



Ursulines' 1736 songbook preserved by HNOCC

By Beth Donze
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Singing at Mass surely had to have fostered the Catholic faith of the Ursuline nuns who came to New Orleans in 1727 as missionary educators of girls in French Louisiana.

But now music historians can speculate that some of those hymns might also have helped to alleviate the sisters' homesickness, having been set to familiar secular tunes originally composed in their native France.

Shedding light on the early Ursulines' musical world is a more than 280-year-old, hand-copied collection of music that survived in the sisters' library – a songbook that is the oldest known example of European music in the Mississippi Valley.

The songbook, preserved for modern audiences in The Historic New Orleans Collection's 2014 book, "French Baroque Music of New Orleans," contains music and lyrics for 299 spiritual songs that fall into four lyrical themes: "The Glory of God"; "Mysteries of Our Lord"; "Virtues"; and "Vices."

Ursulines built large library

Given the bent of the 1736 manuscript, it is not a big leap to imagine the Ursulines drawing from the songbook to inform their own religious formation and that of their students, said Alfred Lemmon, director of the HNOCC's Williams Research Center.

"We know they would sing different parts of the Mass – such as the Kyrie and



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"*Vertus*" – *Virtues* – is one of the lyrical themes of a 1736 collection of music used by New Orleans' Ursuline Sisters. The collection is the oldest known example of European music in the Mississippi Valley.

the Gloria – but they would sing different things as well, possibly songs (from this collection)," Lemmon said.

The manuscript came into the hands of the HNOCC in 1998, when it acquired the Ursuline Sisters' library of about 3,000 books dating from the earliest days of the convent and school in the French Quarter.

The songs, written by prominent French and Italian composers, including Jean-Baptiste Lully and Francois Couperin, were copied in Paris in 1736 from an original source called "Nouvelles poésies spirituelles et morales sur les plus beaux airs de la musique françoise et italienne avec la basse" (New spiritual and moral poems for the most beautiful tunes of French and Italian music with bass). The copyist, who embellished the manuscript with illustrations, is known only by the initials "C.D."

Obvious treasure

The manuscript was sent to the New Orleans community of Ursulines in 1754 by a "Mr. Nicolle," possibly as part of the Frenchman's ministry of providing inspirational books to Catholic missionaries. A copy of his devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus also survives in the Ursuline library preserved at the HNOCC.

Most of the songs are contrafacta – secular tunes of the time that were reset with sacred lyrics. The practice of applying different lyrics to an already familiar tune was common in 18th-century Europe, Lemmon said, citing a famous example.

"'Ode to Joy,' which we know as a hymn, is from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony," Lemmon said. "Everyone knew that tune, (but later on) someone had the idea to write a spiritual text to it."

Musical shorthand

According to scattered references in letters and other historical documents, many of the Louisiana-based Ursulines were talented musicians in their own right, playing the harpsichord, bass violin, and flute.

Lemmon said such musical aptitude was helpful when it came to playing songs from the 1736 manuscript. A "musical shorthand" provides performers with only a single vocal line and a single bass line, rather than more complex arrangements.

This pared down approach to presenting music was common for the period.

"Performers (guided by the Ursuline manuscript) were expected to be able to complete the rest of the music – to improvise if they wanted one of the verses to be done with the flute, or (rotate in) a mature soprano for another verse," Lemmon said. "We wanted to put it into the hands of (today's) performers exactly as it was written, and let those performers bring their own creative spirit to it."

Mindful of musicians' needs

The hand-illustrated, leather-bound collection was deliberately produced in horizontal "landscape format" – wider than it is high.

"One of the reasons they did that was so that the performers would not have to turn pages as often. It was an issue of practicality," explained Lemmon, noting that ensembles in North America and Europe have done performances based on

the Ursuline manuscript. It also guided a "very well-received" performance at the book's launch in November 2014, he said.

Lemmon said "French Baroque Music of New Orleans" restores Louisiana's Colonial-era music to its rightful place in the city's musical tradition.

Before the advent of jazz, New Orleans was ground zero of European music in the United States: the site of the country's first performance of a Beethoven piano concerto in 1819; the base of traveling opera companies that toured the East Coast in the 1820s; and home to multiple opera houses in the early part of the 19th century.

"The city even had a German opera house that would translate French and Italian operas into German," said Lemmon, adding that the early jazz musicians were classically trained players who wrote their own music and who were adept at playing operatic overtures on the piano. In the 1840s, the city's free people of color formed their own orchestra.

"We love our history, we love our music, but it is so much richer than we imagined, and (the Ursuline manuscript) is a wonderful example," Lemmon said. "It survived hurricanes; it survived fires; it survived humans. We have this treasure!"

The Ursuline music manuscript will be on display in the exhibition "Founding Era," which opens at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 533 Royal St., on Feb. 27, 2018.

