The role of music among the Spanish high nobility during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs remains somewhat elusive. Due to the extensive destruction of family archives by natural disasters, theft, wars, neglect, transfer, and dispersal, few, if any, of the libraries and archives of Spain’s noble households survive intact, and many contain distressingly few records from this period.1 Thus, compared to institutions like the royal chapels and major cathedrals, relatively little is known about the musical establishments of these courts. However, the information that can be gleaned indicates that members of the high nobility were important patrons of musicians, played a key role in popularizing the vihuela, and, particularly after the death of Ferdinand in 1516, were the primary supporters of indigenous secular music. It is also the case that their patronage of music was rather different to that of other European nobles—and for a number of reasons.

The turbulent transition of Spain from a collection of independent kingdoms to a more or less unified nation under a pair of strong monarchs created a noble estate in the service of, rather than in competition with, the Crown. Most of the Iberian high nobility was created during the fifteenth century, when warring rival factions solicited allies by granting titles and lands to powerful vassals. By the time that Ferdinand and Isabel married in 1469, the number of noble dynasties had increased dramatically, and the Catholic Monarchs awarded even more to their allies during the war of succession over Isabel’s ascendancy to the throne. In 1400 there were fewer than ten noble families in Spain; by 1480, the year that the queen’s rivals were finally vanquished,
there were forty-nine, and new titles continued to be issued (Highfield 1965: 376).

While the newly minted high nobility was vastly influential within each family’s own domains, it was very largely subjugated by royal authority (Highfield 1965: 253). Their position within Castile and Aragon was determined by the noble family’s relationship with one or both of the Catholic Monarchs, and given the large number of newly created nobles in the Spanish kingdoms, contention for royal access and influence was fierce. While economic power and extensive networks of clients were important factors in this competitive environment, it was also crucial for members of the new aristocracy to demonstrate their worthiness through piety, devotion to the humanities, and liberality, which came to be considered truer indicators of inherent nobility than bloodline.

The essayist Sebastián de Covarrubias defines the ‘hombre liberal’ as ‘he who gracefully, without consideration of any reward whatsoever, does good and gives to the needy, observing the manner in which it is given so as not to give in to wasteful extremes’ (‘El que graciosamente, sin tener respeto a recompensa alguna, haze bien y merced a los menesterosos, guardando el modo devido para no dar en el estremo de pródigo’) (Riquer 1943/98: 765). However, in practice, the term was employed to describe munificence in a broader sense; those nobles who allotted vast sums to lavish livery, banquets with fifty different dishes, and extensive musical establishments, were deemed by chroniclers of the period—who always speculated about the cost—as both ‘liberal’ and ‘truly noble’ (Fernández Madrid 1991: 106–8). ‘Liberalidad’ was the ultimate tool in the rivalry for fame and favour; extensive spending on luxurious entertainments, artistic patronage, and other displays of apparently limitless wealth largely replaced military reputation as a means of ascendancy (Domínguez Ortiz 1973: 39). While this might suggest a tendency toward lavishness and great expense at all times, the pursuit of ‘liberalidad’ and, by extension, the patronage of music, was influenced by a number of other factors, including financial realities, personal tastes, and the reputation and duties of individual nobles. Some supported choirs and instrumental consorts because they loved music, some paid the substantial sums involved to prove they could afford to do so, and some spent as little as they could on an ephemeral art that was unlikely to preserve their fame over time.

Given that documentation of the households of the high nobility from the age of the Catholic Monarchs is relatively sparse, information on their patronage and use of music has to be extrapolated from fragmentary records from a select number of households: