

Introduction

When listening to recordings of vocal and instrumental works made around 1900, our attention is likely to be drawn, for better or worse, to portamento. Instances of portamento in these recordings are indeed considerably greater than we would hear in present-day performances of the same works. From our modern perspective, we may regard these earlier interpretations as being overly sentimental or kitsch. *Zarzuela*, the Spanish-language musical theatre genre that flourished between 1850 and 1950, was no exception.¹ This becomes obvious from even cursory listening to the increasing number of historical recordings that have become widely available in recent years, both through digitization projects led by research libraries² and through commercial CD releases.³

The appearance of this wealth of material has the potential to transform the ways in which we study and understand *zarzuela*, including how it was interwoven into its cultural and social contexts and assessing its place within broader styles of singing and their developments between the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries. Scholarship on *zarzuela* has grown significantly since the 1980s, after musicology established itself as a discipline in its own right within Spanish academia and *zarzuela* became one of its pre-eminent objects of study. Out of necessity, much of the work conducted in the initial decades was foundational and was led to a great extent by the Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales (Complutense Institute of Musical Sciences) at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Staff at the Instituto compiled an ambitious dictionary (*Diccionario de la zarzuela en España e Hispanoamérica*) that included entries on composers, works and singers,⁴ published biographies of the

¹ Baroque *zarzuela* developed between the 1630s and 1750s as a Spanish-language musical theatre genre. The revival of *zarzuela* in the mid nineteenth century in the hands of Francisco Asenjo Barbieri and others was conceptually rooted in these earlier *zarzuelas* in an attempt to build a Spanish-language theatrical genre. Musically, however, they did not look back to the Spanish Baroque but rather to contemporary Italian opera and French *opéra comique* and *opérette*.

² The most significant digital collections are those of the Biblioteca Nacional de España (available through the Biblioteca Digital Hispánica, www.bne.es/es/Catalogos/BibliotecaDigitalHispanica/Inicio/index.html), which has digitized 20,000 historical recordings (including wax cylinders, shellac discs and piano rolls), and the Biblioteca de Catalunya (available at Memòria Digital de Catalunya, <https://mdc1.csuc.cat>), which has digitized more than 300 cylinders (including about 50 of *zarzuela*) made by the Barcelona industrialist Ruperto Regordosa in his own home in the early twentieth century. Eresbil – Archivo de la Música Vasca is home to about 500 cylinders, most of which have been digitized, but as of February 2024 these can only be listened to on-site, though a small number are available online (www.eresbil.eus/web/ybarra/presentacion.aspx). A small number of *zarzuela* recordings are also available at digitized collections outside Spain (e.g., the Irvin S. Gilmore Library at Yale University).

³ These include those available on Blue Moon Serie Lírica and Naxos Classical Archives.

⁴ Emilio Casares Rodicio, ed., *Diccionario de la zarzuela en España e Hispanoamérica* (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2006), 2 vols.

main composers of the genre⁵ and launched a series of editions that included some of the best-known repertoire works (*Colección Música Hispánica – Música lírica*). At a later stage – and more within the field of Spanish cultural studies rather than musicology – new research directions pushed the study of the genre beyond the ‘composers-and-work’ paradigm and focused on its cultural, social, political and ideological dimensions, such as the place of *zarzuela* within discourses of national identity and studies on venues and audiences.⁶

The realm of *zarzuela* performance, however, has remained surprisingly unexplored. Studies of the social and cultural history of performers⁷ and particularly of performance practice remain limited.⁸ This is somewhat paradoxical. Presumably, a main reason why audiences kept filling *zarzuela* theatres was because of the fascination that the music, as conveyed in the act of performance, exerted on them. Yet we know little about the sonic means through which audiences perceived *zarzuelas* and their associated discourses and connotations.

Against this backdrop, this Element intends to set the foundations for a contextually sensitive history of vocal performance practices in recorded *zarzuela* by tracing the story, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, of one of the most conspicuous features heard in these early

⁵ Luis G. Iberni, ed., *Ruperto Chapí: Memorias y escritos* (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 1995); Víctor Sánchez, *Tomás Bretón: Un músico de la Restauración* (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2002); María Encina Cortizo, *Emilio Arrieta: De la ópera a la zarzuela* (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 1998); Emilio Casares Rodicio, *Francisco Asenjo Barbieri: el hombre y el creador* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1994).

