

The Tiento: An Iberian Art Form

Mark J. Merrill

During my many years of playing and specializing in Iberian repertoire, the most frequently asked question was always: “What IS a tiento?” According to various textbooks, *tiento* (Portuguese: *tento*) is a musical genre originating in Spain in the mid-15th century. It is formally analogous to the *fantasia* (fantasy), found in England, Germany, and the Low Countries, and also the *ricercare*, first found in Italy. The word derives from the Spanish verb *tentar* (meaning either to touch, to tempt, or to attempt), and was originally applied to music for various instruments. By the end of the 16th century, the tiento was exclusively a keyboard form, especially organ music. It continued to be the predominant form in the Spanish organ tradition through the time of Cabanilles, and developed many variants. Additionally, many 20th-century composers have written works entitled “tiento.”

So, “What is a tiento?” It is many things: it can be a fast- or slow-moving work; it can be a work with the cantus in the left or right hand; sometimes it is a structured form and sometimes it is

very improvisatory in nature. So the real answer is: a tiento is many things!

As an undergraduate, I remember during our organ literature class each student was assigned a genre to present to the class. Having a double major in Spanish, of course I was given the Iberian portion to present. We were using two texts for this course: Corliss Arnold’s *Organ Literature: A Comprehensive Survey* (The Scarecrow Press, Second Edition, 1984) and Marilou Kratzenstein’s *Survey of Organ Literature and Editions* (Iowa State University Press, 1980). The two books had a total of 11–14 pages devoted to this repertoire as compared to English repertoire, which had nearly 40 pages! It was clear that Iberian repertoire was very under-represented.

During my investigation I quickly discovered that the term tiento was a very generic label applied by many composers of the period and that many of these works had no common variables. So the word “tiento” was a broad term.

Keeping that in mind, it was obvious that the full title of the tiento was important. There are many types of tientos

and the full title gives the player every bit of information that is required to fully interpret, register, and realize the performance of the work in question—much like French Classical titles tell the organist what registration is required for the particular piece.

The title tells all!

Indeed, the title tells the performer nearly everything one needs to know in terms of tempo, registrations, and ornaments (or lack thereof). Let’s learn a few basic terms first. *Tiple, mano derecha*: both terms refer to the fact that the melody is in the right hand. *Bajo, baixo*, and *mano izquierda* all refer to the melody being in the left hand. *Tientos de falsas* are generally always played on one manual. Some tientos are contrapuntal in nature and will be played on one manual; this must be determined by studying the texture of the selection: is there an obvious melody line, an obvious accompanying line, and so forth. One other notable point: the use of pedals is generally only at cadences or where a pedalpoint is sustained and at 16’ pitch on a Bourdon or other flute.


The title will often have a reference to the eight church modes. This ordering of the modes tells the performer many important factors as regards the registrations required for the particular work in question. (See performance guidelines chart.)

The 8 Gregorian modes

The basis for interpretation of any tiento lies in two major observations: the mode in which it is written and the title of the work. In determining the mode or tone the performer must refer to the authentic church modes as defined by Cicero, who codified the modes and attributed their astrological meanings in musical terms such as tempo, dynamics, registrations and especially tonal effects or qualities. The title will further provide the given information as to specific or implied registrations.¹

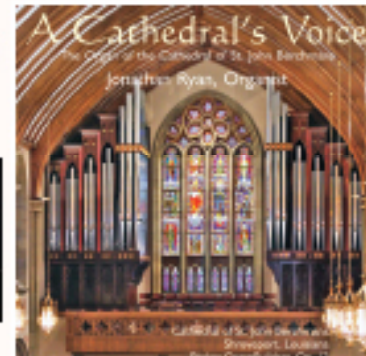
Each mode has particular implications regarding the use of registrations as well as moods. The early modes played a very important role and had a very strong connection to daily life. The classical education consisted of literature, poetry, science, astronomy/astrology, mathematics, and music. The

