

QuikReads on the production Villa y Corte

1. Tonadilla Escenica

DEVELOPMENT



“El majo de la guitarra”
(1786) – Francisco de Goya

The *tonadilla escenica* (staged musical vignette) first evolved from a genre of solo songs, called *tonadas*, which originated in the Spanish theater during the 17th century as short interludes between acts of larger theatrical productions. At first, these incidental songs were performed by one person accompanying himself on guitar. As *tonadas* gained increased attention and popularity, however, they expanded to include interplay between multiple characters and became a new independent genre of dramatic song. These “little song scenes,” or *tonadilla escenicas* soon lengthened to about twenty minutes in duration and included an orchestral accompaniment.

Although there were many composers who contributed to the development and popularity of the *tonadilla*, Luis Mison (d. 1766) was perhaps its most notable early proponent and contributor to the formalization of its

structure. Born in Barcelona, Mison would rise to become the orchestra conductor for the royal chapel in Madrid. He wrote nearly 100 *tonadillas*, including one entitled *Una mesonera y un arriero* (A waitress and a drover, 1757), which served as a model for later composers.



Original Libretto Cover of “Las jardineras” by Luis Mison

STYLE



The Teatro de la Cruz in Madrid

In 1933, Spanish composer Jose Subira coined the phrase “ornament imprescindible” (indispensable ornament), which beautifully characterized the function of the *tonadilla* within the bigger dramatic spectacle. Though the *tonadillas* were structurally independent of the larger theatrical productions, they were vital ornaments to the dramatic experience and were often more popular than the main event. Many composers fought for the recognition of the *tonadilla* as a form worthy of artistic respect. Chief among them was the Catalan musician Pablo Esteve y Grimau (1730-1794), one of the most successful *tonadilleros* and the conductor of the Teatro de la Cruz in Madrid. Esteve would often translate and stage operas by foreign composers, inserting his own *tonadillas* as interludes. As F.M. Nipho said in 1763, “These days one doesn’t go to the theater for the *comedia*, but for the *sainetes* [comic one-acts] and *tonadillas*.” Indeed, many theaters depended on the popularity of the *tonadillas* to remain solvent.

TONADILLA AS POPULAR ART

At the peak of the genre's popularity, thousands of tonadillas were composed and performed. Subjects of these song-scenes varied widely, but were mostly drawn from popular life. The lower classes in particular provided inspiration for character tropes, favorites of which were the dashing men (*majos*) and street ladies (*majas*) of Madrid. With such a profusion of tonadillas being composed and performed, the life-spans of individual pieces were often as short as a week on the stage. This constant turnover and the scenes' satirical, often bawdy subject matter made tonadillas vehicles for some of the most topical commentary on issues of the day. Composers had to be careful, however, about just how closely their satire resembled real-life events, as Pablo Esteve y Grimau learned when he spent a brief period in jail for making all-too-apparent sarcastic references to a well-known society lady of the time.



"Dance of the Majos at the Banks of the Manzanares" (1777) – Francisco de Goya

DECLINE IN SPAIN



*Manuel del Popolo Vicente
Garcia in the role of Otello*

By the 1830s, the tonadilla's popularity was waning, replaced in the public's affections by the resurgent *zarzuela*. The last of the great tonadilleros was the Andalusian Manuel del Popolo Vicente Garcia (1775-1832). Known as Rossini's favorite tenor, he was one of the most influential Spanish musicians of his day and originated many operatic roles internationally, enthusiastically helping to spread the Spanish musical idiom across Europe. As the tonadilla declined in Spain, it found new life in the rest of Europe through the works of outside composers, including opera and song composers George Bizet, Saverio Meradente, Enrique Granados, Joaquin Nin, Gernando Obradors, and Ernesto Halffter, who were attracted to the genre's distinctive form and Spanish flavor.