

The Harp in Fifteenth Century Spain

by Egberto Bermudez



he period between the first decades of the 15th century (death of Martin I of Aragón in 1410, the accession to the throne of Juan II of Castile in 1406) and the death of Fernando of Aragón in 1516 and the election of Charles I as king and then Emperor, witnessed very important developments in the political, social and cultural spheres of the Kingdoms of Aragón and Castile. These events eventually led to the unification of Spain under one throne and to the imperial expansion of the following century. In the previous century, Catalonia and the other domains of the house of Aragón had experienced a period of great economic prosperity with the strengthening of the middle classes and the bourgeoisie. In Castile, the climax of the *reconquista* maintained alive the medieval mentality and the privileges of the court as well as widening the gap between the high nobility and the peasant and middle classes. The fifteenth century apparently reversed the roles of Castile and Catalonia. While decadence and political crisis appeared in the Aragonese kingdom, in Castile there were signs of economic and agricultural recovery and activity in the maritime Cantabrian and Andalusian fronts. The middle classes, the clergy and the lesser nobility recovered their political strength. This climate of optimism and moderate prosperity gained momentum in the last quarter of the century when the Castilian internal *reconquista* and maritime expansion joined the Catalanian economic infrastructure and the Mediterranean ambitions.¹

The old five kingdoms of the late medieval period: Castile, Aragón, Portugal, Navarre and Granada, had their own cultural peculiarities and at some points in their history were subjected to French, Italian, English and also Muslim influences. The inner cultural situation (excluding Granada which was a Muslim kingdom) was still dominated by the medieval stratification in which the clerics,

the nobility, the citizens, and the peasants were the main social forces. The cultural climate represented by the *romancero viejo*, with its corresponding *villancico*, covered (at least partially) all layers of the society. The songs and song-dances of "labradores" or the political satires and street songs of the "ciudadanos" were used, parodied and imitated by learned clerics and noble amateur poets and musicians. On the other hand, instrumental music was maintained in the hands of the professional minstrels (*ministriles*, *juglares* and *tañedores*) as part of the late medieval European heritage. It was only until the beginning of the following century when the slow process of popularization of instrumental music as an amateur and domestic activity permeated the higher layers of the society.

The presence of the harp in 14th century Spanish musical culture is widely documented. The literary references to it in the works of the Arcipreste de Hita, *Libro de Alexandre* or *Poema de Alfonso XI* are already well known and the work of M.C. Gómez-Muntané on the musical life of the Aragonese court gives us precise information about this instrument.² The *Cancionero de Baena* compiles the works of the poets around the court of Juan II of Castile and it frequently mentions the harp (*harpas* or *farpas*) in addition to keyboard instruments (*escaques* and *monicordios*).³ Harps and guitars are mentioned, along with wind instruments, in the *Cancionero del Llavía*. In a poem by Sancho Cota, plucked instruments, such as harps, zithers and psalteries (*harpas*, *cítaras* and *salterios*), are noted along with keyboard instruments like the harpsichord and clavichord (*clavicordio* and *monacordio*).⁴ However, most of these references are rethoric *topoi* [Ed. Note: plural of *Topos* (Greek) refers to a "common place concept"] and they consist of the enumeration of musical instruments as a literary artifact. As musical evidence, they should be considered as such and no firm conclusions can be made based on them.⁵

One of the major changes occurring in the early 15th century regarding the minstrel activity in the courts was the gradual loss of importance of the loud instruments in favor of the soft ones. M.C. Gómez-Muntané indicates that this happened in the kingdom of Aragón under the rule of Martin I and Fernando of Trastámara. Minstrels playing shawms (*chirimía*), trumpets (*trompeta*) and kettledrums were also used by the Castilian court and some of them came with Fernando I to the Aragonese court.⁶ Another major change in relation to the education of the minstrels was the gradual disappearance of the yearly trips to the Flemish schools of minstrels where, according to the documents quoted by Gómez-Muntané, new instrumental and dance music was learned and transmitted mainly orally.⁷

