



A Thwarted Romance (part 2 of 2)

(To recap part 1: In school in the 50's I learned the song *A Thwarted Romance*. Recently I began a quest to find out who wrote it. I was sent a scan of it from a songbook, crediting it as "Paraphrased" by Phyllis McGinley from a Latin American folk song, titled *El galán incógnito*. Perhaps coincidentally, I also found a zarzuela (a Spanish comic opera) of that name written in 1862 by Cristobal Oudrid.)

This sort of search creates questions more than answers. How, for example, did Phyllis McGinley, who was to win a Pulitzer Prize for light verse fifteen years later, end up paraphrasing a folk song from Central and South America for a school songbook?

Phyllis McGinley was fascinating. I checked out her prize winning book *Times Three* (Viking Press, 1960) and found her verses painstakingly built, often funny, rich in wordplay, and usually from an odd, suburban viewpoint that was unlike most heavy bohemian stuff popular at the time. Apparently she had an unhappy, wandering childhood and found suburban life satisfying. Some accuse her of being out of step with the feminism of the day, though her work does have its own feminist slant. It reminds me of Dorothy Parker's work in many ways.

Her papers are held at the Syracuse University Library. On their website, I located a listing of a file containing correspondence with Silver Burdett Company, publishers of *New Music Horizons, Book 5* (Silver Burdett Co., 1946) in which the song appears. I ordered copies of these papers and they arrived a few days ago. The letters FROM Phyllis TO the publisher are not there, but letters FROM Charles E. Griffith -- "Music Editor" in 1934 and "Vice President" by 1945 -- TO McGinley answered my question. Starting with a letter of May 29, 1945, the song, which he calls "Incognito," is under discussion. I can't quote directly at length because of copyright issues, but Griffith explains he has

come upon this Spanish-American tune and its literal translation. He calls the lyrics "pleasantly spoofing" and wonders if McGinley would take it upon herself to provide a "transliteration" to be used in one of their school songbooks. She must have said yes quickly, because the *New Music Horizons* book is copyrighted 1946.

This "transliteration" becomes a "paraphrase," no doubt because Miss McGinley exercises quite a creative license. The first half of her work is in May's *Whither Zither*; here's the second half:

The lady listened there with eyes that glistened there • And waited while he sang his roundelay • She said, "You're bold tonight but it is cold tonight • And from my window I must keep away.

"Midnight brings breezes on, breezes bring sneezes on • Woo me some warmer night, minstrel," she said • "If there's a breath of cold I'll catch my death of cold," • And his sweet lady love, stayed in her bed.

By comparison, here's the second half of a literal translation of the song:

The sylph who heard this song, from the incognito • Pulled down the blinds so tight! (Ah, cruel she!) • Then she cried, "Gracious me! How the bats fly to-night! • Singer romantic, I ope not to thee.

My window shows no light, Señor, I go to bed. • Sing to the rain instead, sing not to me." • "Now from the face of Heav'n rain falls in tears like mine • I am drenched through and through singing to thee."

So anyway, this file of letters answered the first of my two burning questions: How did Miss McGinley come upon this song? Answer: Charles Griffith of Silver Burdett came across it and offered it to her.

My second big question arose after many searches mentioned a zarzuela written in 1862 with the same name: *El galán incógnito*. According to Wikipedia, its music was written by Cristobal Oudrid, and the libretto by Francisco Camprodón or Ricardo de la Vega (sources differ). Though I have found the song described as

being originally Spanish, and even as a "zarzuela" song, I have yet to find definitive proof that the song is from the zarzuela of the same name. One source even listed the song with the date of 1820, so I wondered if maybe the folk song existed first, and was incorporated into the zarzuela.

I found a great site called zarzuela.net, and wrote its London owner, Christopher Webber, author of the book *The Zarzuela Companion* (Scarecrow Press, 2002). Mr. Webber kindly wrote back to say that though he had no more immediate information on that particular zarzuela, he did say this: "*What I can say for sure, is that it would be unheard of for an 1850s-60s Spanish composer of standing to include an extant popular song directly in a zarzuela.*" If the song did indeed exist before the zarzuela, he guesses they might have taken the title from the song, but that's it. Meanwhile, he is asking his colleagues at the national zarzuela archive in Madrid if they can help me. Cripes, I've got the whole world in on the search!

Hannah Spence, old friend and Catalog Librarian at the New England Conservatory of Music, who gave me considerable help and encouragement in my quest, found that the original manuscript is held by the Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid. I have perused their website and they're expensive, but maybe I'll save up. Hannah also found this footnote in Wikipedia: "*El Galán Incógnito... written in 14 days... premiered at Teatro de la Zarzuela on 1 November 1862. The endeavor was a complete fiasco.*" Gosh. My kind of show.

I could go on and on and on, but I'll stop here, unless some breaking news lands in my inbox. I just think it's so nice and weird to picture this nerdy kid in Appleton WI (me) in 1957 singing a song paraphrased in 1945 by a soon-to-be Pulitzer Prize winning woman from a Latin American folk song that had possibly begun as an art song in Spain in 1862. Ah, the folk process.

My huge thanks to Hannah Spence, Christopher Webber, Carol Achtman, the Syracuse University Library, Wikipedia, Google, and whomever invented the internet. *WZ June 2015*