
 REPERTORY

Hernando Franco's *Circumdederunt me*: The First Piece for the Dead in Early Colonial America

By Javier Marín



This article presents a study and edition of the four-part motet *Circumdederunt me* by Hernando Franco (ca. 1530–1585), a musician born in peninsular Spain who worked as chapelmaster in Portugal, Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Guatemala before being appointed to that role at the Cathedral of Mexico (1575–1585).¹ Although several scholars have long known that settings of *Circumdederunt me* were freely composed as extraliturgical motets for performance during the Mass, they had not recognized them as specific elements of the liturgy. Nonetheless, this text was performed in Spain and Latin America as an alternative invitational for the Matins for the Dead, either before or in place of the standard Roman prescribed invitational, *Regem cui omnia vivunt*.

Like most of the texts of Requiem, the text of the *Circumdederunt me* is highly dramatic:

*Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis
dolores inferni circumdederunt me.*

The sorrows of death have compassed me:
and the pains of hell have hold upon me.

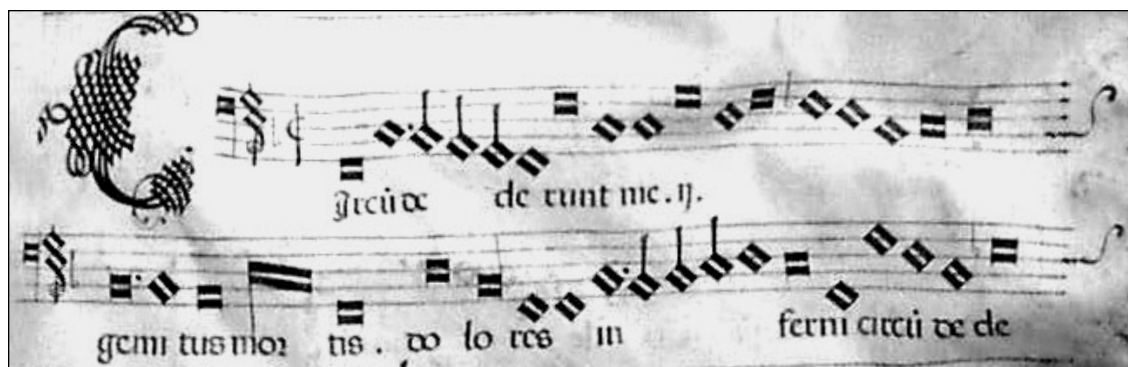
The Liturgy of the Dead was granted considerable importance by the Hispanic ecclesiastical authorities and by composers from a very early age. According to the extant documentary descriptions, the death of a sovereign, noble, ecclesiastic, representative, or a common city dweller, as well as the commemoration to honor all the dead, could have been mourned throughout the Middle Ages with different degrees of solemnity, ranging from simple readings without music or just with monophonic chants, to impressive ceremonies with elaborate polyphony spread across several days. The Requiem Office began to be set polyphonically in the late fifteenth century, and Iberian composers counted among the first systematically to adopt this practice. The first published anthology, Juan Vázquez's *Agenda Defunctorum* (Seville, 1556), appeared thirty years before the first Italian book of the genre, Giammateo Asola's *Officium defunctorum* (Venice, 1586). The atmosphere of heavy mysticism that dominated Hispanic culture during the sixteenth century had a great impact on artistic creation. The outbreak of the Reformation and the Roman authorities' response with the Counter-Reformation provoked a value crisis, and Spain and its New-World colonies strongly embraced the Roman position. Franco was

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¹For the biography of Franco, see María Gembero, "El compositor español Hernando Franco (1532–85) antes de su llegada a México: trayectoria profesional en Portugal, Santo Domingo, Cuba y Guatemala," *Latin American Music Review*, 26 (2005), 267–311.

the first musician who composed liturgical polyphony for the celebration of the dead in the Americas.

