From Zarzuela to Sarwela

A brief insight on where the Zarzuela has ended by the onset of the Sarswela in the Philippines

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The Zarzuela is one of the few theater art forms one can clearly say conveys an old Filipino sentiment. In spite of it being inherited from Spanish colonizers, the zarzuela was utilized, enjoyed and later transformed by the Filipinos into its now more popular type the Filipinized Sarswela. This article attempts to see how far the Filipino sarswela evolved from its roots in the zarzuelas of Spain and how it provided jobs and creative venues for Filipino composers, musicians and theater artists during the time of its inception.

The Zarzuela’s humble beginnings started in the Castillan outskirts of Spain. From the word “zarza” or bramble, it is a genre of musical theater characterized by a mixture of sung and spoken dialogue. Covarrubias’s Tesoro de la lenguazarza as “a spiny mat… a thing that s all linked together and intertwined in itself” (Sadie and Tyrell, 759). Zarzuela is also used generally to describe a mixture of rustic dances, spoken dialogues and songs. This was what transpired in the Palacio Real de la Zarzuela, when Gaspar de Haro, Marquis of Heliache organized short musical plays of lightly burlesque nature to entertain the king and his guests.

Zarzuela, the Spanish light opera: it has one foot in the palace and the other in the street. The genre takes its name from the Palacio de la Zarzuela north of Madrid, in an area surrounded by zarzas (brambles); the Spanish royal family now resides in the palace. The origins of zarzuela were courtly but its subject matter, staging, dance and music all feature signs of popular culture. The genre has been compared to operetta, Singspiel or Broadway musical, but is really unique to Spain. It is theater that alternates music and spoken dialogue (Stanton, 2002: 158).

Because of what seemed to be a shallow assortment of songs and dances with speaking lines, the early Spanish zarzuelas was snubbed by those who were already awed by the grand opera tradition of its neighboring countries.

When nationalism sipped in the consciousness of people around the world, European nations started creating their own music. Amidst the prevailing Italian and German styles, smaller nations started to look around in their own backyard and began creating their own musical forms. Same goes for Spain. In pursuit to have its own identity recognized in the world of music, Spain revived and develop the zarzuela to rival the prevailing Italian Opera.

Designed to compete with the opera imported from Italy, these carried the subtitles “zarzuela comedia” and “zarzuela nueva” respectively. The Term “zarzuela” was last used more than a century earlier (Samson: 1642).

Incorporating nationalistic identities went through processes of adapting and eventually revamping known forms into more suitable structures. Early zarzuela works still has the reminiscent comedy which is a clever combination of poetic and prose dialogue in four to six acts. Travelling actors usually produce and perform comedias in public squares or in the courtyards of city buildings but
unlike the comedia, zarzuelas now enjoy a legitimate venue for a more decent performance on stage and was at a time referred to as “zarzuela comedia.”

A goldsmith from Seville, Lope de Rueda (fl. Ca. 1540-67), and his group of travelling actors produced comedias, a clever combination of poetic and prose dialogue in four to six acts, in public squares or in the courtyards of city buildings known as corrales. Many of Rueda’s comedias featured musical numbers, frequently titled as romances. Romances were based on dances and popular songs of the era. (Sturman, 2000: 14)

As it did in the comedia, music served structural goals in zarzuelas. It was based on popular tunes and text, sometimes rearranged in polyphonic settings. It was especially important in contributing a sense of realism in rustic scenes and provided the medium for mystical, supernatural and anonymous voices and dialogue. (Sturman, 2000: 16 – 17)

Unfortunately the association of the zarzuela with the comedia did not do well for the former. Singers do not find the zarzuela a good vehicle for success if they aspire to go up the ladder in their careers and often turn to the more challenging operatic repertoire to showcase their vocal acrobatics and technical proficiencies. Music in this form holds the backseat and highlights the dialogues more than the songs. This attitude explains why the zarzuela remained inferior compared to the Italian opera for a while.

The Spanish zarzuela reached a more polished and cohesive form in terms of content and structure in 1880. It even flourished in various types and was given other names such as jugete, revista, sainete, parodia, humorada, aproposito, ecloga, pasatiempo, depending on the liking of the its composer. Efforts of noted Spanish composers such as Manuel Breton de los Herreros, Basilio Basili and R. dela Vega to name a few, resulted in the creation of La Verbena de la Paloma. This work is one of the oldest zarzuela still in circulation not only in Spain but also in Latin American communities in the United States of America, marking the emergence of zarzuela behind the shadows of the Italian opera.

