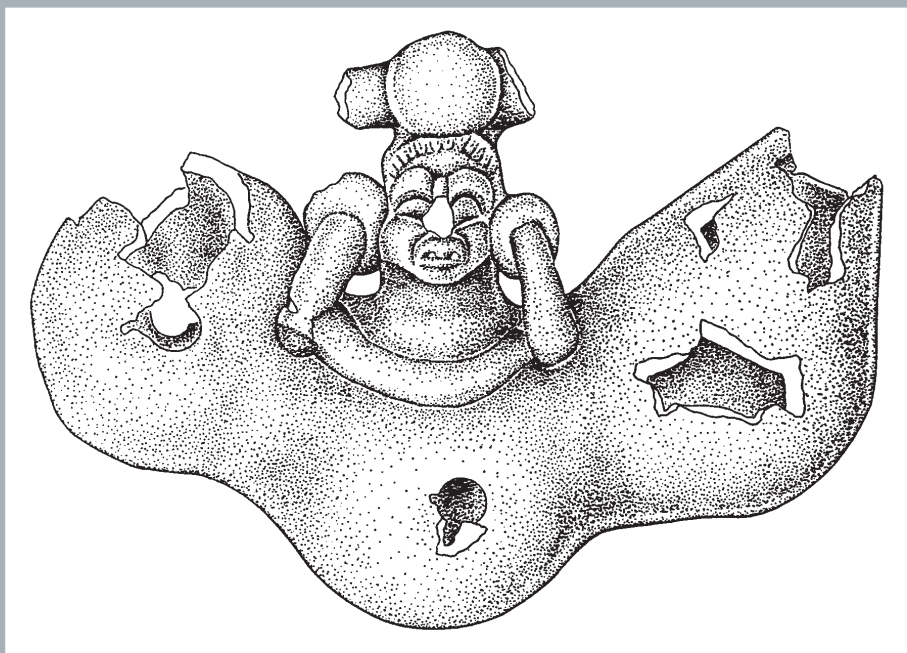


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**Music Archaeology:
Mesoamerica**

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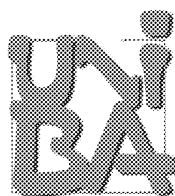


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**Music Archaeology:
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Max Peter Baumann
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Aztec Music Culture

Arnd Adje Both

Abstract

This paper reviews the ethnohistoric record of the Aztec music culture that flourished during the Late Postclassic period of Mesoamerica, AD 1325-1521. The written sources from the early colonial period suggest that among the Aztecs a differentiation was made between temple music practiced by specialized priests and court music practiced by professional musicians. Moreover, information is related on the religious concepts of sound, revealing important insights into the musical knowledge of Late Postclassic Mesoamerica. In this context, archaeological and music iconographical data is also considered.

1. Prologue

Systematic excavations in the historical centre of Mexico City have unearthed ritual deposits of prehispanic temple structures, which formed part of the temple precinct of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, Valley of Mexico (AD 1325-1521). Sound artifacts and diminutive representations of musical instruments were found in many deposits, revealing specific ensembles that played an important role in the ceremonial life of the Aztecs (Both 2005a). To understand the archaeological finds, and the function and meaning of music in Aztec society, a survey of sixteenth-century historical documents is useful, if not necessary. As many chroniclers refer to music and dance practices and, in particular, relate Aztec music terminology, information of high value is present.

2. Musical Instruments

To a large extent, the instrumentarium of the Aztecs was already present by the Pre-classic period of Mesoamerica (c. 2500 BC - AD 200), demonstrating a great continuity of prehispanic musical traditions (see Both 2005b:6267-68). According to the classification of Hornbostel and Sachs (1914) it consisted of idiophones—“instruments in which the body of the instrument vibrates and emits sound by natural oscil-

