

Aztec Music Notes: Mexica (Aztec) culture to the arrival of the Spaniards Conquistadors (1519 – 1521)

Fortunately a lot is known about the music in humanities traditions of the indigenous peoples of México before the arrival of Hernán Cortés and his five hundred conquistadors in 1519. Many recordings are available of music from Chiapas in the south to Chihuahua and Sonora in the north. Almost from the moment the Aztecs were defeated in Tenochtitlán in 1521, Spanish chroniclers investigated voluminously about the conquered peoples' society, architecture, customs, rituals, beliefs, and music. Indeed, these chroniclers noted that Aztecs placed great value on the skills of their highly trained musicians. As quoted in *Music in Latin American Culture: Regional Traditions* (New York, 1999), one of the earliest chroniclers, Fray Toribio de Benavente (aka Motolinía) wrote this in 1540:

One of the commonest occurrences in this country were the festivals of song and dance, which were organized not only for the delight of the inhabitants themselves, but more especially to honor their gods, whom they thought well pleased by such service. Because they took their festivals with extreme seriousness and set great store by them, it was the custom in each town for the nobility to maintain in their own houses singing masters, some of whom [not only sang the traditional songs, but] also composed new songs and dances (p. 37).

Among the instruments used in Aztec song festivals were the *huéhuetl* (cylinder-shaped drum) and the *teponaztli* (hollow log with slits creating tongues struck with rubber-coated sticks). These were considered sacred instruments akin to demi-gods. Among the many pieces of pre-Encounter Aztec music recovered (rediscovered) and recreated by modern early modern musical anthropologists a representative piece is “Tezcatlipoca y Fuego” by Xavier Quijas Yxayótl from the album *Aztec Dances*.