



Saravanda! Dances of New Spain

Tracing the African and Mesoamerican Roots of the Sarabande and the Chaconne

Performed by Ensemble Origo at the Connecticut Early Music Festival — June 6, 2026 — Notes © Eric Rice

This concert demonstrates the obscure origin story of the sarabande and a related dance, the chaconne, through the course of the seventeenth century. By 1700, the sarabande had become a stately, often serious dance in triple meter with an accent of some sort — usually through lengthening but sometimes through subdivision — on the downbeat or second beat of every measure or every other measure. It was such an important dance in the eighteenth century that it was rare to find a suite, one of the foremost instrumental genres of the nobility, that did not include one. The suite, a set of dances whose French name means “that which follows” or “succession,” was so pervasive that today we still refer to sections of music within a long work as “movements,” even if they have no relationship to dance. The four standard dances in the eighteenth-century suite were the *allemande*, *courante*, *sarabande*, and *gigue*, and their musical profiles and physical movements were distinct enough that they were each recognizable to listeners of the period. The suite’s importance as an instrumental genre grew even as it became less associated with dance. Arcangelo Corelli was an important composer of the genre, and Johann Sebastian Bach composed at least forty-five examples. It always had something of an international character: the (*danse*) *allemande* (French for “German dance”) originated in Germany; the *courante* (Italian *corrente*) had both French and Italian types; and the *gigue* (jig) was decidedly English. To round out the picture, the sarabande’s origins were often said to lie in Spain, or perhaps in Spain and Latin America together.

Yet the early history of the sarabande should be reconsidered in the light of our increasingly nuanced understanding of colonialism. Unlike the names of the other standard suite dances, the origins of the word “sarabande” have resisted explanation. The roots of its cousin, the chaconne, are similar — and similarly obscure. For both genres — which have a related, overlapping history — the earliest examples often involve singing as well as dance and have a decidedly lowbrow character that I believe emerged from the convergence of indigenous Mesoamericans and sub-Saharan Africans brought to New Spain as enslaved laborers. This view is not universally accepted among music scholars, for while there is evidence that points in this direction, there is no ironclad proof. The strongest evidence, in my view, is the development of the music itself from its earliest examples in the liturgies of New Spain into the stylized dances that were heard in European courts during the first half of the eighteenth century. This concert traces that development.

How could this essential contribution of Mesoamericans and Africans to these important European musical genres remain so unknown and/or unaccepted today? The erasure of this aspect of music history is best understood in light of the construction of “color prejudice” that was inexorably cultivated to bolster the African slave trade and the seeds of so-called manifest destiny; both were an essential part of colonialism in the Americas. As with another program Ensemble Origo performed (and released as a recording in 2021) that is also related to a European genre representing Black Africans, it was my curiosity about these issues that prompted this concert. I am convinced that the origins of the sarabande and chaconne become increasingly audible if we listen to their earliest layers with an open mind, and I ask listeners to do exactly that. Like most scholars and performers of early European music, I am a white person of privilege, and among the many things such privilege has afforded me is the opportunity to study and perform this music. While I do not claim any first-hand knowledge of exclusion due to my race, my gender, or the traditional beliefs of my ancestors, I am fervently interested in understanding racism, oppression, and their manifestations in cultures past and present. Oppression in music of the past is often simple erasure on the part of music historians and performers: the tacit denial that people of other races even existed in a particular time and place, either through neglect or refusal to bring their documented presence

to light. Such erasure, in turn, has resulted in a lack of understanding of how music was used to perpetuate the myth of white European superiority. Significantly, the idea that these dances emerged from the confluence of Mesoamerican and African cultures in New Spain is still resisted by scholars and musicians on both sides of the Atlantic.