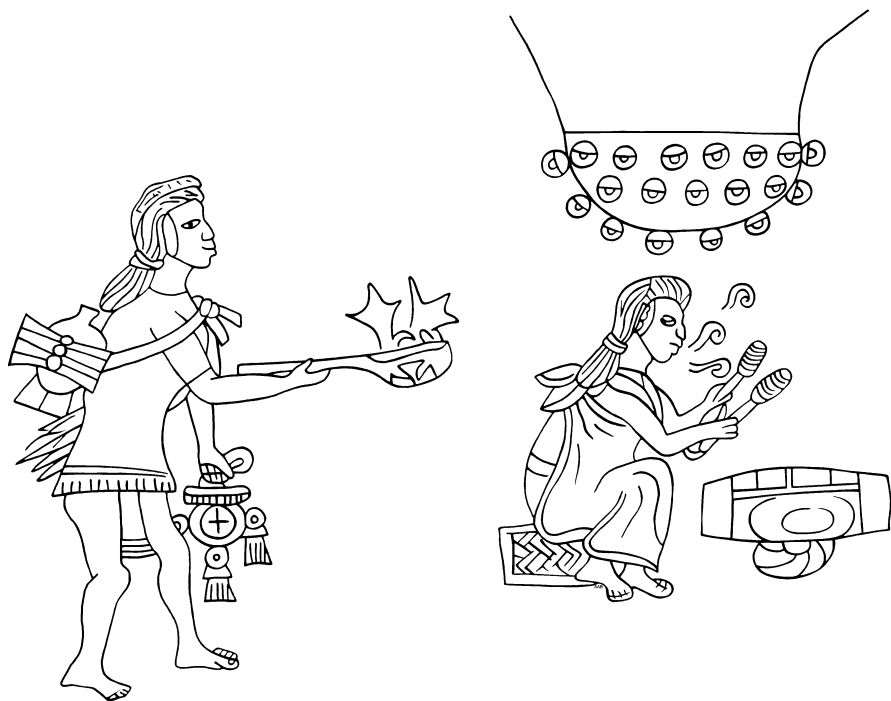


Fig. 1. *Codex Mendoza, Fol. 63r. (portion). Priest performing the nightly tozohualiztli ritual with a slit-drum, while another priest carries an incense ladle.*

Drawing: A. A. Both.

lation,” membranophones—“instruments in which the sound is generated by a vibrating membrane,” and aerophones—“instruments with oscillating air as the sound generator” (see, for example, Estrada 1984, Contreras Arias 1988). Apart from the probable use of the musical bow, stringed instruments (chordophones) were unknown.

Among the Aztec idiophones were rattles made from dried seed pods (*yoyotli*); row-rattles composed of conch tinkles (*cuechtli*, *cuechcohcacalachtli*); rows of gold and copper alloy bells, with or without hemispheric clappers (*oyoalli*, *tzitzilli*, *coyolli*); different types of ceramic rattles (*cacalachtli*); gourd rattles (*ayacachtli*, *ayacachicahuaztli*); wooden rattle sticks with box-shaped resonators (*chicahuaztli*, *ayauhchicahuaztli*, *ayauhquahuatl*, *nahualquahuatl*); bone rasps made of human femurs and deer shoulder blades with vertical incisions, scraped with a shell above a skull resonator (*omichicahuaztli*); turtle shells beaten with deer antlers (*ayotl*, *ayocacallotl*); lithophones made from volcanic stones beaten with stone spheres (*tehuehetl*); and metal gongs struck with mallets (*tlatlapanca*, *chililitli*). Among the most important idiophones were sculptured slit-drums made of hardwoods (*teponaztli*),

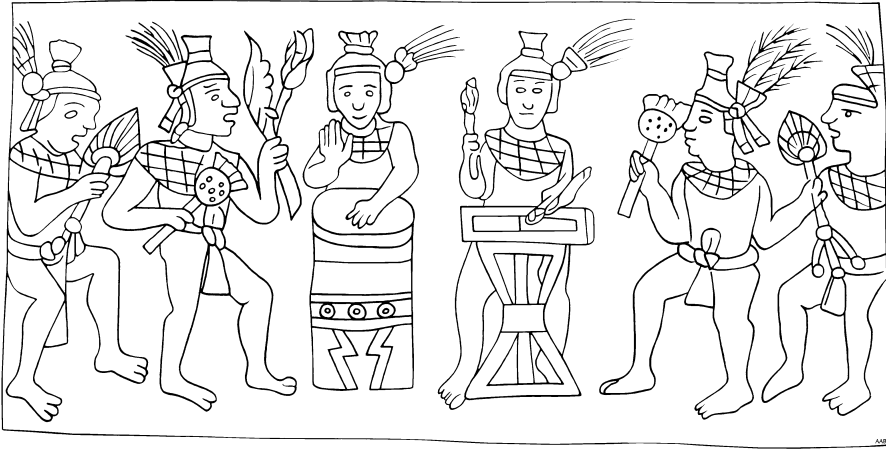


Fig. 2. *Codex Florentinus*, vol. VIII, chapter 14. Court musicians playing a slit-drum, a cylindrical drum and gourd rattles in a ceremonial dance.