The harp had an important place among the group of soft instruments used by minstrels during this period. The documentation from the house of Aragón can be considered representative of the contexts and importance of this instrument in Iberian court music. In spite of being less studied, known documents from other courts follow the patterns observed in the case of Catalonia-Aragón. One of the trends was the continuous exchange of minstrels between courts with political, cultural or familiar ties. This is noted in the case of Navarre where foreign minstrels had been documented in the court since the middle of the 14th century. From 1344 to 1442, French, Italian and English male and female harp minstrels were attached to this court in Pamplona, Olite and San Juan de Pie de Puerto. In 1400, for instance, some minstrels of the Castilian court, including a harpist, performed before the Queen and royal family.⁸ In the particular case of Aragón, regarding the musical relationships with other courts, we know that in 1429 the minstrels Perrinet Prebostel (organ player) and Michalet de Netanvila (harp player) attached to the service of Alfonso went to Portugal for the marriage of Edward of Portugal with Eleonor, sister of the Aragonese king.⁹ Some foreign (Spanish) harp minstrels were also attached to the Aragonese court and accompanied King Alfonso to Naples in 1432.¹⁰ Another tradition was that of the visits and short residences of minstrels in

related courts. In the case of the house of Catalonia-Aragón, minstrels coming from Navarre, Sicily and Valencia visited the Aragonese court up to the first decades of the 15th century but to some extent this practice, well extended in the previous century, gradually disappeared during this period.¹¹

The harp seems to have gained popularity in the musical activity of the Aragonese court during the last decades of the reign of Pedro IV (1336-1387) and was especially associated with the House of Juan I (1387-1396).¹² Before and after his accession to the throne, Juan I had at his service at least five harpists among other minstrel players of string instruments, some of whom might also have been performers on wind instruments.¹³ During this period, the harpist and composer Jacob Senleches, whose music is represented in the Chantilly Ms., served Cardinal Pedro de Luna in Aragón and probably accompanied him to Avignon when he became Pope Benedict XIII. According to Gómez-Muntané, the repertoire of the Iberian courts was closely connected to that of the musical circles of Avignon, Savoy, and Piedmont.¹⁴

Iconographic sources of the period for most of Europe indicate the use of the harp as an accompaniment instrument for the voice or as part of a consort of soft instruments playing instrumental or dance music. This was probably part of an oral performance heritage but as Christopher Page indicates, if we consider the extant polyphonic repertoire, we might consider the possibility of the harp being used to play individual or paired voices to accompany the voices or to be part of a consort.¹⁵ In the case of the Iberian peninsula, most of the iconography with musical instruments comes from the Valencia-Catalonia-Aragón area. The late medieval Aragonese Marian iconography studied by Ballester i Gisbert shows a predominance of lutes, harps, organs, and singers, something which in general terms agrees with its French and Italian counterparts.¹⁶

As to the instruments themselves, the Aragonese documents of the late 14th and early 15th centuries show the existence of instruments of several sizes. The instrument contained in the Tryptic of the Monasterio de

Piedra (1390), along with other documentary evidence, offers the possibility of the use of different types of harps (of one and two ranks) during this period.¹⁷ These documents mention large (*gran*), double (*doble*) and single (*simple*) harps. In one document of 1386, it is clear that single and double do not refer to size but to the number of ranks of strings, information that is supported by the already mentioned iconographic specimen of two parallel ranks of 14 and 15 strings. However, it is impossible to conclude whether it had a diatonic, chromatic or partly chromatic tuning.¹⁸ The harps mentioned in the Aragonese documents had gilded sections or were decorated with marquetry, inlay work, carvings or paintings. In other cases they are mentioned along with strings, metal or ivory tuning keys, and leather or wooden cases.¹⁹

