

## Introduction to the Zarzuela

### WHAT IS THE ZARZUELA?

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When Philip IV was King of Spain in the 1600s, he would host hunting parties for favored members of court at his estate outside of Madrid. The hunting lodge on this estate was called La Zarzuela, because of the brambles (*zarzas*) that surrounded it. On rainy days, the King's guests could not hunt; they needed entertainment. So, the King would summon actors and musicians from Madrid, who would put on musical plays for the court's pleasure. These musical plays came to be called zarzuelas.

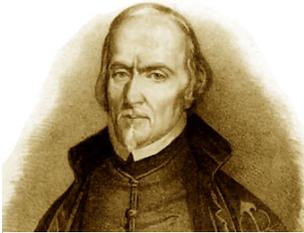


*La Zarzuela*

### ORIGINS

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The first composer of zarzuelas was Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681). He used the idea of the *comedia*, a funny and sometimes slapstick play featuring popular music and dances, and shortened it so that it was easier to perform. Since Italian opera was just becoming popular, he took some ideas from Italian composers and combined them with traditional Spanish forms. Calderón focused equally on music and poetry in these productions by turning some of the dialogue into songs. Occasionally he even had his singers sing their dialogue without music, an Italian technique called *recitative*. While the stories that he used were often heroic tales with ancient gods and goddesses, he also included some of the slapstick humor and popular dances of the *comedia*. Though he did not realize it, Calderón was creating the zarzuela, a new kind of musical theater.



*Calderon de la Barca*

The noblemen in King Philip's court loved the zarzuela, and productions at court became increasingly lavish, with elaborate costumes and complicated stage machinery that provided special effects. As its popularity grew, the zarzuela moved from being presented only in the king's court to also being performed in the public theaters and town squares, called *corrales*, so that everyone could see them. The most popular zarzuelas were even performed for the Spanish colonists living in what is now Latin and South America, what the Spanish called "New Spain." Because of their beautiful music, poetic text, and entertaining subject matter, the zarzuelas appealed to noblemen, peasants, and colonists alike, and they quickly became one of the dramatic forms most strongly associated with Spanish heritage.

### EARLY COMPOSERS

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More and more, the finest playwrights and composers were choosing to create zarzuelas. Among these was Sebastián Durón (1660-1716), a famous organist and composer in Madrid. Durón used many forms of Spanish music, but he is perhaps best known for his zarzuelas, including *Las Nuevas armas de amor*, which debuted to modern North American audiences in the Orchestra of New Spain's 2013 production in Dallas, Texas.



## ITALIAN INFLUENCE

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Jose de Nebra

When the Bourbon Philip V ascended the Spanish throne in 1700, he brought with him Italian operatic troupes. Savvy Spanish composers quickly incorporated the Italian influences of Vivaldi, Scarlatti, Porpora, and others into their compositions in order to gain royal favor. One such composer was Jose de Nebra, who wrote prolifically for the stage. Many of Nebra's zarzuelas were Italianate in style, featuring *secco* (dry) recitatives accompanied only by continuo, as well as *da capo* arias, which features a soloist accompanied by an orchestra.

## IPHIGENIA EN TRACIA

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Nebra's final zarzuela, *Iphigenia en Tracia*, debuted in Madrid in 1747, and continued the tradition of adapting Classical mythology for a baroque audience. The story is a loose continuation of the famous tragedy by Euripedes titled *Iphigenia in Aulis*. It imagines that the virtuous princess Iphigenia, who is spared from being sacrificed at the hands of her father in Euripedes' play, is a priestess to Artemis (Diana) in Thrace. There she is forced to sacrifice all foreigners who are shipwrecked on the island. The drama develops when Iphigenia's own brother, Orestes, and his friend Polydorus are shipwrecked and taken prisoner.



"Iphigenie" (1862)  
by Anselm Fuebach

*Iphigenia en Tracia* showcases the Italianate influences on the Spanish zarzuela. In "Gozaba el pecho mio," the character Dircea leaps between confidence and jealous fury in an electrifying *da capo* aria reminiscent of Vivaldi. The music also foreshadows the coming of the classical era, when simpler, more song-like melodies with clearer distinctions between soloist and orchestra became popular. In the quartet "Muera un afecto incierto," for instance, one can hear that the *galant* movement is just around the corner.

## ALLEGORY IN BAROQUE ZARZUELA

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"Allegory of Music"  
(between 1475 and 1500)  
by Filippino Lippi

The pastoral-mythological themes of Baroque musical theater naturally lean themselves to allegory, and the scoring of many operas and zarzuelas reflected this. Composers employed musical tropes and devices such as dissonant intervals, tremolo, pizzicato, as well as ascending and descending melodic lines to reinforce textual meaning. Likewise, individual instruments were used to express the mood and message of a scene. In *Iphigenia en Tracia*, for instance, Iphigenia's aria in Act 1 features interplay between strings and flute. This would have alerted the audience that Iphigenia deserved their sympathy, since the flute was often used to express purity of heart. The use of allegory in musical productions was so common that the era produced a form called the "simile" aria, which relates the singer's thoughts to a situation in the world at large. Be sure to listen for Polydorus' aria "Vacilante pensamiento," which describes a ship foundering in a storm and is a beautiful example of a simile *da capo* aria in *Iphigenia en Tracia*.

## **REVIVAL OF ZARZUELA**

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By the mid 1780s, the zarzuela had fallen from favor, and production almost stopped completely. It was not until the mid-1800s, when the Spanish people demanded art that showcased their national heritage, that interest in the zarzuela revived. Patriotic composers once more chose to write full-scale zarzuelas, though in a much-changed and lighter form, and the trend continued well into the 20th century. Now, with groups like the Orchestra of New Spain leading the way, there is once again interest in reviving the Baroque and early Classical zarzuelas that were the foundation of formal Spanish musical theater.

Rachel Adams