Drawing: A. A. Both.

which were beaten with two gum resin covered wooden mallets called “rubber hands” (*olmailt*). For a better resonance, these instruments rested on a ring called a “throne” (*icpalli*) in temple rituals or on an X-shaped wooden stand in ceremonial dances (Figures 1 and 2). Small slit-drums (*teponaztontli*, *tecomapiloa*) were provided with a hanging gourd as additional resonator and carried in processions with a strap.

Among the membranophones were sculptured and painted cylindrical drums with three-stepped legs made of the wood of the swamp cypress (*huehuetl*, *tlalpan-huehuetl*); and different types of ceramic drums (*xochihuehuetl*). Furthermore, small metal drums made of gold (*teocuitlahuehuetl*) are mentioned, but it is not certain if these were musical instruments or diminutive representations, as no specimen has been preserved. Membranophones were beaten with the palms of the hands (Figures 2 and 3), and covered with deer, coyote, ocelot or jaguar hides. Extant drums often show the imagery of the Aztec gods of music, Macuilxochitl (“5-Flower”) and Xochipilli (“Prince of the Flowers”).

Among the aerophones were marine shell trumpets (*tecciztli*, *quiquiztli*); cylindrical trumpets made of ceramics and vegetable material (*acatecciztli*, *atecocolli*); bone flutes (*topitz*); reed flutes (*acapitzli*); ceramic tubular duct flutes with four finger holes (*tlapitzalli*, *tlapitzayaxochimecatl*); tubular flutes made from greenstone, usually jadeite and green marble (*chalchiuhtlapitzalli*); and many different types of ceramic globular flutes and whistles (*huilacapitzli*, *zozohuilotl*, *zozolocli*, *quauhtopotli*, *quauhtlapitzalli*, *tecciztotontli*, *chichtli*). Noteworthy are the skull whistles, which belong to the so-called air-spring whistles. Their elaborate acoustical mecha-

nism produces a distorted sound reminding one of the atmospheric noise generated by the wind (see Both 2005c, Both 2006:325-26).

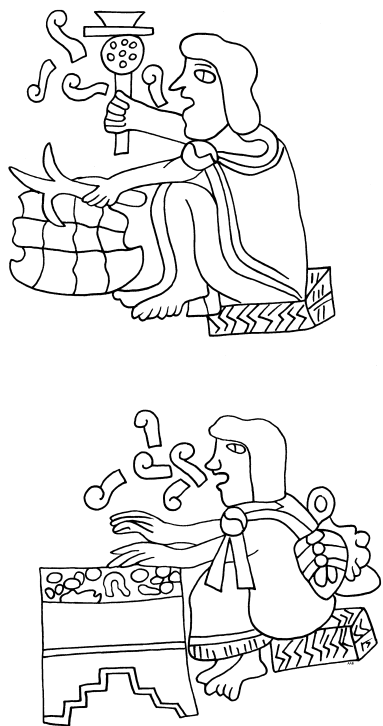


Fig. 3. *Codex Magliabechiano*, Fol. 72r. (portion). Priests performing the death rite of the *Tititl* ceremony playing a gourd rattle, a turtle shell and a cylindrical drum.
Drawing: A. A. Both.

The autochthonous classification of the Aztec instrumentarium does not correspond in all aspects with the current musicological classification. There is evidence that many instruments were classified on a basis of the symbolism of the material they were produced from, sound symbolism, and mythological meaning. For instance, drum and metallic sounds were signs of royal power and associated with the fire and the sun, while the sound of the shell trumpet, which was believed to be of creative power, was associated with the aquatic underworld and the moon.

The Aztecs probably divided idiophones and membranophones into three or four sub-groups, (1) *huehuetl* and *teponaztli*, (2.1) rattling and (2.2) clattering instruments, and (3) metallic sounding instruments. Wind instruments (aerophones), on the other hand, formed another main group, divided into (1) natural trumpets and (2) flutes. According to this proposed system of classification, the instrumentalists were divided into percussionists or “beaters” (*tlatzotzonqueh*) and wind players or “blowers” (*tlapitzqueh*) (Sahagún 1950-82, Part IX [Book 8]:45). Furthermore, each musician was named for the instrument he played, for instance, “drum beater” (*huehuetzotzonani*) or “shell trumpet blower” (*quiquizoani*), indicating a high degree of specialization in musical practice.