The cultural ties between Castile and Aragón were gradually strengthened during the 15th century. At the same time, the expansion of Alfonso V to Italy opened the possibility of the cross-cultural and musical fertilization in the Aragonese domains that at the end of the century gave way to the development of instruments as important in European renaissance music as the *vihuela de mano* and *vihuela de arco* (viol, viola da gamba).²⁰ Before his accession to the throne, Alfonso V of Aragón had at his service the young Íñigo López de Mendoza, later Marquis of Santillana, the famous Castilian poet. The two richly decorated harps given to him in 1413 and 1415, suggest that the young nobleman may have been educated musically according to the late medieval tradition of chamber music making in courtly and noble circles.²¹ Likewise, the Castilian court followed the Aragonese regarding its taste for music and private chamber music making. During the reigns of Enrique III and Juan II, the royal chroniclers and also those of the *condestables* Miguel Lucas de Iranzo and Alvaro de Luna refer to vocal and instrumental music making. Even the unfortunate Enrique IV of Castile is also described as a "good musician, graceful in singing and playing..."²² As a survival of the European 14th century tradition of the presence of foreign minstrels in court music, Alfonso V included a Spanish (probably Castilian) harpist among the musicians of his

journey to Italy in 1432. In 1456-69, French and Italian harpists were still employed along with native instrumentalists at the court of Juan II of Aragón.²³

Social conflict was one of the main characteristics of mid-15th century Spanish society. In Catalonia-Aragón, the middle classes (artisans and merchants) obtained in 1455 a more democratic treatment while in Castile the high nobility deposed King Enrique IV in 1464 and consolidated their privileged position.²⁴ These contradictory processes characterized the significance of the social and political changes of this period of transition from late medieval to early modern Europe. In the cities, singers, makers and players of all instruments continued to look for appointments at courts but gradually became more independent and self employed practitioners. Consequently, instruments like the harp, which was traditionally associated with courtly life, its pomp, chivalric and aristocratic symbolism, became more and more widespread among the middle layers of the society. In Spain, this process coincides with the unification of the Castilian and Aragonese thrones and the joint reign of Isabel of Castile and Fernando of Aragón (1479-1504). According to late medieval court ideology, the harp continued to be an important status symbol and that which belonged to the Catholic monarchs was no exception. One such harp was varnished yellow and had marquetry decoration, carved human effigies, bone pegs, and a coat of arms with "castles and lions."²⁵ On the other hand, low and middle class makers and minstrels made and played harps and were, in some cases, related to the court and the high nobility. However, some musicians like the crypto-Jewish Castilian harpist Alonso Micer, practiced his art independently prior to 1494.²⁶

The internal political order and security achieved by Fernando and Isabel during the last quarter of the 15th century was complemented by the gradual expansion of the Iberian borders (Italy, America and North Africa) and by other facets that in the following decades inoculated new life to the cultural and musical life of Spain. One facet was the consolidation of the ties with the

Burgundian court and the German empire and another was the regulation of commerce and industry which covered a wide variety of aspects including musical instrument making.²⁷ Late 15th and early 16th century *Ordenanzas* for most Spanish cities contain a chapter relating to musical instrument making in which, besides vihuelas, viols, and keyboard instruments, harps are also mentioned as an important part of the trade and of the examination of makers.²⁸

The ties between Spain and the Burgundian court were reinforced with two marriages in 1496, that of Prince Juan and Princess Juana, children of the Catholic monarchs, respectively with Margaret of Austria and Philippe le Beau, children of Emperor Maximilian. According to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, and following the tradition of the Castilian royal house, until his sudden death in 1497, Prince Juan had a special taste for music and knew how to sing and play several instruments (organ, claviorgan, harpsichord, viols, vihuela de mano, and recorders). Besides his own musical abilities, he had at his service minstrels of wind instruments, tambourines, psalter, harp, and rebec. On the other hand, Princess Juana, who was living in Flanders, participated in the musical life of the court following the Burgundian tradition. After her first return to Spain in 1502, she had some Castilian minstrels, including a harpist, at her service. Also, harp minstrels of different courts had visited Philip and Juana in Malines since 1497 and probably some Flemish minstrels followed them to Spain in 1506.²⁹ After the death of her husband in that year and her retirement to Tordesillas, music, one of her lifelong inclinations, was one of her few sources of comfort.³⁰

