, as well as the relevant dates of publication.

Verses of How a Lady Begs a Black Slave to Sing to Her must have been printed before or during 1524. This date is suggested by the fact that the pliego suelto containing this composition is catalogued in Fernando Colón's library as bought on November 3, 1524. Lasso's piece Canta, Giorgia, on the other hand, was most probably written between 1549 and 1551, when the composer resided in Naples (Erb, 4-6). Given the large Spanish population in Naples at the time and the impact it undoubtedly had on the cultural life of the city, it is very probable that the anonymous poet that wrote the lyrics for Lasso's moresche could, at least in the case of Canta, Giorgia, have been inspired by these coplas and/or similar pieces performed during the presentation of Spanish plays. Spanish poets were second to none in their ability to exploit the comic effect of their language imperfectly acquired by African slaves, and it is highly plausible that the vogue for poesía de negros in southern Italy owed its origin to a prolonged contact with 16th-century Spanish culture.

Appendix

Canta, Giorgia, canta
che bede namolata!
Giorgia non pote cantar!
Che sta murta, passionata?
Tutta negra sta storduta
quando bene gente ianca,
Canta, Giorgia, canta!

Alla cura
che de cua,
siamo, siamo
bernaguala!

Pamini, Lucia, Pamini!
Che patrona vol francare,
vo dar marit', oi me!
Piglia, piglia, gente lurma,
che vo far gonell'a tia,
a ti cilum corachi bischine,
a Regina ti mai gara.

Tin-che tinc.
Messer dorma, dorma,
Parino sotto lietto,

Madonna gamb'in collo,
Messere grida, grida,
Madonna fuia, fuia,
Parin sona zampogna,
Armare Reio io gua gua!

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Notes

(1) I would like to thank Derek C. Carr for his valuable comments and Antonio Santos Morillo for sharing with me his unpublished dissertation.

(2) A facsimile edition of these coplas may be viewed in Rodríguez-Moñino, Los pliegos poéticos de la colección del marqués de Morbecq, 157-60.

(3) This is item number 4104 in the Regestrum. After the title and description, the rubric states: "Costó en Medina del Campo 3 blancas a 23 noviembre de 1524" (Rodríguez-Moñino, Los pliegos poéticos de la biblioteca colombina, item 139).

(4) Reproduced from Haberl, Sandberger, vol. 10, 125-129.