⁶ Lucy Harney, ‘Controlling Resistance, Resisting Control: The *género chico* and the Dynamics of Mass Entertainment in Late Nineteenth-Century Spain’, *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 10 (2006): 151–167; Enrique Encabo, *Música y nacionalismos en España* (Barcelona: Erasmus, 2006); Lucy D. Harney, ‘Zarzuela and the Pastoral’, *Hispanic Issue* 12, no. 8 (2008): 252–273; Tobias Brandenberger and Antje Dreyer, eds., *La zarzuela y sus caminos: Del siglo XVII a la actualidad* (Berlin: Lit, 2016); Andrea García Torres, ‘El teatro lírico como género difusor de las ideologías dominantes en torno a la Guerra de África (1859–1860)’, *Anuario Musical* 72 (2017): 191–208.

⁷ While a significant number of performers’ biographies exist that provide very valuable information, most if not all are more journalistic or reminiscent than scholarly in nature. See, for example, Olimpio Arca Caldas, *Unha voz ... Mary Isaura* (A Estrada: Asociación Fillos e Amigos da Estrada, 2001); Pedro Gómez Manzanares, *Felisa Herrero: Musa de la zarzuela* (Madrid: Cultiva Libros, 2011); María Luz González Peña, Javier Suárez-Pajares and Julio Arce Bueno, *Mujeres de la escena 1900–1940* (Madrid: SGAE, 1996); José Manuel Rodríguez Arnáez, *Lucrecia Arana: Jarrera castiza – La reina de las tiples del género chico* (Haro: Asociación Cultural Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, 1992).

⁸ The only works that specifically address singing practices are Ramón Regidor Arribas, *La voz en la zarzuela* (Madrid: Real Musical, 1991) and the dictionary entry ‘Voz’, in Emilio Casares Rodicio, ed., *Diccionario de la zarzuela en España e Hispanoamérica* (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2006), vol. 2, 941–944. Both focus mostly on voice types and sub-types and matters of range and tessitura and take a prescriptive rather than descriptive approach. The use of historical primary sources other than the scores themselves is limited.

recordings: portamento. The start and finish dates frame a cohesive unit within the history of recorded music in Spain. In 1896, the first commercial recordings of *zarzuela* in Spain are likely to have been made and in 1958, Ataúlfo Argenta, a prolific conductor who pioneered the recording of complete *zarzuelas* on LPs (long-playing 33 rpm records), passed away. While *zarzuelas* certainly continued to be recorded after 1958, Argenta's death marked, in a way, the end of an era. The 1950s also brought fundamental changes to the genre's popularity on stage. Once a thriving art form filled with premieres of new works, by the end of the decade *zarzuela* had become increasingly fossilized into a set repertoire of canonic works, a process to which Argenta's extensive catalogue contributed considerably.

Portamento is certainly not the only aspect of performance in earlier *zarzuela* that merits attention, but it is particularly important because it offers a compelling way to hear the interweaving of performance style with the genre's social and cultural contexts. This can allow us to explore how and why styles can change according to social and cultural shifts without resorting to simplistic cause-effect explanations. One particular aspect of portamento that allows us to combine performance practice with contextual study in this way is that it was an aspect of performance that *zarzuela* shared with contemporaneous recorded genres, including opera, art song, various vernacular vocal styles and a wealth of instrumental music. This necessitates that we engage with questions such as how *zarzuela* interfaced and interacted with these other genres, both in Spain and internationally, how these interactions were regarded by composers, musicians, critics and audiences at different points in time and, ultimately, how the genre was perceived to represent national identity in a distinctive way. These are indeed key questions in *zarzuela* scholarship that go beyond performance. While the genre was universally recognized as a distinctively Spanish art form, a range of controversies and debates emerged throughout the decades on the extent to which foreign influences were to be either celebrated or decried.⁹

While some of these controversies and debates will be spelled out in more detail throughout this Element, there are two general themes in the reception of *zarzuela* in Spain that I wish to call attention to at this point, for they provide a foundation for understanding much of the history of the genre, particularly to newcomers. First, the discourses of Spanish identity upon which *zarzuela* was built and which it disseminated to its audiences were not monolithic. Different notions of Spanishness coexist in *zarzuela* and perceptions and debates concerning Spanish national identity changed throughout the period under study. Second, controversies abound surrounding the relationship between *zarzuela*

⁹ Sánchez, *Tomás Bretón*, 243.

and opera. While the two genres obviously share a great deal in terms of compositional techniques and singing styles, some in the Spanish music scene at different points in time have regarded *zarzuela* as inimical to opera, arguing that Spanish composers had been drawn to *zarzuela* because it was popular and profitable. By writing *zarzuela*, it was thought that they were neglecting to build a tradition of Spanish opera, one that would allegedly have given Spanish music a more universal appeal.¹⁰

