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Review

María Gembero-Ustárrroz, ed. **Música para mujeres en la España del siglo XVIII: Obras de Francisco de la Huerta para el Monasterio de Santa Ana de Ávila (1767-1778)**. Monumentos de la Música Española, Volume 87. Madrid: CSIC, 2025.

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The rich musical culture and repertoire performed by nuns within convents and female monasteries remain underrepresented in mainstream narratives of music history. This is particularly apparent in the Spanish and Latin American contexts, given the substantial number of convents and female monasteries in those territories during the early modern period, where music was an integral aspect of daily life, as I have discussed in several articles and in my review of César D. Favila's book *Immaculate Sounds* published in this journal (*Diagonal* vol. 9, no. 2, 2024).

Although catalogues and studies devoted to this repertoire have multiplied over the past four decades, comparatively little of the music preserved in their archives has appeared in modern editions. Among those, editions from the eighteenth century predominate, including Paulino Capdepón's two volumes (Alpuerto, 1997 and 1999) of music from the female monasteries of La Encarnación and Las Descalzas Reales, both in Madrid, Luisa Morales' edition (Institución Fernando el Católico, 1997) of the keyboard music preserved at the Monastery of San Pedro de Las Dueñas (León), and, more recently, Águeda Pedrero-Encabo and Antonio Soriano's edition (ICCMU, 2026) of a sonata by Blasco de Nebra from the convent of Santa Clara in Sevilla.

Vocal music from the Santa Ana de Ávila monastery has recently been the subject of two important publications: Alfonso de Vicente's book (Reichenberger, 2026) and the volume under review by María Gembero. Both works are highly regarded for their substantial contribution to expanding the repertoire composed for and performed by nuns in the Hispanic world.

In her introductory study, Gembero, an esteemed Senior Research Scientist in musicology at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), explains that this publication is the first of a projected two-volume edition comprising seventy-eight compositions by Francisco de la Huerta Romanos (Borja, Zaragoza, 1733–Pamplona, 1814), written for the Monastery of Santa Ana in Ávila during his tenure as chapel master between 1767 and 1778. The present volume contains forty-three arias and recitatives, while the remaining twenty-five works—including villancicos, duets, and trios—are to appear in the second volume of the set. All the compositions are preserved in the monastery's musical archive, whose catalogue was published by Alfonso de Vicente in 1989.

The Monastery of Santa Ana in Ávila was founded in the twelfth century. Like many female convents in Castile, it was established under noble patronage and benefited from regular endowments that ensured its economic prosperity. Between 1502 and 1529, Bishop Carrillo de Albornoz incorporated Ávila's two other Cistercian convents, Santa Escolástica and San Millán, into Santa Ana. In 1978, the community relocated to a new site outside the city walls, on the southern outskirts of Ávila. Santa Ana preserves a rich collection of music in its archives, including hundreds of compositions dedicated to the

nuns. According to Alfonso de Vicente, the activity of nun musicians reached its peak during the eighteenth century. Numerous testimonies of this extensive activity are available: archival records and music scores, in addition to several eighteenth-century instruments, offer valuable insights for performing this repertoire. Among the instruments, there were three harps, including a cross-strung harp signed by Juan de la Torre. (the other two have since been sold); a psaltery by Ginés Roca, 1781; and a clavichord (ca. 1780), now in the Sigal Music Museum in Greenville, South Carolina (see [HERE](#)). Archival records also document the acquisition of a new organ between 1746 and 1749 and a harpsichord between 1783 and 1786.

The music chapel in Castilian female monasteries such as Santa Ana followed a well-defined organisational structure. The *vicaria de coro* occupied the highest position within the musical hierarchy; she was responsible for directing the choir and selecting suitable music for the celebrations. The *cantoras* were responsible for singing the solo parts, intoning the chant, maintaining the choir library, and assisted in directing the choir. Instruments in the music chapel often included violin, flute, bassoon, keyboards (organ, harpsichord), harp, psaltery and percussion and it was common for nun musicians to play several instruments. In some monasteries, there was a chapel master responsible for supplying and composing music, as at Santa Ana. Nevertheless, in practical terms, the nun-organist was often the principal musician in many female monastic establishments where the position of chapel master did not exist.