Another point of contact with other musical traditions was the Aragonese kingdom of Naples. Italian and French harp minstrels had been active there since the 1430s.³¹ In the court of Fernando (Ferrante) I and Fadrique III of Aragón, the Burgundian element was conspicuous due to the fact that the Aragonese and the Hapsburg families strived to maintain the Burgundian etiquette and ceremonial usage after the collapse of the Duchy in 1477. The widely reputed Flemish

theorist and composer Johannes Tinctoris, who worked at the court of Fernando of Aragón and Sicily from 1475 to 1494, translated the rules of the Order of the Toisson d'Or for him and tried to follow Burgundian standards in the musical activity of the court.³² In the first years of the 16th century, the Neapolitan kingdom collapsed and the heir, Fernando III Duke of Calabria, was taken to Spain in 1502 with his court which included several minstrels including the famous harpist, Ludovico.³³ The historian and chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, formerly attached to the court of Prince Juan before his death, served King Fadrique in Naples and was also at the service of the Duke of Calabria in Spain before traveling to America in 1514. He mentions that as part of his musical duties, Ludovico "de la arpa" played and sang for the Duke a *romance* apparently composed by King Fadrique and included in the *Cancionero de Palacio* where there are other pieces which refer to the political events of the partition and conquest of the kingdom of Naples.³⁴ Fernández de Oviedo himself travelled to America with the expedition of Pedrarias Davila and with him several musicians including trumpeters, drummers, a tambourine player, a flute and bagpipe player and the harpist Maestre Pedro Valenciano. Several years later c. 1520, he is called Maestre Pedro "el de la arpa" in an account of the exploration of the northern coast of Mexico.³⁵

In 1555, Juan Bermudo states that he heard that the renowned Ludovico stopped the strings to produce sharps in cadences and Alonso Mudarra's famous "*Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*" (1546) gives us an idea of what could have been the type of repertoire he played.³⁶ Moreover, it is interesting to note that as indicated by John Griffiths, this piece is based on the *folia* ground.³⁷ It is possible that it represents an older tradition of music making on melodic-harmonic schemes like that of the *basse-dance* tunes. It is also interesting to note that the *folia* melodic scheme appears also in several pieces of the *Cancionero de Placio*.³⁸ It is also likely that the survival of this late medieval tradition is related to the musical activity of the Aragonese areas fertilized by its Italian,

Savoyard, French, and Burgundian connections.

The harp developed its great importance in Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries from these beginnings. Within this early framework there was a continuity of the minstrel harp tradition from the late medieval era. There was also the peculiar personality

that the Spanish musical culture acquired from the influence of the Burgundian court through this age to the new Hapsburg monarchs. Throughout this period the harp played an important role, not only musically but ideologically, being the symbol *par excellence* of heavenly music and divine order and monarchy.

Endnotes:

1 Cf. Pierre Vilar, *Historia de España*, Barcelona: Crítica, 1978, pp. 32-39 and J. Vicens Vives, *Aproximación a la historia de España*, Barcelona: Ed. Vicens-Vives, 1972, pp. 89-105.

2 M.C. Gómez Muntané, *La Música en la Casa Real Catalano-Aragonesa 1336-1442. I. Historia y Documentos*, Barcelona: A. Bosch, 1979.

3 Felipe Pedrell, *Organografía musical antigua española*, Barcelona: Juan Gili, 1901, pp. 70 and 124.

4 Daniel Devoto, "Los instrumentos de la coronación de Nuestra Señora de Fernán Ruyz, según un nuevo texto," *Anuario Musical*, 30, (1975), pp. 35 and 41.

5 D. Devoto, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

6 M.C. Gómez Muntané, *op.cit.*, pp. 44-45.

7 M.C. Gómez Muntané, *op.cit.*, pp. 73-77.

8 Cf. Higinio Anglés, *Historia de la música medieval en Navarra*, Pamplona: Diputación Foral de Navarra, 1970, pp. 380-382; Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Poesía Juglaresca y orígenes de las literaturas Románicas: Problemas de historia literaria y cultural*, Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1957, p. 95, n.4.; and Higinio Anglés, "Spanien in der Musikgeschichte des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Scripta Musicologia*, II, Roma: Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 1975, p. 894.

