

# **A century of zarzuela (1839-1939) in a convulsed Spain**

## **Some extemporaneous considerations**

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### **Musical theater next to a small, almost irrelevant bramble**

A *zarzuela*, in Spanish, is a small bramble to whom the suffix "*ela*" connotes with a certain tone of irrelevance, if not contempt. However, by extension it also points to the musical theater which, as a relevant part of the Spain as a nation cultural heritage, we are going to briefly consider in this pages. For the rest, *La Zarzuela*, thus, written with initial capital letter, is the name of the palace where the current King of Spain, don Felipe VI, lives. Located a few kilometers from the center of Madrid, it is a privileged setting, with gentle hills and charming oaks among which you can see rabbits running around, hares jumping and partridges flying. If this is the case today, in the 21st century, in a place where highways and roads are full with hundreds of vehicles every day, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the area must have been a true paradise for cynegetic activities.

The Spanish monarchs of the *Siglo de Oro* -Golden Century- were, among other things, very fond of hunting. When in the kingdoms that made up the Spanish Empire, as in the times of the more austere Philip II, *the sun still did not set* -especially during the reigns of Philip III and Philip IV- hunting filled up a good part of the leisure time of those monarchs. The little mountains of El Pardo were an ideal environment to practice this activity. For this reason, as a place to rest after hunting, in the place known at the time as *La Zarzuela*, a building had been constructed in which, after a pleasant day's hunting, the king and his entourage of nobles and aristocrats relaxed, in the so-called "La Zarzuela" festivities, with another of their main passions: theatrical performances which, as had been the norm since the times of classical Greece, combined the representation plot of the spoken theater with music, in an inseparable way.

In fact, the opera as a completely musical theater - of which Claudio Monteverdi, with *L'Orfeo. Favola in musica* (Mantua, 1607) must be considered the founding father - it had to be born, at the beginning of the Renaissance, at the impulse of the *Camerata Fiorentina*. Those who were part of that group of poets, musicians and singers that Count Bardi welcomed in his home in Florence, dreamed of an impossible one: to recreate, without any partiture and, because of that, with none options to succeed with their effort, the universe of musical theater of the times of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. Anyway, as a resul of that commitment and due to their attempt, opera

was born, as a cultural expression of high register; and, as time went by, when the themes of the classical mythology started to stop being the source of the arguments of these works, to align themselves with the less sophisticated tastes of a less cultivated people, the simplest shows appeared, with popular types, satirical and carefree tone, typical of the Italian *commedia dell' arte*.

### **From humble hunting lodge to magnificent Royal Palace**

But let's start our journey at *La Zarzuela* Palace. After the routine control at the entrance of the enclosure and once the *Guardia Civil* gives way to the visitor who is on his way to the royal audience, he lines up the car for five or ten minutes on gentle ramps, along which the driving is extremely pleasant: as the car goes along, tracing the wide curves that draw the rise, the scents of thyme and rosemary, serve as a balm and as an occasion for the visitor of the royal residence to finish their *composition of the place*: what am I coming for to see the king? Just to dispatch with the monarch? Maybe to present him some business project from a company or the civil society? Perhaps it is a reception of homage? Anyway, although the agenda will be different, depending on whether the visitor travels by cab, in his own vehicle, together with others in a bus... or in an official car, the time that takes to arrive to the top of the small hill where the palace is located, will serve for anyone to prepare hir or herself for the meeting.

If you are an ordinary citizen, you will probably go expectantly, aware of the honor of crossing the entrance, climbing slowly -never more than 40 kilometers per hour!- the sweet slopes of the path. You will enter the anteroom which gives access to the place of reception, receive the pertinent indications from His Majesty's civil and militar assistants, and finally, be received: you will shake don Felipe's firm hand, while, with great probability, you will be forced to smiling back at him looking up, because few of the visitors surpass the king's stature... Once the official photo had been taken that attests to having been received at La Zarzuela, and after having talked for a few minutes about the matter that justified the visit, you would go back on the road, with satisfaction and awareness of having had a sort of privilege, going back down the hill that leads the traveler again to *El Pardo* road; and from there, to Madrid.

