Musical Lives: Late Medieval Hispano-Jewish Communities

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We cannot hear the music accompanying the Dance of Miriam portrayed in the illumination to a Catalan-Aragonese codex of the Haggadah (c. 1320s) (Figure 15.1). Yet, without music there is no dance, and the musical instruments depicted attest to an interest in music-making by the late medieval painter and his patron. The question of the religion of the artist/observer or of his model—was he a Christian?—was raised in the nineteenth century and continues to engage scholars. However, there can be no question as to the Jewish character of a Passover Haggadah and the decorum attendant upon it. The patron’s tastes, no less than the artist’s, determined the outcome, as did the Hebrew texts that frame the picture. The influential scholar Ramón Menéndez Pidal averred that we could hear the music of the Jews of the time of the Catholic Monarchs; it had been petrified like submarine coral thanks to the magic wand of tradition (Gutwirth 1994–95: 481ff). Yet behind the ‘tradition’ collected in the twentieth century, some have discerned the music of a tango (Seroussi 1990).

I History and Music

Numerous additional examples of the problems with sources could be produced, but the most famous is the description of the music-making of the Jews at the time of their expulsion by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492. In the 1930s, Thomas Walsh accepted uncritically the narrative of the expulsion written by Andrés Bernáldez (c. 1450–1513), chaplain and confessor to Diego de Deza, Archbishop of Seville, and sometimes referred to as the priest of the southern Andalusian town of Los Palacios y Villafranca (‘cura de los Palacios’), which Walsh translated as: ‘the rabbis encouraged them and caused the women and boys to sing and play tambourines and timbrels to make the people merry’.

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1 The Sarajevo Haggadah is available in a number of facsimiles. On the instruments, see Molina 2010, and for an art historical study, see, for example, Franco Mata 1993.
Given that Bernáldez’s chronicle of the Catholic Monarchs—entitled Memorias and not Historia (Gómez-Moreno & Mata Carriazo 1962)—is a source of the narratives of expulsion, discovery and conquest, the question of credit and credibility becomes central. Indeed, a long tradition believed in Bernáldez’s description of the expulsion (which includes the above passage on Jewish music) and the passages on Jews in such fifteenth-century Castilian chronicles as ’impartial’ (Gutwirth 1984). Many readers paraphrase his lines on music as if the book offered a realistic, transparent description. More recently, research on areas where Bernáldez’s assertions can be tested—because numerous independent archival records, particularly concerning the military history of the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, survive—has led to the assertion that his account is reminiscent of a film set: ‘Huge conscripted armies of knights and foot soldiers; vast requisitions of beasts of burden and supplies or provisions; towns and city walls that are destroyed and rebuilt as if by magic, making the modern reader automatically think about contemporary “cinema cities”’.2

2 Azcona 1964: 505: ‘Levas gigantescas de caballeros y peones; requisas impresionantes de bestias de carga y de mantenimientos o vituallas, ciudades y murallas que se destruyen y reed-