It is significant that, in prehispanic musical thought, no term for “music” or “musician” existed. In keeping with the Aztec concept of instrumental music as the “art of song” (*cuica tlamatiliztli*), all musicians were considered to be “singers” (*cuicanimeh*). This concept is expressed by the designation of the slit-drum player, “singer of the slit-drum” (*teponazcuicani*), revealing that he did not “play” but “sang” on his instrument. A similar concept was applied to the dance, called metaphorically “to sing with the feet” (see Stanford 1966:103).

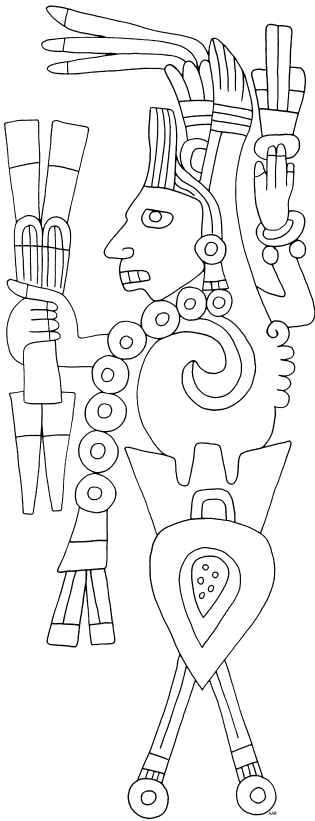


Fig. 4. *Codex Borgia, Fol. 4r.*
(portion). *Tecciztecatl, the god*
of the moon, emerging out of
a shell trumpet with two spears
in his hand.

Drawing: A. A. Both.

In some cases, the ritual function of musical instruments is reflected in the Aztec (Nahuatl) terminology. The blue-painted rattle stick of the rain priests, literally “instrument to strengthen the fog” (*ayauhchicahuaztli*), was shaken to bring the rain from the *Tlalocan*, sphere of the rain god Tlaloc (Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:77, 208). Other terms for the rattle stick, such as “sorcerers’ pole” (*nahualquahuatl*) and “fog pole” (*ayauhquahuatl*), emphasize the evocative power attributed to the instrument (Stevenson 1968:38, Neumann 1976:248). Instruments whose designations were derived from the verb “to fortify, to make something strong” (*chichahua*)—particularly the rattle stick, the gourd rattle, and the bone rasp—served to invoke magical support for any given ritual aim. Above all rattling and clattering sounds were important for that purpose. Their symbolic meaning probably originated in the association of natural sounds, such as pattering rain or the warning sound of rattlesnakes, and therefore was related to the Aztec deities of the rain and the wind. Clattering sounds were related to the underworld. The role that these and other associations played in the function and meaning of musical instruments cannot be sufficiently emphasized (see Both 2006).

Some musical instruments were considered to be sounding idols, indicating that ritual music could be perceived as a voice of the gods, and that the Aztec instrumentalist fulfilled the role of an expert mediator through whom a god sang (Both 2002:281, 2005b:6270). In this context, music functioned as a means of communication with the spiritual realm, obviously one of the motivations

of the high formalization of Aztec music practices, which were accompanied by acts invoking numinous protection, such as the consecration of musical instruments with the smoke of copal.

Drums were considered the former court singers who resided at the house of the sun but then were stolen by Tezcatlipoca and manifested on earth in their present form, as related by Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta (1973:50-51, see Ceballos Novelo 1956, Nicholson 1971:402, Both 2005b:6270). In this account a mythological explanation is to be found that drums were deified as solar entities. The shell trumpet, on

the other hand, was associated with the moon in the form of the male divinity Tecciztecatl, as depicted in the *Codex Borgia* (Figure 4). Its sound was of great importance in the cult of fertility, and regarded as the primordial blast of the world produced in the underworld by Quetzalcoatl heralding the creation of humankind (see, for example, Johansson 1997, Both 2005b:6269-70). The sound of tubular duct flutes, on the other hand, was related to Tezcatlipoca, and birdcalls were imitated on whistles as manifestations of Xochipilli and other deities. Excavated sound artifacts show that these associations were expressed often in the shape and symbolic decoration of musical instruments, thus allowing specific sounds to be assigned to specific cult complexes.