If the one who is going to be received in the audience is the president of the government; some minister of his team; a representative of the public administrations or of some of the high institutions of the State -the Cortes; the militia; judges, magistrates or representatives of the Judiciary Power; some president of one of the autonomies that make up Spain as a political entity since the Constitution of 1978 configured the model of State in the current terms-; or some politician in office... the visit will surely have a less exceptional character, but it will not cease to be equally useful to the visitor, to slowly approach the ascent ramp, while he or she arranges in his or her head the ideas, reviews the protocol and checks fleetingly by the rear-view mirror that, depending on the case, the knot in the tie or the lipstick is conveniently fitted...

The place where *La Zarzuela* Palace is located is pleasant, very pleasant, an excellent place to set the residence of the Spanish Head of State: with very good judgment, the now controversial King Emeritus, don Juan Carlos de Borbón, decided at the beginning of the *Transición* -the name given to the political process that led Spain from the authoritarian regime of General Francisco Franco (1936-1975) to democracy-, to establish *La Zarzuela* Palace as his official residence. This had been his home since the time when he held the title of *Prince of Spain* -and not that of *Prince of Asturias*, as the heir to the Spanish Crown was once again called, once the Spaniards had democratically endorsed the new Constitution. By so doing, the magnificent, spectacular building in the Plaza de Oriente, the very *Royal Palace*, remained just as a facility for receiving the ambassadors who came to Madrid to present the mandatory credentials that legitimized them as representatives of their respective countries in Spain... and little else.

### **Operas y zarzuelas**

As if it were an allegory, *La Zarzuela*, with the charm that *El Pardo* little mountain lends it, managed to displace from the heart of Spanish life the most impersonal and administrative Royal Palace, located in Madrid's Plaza de Oriente, right next to the Teatro Real. This theater, which had been promoted in 1818 by King Fernando VII as a building destined to host the Opera House, would be inaugurated years later, in 1850, by Queen Isabel II.

And what about *la zarzuela*, like this, written with small initial letter? What is the meaning of what beats behind that name, when it refers to that artistic expression, typically of the Spanish musical theater? *La zarzuela*, in this respect, must be placed alongside other similar, homologous expressions, proper of another contexts and countries: in addition to the opera itself, it is worth mentioning the so-called *Italian comic opera*; the most modern *operetta*, mainly from Vienna; the *ópera-comique* in France, the *singspiel* in Germany and the *ballad opera* in England. In all of them the theater is combined with music. As we shall see later on this article, in the case of Spain, a repertoire has been created which, without doubt, should be considered as one of the most substantial and consistent signs of cultural identity of the Spanish heritage.

The monograph in which this contribution on *la zarzuela* is inserted, expressly seeks to explore some of the most distinctive cultural expressions produced by the human spirit -no doubt, poetry, novel, theater, opera, *ballet*, classical music, the first cinema films... but also, science, psychology, inventions...-, throughout the abundant century that spans the historical period from 1830 to 1939. It is within this framework, that it is worthwhile to give an brief account of the significance of what *la zarzuela* represented.

Telling the history of *la zarzuela*, even if a succinct way, will give news to the curious reader of the evolution of a phenomenon that has not always been given the attention that would have been desirable. And, above all, diving into some of the possible

causes that may explain this circumstance, will allow us to venture some extemporaneous considerations close to a sort of Philosophy of History.

*La zarzuela*, as a musical theater, is simple to define: it combines spoken parts - generally in Spanish; eventually, in some of the other Spanish official languages or dialects, but always in a vernacular one; instead of be written in Italian, as used to be the case in operas, which were incomprehensible to a large part of the public. *La zarzuela* presents musical numbers and a wide score where, besides the human voice - *romanzas*, duets, choirs, *concertantes*-, the symphonic orchestra takes the leading role. To this, sometimes, folk instruments are added, which contribute to give it the popular tone of which, frequently, the plot of the *zarzuelas* is covered.