See also: M.C. Gómez-Muntané, "La Musique a la maison de Navarre a la fin de Moyen Age it le chantre Johan Robert," quoted by J. López-Calo, "El Motete de Gormáz-Burgos. Una nueva aprotación al Ars Nova en España," *Revista de Musicología*, 9, 2 (1986), p. 549.

9 Ma. Carmen Gómez-Muntané, "Les musiciens du roi de Portugal: une mention de Jacquemart le Cuvelier," *Revue de Musicologie*, 73, 1, (1987), p. 104.

10 Higinio Anglés, "Alfonso V d'Aragona Mecenate della Musica ed il suo Menestrel, Jean Boisard," *Scripta Musicologie*, II, p. 770.

11 Ma. C. Gómez-Muntané, *La música en la casa real...*, p. 73.

12 Cf. Andrés Descalzo, "Músicos en la Corte de Pedro IV El Ceremonioso (1336-1387)," *Revista de Musicología*, 13, 1, (1990), pp. 102-103 and Gómez-Muntané, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-55.

13 M.C. Gómez-Muntané, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-55

14 M.C. Gómez-Muntané, "Sobre el papel de España en la música europea del siglo XIV y primer tercio del siglo XV," *España en la Música de Occidente: Actas del Congreso Internacional celebrado en Salamanca 29 de octubre- 5 de noviembre de 1985*, Madrid: INAEM, 1987, I, pp. 45-47. There she mentions the association of Machaut with the court of Navarra and the presence in the Chantilly Ms., Musée Conde 564, of works of Jean Robert Trebor who served the Aragonese and Navarrese courts.

15 Christopher Page, [The harpsichord]: "In the direction of the beginning," in Schott, H. (ed.) *The Historical Harpsichord*, 1, Pendragon Press, (1984) p. 120.

16 Jordi Ballester i Gisbert, "Retablos marianos tardomedievales con ángeles músicos procedentes del antiguo Reino de Aragón. Catálogo., *Revista de Musicología*, 13, No. 1 (1990), pp. 198-99. Cf. Edmund A. Bowles, "A Checklist of Musical Instruments in Fifteenth Century Illuminated Manuscripts at the Biblioteque Nationale," *Notes*, 29, 4, (1974), p. 491; "A Checklist of Musical Instruments in Fifteenth Century Illuminated Manuscripts at the British Museum," *Notes*, 30, 3, (1974), p. 702; and Howard Mayer Brown, "The Trecento Harp," *Studies in the Performance of Late Medieval Music*, Ed. S. Boorman, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983, pp. 63-73.

17 Cristina Bordas, "Origen y evolución del arpa de dos ordenes," *Nasarre: Revista Aragonesa de Musicología*, 5, 2, (1989), pp. 87-91 and M.C. Gómez-Muntané, *op.cit.*, pp. 177-196.

18 Cf. H. Anglés, "La Música en la corte del rey Don Alfonso V de Aragón, El Magnánimo (Años 1413-1420)," *Scripta Musicológica*, p. 961.

19 Cf. M.C. Gómez-Muntané, *op.cit.*, and H. Anglés

20 Cf. Ian Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984, Chapters 3-5.

21 H. Anglés, "La música en la corte del rey Don Alfonso...", pp. 927 and 961. About the close links between the poet and the Aragonese court, see also: Augusto Cortina (ed.), "Prólogo" in *El Marqués de Santillana: Obras*, Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1956, pp. 9-12.

22 Cf. Samuel Rubio, *Historia de la Música Española: 2. Desde el "ars nova" hasta 1600*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1983, pp. 65-69 and Augusto Cortina, "Jorge Manrique, Voz, Alma, Ambito" in *Jorge Manrique: Cancionero*, Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1971, p. xv.

23 Cf. H. Anglés, "Alfonso d'Aragona...", p. 770 and "Spanien in der Musikgeschichte...", pp. 886-889.

24 J. Vicens Vives, *op.cit.*, pp. 91-94.

25 It is described as such in the inventory of the Alcázar of Segovia made in 1503, one year before the death of Isabel. Cf. Higinio Anglés, *La Música en la corte de los reyes católicos*, Barcelona: Instituto Español de Musicología, 19, p. 71.

