

## Editor's Notes for *Benedicamus Benedico*

In addition to being a well-recognized composer, Hilarión Eslava was also an educator and musicologist. With the publication of his 10-volume *Lira Sacro-Hispana* (1852-1860), Eslava sought to resurrect the forgotten work of Spanish composers before him (rather like what I'm trying to do now for *his* work). Matías Juan Veana (1656-1705) was master of the chapel at the Encarnación Monastery in Madrid from 1680 until his death and a well-known composer in his time<sup>1</sup>. In *La Lira Sacro-Hispana* (Vol. 3), where this particular piece is found, Eslava mentions that "although Veana composed numerous religious works, he became particularly well-known in his time for the grace and good taste with which he wrote *villancicos de Navidad* (traditional Christmas carols), in particular those with humorous themes."

This piece is a wonderful example of such a *villancico*. As best as I can interpret it, this carol describes a scene at a church in Gijón (a major port city in the northern Spanish Principality of Asturias) during Christmas Eve. A country bumpkin of a sacristan (church assistant or sexton) from the little village of Candás is helping a certain Ferreira (perhaps the sacristan at the larger church in Gijón) prepare for the *Misa de Gallo* (the name given in Spain to the Christmas Eve Mass). The sacristan from Candás is sarcastically described as being "so clever that to the *ite missa est* he would respond *benedicamus*". In the ancient Latin Catholic liturgy, the former words (which very loosely translate as "Go forth and serve [the Lord]") are the common words of dismissal at the end of an ordinary Mass, and are followed by silent prayer. *Benedicamus Domino* ("Let us bless the Lord") is an alternate formula used only on certain special occasions, which is followed by the words spoken by the congregation *Deo gratias* ("Thanks be to God"). The humor in the sacristan's confusion would have been obvious to 17<sup>th</sup> century listeners in Spain. To make matter worse, the sacristan has questionable singing talents that Ferreira would prefer were drowned out by ringing the church bell (*esquilón*<sup>2</sup>) instead, calling the faithful to Mass. The man from Candás then shows off his exceptional 'talent' by proudly concocting a new liturgical chant in questionable Latin, *Benedicamus benedico, benedicamus Domino*, which Ferreira amusedly sings along with the sacristan. The lyrics of this *villancico* are an alternating hodgepodge of Spanish, Asturian ("Asturianu", a Romance language from Asturias), and liturgical Latin. When combined with long-forgotten traditions and references, it is a little difficult to translate effectively. I have done my best to do so below.

This work has been transcribed from three different sources: (1) A probably close rendition of the Veana original, published in *La Lira Sacro Hispana*, which is scored for two choirs (SSAT and SATB) with a *basso continuo* accompaniment, (2) an annotated manuscript copy probably made by a composer and good friend of Eslava's, Francisco Asenjo Barbieri (1823-1894) scored for SSTBariton-SATB, and featuring a brief introduction and organ accompaniment by Eslava, and (3) a neater and probably later manuscript version (by someone else) of Barbieri's copy. In these two latter versions, the parts of the sacristan and Ferreira are sung respectively by the baritones and the second sopranos in the first choir. All three of these versions come from the archives of the National Library of Spain.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed biography of the composer can be found on the Spanish Royal Academy of History, at <http://dbe.rah.es/biografias/37644/matias-juan-veana> (in Spanish).

<sup>2</sup> *Esquilón* is usually defined as a medium-size bell with a long, conical neck ending in a wide mouth, traditionally used in Spanish churches large and small to announce most daily functions.

As I was working on a new transcription of this piece, and given the precedent set by Eslava in ‘updating’ this composition, I decided to throw in a couple of additional elements, namely chimes and tambourine (to mimic the church *esquilón* and the *pandeiro*<sup>3</sup>, respectively) thus reflecting the instruments mentioned within the lyrics. I think don Hilarión would forgive me for these small (optional) additions.