Two centuries later, the zarzuela reached the Philippines through the efforts of Spanish dramatist Dario Cespedes and his zarzuela company in 1878 and Alejandro Cubero with Spanish actress Elisea Raguer in 1880. Cespedes’ company presented Jugar con Guego as the first Spanish zarzuela performed in the Philippines with music by Francisco Asenjo Barbieri and libretto by D. Ventura dela Vega while Cubero was given the title of “Father of Spanish Theater in the Philippines” due to his efforts of bringing each zarzuela performances to a level of perfection (Samson, 1642). Ateneo de Manila had their production of zarzuelas in 1880. Entitled Junto al Pasig, this work is written in verse by Jose Rizal presented by Ateneo de Manila with music by Blas Echegoyen. This is just one of the early amateur zarzuelas making clear its fast growing popularity in Filipino societies. Trainees and protégés of Cubero and other zarzuelistas started staging zarzuelas in the provinces. People in all walks of life had the chance to witness this form of entertainment whether they speak Spanish or not. As a result of these introductions of zarzuela in the countryside, the inevitable emergence of zarzuelas in the native languages began.

The new troupes ventured out in the provinces, as far as Iloilo, Bacolod and the Bicol region – areas with enough Spanish –speaking inhabitants. In a few years with the change of regime zarzuelas in the native languages began to appear (Samson 1642).

This commences the evolution of the zarzuela to fit the Filipino society. Since zarzuelas in Spain usually depicts the rustic life of Spanish society and its common folk, it is not surprising the same will happen in the Philippines if the Filipinos are expected to patronize this art form. People need a way to connect with it and it should mirror their lives if this goal is to be achieved. Incorporating existing theater forms that are more familiar such as the moro-moro in the zarzuela did it for starters. Moro-moro is believed to be an offshoot of a chivalric-heroic poem called the awit and a legendary religious poem called the corridor that had swept the country as early as 1610 up to the beginning of the twentieth century. It tells of the loves and brilliant deeds and adventures of king and queens, of
princes and princesses, of counts and dukes. It also relates of giants, tigers, lions, bears, serpents, dragons, angels, saints, and devils. Often tinged with supernatural and miraculous forces, it may present poisons, magic rings, birds that drop messages, people who get enchanted in the forest. The hero is expected to emerge victorious despite all obstacles and to risk his life for the hand of his lady love (Carpio 2001).

At the end of the three and a half centuries of Spanish rule the Americans took over and the political needs of the moment gave rise to a unique theater form in which the central ideas of the moro-moro intermingled with the gaiety, humor, frolic and abandon of the Spanish zarzuela. This new form was the Filipino zarzuela (Samson 1642).

Eventually main characters in the zarzuelas became Filipinos in conflict with Spaniards or Americans with the Filipinos emerging as the victorious ones in the end of course. This conclusion of having the native hero winning in the end echoes the moro-moro theme.

Back in Spain, the Spanish zarzuela is still in the process of reinventing itself. It flourished into several forms and styles under one umbrella term zarzuela. As it reached its golden age, zarzuelas in Spain have now placed great importance to music in contrast to its earlier form where all the theatrical elements stood on equal footing. One very distinct characteristic Spanish zarzuelas in terms of vocal styles is the use of gorgoritos or the vocal trills very common to Spanish art songs. The style of using the natural voice and other regional vocal ornamentations and incorporate it with operatic styles gave zarzuelas a very rustic Spanish flavor. As for Filipino sarswela, it has completely abandoned the zarzuela and had a transformation of its own.

Early sarswela does not seem to possess great music. Even the text does not contain any great literary value. A possible reason for this lack of artistic vibrancy is because the early sarswela only serves as a form of entertainment that aimed to stir the Filipino audience to rise up against the prevailing foreign domination in the land.

Literary and dramatic values were also hardly present in those early vernacular works. They were perhaps merely propaganda vehicles rather than literary or artistic types. After all, they were revolutionary plays without any immediate esthetic purpose. What they did was strengthen and stimulate the nationalistic spirit of the Filipinos (Samson 1642).

These types of sarswelas with political overtones prevailed in the American era and soon enough American authorities find it dangerous for them and started the arrest of librettists and sarswela producers that they consider subversive.

One of the zarzuelas presented during this period was Pag-ibig sa Lupang Tinubuan, with Libretto by Pascual Poblete and music by Severino Kimpin Bautista. It was premiered early in 1900 and in its third performance, in March of that year, saw the arrest of librettist and owner of the Oriental Theater, where the work was being staged. Raids like this continued and they discouraged works with political overtones (Samson 1642).