3. Temple Music

In the temple precinct of Tenochtitlan, music had multiple functions and played an integral role in many rituals. As many practices were concealed from the Spaniards and did not survive the conquest, important information is fragmented or lost. However, sacred temple chants directed towards the deities, processions of priests and warriors, and ceremonial dances are related. Musical instruments were played by different groups of priestly musicians and dancers, and by the representatives of deities.

For instance, nightly sacrificial rites were initiated in a ritual called "the frequent sounding of wind instruments" (*tlatlapitzaliztli*) performed with shell trumpets and flutes (Sahagún 1997:80). The Spaniards perceived the sound of this ritual as "extremely sad" and "dark" ("gran rato un sonido triste;" Acosta 1940:239). At midnight began the "beating" (*tozohualiztli*), the night watch of the slit-drum players accompanying chants and astronomical observations on top of the temples (Sahagún 1997:80). A depiction of this important ritual is found in the *Codex Mendoza* (Figure 1). In a fertility dance called "the sowing of the rattles" (*ayacachpixolli*), all kinds of rattles were shaken by the dancers (Sahagún 1997:57).

In sacrificial dances, the representatives of deities wore metal bells or conch tinkles as part of the ritual garment. The representative of the goddess *Xilonen* played a rattle stick before her sacrifice (Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:99). In ritual human sacrifices, priests played shell trumpets and large wooden drums as an announcement that the heart was being offered to the gods (Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:89). The sacrificial music was perceived by the Spaniards as "gloomy," "dark," "distressing" and "horrifying" ("triste," "doloroso," "espantable;" Díaz del Castillo 1960, vol. I:282, vol. II:34-39).

In a death rite of the *Tititl* ceremony a priest played simultaneously a gourd rattle and a turtle shell, while another priest played a cylindrical drum (Figure 3). During the *Etzalcualiztli* ceremony in honour of Tlaloc, priests sounded shell trumpets and gongs in the course of ritual cleansing (Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:77). In another ceremony, priests played shell trumpets alternately with clay whistles (*ibid.*:130). In a procession of the *Huey tecuilhuil* ceremony priests blew shell trum-

pets while a group of women played on little slit-drums with gourd resonators (*ibid.*:98). In the *Ochpaniztli* ceremony a group of old priests played slit-drums in a procession to the skull rack, where the representative of the goddess *Toci* trampled on her drum, thus destroying it (*ibid.*:113-14).

The ritual destruction of musical instruments, which marked the conclusion of individual stages of a ritual cycle, was also practiced by the young impersonator of Tezcatlipoca, who broke his flower-flutes on each step of the stairway of a mountain temple before being sacrificed (Figure 5). The calyx-shape of the flutes expresses by its flower-like morphology the perception of instrumental music as a “flowery song” (*xochicuicatl*) and establishes a metaphorical link between sound and scent, both of which regarded as sacrificial gifts and a means of communication with the spiritual realm (Both 2002:281).

Musical instruments were stored and worshipped in all sanctuaries of the sacred temple precinct. A specific temple, the “place of the cord” (*mecatlan*), was dedicated to the shell trumpet and other wind instruments and served as a place for instruction in formal playing techniques (Torquemada 1975-79, vol. III:227, Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:172-73). The temple comprised a shrine for the instruments, and rooms for gathering, and was possibly part of the house of the priests (*calmecac*). Another important temple was the *teccizcalco*, “at the house of the shell trumpet,” which was dedicated to Tecciztecatl (*ibid.*:169). A monumental sculpture representing a shell trumpet of 87 x 74.5 x 44cm was located on an altar excavated about 50 metres east of the Great Temple (Luna Erreguerena 1982). The sculpture emphasizes the importance of shell trumpets in Aztec ceremonial, as no other musical instrument was represented at that scale.