The *Circumdederunt me* by Franco is uniquely preserved in the manuscript Mexico D.F., Archivo del Cabildo de la Catedral Metropolitana, Polyphonic Choirbook II, a recently-discovered parchment book which can be dated to the first decade of the seventeenth century.² This manuscript is devoted almost completely to works by Franco and is mainly comprised of Vespers psalms. However, the last folios of the book include some items for the First Nocturne of Matins for the Dead. Interestingly, the pieces are not arranged by genre, as usual, but rather according to the order of the chants and recited items in the service. These same items were copied in a later volume, México 2 (copied ca. 1700), with responsories, lessons, and psalms for the Second and the Third Nocturnes of Matins and for Vespers of the same celebration.³



Beginning of the bass part of Franco's *Circumdederunt me* in the manuscript México 11 (ca. 1600)

Mexico II has two four-part settings of *Circumdederunt me*, both ascribed to Franco in the upper part of the page ("Ferdinandus Franco"). There is no reason to hesitate about these attributions, given that the volume was compiled soon after Franco's death and probably by Juan Hernández, successor of Franco as a chapelmaster in Mexico Cathedral and singer in the *capilla de música* conducted by Franco himself. If Cristóbal de Morales (ca. 1500–1553) was the first to set polyphonically the invitatory and Matins lessons in Spain, Franco was the first composer active in Latin America who made the same, but in a very different cultural context. No other New-World composer, apart from Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla (ca. 1590–1669), composed a polyphonic setting of this text.⁴

The two Franco pieces are placed right at the beginning of the Requiem section (fols. 81v–83r), which implies that they were sung first in the service—the works are organized follow-

²See Javier Marín, "Cinco nuevos libros de polifonía en la Catedral Metropolitana de México," *Historia Mexicana*, 208 (2003), 1073–94, for a preliminary description, and *Música y Músicos entre dos mundos. La Catedral de México y sus Libros de Polifonía (siglos XVI–XVIII)*, 3 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of Granada, 2007), 2: 370–410, for a complete catalogue and critical commentary of the book.

³A selection of all three nocturnes has been published in Grayson Wagstaff, ed., *Matins for the Dead in Sixteenth-Century Colonial Mexico: Mexico City Cathedral 3 and Puebla Cathedral 3*, Collected Works, 26 (Ottawa: Institute of Medieval Music, 2007).

⁴Gutiérrez de Padilla's *Circumdederunt me* (6vv) is preserved in two copies at Puebla Cathedral, where he served as a chapelmaster: Puebla Choirbook 3, fols. 30v–33r, and Puebla Choirbook 15/B, fols. 147v–150r.

ing the Office. Franco's decision to compose two settings is not surprising. The account of the *exequias* held in Mexico City in 1559 to honor Emperor Charles V's death—the first documented celebration of this kind in Mexico and possible model for the next—mentioned specifically the performance of the Morales's *Circumdederunt me* as an invitatory. Probably the main part of the office could have been composed by Franco in Guatemala during the 1560s, because some of the items are copied in the manuscript Guatemala 3. Surprisingly enough, there is no copy of the *Circumdederunt me* at Guatemala, so Franco probably composed these settings during his tenure at Mexico Cathedral, fitting the local liturgical requirements established since the middle of the sixteenth century.

In the Requiem music by Franco one can find two distinct styles. The first consists of a chordal, homophonic presentation of the chant melody, usually presented in long values in the cantus or tenor. This simplicity was looked for deliberately by the composers, to whom the most important thing was the clarity and intelligibility of the text, i.e. the invitatory *Regem cui omnia vivunt*, the lesson *Parce mihi Domine* or the psalm *Domine ne in furore*. The second style also presents the chant in a clear way, but it is the starting point for a discrete imitation constructed around the chant notes or motives or free counterpoint; in this more ornamented polyphony—always within the general austerity of the music—the voices move more independently, although without reaching the licenses of the freely-composed motet; the two settings of *Circumdederunt me*, the responsories, and the three antiphons for the First Nocturne, *Dirige Domine*, *Convertere Domine*, and *Nequando rapiat* follow this rule.