Incidents like this forced sarswelistas to change their tone a bit so as not to let the authorities disrupt the thriving art form. This change of mood for the meantime paved way for a grander sarswela that demanded more composers, writers, theater artists and musicians. The names of composers Bonifacio

Soon Filipino zarzuela found itself evolving into a kind of comedy of manners. Elaborate theatrical and musical displays were deemed a necessity. In no time at all, musician found themselves much in demand as composers, conductors or members of orchestras (Samson 1642).

Abdon and Jose Estrella with musician Remigio Agustin and Leon Ignacio surfaced and started creating sarswelas “Ang Maya” is one example of a with much needed musical and theatrical values. Estrella’s “with much needed musical and theatrical values. Estrella’s “
Among Estrella’s many waltzes, the now famous “Ang Maya” is what he is remembered for. It was originally composed for Severino Reyes and his zarzuela Filipinas para los Filipinos in 1905 (Samson 1644).

refreshing music style in song found in sarswelas where he provided the music. It displays clearer forms and sections and displays just enough vocal artistry from the singer that does not overshadow the rest of the performance and performers.

Although the Filipino sarswela strayed away from the original Spanish zarzuela style, it seemed that it did the sarswela and the Filipinos more good than bad. It enabled them to develop their own artistry that somehow gave that distinctive flavor that can be claimed truly Filipino. The works of Severino Reyes, and his collaboration with several other Filipino composers such as Fulgencio Tolentino for Walang Sugat, Juan de Sahagun Hernandez for Minda Mora, are just a few of several great works that emerged during this period of prolific production and creation of sarswela materials. Other works include Leon Ignacio’s “Dalagang Bukid.” This also launched the career of the well known sarswela performer Honorata “Atang” dela Rama who later became the “Queen of Kundiman.” Famous Kundiman composers such as Nicanor Abelardo and Francisco Santiago also had their share of sarswelas. Abelardo’s “Ang Dakilang Punglo” featured the immortal “Bituing Marikit” that has become a favorite in the long list of Kundiman back then until this day of videoke and magic sing. The list will go on and sadly for some works that were destroyed during the Second World War, it only remained in the memories of those who were lucky enough to witness such great works. Even the existing libretto and music of Severino Reyes’ Walang Sugat are just fragments of what the war has left behind. Its reconstruction and inclusion of newer songs were a collaboration of several other composers to fill up the ones lost from the original works of Fulgencio Tolentino.

Conclusion

Enumerating just a few of the much known sarswelas only proved how much it evolved from the rustic Spanish zarzuela based on the comedia of the olden days. As the sarswela completely deserted the zarzuela traditions and styles of Spain, the Filipinos were able to put their mark in the art form’s Filipinized version. It seemed to have undergone a three hundred sixty degree turn by changing the Spanish text using the vernacular and other regional dialects around the Islands, using ways and culture unique to Filipino society and the distinctive nationalistic fervor which is ever present in the sarswelas of

The first step in the indigenization of the zarzuela, therefore, was the language. The subject matter followed naturally, being the experience the language could encapsulate, the reality coming from its own cultural matrix.

Although their models for the form, the Spanish zarzuelas, dealt with mythology, royalty, nobility, Dons and Donas and other character of Spanish life, the native sarswelistas focused on Filipino situations, domestic and social: marriage, family, vices, elections, feasts. Stage drama in the Philippines, which had before then been mainly religious or drawn from European metrical romances, has finally found the form in which it was possible to present native day-to-day life on stage (Fernández, 1996: 81).

the 1900s. It has been revived and restaged through the years and still possesses these very qualities that the audiences loved. Although one cannot avoid comparing the sarswela with the theater forms of today with the likes of the west end and Broadway musicals, sarswelas echoes the old Filipino culture which started as an offspring of how the Filipinos back then dealt with and processed the influence of foreign culture to make something better for Filipinos by Filipinos.

Situations and circumstances were different back then and most of the things created or developed during that time are just products of the era and not of their chosen personalities. Filipino artistry is faced with a challenge to survive foreign domination and a way coming up with something worthwhile out of something that is not good resulted to the sarswela. The sarswela cannot be
compared to the modern western musicals of today which are commonly staged in the country following strict adherence from its original performance abroad. If one will look at how these modern musicals came to being is because of totally different set of circumstances. Meanwhile, original Filipino musicals of today still look back to the sarswela traditions of their forefathers for inspiration so as not to lose the Filipino flavor in their modern Filipino works.

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