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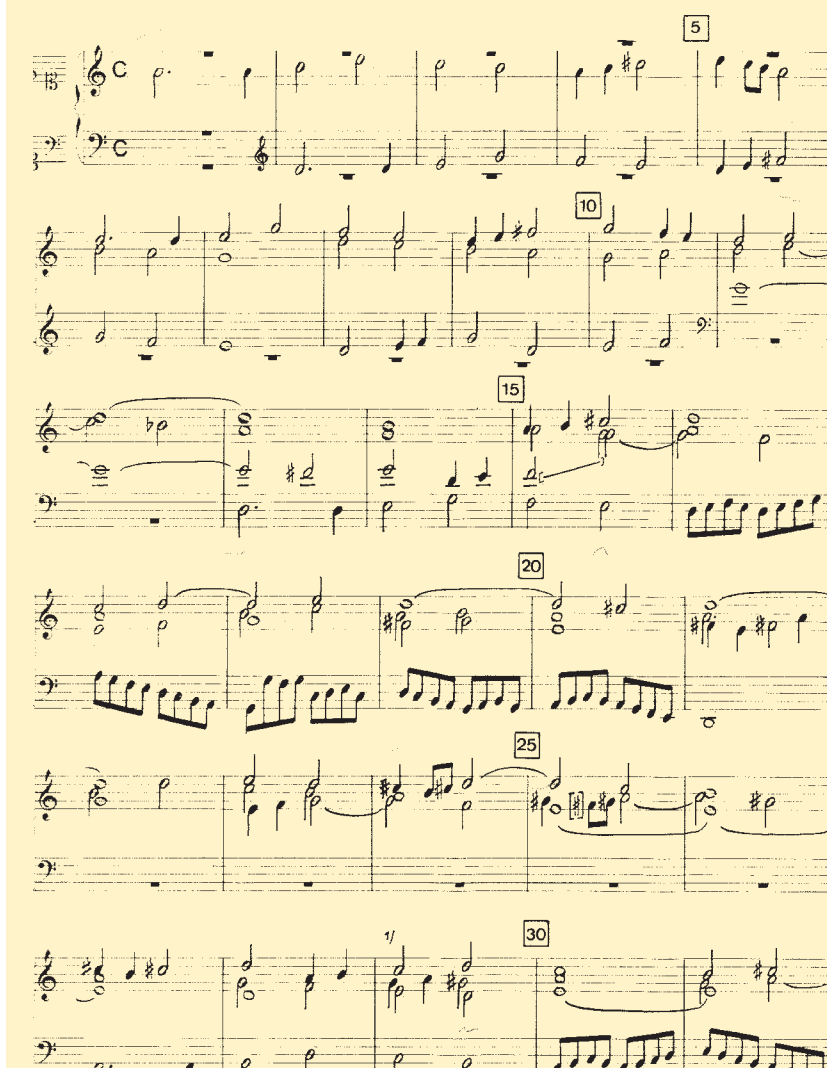
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Tiento de mano izquierda de 1º tono, by Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia

Performance guidelines

| Type of Work | Left Hand Registration | Right Hand Registration | General Implications |
|--|---|---|--|
| Tiento | 8', 4', 2½', 2', 1½' 16', 8', 4', 2' 8', 4', 2', Mixture | 8', 4', 2½', 2', 1½' 16', 8', 4', 2' 8', 4', 2', Mixture | Generally played on one manual. Plenum through mixtures is possible. This work is contrapuntal in most cases. |
| Tiento de falsas | 8' Gamba, 8' Flute 8' String tone, 8' Flute 8' Celeste, 8' Gamba 8' Flute | 8' Gamba, 8' Flute 8' String tone, 8' Flute 8' Celeste, 8' Gamba 8' Flute | Generally played on one manual. Piece makes use of suspensions. The idea is conflict and resolution; place emphasis on the conflict, NOT the resolution. |
| Tiento de mano izquierda Tiento de bajo tono Tiento de baixo | 8' Trumpet 8' Krummhorn 8' Reed 8', 4', 2½', 2', 1½' 4' Reed (bright) | 8' Principal + (4' Flute or Principal) 8' Flute, 4' Flute, 2½' Flute 8' Gamba, 8' Flute + (4' Flute) | The melody is in the left hand. It is important to make sure you balance the sound levels of each hand, while maintaining contrasting sounds. |
| Tiento de mano derecha Tiento de tiples | 8' Principal, possibly + (4' Flute or Principal) 8' Flute, 4' Flute 8' Gamba, 8' Flute + (4' Flute) 8' Flute | 8' Trumpet 8' Reed 8', 4', 2½', 2', 1½' 8', 4', 2½' 16' Reed (bright) Plenum through Mixture | The melody is in the right hand. It is important again to contrast the sounds while maintaining a balance. |
| Tiento de Batalla | This will vary depending upon the texture of each section; is the melody in the right/left hand, etc. | This will vary depending upon the texture of each section; is the melody in the right/left hand, etc. | This type of work makes use of echo sections within each portion. Use contrasting reeds, cornets, plenums, etc. |

modes indicate the nature or spirit of the work: tempo, tonal colorings, and registrations. This is very similar to the early French Classical school, in which the title dictates the possible registrations and mood of the work.

