

Editor's notes for "Por qué, cielo, te admiras" – Villancico y Baile de Seises

Here is another of Hilarión Eslava's *Villancicos* intended as a *Baile de Seises* from the archives of the Cathedral of Sevilla, obtained via the Institución Colombina. *Villancicos* are a traditional form of Spanish song, frequently (though not necessarily) on a religious theme and, in olden times, not exclusively associated with Christmas, as they are today. *Villancicos* typically consist of an introduction, a refrain ("*estribillo*") and a set of "*coplas*" or verses, each part with its own prescribed meter. The "*Baile de Seises*" is a form of children's liturgical dance that has been traditional in some parts of Spain, most prominently in Sevilla, for many centuries and is still performed today on a few specific celebrations of the Roman Catholic liturgy. In the Cathedral of Sevilla (the object of this particular piece), the *Seises* (singular "*Seise*") are a group of ten pre-adolescent boys who are dressed in traditional baroque-era costumes, striped in blue or red depending on the occasion, their heads covered by plumed hats of matching colors. Their name comes from the Spanish for "six" ("*seis*"), as they were originally six boys who were trained as leading choirboys, educated and boarded at the church's expense.

During his time as Master of the Chapel at the Cathedral of Sevilla (1832-1844), one of Eslava's responsibilities was to look after the education and well-being of the *Seises*. He also wrote nearly a dozen *villancicos* for the *Baile de Seises*, a task that he once referred to as "one of his greatest pleasures" as a composer. I believe he enjoyed this form of music because it gave him opportunity to freely draw on traditional Spanish folk music.

I have previously transcribed and described several other *Villancicos y Bailes de Seises* by Eslava, so for additional historical context, rather than repeat myself here, I direct you to <https://hilarioneslava.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ed-Notes-candor-de-luz-eterna-orchestrated.pdf>. In these notes I will focus on the specific music.

The lyrics for this *villancico*, intended for the octave of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (ending December 8), are taken from a poem written before 1820 by Fr. Pedro Manuel Prieto (?-1820), entitled "*Letrillas a la Santísima Virgen en el misterio de su Concepción*" (#23 in a book of his poetry published in 1820). Prieto was *Canónigo Magistral* (chief preacher appointed by the *cabildo* or chapter) of the Cathedral of Sevilla. Here, Eslava's introduction is highly dramatic, transitioning to a cheerful *estribillo* and a set of *coplas* in the Spanish *cuarteta* poetic meter, musically reminiscent of *seguidillas*.

The original manuscript for this piece came to us in the form of a general score (which appears to be in Eslava's own handwriting), and a collection of *particellas* of less certain hand and date. The trombone, cello, and castanet parts were only included as *particellas*, indicating that they may have been added later. The original composition dates to 1835, in the first few years of Eslava's appointment as Master of the Chapel of the Cathedral of Sevilla. Notations in the *particellas* indicate that this *villancico* was performed until at least 1907, at which point it likely fell victim to the 1903 Papal *Motu Proprio*, which practically banned all but monodic Gregorian singing in the Catholic liturgy until the Second Vatican Council 60 years later.

Following are a few more detailed observations about the score:

1. There were sparse as well as conflicting dynamic and articulation instructions between the *particella* set and the full score, and also between individual parts. The vocal parts were especially lacking in dynamic instruction, so for clarity, I did add suggested dynamics that do not appear in the source. I did my best to discern Eslava's true intent, but it would be wise to consult the original version if in doubt.

2. This is the second *villancico y baile* I have encountered that actually provides specific rhythm for the castanets. This was provided as a separate *particella*. Some of the notes showed a squiggle that looked vaguely like “tr” above the note, whereas others showed tremolo lines on the stems, and a few bore both notations. I chose to show all notes bearing such notations with only tremolo lines for purposes of my transcription.

As a final note, the audio rendering of this piece on the hilarioneslava.org music page (<https://hilarioneslava.org/music/>) was created using MuseScore 4’s improved soundfonts. Feedback is welcome!

SPANISH LYRICS	APPROXIMATE ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<p>INTRODUCCIÓN ¿Por qué, Cielo, te admiras, por qué, Tierra, te pasmas; de que soy concebida, toda hermosa, y sin mancha? Siendo yo de <i>ab-eterno</i> prevista, y destinada para Madre del Verbo, y de la misma gracia; no era bien que estuviese ni un instante, manchada.</p>	<p>INTRODUCTION Why, Heaven, are you amazed, why, Earth, are you astonished, that I was conceived, so beautiful and without blemish? Having been for all eternity foretold, and fated to be the Mother of the Word, and of grace itself; it was not right that I should be, not even for an instant, blemished.</p>
<p>ESTRIBILLO Bendito el primer momento de tu ser; y más la gracia con que en él fue enriquecida tu benditísima alma. Máquina trina del mundo, suprema, intermedia, y baja; ven, y dobla la rodilla a la que es tu Soberana.</p>	<p>REFRAIN Blessed was the first moment of your being; and the grace with which it was bestowed your most blessed soul. Triune totality of the world, supreme, intermediate, and low; come, and bend the knee to her, to the one who is your Sovereign.</p>
<p>COPLAS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tan preciosa te concibes, y tan Santa por extremo, que sólo se te aventaja el que pudo, y quiso hacerlo. 2. Atónita la milicia del ejército del Cielo, ¿Quién es esta? se pregunta, ¿que arranca tan alto el vuelo? 	<p>VERSES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. So precious have you been conceived, and so Holy in the extreme, that you are surpassed only by the one who was able, and had the will to do it. 2. Astounded are the soldiers of Heaven’s army, Who is this? they wonder, Who takes so high a flight?