Francisco de la Huerta Romanos served as chapel master at Santa Ana between 1767 and 1778. Gembero traces his musical career, which was centred largely in the Rioja region apart from his years in Ávila. Huerta received his musical training at Tarazona Cathedral, where he served as violinist and bassoonist from 1755 to 1761. He was subsequently appointed second violinist at Ávila Cathedral, a position he retained until 1778 while concurrently serving as chapel master at Santa Ana. After leaving Ávila, he briefly held the chapel mastership at Santo Domingo de la Calzada before moving later that same year to the parish of San Miguel in Alfaro, where he remained until 1780. In that year he secured the prestigious post of chapel master at Pamplona Cathedral, which he held until his death. Gembero identifies approximately 174 surviving works by Huerta. The largest collections are preserved at Pamplona Cathedral (81 works) and Santa Ana (68), while smaller groups are found in the Church of San Miguel de Alfaro (8), the Monastery of El Escorial (8), the Royal Collegiate Church of Roncesvalles (4), Astorga Cathedral (2), Ávila Cathedral (2), and Jaca Cathedral (1).

All the works by Francisco de la Huerta preserved at Santa Ana and edited in this volume are settings of Spanish texts. They comprise twenty-five arias dedicated to the *Santísimo Sacramento* (that's for Corpus Christi's festivities), three for Christmas, and two for Epiphany, together with twelve arias dedicated to the saints of the Cistercian order: eight dedicated to St Bernard, three to St Benedict, and one to St Anne. The volume also includes an aria composed for the profession of Petronila Navarro (*Por el velo, Petronila / Feliz y dichosa Petrona*, no. 3), dated 1768. The authorship of the texts remains unknown.

Most of Huerta's arias were written for three particularly accomplished nun-musicians: María Alfonsa de Liébana (1739-1809), *cantora* (singer) and substitute for the harpist and organist; María Gertrudis Lasegue (1743-1781), *cantora* and violinist, and her sister María Teresa Lasegue (1746-1831), *cantora* and organist. With the sole exception of *En Campo esplendoroso, Aria al Nacimiento* (nº18), every aria is preceded by a recitative. Most are written in duple metre, although approximately one third shift to triple metre in their central section. Several display remarkable virtuosity, clearly reflecting the exceptional musical abilities of the three *cantoras* and their close association with the composer. The

scoring comprises soprano, first and second violin, and figured bass, which could be played on organ, harp, or harpsichord, with the bass line occasionally reinforced by a bassoon, an instrument commonly played by nuns in Castilian monasteries.

The edition is accompanied by a comprehensive critical apparatus, including a separate presentation of the poetic texts. As Gembero points out, some of the manuscript texts pose problems of metre and rhyme, and in a number of cases the transcription and layout of the verses must therefore be regarded as provisional. Editorial criteria encompass the modernisation of the poems' spelling and orthography as well as the modernisation of accidentals and repeat signs in the score. Additionally, certain Spanish musical terms found in the manuscripts have been replaced by their standard Italian equivalents—for example, *tiple* by *soprano*, *sin parar* by *attacca*, and *P.mo* by *pp*. As is customary in this repertory, the arias survive in *particellas*. The transcription into modern score is both welcome and indispensable; however, from a practical performance perspective, the inclusion of the instrumental parts would have considerably enhanced the edition. Too often, editions of newly recovered repertory overlook this important aspect, limiting their usefulness for performers. The volume is handsomely illustrated with reproductions of musical manuscripts, archival documents, and photographs of the Monastery of Santa Ana in Ávila.

Gembero's excellent study and transcription signify a pivotal advancement in the comprehension of Francisco de la Huerta's oeuvre and simultaneously constitute a significant contribution to the eighteenth-century repertoire particularly designed for performance by cloistered nuns. The edition is freely available in digital format through the publisher's website ([HERE](#)). Its open-access publication is particularly welcome and will hopefully encourage both performers and scholars to engage with a repertory that has remained largely inaccessible, thereby bringing this remarkable music to wider contemporary audiences.

Morales López del Castillo, Luisa. "Review: María Gembero-Ustárriz, ed. *Música para mujeres en la España del siglo XVIII: Obras de Francisco de la Huerta para el Monasterio de Santa Ana de Ávila (1767-1778)*. Monumentos de la Música Española, Volume 87. Madrid: CSIC, 2025." *Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review* 11, no. 2 (2026): 135–137.