Archaeological finds made in the historical centre of Mexico City show that at least three shrines were dedicated to the Aztec gods of music, Macuilmochitl und Xochipilli. Two structures, the so-called Red Temples unearthed in 1981 during the *Proyecto del Templo Mayor* north and south of the Great Temple, comprised deposits with bells, fragments of ceramic drums and trumpets, a set of precious stone flutes, and groups of votive representations of musical instruments made of ceramics, volcanic stone and greenstone (Olmedo Vera 2002, Both 2005a:36-70). Remains of a similar shrine were discovered at the northwestern corner of the Cathedral of Mexico City (Batres 1902:47-50, Vega Sosa 1979). It contained a rich offering with many red painted votive representations and a statue of Macuilmochitl. According to recent finds made in the excavations of the *Programa de Arqueología Urbana*, this structure stood next to the Great Ballcourt.

At the southwestern part of the ballcourt, today underneath the *Capilla de las Ánimas* of the Cathedral, two offerings comprising eagle whistles, small flutes with the attached head of Xochipilli and miniatures of slit-drums and ceramic drums were unearthed (see Matos Moctezuma 2001; Both 2005a:116-23, 144-58). Unfortunately, no ethnohistoric information is present on the role that music played in the ritual ballgame, but, according to these archaeological finds, the instruments and possible arrangements are evident.



Fig. 5. *Codex Florentinus*, vol. II, chapter 24. The Tezcatlipoca sacrifice of the Toxcatl ceremony. Drawing: A. A. Both.

Processions and ceremonial dances, theatrical performances of mythological or historical content and ritual games were held on several courtyards of the sacred temple precinct (see, for example, Martí and Prokosch-Kurath 1964). At such times, music played an important role. The central courtyard, a huge rectangular patio near the Great Temple connected with the main entrances of the precinct, was called “place of the dance” (*netotiloayan*) or “sacred yard” (*teoitoalco*) (Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:173, Part XIII [Book 12]:53). It was used for circular dances held at all important ceremonies during the year, involving many hundreds, even several thou-

sands of participants (Motolinía 1970:181-84, Durán 1984, vol. I:192-95, Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]).

The dances lasted for many hours and were admired by the Spaniards for the synchronicity of movement and appearance in the gleam of the fires during the night. As related in great detail by Fray Toribio de Motolinía (1970:181-83), they were initiated with a whistle followed by drum beats in a very slow tempo continuously intensifying in volume. The opening chant was intoned by two chant masters in a “low” and “flattened” voice (“en tono bajo, como bemolado;” Motolinía 1970:182) and then answered in a chorus by all the dancers. Each phrase of the chant was iterated four times, suggesting that the rhythmic and melodic structures were also based on repeated patterns. The vocal intonation and the choreography corresponded exactly to the sound of the drums, indicating that the percussionists played an important role in the leadership of the dances. As related by Motolinía, new chants were always intoned after a formal rhythm change in the course of the ceremony. They were transposed higher and higher, while the tempo was continuously increased, and were characterized as “very graceful” and “cheerful” (“más graciosa,” “alegre;” Motolinía 1970:183). Solemn chants were perceived by the Spaniards as “quiet and grave,” “restrained and moderated,” “low and slow,” and “tuneful” (“reposados y graves,” “con mucha medida y sosiego;” Durán 1984, vol. I:192; “grave y tardo;” Hernández 1986:117; “bien entonado;” Motolinía 1970:182-83). Flutes and whistles, on the other hand, were perceived as “shrill” and “discordant” (“no muy entonado;” Motolinía 1970:183).

4. Court Music

It remains unclear whether the Aztec court musicians, the “common” or “subordinated singers [of the ruler]” (*macehualcuicanimeh*), fulfilled priestly activities or not. They played at the daily banquets and other meetings of the palace for the entertainment of the ruler, accompanied by acrobats and dwarfs, and were ordered for the private feasts of the wealthy merchants (*pochtecah*) (Sahagún 1950-82, Part V-VI [Books 4-5]:26, 123, Part IX [Book 8]:33-43). In a ceremony called “1-Flower” (*ce xochitl*) lasting over a period determined by the ruler, all professional musicians, singers and dancers of the court received presents (Sahagún 1950-82, Part III [Book 2]:36; Part V [Book 4]:25-27). As they were honoured for their duties and their livelihood was guaranteed by tribute incomes, it can be supposed that they represented a professional group similar to the artisans (*toltecah*), who were exempted from dues (Castellanos 1970:68, van Zantwijk 1985:172-76, Diagram 8.4). The court musicians (Figure 2) belonged to the “house of the cloud serpent” (*mixcoacalli*), a section of the palace also existing in other ruling houses of the Valley of Mexico (Sahagún 1950-82, Part IX [Book 8]:45). As well as assembly and storage rooms, it probably contained a workshop for the manufacture of musical instruments.