The most common types of tientos

Tiento de falsas de 2º tono. The name looks daunting, but in fact is relatively easy to understand. *Falsas* indicates that this work consists of many suspensions: conflict and resolution—simple enough. *2º tono* tells us that this work is based upon the second mode (attributed to the moon)—the Hypodorian mode; it is associated with somberness, sadness, and elicits tension. Knowing that, one would use registrations that reflect a somber mood: string tones and celestes at 8' pitch, along with a soft 8' flute, which creates an uneasy feeling of a somber or sad quality. Mystery solved. Tientos de falsas are generally played on one manual for the most part due to the intricate use of suspensions and close harmonies. Pedal is not used, except to emphasize cadences.

Tiento de mano derecha de 3º tono. Again, the title tells all. The *mano derecha* indicates that the melody is in the right hand, leaving the left hand to accompany with 8' pitches. *3º tono* is attributed to Mars and based upon the Phrygian mode, which incites force, energy, and fiery overtones. The registrations possible are: a Cornet in the right hand, or a fiery reed stop such as an 8' Trumpet, or possibly a cluster of trumpets 16', 8', 4' or even a *pleno* if good reeds are unavailable.

Tiento de bajo de 1º tono tells one that the work is for melody in the left

hand (*bajo* meaning lower voice) and the accompaniment is in the right hand. *1º tono* is the Dorian mode, which is associated with the sun. The registration qualities are grave and solemn happiness. The left hand would use a Cornet or wide-scaled reed (Trumpet 8' or possibly a Krummhorn 8').

So, one can see that the title really does tell a great deal about the registrations. The Spanish seemed to be very specific about their registrations. However, one must also keep in mind that the Spanish favored the “divided” keyboard, which means that one could play the solo (melody) and accompaniment on the same manual.

The important aspect of registrations in regard to this repertoire is found at the core of the associations between astrology and the early modes of the church. The chart shown above outlines, in very basic terms, possible registration solutions. Of course, these are merely suggestions; ultimately the final selection will be determined by the stops available on any given organ. Additionally, one must remember that on most American organs one must use two manuals, as divided manuals are rare in this country.

The author hopes that readers will take time to investigate this vast and interesting repertoire, which is so seldom heard or explored in this country. I have included a listing of works that will prove of interest, which is by no means comprehensive; however, it is recommended as a starting point to begin your exploration of this vast and vibrant school of organ design and composition. ■

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List of representative works

Antonio Cabezón:

Diferencias sobre 'La Gallarda Milanesa'
Diferencias sobre 'La Pavana Italiana'
Tiento 2 del primer tono
Un gay bergier

Juan Cabanilles:

Corrente italiana
Tiento de falsas 4º tono

Francisco Correa de Arauxo:

Un gay bergier
Tiento de medio registro de tiple 7º tono

Tomás Santamaría:

Arte de Tañer Fantasia

Pablo Bruna:

Medio registro vasso
Pange lingua

Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia:

Tiento de falsas 6º tono
Pange lingua por ce sol fa ut

has studied organ with Montserrat Torrent for nearly 30 years, earning his *Maestría in Organ* from the Conservatory of Music in Barcelona, Spain, as well as his *Título de Doctorado* from the Real Academia de Bellas Artes in Spain. He has dedicated the past 30 years to documenting, recording, and analyzing nearly 168 historical instruments in Spain. His dissertation, “The Effects and Implications on the Performance Practices of Early Iberian Keyboard Music,” earned him a special citation of merit from the Spanish Department of Culture.

Notes

1. Maria A. Ester Sala, *La Ornamentacion en la Música de Tecla Iberica Del Siglo XVI*, Sociedad Española de Musicología, Madrid, 1980.

Tiento y Discurso Llento de 2º tono, by Francisco Correa de Arauxo