SPANISH TREASURE
IN THE STEARNS COLLECTION

By Charlene Black

The Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments houses an unsuspected treasure: a richly illuminated eighteenth-century choir book from Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The manuscript, which contains six Latin mass texts, conceals an additional hidden jewel: fifteenth-century fly leaves are glued into the heavy, leather-bound covers. This Spanish treasure is currently on display in the School of Music.

The manuscript contains a wealth of illuminations, mostly of typically Spanish religious imagery. For example, the patron saint of Spain, St. James, appears in the guise of Matamoros (Moor-Slayer; folio 98 verso). The illumination, inspired by the famous painting by the seventeenth-century artist Francisco Ribalta (Algemesi, Santiago), depicts St. James’s miraculous appearance during the Reconquest to defeat the Moors. He gallops in on a white steed, sword upraised, mantle flying in the wind, to trample the enemy underfoot.

The prevalence of Immaculate Conception imagery also testifies to the manuscript’s Spanish provenance. Devotion to the Immaculate Conception, the belief that the Virgin Mary was conceived without sin, enjoyed widespread popularity in Spain. In fact, as the frontispiece illustration, this theme occupies the place of honor in the manuscript. The scene, however, has been heavily damaged—Mary’s head effaced beyond recognition—due to repeated kissing (see photo, page 2). Traditionally, this image was kissed in reverence when the book was opened.

The illumination closely copies the canonical interpretation of the theme as conceived by the Golden Age artist Bartolome Esteban Murillo. The iconography, based upon the Book of Revelation’s “woman of the Apocalypse” (12:1), follows the strict guidelines laid down by the Inquisition. Mary appears as a young girl clad in white and blue, her hands clasped in prayer. She is “robed with the sun, beneath her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” In the

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clouds at her feet, seven chubby putti congregate, holding symbols of her purity: lilies, roses, a palm and a mirror. Multicolored roses enframe her, alluding to her metaphorical moniker, the “rose without thorns.” The accompanying text, drawn from the Song of Songs (2:2), calls her the “Lilium inter spinas” (“Lily among thorns”), another reference to her sinless nature.

The Immaculate Conception receives a more abstract treatment on folio 43 recto where putto holds a mirror to reflect the sun’s rays (see photo, page one). Another angel on the left looks out and points to the scene, urging the viewer to behold the mirror. This illumination represents a frequently invoked passage from the Book of Wisdom (7:26), which describes the Virgin as “the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness.”

The inclusion of St. Jerome imagery in the choir book hints at the identity of the manuscript’s makers. As an early proponent of the Immaculate Conception, the translator of the Bible, and a Doctor of the Church, St. Jerome enjoyed great popularity in Spain. In fact, the Spanish monarchy’s official religious order, the Hieronymites, was dedicated to him. Their coat-of-arms, a red cardinal’s hat, appears on folio 115 recto. Its presence suggests that the manuscript was made by Hieronymite monks, perhaps those of the Seminary of St. Jerome in Santiago de Compostela. St. Jerome’s other attributes are collected in a whimsical illumination on folio 92 recto (see photo, bottom left). Its playful quality exemplifies the Rococo style. A mischievous putto, who dons the saint’s hat, plays an eighteenth-century hunting horn, humorously alluding to Jerome’s vision of an angel sounding the trumpet of the Last Judgment. St. Jerome’s lion, his companion when he was a hermit, lies at the angel’s feet.

In addition to the standard religious imagery, the choir book also contains secular themes, including intriguing architectural scenes. On folio 54 verso, a charming medieval cityscape appears. On folio 83 recto, angels bear aloft a neoclassical building (bottom right). Perhaps this apotheosis commemorates an actual architectural commission in Santiago, possibly even the completion of the cathedral’s facade in 1750.

The secular subject matter and especially plainly pagan themes may testify to the monks’ classical learning. Six depictions of ancient sculpture occur (folios 18 verso, 54 verso, 59 recto, 71 verso, and 74 recto), including a classical caryatid in the form of a man (folio 65 recto). The most shocking depiction, however, represents a bearded, goat-like satyr, a Bacchanalian symbol of lust and evil (folio 111 recto).

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From the Director’s Desk

James Borders

Having recently taken over as Director of the Collection I thought it a good idea to begin my tenure by outlining for our Friends some new initiatives at the Stearns. Before doing so, however, let me express my thanks and best wishes to my friend, colleague, and predecessor, Prof. William Malm, who retired as Director on 31 December 1993.

As our regular readers well know, Bill Malm was the driving force behind the Collection for over a decade. Under his leadership we have made great strides in acquisition and documentation. Indeed, Bill insured the very survival of the Collection not that many years ago by insisting that the university provide needed space for its storage and display at the School of Music. His dedication and hard work with the Friends of the Stearns have made it possible for the Collection to boast ample exhibition space including the Moss and Howard display cases, the Virginia Martin Howard Lecture Series, and a growing endowment fund. We will miss Bill’s daily presence in the office, but fortunately he has agreed to retain the title of Director Emeritus. Best of luck in the future, Bill.

As to our new initiatives, the Collection staff hopes soon to make the switch from our aged Zenith to a new and far more powerful Macintosh Power PC computer, that is, as soon as funds are available. The new system will be used at first to facilitate inventory and research, and to produce the Newsletter. Eventually we hope to create with it an interactive CD-ROM catalogue of the Collection’s holdings, including sound and video of instruments being played or constructed. Our plan is to make this interactive catalogue accessible to the public in the galleries and through the university’s computing network. Watch this space for further developments.

The Collection has also undertaken a new project to document and conserve its European bowed strings. Generous donations to begin this work have recently been received from Professors James G. Bastian and Charles H. Sherman, UM alumni and students of the late Prof. Robert Warner, former Director of the Stearns. As a first step in this project, a viola by the German maker Georg Kloz (c.1723-97) has been sent for technical examination, photography, radiography, and an M.R.I. scan to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. Mr. William L. Monical, an expert restorer of violins, will supervise this research.

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With your help, additional instruments may be restored, played, displayed, and appreciated by the musical public. Friends receive The Stearns Newsletter, invitations to the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures and announcements of upcoming exhibits and performances. Your tax deductible contribution will help support all activities of The Stearns Collection.

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New exhibits in the School of Music

Recent acquisitions from New Guinea and New Zealand are on display in the School of Music Foyer Case through the end of summer. Stop by and see some magnificent examples of the craftsmanship of Oceania, including a drum body completely carved and decorated using stone tools.

A new exhibit of 18th-century English guitars was also recently mounted directly across from the School of Music library, third floor of the Music building.

Spanish treasure, cont.

cal nature of the Rococo illuminations described above contrast sharply with the manuscript’s fly leaves. The restricted color range, abstract geometric decoration, and distinctive Oriental flavor of these hidden jewels recall a much earlier tradition. Reminiscent of Arabic style, the ornate calligraphy, angular illuminated letters, and geometric patterns would not be unusual as early as the twelfth century. Other traits, however, pinpoint its production in the fifteenth century, such as the Gothic minuscule script, palette, and spiky floral designs which spill into the margins. Thus, these four-hundred-year-old manuscript pages constitute one of the oldest objects in the Stearns collection, a hidden treasure worth rediscovering.

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