Apart from disentangling the complex threads of Spanish national identity, *zarzuela* and opera, focusing on the study of recorded portamento also allows us to examine how performance practice was interwoven into the history of recording technologies and indeed into the recording industry itself. In order to explore the interface between individual performance practices and the relevant technological conditions, this Element, rather than focusing on a small number of well-known performers (as has often been the case with earlier studies of performance practice as reflected in early recordings), engages with an ample number of singers from various backgrounds. These recordings often reflect what a majority of contemporary *zarzuela* critics, audience members and singers may have considered less-than-optimal performance decisions. Such choices, as we will see, can often be chalked down to a lack of experience or expertise on the part of the recordist or of the singer, particularly in the latter's dealings with technology.¹¹ Rather than simply dismissing these moments as unrepresentative, this Element regards them as opportunities to consider how Spanish recordists and singers interacted and experimented with the parade of successive new technologies arriving in the country. These interfaces and experiments sometimes influenced performance practices on stage in what Mark Katz has termed the 'phonograph effect'. In such instances, recording technologies do not simply document stage performance practices but rather reflect changes in performing styles that happened in the recording studio and subsequently became commonplace in live performance.¹²

¹⁰ On the issue of *zarzuela* versus Spanish opera, see Clinton D. Young, 'Why Did Spain Fail to Develop Nationalist Opera?', *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (2013): 117–137, especially 117–118 and 137; Elena Torres, 'Zarzuela y musicología: historia de un debate en permanente revisión', in Alberto González Lapuente and Alberto Honrado Pinilla, eds., *Horizontes de la zarzuela* (Madrid: Fundación Jacinto e Inocencio Guerrero, 2014), 45–59, especially 46–47.

¹¹ Summaries of a range of technical issues of this nature can be found in Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Understanding the Sources: Performances and Recordings', in *The Changing Sound of Music* (London: CHARM, 2009), www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/studies/chapters/chap3.html and Neal Peres da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4–41.

¹² Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 102.

Beyond looking at the impact of recording technologies on performance practice, focusing on the early recording industry also allows the exploration of related topics that go beyond the merely technological, including, for example, the impact of recording technologies on the music profession as well as on listening and consumption practices.¹³ The formats and conventions we hear in early recordings – particularly those that might seem more alien to us – also allow us to consider broader questions pertaining to ontologies of recorded music vis-à-vis live performance, listening practices and the circulation of recorded music. In turn, we can analyse how these dimensions may have panned out in distinct ways within the context of Spain and *zarzuela*, thus contributing to the shaping of discourses surrounding national identity. However, while *zarzuela* enjoyed a significant degree of circulation in the Americas (in both live and recorded formats), recordings were primarily made in Spain. (Exceptions will be noted and discussed in due course.) Focusing on Spanish-made *zarzuela* recordings facilitates the comparison between recordings that essentially came from the same milieu and which were closely connected to the genre's vibrant live culture, at least until its decline in popularity.

Interpreting Portamento through *Zarzuela* Recordings

This Element takes as its starting point the fact that portamento in *zarzuela* did not develop in isolation from other vocal genres. Of these, opera and art song are the only ones that have thus far received sustained scholarly attention and this scholarship informs the present enquiry. The connection between *zarzuela* and other sung genres is confirmed by historical evidence; indeed, the origins of modern *zarzuela* in the mid nineteenth century were decisively influenced by Italian *bel canto* and French *opéra comique* and *opérette*, not just in terms of compositional language but also performance practice. *Zarzuela* singers at that time trained either at the Real Conservatorio de Madrid or privately with opera-focused singing teachers, many of whom were Italian.¹⁴ Throughout the history

¹³ See also works coming from cultural studies and the sociology of music such as Stefan Gauß, 'Listening to the Horn: On the Cultural History of the Phonograph and the Gramophone', in Daniel Morat, ed., *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in 19th- and 20th-Century Europe* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 71–100, especially 81; Arved Ashby, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 30; and Patrick Feaster, "'Rise and Obey the Command": Performative Fidelity and the Exercise of Phonographic Power', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 357–395, especially 358–359.

¹⁴ Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Historia de la zarzuela* (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2001), 165–72; María del Coral Morales Villar, 'Los tratados de canto en España durante el siglo XIX: Técnica vocal e interpretación de la música lírica' (PhD thesis, University of Granada, 2008), 256–264.

of the genre, it was not unheard of for singers to move back and forth between *zarzuela* and opera, which suggests that singing practices were thought to be transferable, at least to an extent, between the genres.