There are three sections to this concert. In the first section, we aim to situate several musical works used as part of Christmas Matins in about 1624 at Puebla Cathedral, New Spain, in something like their original context. The goal is to show the presence of Black Africans and Mesoamericans in these works and to invite listeners to consider their various purposes. One piece, *Eso rigor e repente*, represents Black Africans celebrating Christmas exclaiming — and perhaps also dancing — the sarabande, offering the closest known musical association between Black Africans and the dance. The representation in this and other, similar pieces is coarse and often overtly racist, and my ensemble colleagues and I do not endorse these ideas and are not performing these works to celebrate them. *Eso rigor* is essential, however, to understanding the relationship of Black Africans and the sarabande, because its musical content, particularly its insistent cross-rhythms, abundantly demonstrates West African influence. While I could have demonstrated the features of this music in scholarly articles, these have less currency and immediacy than the act of listening — of bearing witness with the ears — to this music, which must first be performed by musicians in our own time. These works have been recorded and presented in concert before, but not with the kind of effort toward contextualization that we are offering here.

The second section of the concert traces the printing history of the sarabande through various transformations in France and Italy, while the third section shows the parallel printing history for the chaconne. In each of these sections, we can follow the changes these genres underwent as the seventeenth century progressed, and as most vestiges of their origins in New Spain disappeared.

The Sarabande and the Villancico in New Spain

The earliest mention of the sarabande is in the text of a six-verse *çarauanda a lo divino* by the Spaniard Pedro de Trejo. The music for this piece does not survive, but it was evidently both danced and sung at Corpus Christi celebrations in Pátzcuaro, Mexico, in 1556.¹ The text reads in part, “El criador es ya criatura, çarauanda ven y dura” (“the Creator is now a living being, çaravanda, come and stay”). The work was a *villancico*, a genre that emerged in late fifteenth-century Spain. By the second half of the sixteenth century, the villancico was increasingly used to set devotional texts and was sometimes incorporated into the Catholic liturgy. De Trejo’s *çarauanda a lo divino* was evidently used in exactly this way, and its popular character and use of dance, which were both associated with the Spanish liturgy in some contexts at the time, were likely meant to proselytize native Mesoamericans as well as Spaniards.

While the text of the *çarauanda a lo divino* allows us to associate the genre with a specific performance context, that of the Catholic liturgy, it offers no clues as to the dance’s origin or its nature. Diego Durán, in his *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*, gives us a bit more information:

Tambien habia otro baile tan agudillo y deshonesto que casi tira al baile de esta zarabanda que nuestros naturales usan con tantos meneos y visages y deshonestas monerias que fácilmente se vera ser baile de mugeres deshonestas y de hombres livianos llamibanle cuecucuehuycatl que quiere decir baile coquilloso de comezon.

¹ Hanna Walsdorf, “Die Domestizierung der Sarabande — Ursprungsnarrative eines höfischen Tanzes in der Frühen Neuzeit,” *Troja Jahrbuch für Renaissancemusik* 14 (2015), 69-93, esp. 70. A poem mentioning the sarabande and long held to date from 1539 has now been dated to 1639; see Álvaro Torrente, “Anatomía de una errata: zarabanda, Panamá, 1539*,” *Resonancias* 27/52, May/June 2023, 257-271.

En algunos pueblos le he visto bailar lo cual permiten los religiosos por recrearse ello no es muy acertado por ser tan deshonesto.

There was another dance so brisk and improper that it bears a close resemblance to the *zarabanda* that our natives [i.e., Spaniards] perform with such gyrations and faces and improper antics that it seems to be a dance fit only for improper women and immoral men. They [i.e., Mesoamericans, presumably Nahuas] called it *cuecucuecheuycatl*, which means a “dance of ticklish itching.” In certain villages I have witnessed it being performed — a practice the clergy permits for their own amusement, though this is hardly an appropriate decision, because it is so improper.

— Fray Diego Durán,
Historia de las Indias de Nueva España (1579), Chapter 99

In describing a native dance that is “improper” because it is so lascivious, Durán refers to the sarabande as danced by Spaniards, which would seem to indicate that the native dance bears a similarity to an existing Spanish one. Just a few years later, beginning in 1583, the sarabande was banned in several European cities for its lascivious gestures. But what if the dance had been introduced to Spain much earlier than 1579, and Durán was in fact recognizing the dance at its point of origin? A dance that was widespread enough to be banned in Europe could well have lost any association with its Mesoamerican and African origins, much in the way that, in the mid-twentieth century, Elvis Presley’s music became disassociated with the African American musical tradition that inspired it and thereby allowed white audiences, including those who would have normally avoided that tradition, to embrace it.