26 Francisco Cantera y Burgos, "Conversos y judaizantes en la provincia de Soria," *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares*, 32, 1-4, (1976), p. 98. A process followed by the Inquisition of 1494 in Berlanga de Ennio, Soria, mentions that he is now dead and calls him "tañedor de arpa."

27 Cf. J. Vicens Vives, *op.cit.*, pp. 99-105.

28 Cf. *Ordenanzas de Sevilla. Recopilación de las Ordenanzas de la muy noble y muy leal cibdad de Sevilla...*, Sevilla: Juan de Varela, 1527, f. cxlixv. Reprint of 1502 edition.

29 Cf. G. van Doorslaer, "La Chapelle Musicale de Philippe le Beau," *Revue Belge d'Archeologie et d'Histoire de l'Art*, 4, (1934), pp. 40-41.; and Mary K. Duggan, "Queen Johanna and her musicians," *Musica Disciplina*, 30, (1976), pp. 75-77. It is possible that some of the minstrels of his brother had been also hers. In 1503-4 she had two rebec players at her service: Diego de Madrid and Juan de Madrid, one of them could be identified as a Madrid rebec player of Prince Juan. See: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Libro de Cámara Real del Principe Don Juan*, Madrid: Sociedad de Bibliófilos Españoles, 1870, pp. 182-184; and Luis Robledo, "La Música en la Corte Madrileña de los Austrias. Antecedentes: Las Casas Reales hasta 1556," *Revista de Musicología*, 10, 3, (1987), pp. 759-62.

30 Cf. Alonso de Santa Cruz, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, 1951, II, p. 65

31 Cf. Alan W. Atlas, *Music at the Aragonese Court at Naples*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985, pp. 107-108.

32 The existence of a Ms. with six *L'Homme Armé* masses at Naples can be another element to clarify this connection. This mass was associated with the strong Christian beliefs of the Aragonese and Spanish kings and also with the Order of the Golden Fleece which passed directly from the Burgundian dukes to the Spanish kings. Information given by Reinhard Strohm in a lecture given at King's College, London, in February 1990.

33 Cf. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Las Quincuagenas de la nobleza de España*, I, Madrid: Imp. Fundición de Manuel Tello, 1880, pp. 244-45.

34 The piece is "A la mia gran pena forte." Barbieri, in his 1890 edition, quotes the *Catálogo Imperial* by Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo but confuses Fernando, Duke of Calabria, with King Fernando el Católico. The text of the *romance* is allusive to the partition of the Kingdom of Naples in 1501 between Fernando and Louis XII, King of France. Other pieces in the same collection like "Franceses por que razón" and "Gaeta nos es sujeta," refer respectively to the Spanish conquest of the Rousillon in 1503 and Gaeta in 1504. Cf. G. Fernández de Oviedo, *Coronica de las Indias. La Historia General de las Indias*, Salamanca: Juan de Junta, 1547, f. 46v; and Francisco Asenjo y Barbieri, *Cancionero Musical de los siglos XV y XVI*, Madrid: Tip. de los Huerfanos, 1890, pp. 169-70.

35 In the first document, he is called "tañedor de arpa" and in the last document it is confirmed he was from Valencia. This is interesting due to the fact that there was a strong harp playing tradition in the realm of Aragón. Cf. Juan Friede, *Documentos Inéditos para la historia de Colombia*, I, (1509-1528), Bogotá: Academia de Historia, 1955, p. 44; and Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, México: Ed. Porrúa, 1967, p. 93.

36 Juan Bermudo, *Declaración de Instrumentos Musicales*, Osuna: Juan de Leon, 1555, Chapter LXXXVIII f. CXv; and Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de Música en cifras para vihuela*, Sevilla: Juan de Leon, 1546.

37 Cf. John Griffiths, "La 'Fantasía que contrahaze la harpa' de Alonso Mudarra: Estudio Histórico-Analítico," *Revista de Musicología*, 9, 1, (1986), pp. 30-32. Based on Barbieri, he reproduces his misinterpretation about the identity of Ludovico.

38 Cf. Richard Hudson, "The Folia Melodies," *Acta Musicologica*, 45, (1973), pp. 100-101.