

Beyond Italian Opera
Manuel García in postcolonial Mexico City (1826-1828)

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ABSTRACT

The thesis 'Beyond Italian opera. Manuel García in postcolonial Mexico City (1826-1828)' examines the operatic activities of the tenor and composer Manuel García in Mexico City between 1826 and 1828, and how they intersected with the Mexican nation-building project in the aftermath of independence from Spain. Building from the small body of previous academic work on the topic, my thesis aims to rethink these years as a short yet critical step in the cultural transition of Mexico into its postcolonial identity. Arriving at a period when Italian opera was widely viewed by the new Latin American elites as a powerful marker of civilisation against the perceived backwardness of the colonial state, García appeared to offer a chance for Mexico to emerge as a culturally modern nation in the new Atlantic geography of the post-Napoleonic world. As soon as his performances began, however, García's music presented local audiences with an unexpected problem, in revealing new approaches to Italian opera which did not correspond with what Mexican audiences had come to know under that name during the cultural domination of the Bourbon empire. Drawing upon a wide array of primary sources, the thesis investigates how opposed understandings of operatic italianità collided in Mexico, leading to new ways of composing, performing and thinking about Italian opera.

The introduction discusses the main musicological debates and ideas on García in Mexico and, more broadly, on opera in Latin America after independence. While most of the perspectives proposed over the last few decades implied a Eurocentric approach leaving little or no agency to Mexico and society, I suggest a more nuanced perspective that takes into account not only the role that Mexican elites played in the reception and production of Italian opera but also how such role was profoundly shaped by the stamina of colonialism after independence.

My first chapter reconstructs the operatic worlds of Manuel García and Mexico City before 1826, putting them side by side to shed light on their cultural and social differences. I follow biographical approach through the life and career of Manuel García up to his arrival in Mexico City, with a focus on the manifold cultures and experiences that defined his multi-layered operatic identity. The second part zooms in on Mexico City and its operatic landscape – its theatres, audiences, companies, musical markets and practices – to see how the interaction of creoles' colonial past with new notions of operatic italianità defined the hybrid scenario where García was soon to make his operatic debut.

My second chapter draws on these differences to explore what creole elites and Manuel García expected of each other. It examines the networks through which they came to know each other and how they contributed to define their own narratives. Born in Spain, Manuel García knew the musical culture of Mexico perhaps better than any other of his colleagues. Nonetheless, the years he spent across Europe configured this situation in more Eurocentric terms as an easy and underdeveloped stage. Mexican elites, meanwhile, imagined García with the enthusiasm of a society ready to welcome one of the most famous European stars of his time. Yet, not unlike in the case of later operatic icons

coming from Europe, the creole picture of García became reframed according to colonial models as a singer and composer ready to bring them what they wanted from across the Atlantic.

My third chapter analyses García's first Mexican season of 1827. The first section examines the preparations of the premiere through reconstructing the manifold discussions that took place with local impresarios and the contracts he signed with local artists. The second section investigates the two main events of the season, the premiere of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and García's debut as a composer in Mexico with *L'Abufar*, through which García imposed his own idea of opera. The negative reception of these operas forced local impresarios to finish the season earlier than expected, urging García to find new operatic stages to keep performing.

My fourth chapter turns to the immediate effects of this clash between García and his audiences. It starts at the beginning of the year 1828, when García finally resumed his activity amid the protests of creoles against his operas and the legalisation of local anti-Hispanic attitudes with the Expulsion Law in May 1827. With his opera *L'amante astuto* (January 1828), premiered in New York, García tried to react caustically to the new unfriendly environment with subtle provocations against local operagoers and their anti-Hispanism. At the same time, however, he adapted his original manuscript to better conform to the tastes and traditions of Mexico City: a change that the following opera, *Un'ora di matrimonio* (February 1828), took even further.

My fifth chapter focuses on the opera *Semiramide* premiered in May 1828. Based on the same libretto Rossini used for his opera in 1823, García's work was meant to solve at once his crisis of popularity and creole dissatisfaction with his previous works with a sumptuous music and an opulent staging. *Semiramide*, however, had the opposite effect: while the rise of the liberal, anti-Hispanic elites heated the debates against his Spanish identity, García was personally confronted by the failure of his biggest operatic effort and, therefore, of the entirety of his Mexican enterprise. He realised that his idea of opera, however mediated by creole tastes, seemed incompatible with Mexico City.

The sixth chapter delves into his last months in Mexico City. The arrival of the soprano Carolina Pellegrini, endorsed by the liberals as the new Italian diva of Mexico City, heated political and musical debate against García before the presidential elections of September 1828. Without the support of the conservatives, García was lost: his last operas were ignored or even removed before being premiered, while Mexico City finally accepted having operas performed in Italian.

My thesis rethinks García's corpus of Mexican operas as part of a wider network of transatlantic exchanges and local interactions where political and cultural frameworks of the past (Spanish colonialism) and the present (Europe cultural imperialism) were continuously contested and renegotiated. This work therefore offers new perspectives for rethinking the composition and performance of Italian bel canto in Latin America in the early nineteenth century as a complex process that, by welcoming yet also challenging the cultural authority of Europe, helped to shape new American identities.