### **Chronology and evolution of *la zarzuela grande* and *el género chico***

In order to specify more accurately the concept of *la zarzuela*, it is necessary to establish a double distinction, one chronological and another structural<sup>1</sup>. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between *la zarzuela antigua* -the ancient one-, corresponding to the 17th and 18th centuries, today almost forgotten, in which composers like Sebastián Durón, Antonio Lóteres, Joaquín Martínez de la Rosa or José de Nebra stood out; and *la zarzuela moderna*, whose starting date can be fixed, precisely, in the year 1839. From the structural point of view, it is also convenient to distinguish -in this case, taken into consideration its length- between what is known as *la zarzuela grande* -the big one- and the so-called *el género chico* -the tiny. This latter - sometimes giving rise to a truly *género ínfimo*- includes one-act pieces. It became fashionable from 1870 onwards, during the years of *la Restauración*, i. e., the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in the Spaniard throne. It extends into the period of the end and the beginning of the new century; and it finally declines again in favour of *la zarzuela grande*, which revived from 1910-1915 onwards, under the influence of Viennese operetta.

What is called *la zarzuela moderna* is reborn as a kind of *Ave Phoenix* from the ashes of *la zarzuela antigua*. This one had almost completely disappeared from the stages at the end of the 18th century, overwhelmed perhaps by the thrust and the undeniable quality of an Italian-style opera. Those operas, however, did not manage to satisfy the taste of all audiences, especially those spectators who did not find it easy to understand arguments, dialogues and lyrics written in Italian language.

If to this fact, which pointed to the felt need to offer a musical theater in Spanish, one adds a certain dose of the nationalist romanticism characteristic of the time, one will understand that, precisely around 1830 -the year that marks the starting point of the

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<sup>1</sup> It is not our task to make an erudite presentation about *la zarzuela* and its history. For our objective, it will be sufficient to limit ourselves to leaving some basic data that will allow us to sufficiently understand the evolution of the Spanish musical theater *par excellence*, in order to be able to weave together some more general, extemporaneous considerations to what we have already mentioned above. The interested reader will find easily good sources, both *on-line* and in monographs, dedicated to *la zarzuela*. For its precision, quality and abundant documentation, we recommend the access to the extensive bibliography of Roger Alier, which can be identified on the Internet.

works in this book and, moreover, the date on which the Royal Conservatory of Music is established in Madrid-, both the public and the specialized critics begin to dream of giving life to a kind of national opera in Spain, as will happen in other contexts and latitudes.

Capturing the opportunity that that more or less explicit demand implied, three professors of the Real Conservatory -Ramón Carnicer, Mateo Albéniz and Baltasar Saldoni- composed *Los enredos de un curioso*, a work that, as we say, seeks to inaugurate a Spanish style opera, what it did was to link with the spirit of the old *zarzuela* that half a century ago had almost completely disappeared from the stages. However, it was the work *El novio y el concierto*, with lyrics by Breton de los Herreros and music by an Italian living in Madrid, Basilio Basili, premiered at the Teatro del Príncipe in the capital of Spain on March 12th, 1839, which happens to be the starting point of modern zarzuela. This title was followed by *El contrabandista* (1841), *El ventorrillo de Crespo...* and, after giving up -by way of the strength of the facts- the possibility of giving way to a Spanish national opera -in impossible comparison with the romantic works of a Gioachino Rossini, a Gaetano Donizetti or a Vincenzo Bellini-, the modern *zarzuela* would end up consolidating definitively and successfully in Spain, as a musical native theater. This happened mostly from the year 1850 and especially, when on October 10th of 1856, the *Teatro de la Zarzuela* is inaugurated, in Jovellanos street of Madrid, with capacity for about 2500 spectators.

### Thirty selected zarzuelas over a century

Before closing this section with some general considerations, even without intending to provide an exhaustive list of titles and authors, it is worthwhile, at least, to give an indication of some of the ones that "*the undersigned*" considers among the most outstanding throughout the century that we are dealing with. In a selective way, we would like to call the reader's attention to the following thirty zarzuelas or fragments of them. We indicate the year, the title of the work, the name of the author or authors, and we provide a link to access all or some of the well-known fragments.