While the association of the sarabande with indigenous Nahuas can be made through Durán’s text, the genre’s association with enslaved people from West Africa stems from the numerous references to dance in *villancicos negros* (i.e., those that represent Black Africans). In the case of *Eso rigor*, the reference is specifically to dancing the sarabande. Hanna Walsdorf has noted that, unbeknownst to church authorities or even composers, the word “sarabande” may have invoked Congolese spirituality: in Ki-Kongo, the word *nsala-banda* has a literal meaning along the lines of “work something sacred.” We have seen that dance was permitted as a form of recreation and that local practices were adapted to proselytize oppressed people; in such an environment, the conflation of a word associated with spirituality and an indigenous dance performed in conjunction with Christian celebrations is entirely plausible.

I. Puebla, New Spain, ca. 1624 – The End of Matins for Christmas

Villancicos were substituted for Latin responsories — pieces of plainchant sung in response to readings — much as contemporary Christmas songs might be substituted for traditional carols in a “Lessons and Carols” service. The use of both Spanish and occasionally Nahuatl text was meant to assist in proselytizing native Mesoamericans and enslaved Africans. The last four readings in Christmas Matins tell the story of Jesus’s birth and reaction to it on the part of the shepherds and the Wise Men, and the first four pieces on the program are villancicos that could have followed those readings during a Matins service at Puebla Cathedral in about 1624. The *maestro de capilla* at that time was Gaspar Fernandes, a prolific composer whose music survives in a manuscript now housed at Oaxaca Cathedral; from 1622 he was assisted by Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, who replaced Fernandes upon the latter’s death in 1629.

Xicochi xicochi is a lullaby in Nahuatl, the language of the Nahuas, which we accompany with a five-string Spanish guitar. As mentioned above, the next piece, *Eso rigor e repente*, links the sarabande with Black Africans and the celebration of Christmas (in the text of its *estribillo* or refrain), and it also mentions two other dances, the *folia* and the *viyano* (in its *coplas* or verses). Gutiérrez de Padilla's *A la xacara xarcarilla* invokes the *jácara*, another important dance of the period, linking it with Christmas celebrations as well. Fernandes's *Dame albriçia mano Anton* features a dialogue between two choirboys that leads to a rhythmically charged *estribillo* setting the text "And all the Black people will dance for Him." In each of these Spanish-language *villancicos de negro* we hear representations of West African (Guinean) speech and music, with abundant syncopation and hemiola (shifting of accents from threes to twos and back). The instrumentation of these works is suggested by the texts themselves, which often mention guitars, and by the confluence of Mesoamerican, African, and European traditions. The Matins service would have ended with a Te Deum, and we have chosen a polyphonic setting alternating polyphony and plainchant by Francisco Guerrero, whose music circulated widely in New Spain. Guerrero's setting underscores the coexistence of very lively *villancicos* and the comparatively subdued, subtle style of late Renaissance liturgical polyphony.

II. Early History of the Sarabande

The sarabande was clearly in Europe during the last quarter of the sixteenth century: as noted above, it was banned for its lasciviousness in 1583, and Cervantes mentioned it in work he published in 1600. Its appearance in print occurred later, however, in conjunction with the rise in popularity of the five-string Spanish guitar. Tablatures of the sarabande were published in Italy during the first quarter of the seventeenth century, and Luis de Briçendo's *Saravanda Española muy facil* is an example. At this stage, the sarabande was often a simple chord progression that was strummed with the fingers or thumb of the right hand in a style known as *battuto*, *golpeado*, and, later, *rasgueado*. The chords accompanied a singer, who rendered and sometimes improvised a simple refrain and verses, and the result may strike some listeners as remarkably similar to the work of American folk singers such as Joan Baez. At the same time, however, composers of music for the lute used the chord progression and style of the sarabande to create highly prescriptive tablatures that did not involve strumming (non-*rasgueado*). Alessandro Piccinini's *Aria di saravanda in varie partite*, a set of variations, is an example.