Evidence suggests, however, that performance practices, though transferable, might not have been thought to be exactly equivalent, for *zarzuela* could also accommodate numbers with more traditional or popular streaks. These songs presumably called for performing styles more akin to those heard in music hall, cabaret and similar urban genres that were being recorded elsewhere at the turn of the century. Such vocal deliveries were characterized by a low soft palate that resulted in a nasal tone and intelligible diction, both of which were key to making humorous texts intelligible.

Similarly, when leading opera singers ventured into *zarzuela*, their approaches to singing could sometimes raise eyebrows. The Teatro Real in Madrid, although specializing in opera, occasionally hosted one-off performances of successful *zarzuelas* outside the main season. Some roles went to well-known *zarzuela* performers and others to operatic celebrities. In 1904, Ruperto Chapí's *La revoltosa* was staged with opera stars Matilde Lerma, Andrés Perelló de Seguro, Luisa García Rubio and Emilio Cabello in the main roles. Only one *zarzuela* performer appeared with them, the baritone Emilio Mesejo, who at the time was immensely popular. Reviews of these performances at the Real document certain performance practices that we do not normally hear in recordings or find in other reviews. Lerma allegedly interpolated a high C in a duet that was said to 'leave her partner, Mesejo, speechless and shocked'.¹⁵ *Zarzuela* was seen as being able to integrate such hybrid elements into itself, unlike opera.

The definition of portamento employed in this Element is deliberately a simple one: following Ellen T. Harris in *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, it can be thought of as 'the connection of two notes passing audibly through the intervening pitches'.¹⁶ This definition is well suited to the period under study and aptly describes what we hear in *zarzuela* recordings. While in the eighteenth century and earlier the notion of *portamento di voce* was broad and vague, by the early nineteenth century its meaning had been restricted to the expressive sliding which is familiar to us today.¹⁷ Within *zarzuela* recordings – as well as in contemporary examples from other genres – portamento reflects some variability, for example, in terms of speed or the size

¹⁵ 'Teatro Real', *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 25 January 1904. All translations are mine.

¹⁶ Ellen T. Harris, 'Portamento (i)'. Grove Music Online, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemu-sic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000040990, accessed 14 July 2023.

¹⁷ Potter, 'The Rise and Fall of Portamento', 524–526.

of the intervals to which it was applied. This Element will examine how this variability maps out over time and what factors might have shaped its different directions.

Several conclusions drawn from existing scholarship on portamento inform my approach to *zarzuela* recordings. First, a key preoccupation in many studies has been to deduce from existing recordings the rules that might have determined when and how portamento should have or could have been applied.¹⁸ Written sources, such as treatises and reviews, do not always help in this regard. Sometimes they may warn against performing portamento in ways that go against good taste, but rarely do they define what is meant by good taste. This is seen in Spanish sources from the period at hand¹⁹ as well as in others from throughout Europe.²⁰ Our modern ears, unaccustomed as they typically are to portamento, might be unreliable in determining what constituted good taste at the time and what did not. On the basis of recordings, a range of literature has convincingly mapped out portamento conventions, for example, within the boundaries of a composer's output,²¹ a single song²² or a particular country.²³ My approach here follows a similar logic: given that portamento conventions were not spelled out – at least in writing – our best means to understand how they worked is to compare a manageable body of recordings that share a common notion of style. While outliers and unorthodox practices certainly made their way into recordings, such comparisons can help us identify norms and exceptions and detailed examinations of the historical contexts can assist in understanding how these practices came about and what they reveal about the relationships of singers, listeners and recordists to technology.

Another result of earlier studies relevant to the present one concerns the relationship between portamento and legato. Scholars have repeatedly pointed out that portamento is not only a deliberate expressive choice in musically or dramatically important moments but also can operate as a technical aid to facilitate legato (smooth) motion on difficult or large intervals.²⁴ Spanish primary sources explicitly recognize that portamento had this dual nature.

¹⁸ Deborah Kauffman, 'Portamento in Romantic Opera', *Performance Practice Review* 5, no. 2 (1992): 139–158; John Potter, 'Beggar at the Door: The Rise and Fall of Portamento in Singing', *Music and Letters* 87, no. 4 (2006): 523–550.

¹⁹ Morales Villar, *Los tratados de canto en España*, 373 and 454.

²⁰ Potter, 'Beggar at the Door', 523.

²¹ Roger Freitas, 'Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127, no. 2 (2002): 226–257, especially 244.

²² Potter, 'Beggar at the Door', 525–532.

²³ Sarah Potter, 'Changing Vocal Style and Technique in Britain during the Long Nineteenth Century' (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2014), 109–113.

²⁴ Kauffman, 'Portamento in Romantic Opera', 153.