Año	Título	Autor	Enlace Web
1851	Jugar con fuego	Francisco Asenjo Barbieri	<a href="https://www.rtve.es/alacarta/audios/la-zarzuela/zarzuela-jugar-fuego-francisco-asenjo-barbieri-03-12-17/4342059/">https://www.rtve.es/alacarta/audios/la-zarzuela/zarzuela-jugar-fuego-francisco-asenjo-barbieri-03-12-17/4342059/</a>
1855	Marina	Pascual Emilio Arrieta	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPzCBz0uULI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPzCBz0uULI</a>
1874	El barberillo de Lavapiés	Francisco Asenjo Barbieri	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9K-Jfx0HNfE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9K-Jfx0HNfE</a>
1877	Los sobrinos del capitán Grant	Manuel Fernández Caballero	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXXKdTkyjCg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXXKdTkyjCg</a>

1886	La Gran Vía	Federico Chueca/ Joaquín Valverde	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbBypgcX34w">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbBypgcX34w</a>
1887	La Bruja	Ruperto Chapí	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ly4VMhUGRk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ly4VMhUGRk</a>
1893	El dúo de la africana	Manuel Fernández Caballero	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04aZjHZNidw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04aZjHZNidw</a>
1894	La verbena de la Paloma	Tomás Bretón	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_XNnvmLQ1Q">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_XNnvmLQ1Q</a>
1897	La boda de Luis Alonso	Gerónimo Giménez	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoaJf02TiyI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoaJf02TiyI</a>
1897	La Revoltosa	Ruperto Chapí	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEHrPMkjoM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEHrPMkjoM</a>
1898	Gigantes y cabezudos	Manuel Fernández Caballero	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf9aifhK7Rg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf9aifhK7Rg</a>
1900	La alegría de la huerta	Federico Chueca	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-GnOZMz_I">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-GnOZMz_I</a>
1902	El <i>puñao</i> de rosas	Ruperto Chapí	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbpW5ZdkkPs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbpW5ZdkkPs</a>
1903	La reina mora	José Serrano	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TpHkpzculk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TpHkpzculk</a>
1904	Bohemios	Amadeo Vives	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kn5uo5cQNmW">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kn5uo5cQNmW</a>
1910	La corte de faraón	Vicente Lleó	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRhop3WwIwg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRhop3WwIwg</a>
1914	Las golondrinas	José María Usandizaga	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vCYD9SygMI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vCYD9SygMI</a>
1916	El asombro de Damasco	Pablo Luna	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD4PclJhZEI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD4PclJhZEI</a>
1918	El niño judío	Pablo Luna	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0b20ZDIzBv8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0b20ZDIzBv8</a>
1921	El pájaro azul	Rafael Millán	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nnFLQ2Y8_U">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nnFLQ2Y8_U</a>
1923	Los gavilanes	Jacinto Guerrero	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kJzTd9jwFM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kJzTd9jwFM</a>
1924	La leyenda del beso	Reveriano Soutullo / Juan Vert	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81pl04F67yM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81pl04F67yM</a>
1926	El caserío	Jesús Guridi	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwYbPkUPbxQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwYbPkUPbxQ</a>
1927	La del soto del parral	Reveriano Soutullo / Juan Vert	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVHm2Va13cw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVHm2Va13cw</a>
1929	Los claveles	José Serrano	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i9b3OkRK3c">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i9b3OkRK3c</a>
1930	El cantar del arriero	Fernando Díaz Giles	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9x2pLKKMI8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9x2pLKKMI8</a>

1932	Don Gil de Alcalá	Manuel Penella	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-l0tFUTvB4Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-l0tFUTvB4Y</a>
1932	Luisa Fernanda	Federico Moreno Torroba	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x4CWhVnvUw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x4CWhVnvUw</a>
1934	La chulapona	Federico Moreno Torroba	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O0CGENx28o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O0CGENx28o</a>
1936	La tabernera del puerto	Pablo Sorozábal	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk7ZFD0-55o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk7ZFD0-55o</a>

### Some extemporaneous considerations

To follow the history of Spain to the rhythm of *zarzuela* music, from approximately 1839 to 1939, is a very instructive exercise.

By setting the limit on the latter, we would be closing one of the saddest episodes in the history of Spain, that of the Civil War (1936-1939), the result of the reaction of the nationalist side, which would eventually triumph on the battlefield, in the face of a fanaticism that was unsustainable politically and unbearable socially, with, among other things, the greatest and most arbitrary religious persecution ever known in the West against Catholic Christians, at least since the times of pagan Rome.

