

Fantasia Religiosa al Nacimiento de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo **Dividida en Tres Pequeños Cuadros**

Religious Fantasy to the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ **Divided into Three Small Tableaux**

Editor's Notes

In 1854, the interior of the Cathedral of Murcia was reduced to ashes by a devastating fire. Among the priceless treasures lost to the flames were its two organs, built by Fernando Molero en 1799. Mariano Barrio Fernández, bishop of the diocese of Cartagena-Murcia, immediately sought the support of the Spanish government to reconstruct the temple. While in Madrid, bishop Barrio consulted with Hilarión Eslava about the acquisition of a new organ. Eslava was at the time one of Spain's best-known organ scholars, and went on to create the first Chair of Organ at the Royal Conservatory in Madrid in 1856. In 1852, Eslava had the opportunity to tour a number of European capitals and was impressed by the advances in organ technology he witnessed. His recommendation to bishop Barrios was to commission the new organ for Murcia's cathedral to the German designer based in Belgium, Joseph Merklin. In doing this, Eslava hoped to "present to Spanish organ builders a model of the advances made in this field that had not been possible in Spain due to the wars and political upheavals of the time." Construction of the organ began in 1855. The instrument had its first public performance on July 17, 1857. Experts, led by Eslava, certified its extraordinary quality and took part in the solemn celebration that accompanied its premiere. The organ, in Eslava's view "... is not only an instrument, but an admirable assembly of numerous instruments that toy under the hands of a single performer." This was undoubtedly an occasion of pride and triumph for Eslava.



Catedral de Murcia's Merklin-Schütze Organ (from Ref. 2)

Hilarión Eslava composed this set of three Christmas Nativity tableaux for the organ inauguration festivities at the Catedral de Murcia. The piece was specifically intended to showcase the capabilities of the Merklin-Schütze instrument, later reputed to be the first "romantic-style" organ ever produced. The first tableau in the set, "The Octavian Peace", was composed to highlight the principal part of the flutes; the *recitado* and the second tableau, "The Joy of the Shepherds of Bethlehem", subtitled "Pastorela", was designed for the soft reed registers like oboe and human voice, and the third, "Coming of the Three Magi", labeled "March", for the brilliant reeds (see below).

"Octavian Peace" or "Pax Romana" refers to the period of relative stability under Roman rule that started during the reign of emperor Octavian (Augustus) between roughly 30 BCE and the death of emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE, during which Christ's birth would have taken place in Roman-occupied Judea. The three-part piece was published in Part 2 of Eslava's groundbreaking organ treatise "Museo Orgánico Español", which he had started in 1853. For this re-edition of the work, the Museo Orgánico score provided by the Biblioteca Nacional de España was used as the primary source, additionally contrasted with a manuscript copy supplied by Eresbil – Basque Music Archive.

The printed score was accompanied by the following note/admonition by the composer:

"This fantasy was composed for the inauguration of the great Organ of the Holy Cathedral of Murcia. The first tableau was composed to highlight the principal part of the flutes; the *recitado* and the second tableau for the soft reed registers like oboe, human voice, etc.; and the third for the brilliant reeds. As the four keyboards were at play in this piece, along with the numerous registers available on that Organ, it was deemed convenient not to indicate them here, instead only adding piano, forte, etc., so that the piece can be played on any other organ, observing only the character of the registers that are suitable for each tableau, as noted earlier."

The organ soundfonts available in Musescore are rather limited, and I was not able in the sound file accompanying these notes to truly replicate the sounds intended by Eslava, but I did the best I could to strike a balance between Musescore soundfonts that capture the spirit of the work and the original intent of the composer.

Bibliography

1. Eslava, M.H., "Museo Organico Español", Vol. 2 (first edition 1853). In Spanish.
2. "IV Ciclo Internacional de Órgano, Gran Órgano Merklin-Schütze de la Catedral de Murcia", music program, Murcia (2018). In Spanish.
3. "Inauguration Solennelle des Grandes Orgues placées par Merklin, Schütze et cie. dans la Cathédrale de Murcie (Espagne) le 8 de juillet de 1857, dirigée par D. Hilarion Eslava, Maître de Chapelle de Sa Majesté la Reine d'Espagne", imp. De E. Guyot, Brussels, Belgium (1859). Copy obtained from the Royal Library of Belgium/KBR. In French and Spanish.
4. "Historic Organs of Spain", a brochure for a May, 2013 tour with Michael J. Barone, <https://pipedreams.publicradio.org/tour/2013spain/2013pipedreams-posttrip.pdf>