

Cordelia Zars

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“What is Believed and What is Borrowed: 500 Years of Cultural Appropriation in Spanish Music”

This year, I worked on a project about the nature of Spain’s relationship with Islam, studied through the lens of music. Since the original expulsion of all Muslims in 1609, the reigning ideology in Spain has remained: Christians in, Muslims out. Practicing Muslims have either been forced to leave or to stamp out their religion in exchange for another. Most of the cultural remnants left by the 800-year Islamic inhabitation have disappeared, wiped away at the hands of the Christians. Even historical investigations into the Arabic influence on Spanish art were censored and discouraged until the fall of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. Only recently has any literature emerged that dares to reveal the extent of Islam’s impact on Spanish identity.

However, through all these years of the violent rejection of Islam, there’s one large inconsistency. Music. For all that they hated Muslims, it seems the Christians couldn’t bring themselves to hate their songs. Even as Christians forced hundreds of thousands of Muslims out of the Peninsula, they retained Arabic music and converted it into their own. Arabic scales, ornamentation styles, even specific melodies, have been deliberately copied note for note into Christian liturgical song. Change a few words here and there, scratch out the Arabic names and write in “*la Virgen María*” and voilà, it’s like Islam never existed. Arabic music weaves through the sonic tapestry of the Renaissance and infuses contemporary song; from the north to the south, traces of it can be found everywhere—it *is* the music of Spain. Sung by thousands of Islamophobic Catholics, the music of the religion they hated and feared has entered their bodies, their breaths, and their sense of selves. While denying the religious minority their every human right, the Christians have consumed Islamic culture, appropriated it, and forgotten it wasn’t always theirs.

This year, I had the privilege of delving profoundly into this conflict between ideology rejection and daily consumption of culture. By studying musical scores, analyzing performance techniques, speaking with performers of Spanish music, reading extensively, and, thanks to the generous support of the Grua O’Connell Award, traveling to Spain to immerse myself in this living history, I have come to understand cultural appropriation in a way I never imagined I would. At the end of this semester I presented my work before the Music Department, demonstrating each musical style with my voice, and submitted a paper.

I am extremely grateful for the support of the Grua O’Connell Grant, and for Bowdoin College for making this unforgettable learning experience possible for me.

Thank you.

Cordelia Zars ‘17