The court musicians were famous for performing the regional chants and dances of ethnic groups, such as the Huasteca, probably considered as part of the spoils of conquest (Sahagún 1950-82, Part V [Book 4]:25-26, Part IX [Book 8]:45, Hernández 1986:116-18). A talented high-ranking group was responsible for the composition and instrumentation of new chants and dances in honour of the ruler (Sahagún 1950-82, Part V [Book 4]:26, Motolinía 1970:181, Durán 1984, vol. I:195). The sacred hymns referred to historical records, such as conquering battles or dynastic marriages, or to myths, and fulfilled a highly important function in the oral tradition of cultural knowledge. The Spaniards were "very pleased" by the music performed at the palace, perceiving it as "very gentle" and "sweet" ("mucho contento;" Durán 1984, vol. I:195; "más suavemente;" Hernández 1986:113).

In specific picture manuscripts called "songbooks" (*cuicamatl*), the musical information was notated pictographically (Sahagún 1950-82, Part IV [Book 3]:65, Motolinía 1970:183-84). For mnemotechnical devices of rhythmic patterns a codification system composed of the syllables *to*, *co*, *ti* and *qui* was used (*Cantares Mexicanos* 1985, see Haly 1986). As no prehispanic songbook survived the conquest it is unknown if these syllables were notated by means of specific pictograms.

Another section of the court was the "song house" (*cuicacalli*), a richly decorated building with a huge courtyard (Durán 1984, vol. I:188-90). It probably took up part of the old palace built in the fifteenth century under Moctezuma I., southwest of the temple precinct. In the *cuicacalli* lived the masters of the youths and leaders of the ceremonies who assembled daily in the patio (Durán 1984, vol. I:189, Sahagún 1950-82, Part IX [Book 8]:43). Among these was a court musician of high rank, the "master of song" (*tlapitzcatzin*), who fulfilled an important function, as he was not only responsible for the mediation of chants and dances, but also ensured their correct ceremonial performance (Sahagún 1997:84, Torquemada 1975-79, vol. III:264). Warriors of high rank met daily in the *cuicacalli* to perform dances with a group of women for their own enjoyment (Durán 1984, vol. I:194-95). One of the most important functions of the institution was the careful instruction of children and young adults in music and dance practices (*ibid.*:189). Their education, which was independent of sex and social rank and obligatory for all inhabitants of Tenochtitlan, underlines the great importance of music and dance practices in Aztec society.

5. Conclusion

Aztec music culture was highly elaborate. The function of the temple and court musicians, who belonged to different institutions of the sacred temple precinct and the palace of Tenochtitlan, was clearly differentiated. While different groups of priests performed the music in the temple cult, the court musicians were a privileged group of palace attendants with diverse duties. The differentiation becomes clear in view of the sacred chants of the temple singers directed towards the deities, and the hymns with historical content performed by the court musicians in honour of the rulers.

Apart from the remark that the merchants ordered court musicians to their private feasts, little is known about the role that music played in Aztec society outside of the temple precinct and the palace.

According to the chroniclers of the sixteenth century, Aztec music was “extremely sad,” “dark,” “gloomy,” “distressing,” “horrifying,” “shrill” and “discordant” (music in temple cult), “solemn,” “quiet and grave,” “restrained and moderated,” “low and slow,” “very graceful,” “cheerful,” and “tuneful” (music of ceremonial dances), or “very gentle” and “sweet” (music at the court). However, these perceptions are influenced by the European aesthetics of the sixteenth century, which did not correspond to the prehispanic perception. On the other hand, the general descriptions on the nature of Aztec music demonstrate its great diversity depending on a range of different purposes and motivations. The complexity of the Aztec music culture is indicated also by the notation of musical information in specific picture manuscripts, and the syllabic codification of rhythmic patterns.

Concerning the concept of music, no difference was made between instrumental and vocal music. Instrumental music was considered a “song,” and the instrumentalist a “singer.” As ritual music was perceived as the chant of a god, he took the role of a medium through which a deity “sang”. Thus, the musician established communication with the spiritual world. Many musical instruments were considered to be sounding idols and were worshipped on altars and in specific temples. Their complex function was determined by the symbolism of the material of manufacture, sound symbolism and mythological meaning.

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