Accompanying the Barbieri manuscript copy are the following cautionary statements or notes:

1. (*Referring to the organ*) Although most of this accompaniment must be played in the flute registers, some of the phrases may be played with reeds, depending on the color given to the voices.
2. The prelude does not pertain to the age (*when this work was originally written*), because at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they were not used, but it may perhaps be convenient for today’s performance to commit that anachronism (*sic*).
3. These *villancicos* were generally played without organ, with the *violón* playing the *basso continuo*, reinforced in the *forte* parts by the *bajón*<sup>4</sup>.
4. It is easy that I may have made mistakes because of the annoying way in which I have had to write in separate sheets of paper, as there was no space in the partition (*sic*).

And separately on the same score (referring to the organ accompaniment):

This prelude should be played with oboe in the right hand and bassoon in the left, adding the tremolo with which the bagpipe (*sound*) is imitated.

And, also for the organ, at Measure 19,

Flute and contrabass (play bass part alone if voices are not strong).

#### LYRICS AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

Cierto sacristán de Asturias viene a la misa del Gallo tan diestro que al *ite misa* responde *benedicamus*.  
(A certain sacristan from Asturias comes to the Christmas Eve Mass, being so clever that to the *ite missa est* he would respond *benedicamus*.)

Ferreira: Toca el esquilón sacristán de Candás, toca el esquilón que no lo perderás.  
(Ferreira: Ring the church bell, sacristan from Candás, ring the bell and you won’t lose it.)

Sacristán: Calla-te Ferreira, non digas esquilón, calla-te non juzgues que estamos en Gijón.  
(Sacristan: Be quiet Ferreira, don’t say ‘bell’, be quiet and don’t judge, for we are in Gijón.)

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<sup>3</sup> In the Galician language, a *pandeiro* (*panderu* in Asturian) is similar to a tambourine. The Asturian *panderu* can be round, square, or rectangular in shape, and is not generally tunable.

<sup>4</sup> *Violón* in this context being essentially a contrabass or violoncello and the *bajón* being a precursor of the bassoon.

Tutti: Toca el esquilón sacristán de Candás, toca el esquilón que no lo perderás.  
(Ring the church bell, sacristan from Candás, ring the bell and you won't lose it.)

Ferreira: Toca el esquilón, y nada te dé pena, toca el esquilón, que a questa es noite buena.  
(Ring the bell and let nothing sadden you; ring the bell, for this night is Christmas Eve.)

Sacristán: Ay la mi Ferreira tocar le non quieru, dega-me cantar al son del pandeiro.  
(O my Ferreira, I don't wish to ring it; let me sing to the sound of the *pandeiro*.)

Tutti: Toca el esquilón, y nada te dé pena, toca el esquilón, que a questa es noite buena.  
(Ring the bell and let nothing sadden you; ring the bell, for this night is Christmas Eve.)

Ferreira: Di me que tu nada quieres cantar hoy, que ya has cantadu muchas sin tocar bajón.  
(Tell me you don't want to sing today; for you have already sung many songs without playing the *bajón*.)

Sacristán: La que cantar quieru inda non se oyó. Y asi va por nueva si non por mejor.  
(The one I want to sing has never before been heard. It is new, if not better.)

Tutti: Toca el esquilón sacristán de Candás, toca el esquilón que no lo perderás.  
(Ring the church bell, sacristan from Candás, ring the bell and you won't lose it.)

Ferreira: Pues vaya de tuniyu.  
(Well, what a rascal.)

Sacristán: Tengan atención.  
(Listen carefully.)

Ferreira: Sacristán despacha.  
(Sacristan, get going.)

Sacristán: Ferreira ya voy.  
(Ferreira, I'm going.)

Ferreira: Yo te ayudaré,  
(I will help you.)

Ferreira y Sacristán: Vaya entre los duos: *Benedicamus benedico, Benedicamus Domino*  
(We go together, *Benedicamus benedico, Benedicamus Domino*.)

Tutti: *Benedicamus benedico, Benedicamus Domino*

Sacristán: Si el rey me escuchara aquesta canción, mandara me luego facer me cantor.  
(If the king heard me sing this song, he would make me his singer.)

Ferreira: Como la dijiste.  
(Just as you said.)

Sacristán: Non se me olvidó.  
(I didn't forget it.)

Ferreira y Sacristán: Benedicamus benedico, Benedicamus Domino.

Tutti: Benedicamus benedico, Benedicamus Domino.