The year 1939 also marked the end of a decade lost, due to the excesses of a capitalism without compass, drunk on freedom without responsibility, and, as a result of that, unable to overcome the hangover of that *Black Thursday* of October 24th, 1929, with the *crack* of the New York Stock Exchange.

The world was about to enter an even more dramatic and saddening stage: World War II, with the Nazi barbarism, the Holocaust, and the evidence of the extreme levels of refinement to which human evil can lead, when added to it, among other things, the convenient dose of hatred of the different; a significant amount of the most genuine stupidity; the guilty silence of many; the mindless fanaticism of others; the short-sighted and narrow-minded selfishness of much of the intelligentsia; and a world leadership far removed from the stature and level that would have been desirable to pilot the ship of history in seas as stormy as those of the 1930s.

And what can we say about the Spain that evolved from the 19th century to the year 1940, *the first one of the Victory*, but that could hardly have known a more convulsive historical stage?

Indeed: it had started the 19th century with the War of Independence of the Spanish nation against Napoleón and his brother, the intruder king José I Bonaparte, the French invader. The struggles between liberals, more or less exalted, and conservatives, more or less immobilist, would be the dynamics of a sadly century, during which enormous parts of Spain and its empire would have been losing, with the independence of the new American republics and the final humiliating loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, after a war, provoked in a tyrannical and

demagogic way by the then emerging power that the United States represented, after having let its future be guided by the victory of the north over the south in its own Civil Secession War.

Among other things, throughout the years that concern us, Spain had to know the promulgation of about ten Constitutions or similar texts, of different tone and nuance; it suffered a considerable number of military pronouncements and *coups d'état*; it experienced various civil wars - the three *Guerras Carlistas*, plus the one already mentioned in 1936-1939; it went through various regime changes and saw how the State changed its political configuration -First Republic, with five presidents in one year; expulsion of the Bourbon dynasty, with the exile of Queen Isabel II; later restoration -*la Restauración*- in the person of Alfonso XII, after the failed attempt to establish a new dynasty with Amadeo I of Savoy; a dictatorship, that of General Primo de Rivera, at the beginning of the 1920's; a new march into exile of a Bourbon king, Alfonso XIII, the advent of the Second Republic, of unfortunate memory; the assault on the Republican order by the parties of the extreme left which, in the end, would create the objective conditions for a new -hopefully definitive- *Guerra Civil*, and the subsequent consolidation of the Franco regime. There were also in between skirmishes and colonial wars in the Americas and North Africa. And, of course, as we have already said, there was finally the loss of the last possessions of the Spanish Empire, as a result of the defeat suffered in 1898 by the Spanish Navy against the United States of America.

In this whole *iter*, the zarzuela was always sounding, as a kind of continuous bass of its own music, with tones and cadences capable of vibrating to the sound of the spirit of a people who assumed it as their own and expression of some of the most distinctive features of their soul.

It is certain and therefore we must acknowledge it without any shadow of a doubt, that *la zarzuela* does not have the quality of Italian opera, neither in its romantic expression nor in the *verista* one. Surely *la Zarzuela* neither does reach the levels of the French *grande opera* or of the total spectacle that the works of Wagner constitute. And nevertheless, it neither needs to be compared with those, nor -in case of doing it- it should end up being considered as an cultural expression of minor value. These are different realities and, to a certain extent, not measurable with the same measurement pattern. Each one in its own style had its reason to be; and all together contribute to mark a chapter in the history of human culture: the one represented by musical theater, which, in turn, constitutes a kind of *objectification of the spirit*, insofar as it crystallizes into a series of objective realities -the works and the titles- which, in turn, have a limited path, which ends up closing in on itself, as the vital impulse that, responding to the circumstances of its moment, animated an innovative creativity that necessarily has to close its cycle, disappears.

Many things will depend on whether we learn to approach these cultural creations with an open mind, a conciliatory attitude and eyes willing to let ourselves be surprised, out of admiration and respect, by the creative capacity of the human soul:



tolerance, altruism, collaboration with one another, solidarity ... even - and above all - peace and some of the most essential balances, outside of which the future of humanity could be seriously compromised.