The next three sarabandes on the program demonstrate its swift incorporation into France's avid dance culture. Michael Praetorius recorded two sarabandes from the *Ballet de Monseigneur de Navarre* in his 1612 dance collection *Terpsichore*, and we perform these with recorder, violin, lute, bass viola da gamba, and percussion. The dances have all of the rhythmic vitality of the sarabande, with abundant hemiola heard throughout. While these works invite a spritely tempo, the sarabande was also performed as a sung work with a grave character. Jean Boyer's *Cloris, veux-tu savoir* is a setting of a plaintive and dramatic text to a single line of music to which we gradually add theorbo, violin, and percussion. Here, the rhythm involves an elongation of every other downbeat in the triple meter — a feature that later became a standard marker of the sarabande. French Baroque opera employed a great deal of dance, and the rhythmic features already discussed can be heard in Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Premier Air des Espagnols* from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, an opera produced in 1670. Interestingly, the sarabande in Lully's hands was still used to represent Spain and had not yet become a generic dance within the suite. We conclude our sarabande set with just such a generic work, however: Arcangelo Corelli's beautiful sarabande from the Violin Sonata in F Major, published in 1700.

III. Early History of the Chaconne

The earliest examples of the printed sarabande involved variation techniques and sometimes a set chord progression; the chaconne, whose origins are also obscure and also rooted in New Spain, often involved a set chord progression or a repeated bass line. The text of the last piece on our program (but the first chronologically), the five-voice villancico *Un sarao de la Chacona* by Juan Arañés, associates the genre with a festive, perhaps even hedonistic atmosphere. It is mentioned by Cervantes before 1616, so it was circulating well before it was printed in 1624. Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and other Spanish authors of the time associated the dance with servants, enslaved people, and Mesoamericans.

The four Italian examples show the flexibility of the form. Andrea Falconieri's *O vezzosetta dalla chioma d'oro*, for two low voices and basso continuo, is a simple song with a pattering text uttered by a desperate young man about a young woman. We have interspersed the strophes with violin and viola da gamba improvisations. Francesco Manelli's three-voice *Acceso mio core* is more serious: its text shares the thoughts of one who has forsworn love entirely, and the lilting, repetitive bass line creates an atmosphere of resignation, while the imitative vocal lines unfold against each other with shimmering suspensions. We have chosen to perform the work with high voices instead of the original low ones. Claudio Monteverdi's *Zefiro torna* is one of the composer's most celebrated and virtuosic duets. The two singers (sopranos in our performance) perform florid melodic lines, which often represent the vivid natural imagery of the text, over a relentless, repeating bass line. This unified, happy soundscape is brought to a halt when the speaker's loneliness and torment emerge onto the scene. The repeating bass line stops, the harmony turns dark, and dissonance abounds; just as quickly, the happy chaconne returns and then concludes with vocal fireworks.

Nicola Matteis's *Diverse bizzarie sopra la Vecchia Sarabanda o pur Ciaccona*, is a potent demonstration of the relationship between the sarabande and the chaconne. The title invokes both genres as well as the notion of variation ("diverse") and otherness ("bizzarie"). The piece is a vehicle for virtuosity on the part of the violinist, as so many variation forms are. Like the sarabande by Corelli, this work marks the completion of the genre's transformation from a transatlantic amalgamation of several cultures into a thoroughly European one. The chaconne from Lully's *Phaëton* is sometimes considered one of the earliest chaconnes in the European tradition; on our program, it is the latest. We have arranged it for a consort of recorders and strings rather than the orchestra Lully would have used. The *Chaconne en rondeau* by Marin Marais, a musician active at the court of Louis XIV and an important composer of music for the viola da gamba, is a reminder that some late seventeenth-century instrumental forms combined the lyricism of European string instruments with rhythmic vitality that has its roots in Africa and arrived in Europe via New Spain.

The transformation of the sarabande and chaconne from lowbrow, othering representations into two of the most celebrated forms of European musical art is an incredible story that our concert can only sketch. Our hope is that we have allowed voices of people who contributed to this story — people whose legacies in the Western tradition of notated music are only now coming to light — to be heard.

—Eric Rice