We can apply some of the characteristics that Grayson Wagstaff pointed out in relation to Morales's setting to Franco's *Circumdederunt me*. The most melismatic voice is the soprano, which carries the chant melody, while the rest of the voices are mostly syllabic. Franco incorporated the liturgical chant in the highest voice note for note—surprisingly the same melody Morales used and in the identical voice—making the chant melody the structural element for the composition. The cadences on “mortis” and “me” follow the division of the text and are both on the pitch F, as are the monophonic cadences at these points.

There are a few moments of word painting. On the word “gemitus” [groan], the alto presents a descending motive which falls to the voice types' lowest note in the piece, an F. The word “inferni” [hell] is set in all the voices to lines that descend to a low register. Immediately after that, all four voices lead up. The only completely homorhythmic section in all voices, on the word “dolores” [pains], sounds truly declamatory in style. The action of surrounding is expressed by the opposite descending (alto and tenor) and ascending (soprano and bass) movement on the word “circumdederunt” (measure 14). But Franco did not want to break the overall emotional climate of the piece with strong madrigalistic effects. The rhythmic motion is subdued, according to the somber quality of the music, due to the composer's preference for a low register for all voices. His harmony shows a clear preference for minor thirds and sixths.

From the Chapter Acts of Mexico Cathedral we know Franco directed an ensemble of musicians that in 1582 was formed by ten adult singers and an unknown number of choirboys. From this documentary evidence it is clear that Franco's polyphony was intended to be performed by a small number of singers, probably two or three per part maximum.

This serene *Circumdederunt me* could be considered the most characteristically “Hispanic” item composed in Viceregal Mexico by the Spaniard Franco. All of this music is concise, delightful to sing, and suitable for liturgical use. In sum, it is an exquisite piece to sing and meditate about the quick passage of time, the transitory nature of earthly life, and the contrasting mysteries of mortality and eternity. ♪

Circumdedederunt me

Hernando Franco

MEX-Mc, MS 11, fols. ilv-82r

Soprano
Cir - cum - - - de - - - de - - -

Alto
Cir - - - cum - de - de - runt me cir - cum - de -

Tenor
Cir - cum - de - de - - - - runt me - - - cir - cum - de -

Bass
Cir - cum - de - de - runt me cir - cum - de - - - -

5
S
- - - runt me ge - mi - tus mor - - - tis, do -

A
de - runt me ge - me - tus - - - mor - tis, - - - do -

T
de - runt me ge - - - mi - tus mor - - - tis, do

B
de - runt me ge - - - mi - tus mor - - - tis, do -

2
10

S
lo - res in - fer - - - - ni cir - cum - - -

A
lo - res in - fer - - - - ni cir - cum - de - de - runt

T
8
lo - res in - - - fer - - - ni cir - cum - de - de -

B
lo - res in - fer - - - - ni cir - cum - de - de - - - - runt me,

15

S
de - - - - de - - - - runt _____ me.

A
me, cir - cum - - - de - de - runt me.

T
8
- - runt _____ me, cir - cum - de - de - runt me. _____

B
cir - cum - de - - - de - - - - - - - runt me.

2. Antiphon: Circumdederunt me II

19

S
Cir - - - cum - - - de - - - de - - - - -

A
Cir - cum - de - de - runt me, cir - cum - de - de - - -

T
8
Cir - cum - de - de - - - runt me, cir - cum - de -

B
Cir - cum - de - de - - - runt me, cir - cum - de - de - runt

24

S
- - - runt me ge - mi - tus mor - - - tis do -

A
runt me ge - - - mi - tus mor - - - - tis do -

T
8
de - runt me ge - mi - tus mor - - - tis do -

B
me - - - ge - - - mi - tus mor - - - tis do -

Circumdede runt me

4
29

S
lo - res in - fer - ni cir - cum - de - de - runt me.

A
lo - res in - fer - ni cir - cum - de - de - runt me.

T
lo - res in - fer - ni cir - cum - de - de - runt me.

B
lo - res in - fer - ni cir - cum - de - de - runt me.

34

S
de - de - runt me.

A
runt me cir - cum - de - de - runt me.

T
runt me cir - cum - de - de - runt me.

B
me cir - cum - de - de - runt me.