

Maese Pérez el organista

by

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(Translated by Anna Battista)

In Seville, in the same atrium of Santa Inés, while waiting for the Midnight Mass to begin, I heard this tradition from a nun of the convent.

Naturally, after hearing it, I impatiently waited for the ceremony to start, eager to witness a miracle.

However, nothing was less miraculous than the organ of Santa Inés, and nothing more ordinary than the tasteless motets that their organist gifted us that night.

Upon leaving the mass, I couldn't help but mockingly ask the nun:

"What's the matter with Maese Pérez's organ? Why does it sound so bad now?"

"Well," the old woman replied, "because this is not his."

"Not his? What happened to his organ, then?"

"It fell apart, being so old, many years ago."

"And the organist's soul?"

"It hasn't appeared again since they installed the one that now replaces it."

If any of my readers were to ask me the same question after reading this story, now they know why the miraculous wonder has not continued to our days.

- I -

"Do you see that one in the red cloak with the white feather in his felt hat? It looks like he's carrying all the gold from the galleons of the Indies on his doublet. The one who's just descending from his litter to shake hands with that lady over there, who, after letting go of his hand, advances towards us, preceded by four pages with torches? Well, that's the Marquis of Moscoso, the gallant of the widowed Countess of Villapineda. It's said that before setting his eyes on this lady, he had asked for the hand of a wealthy lord's daughter, but the girl's father, rumored to be a bit miserly... But, hush! Speaking of the scoundrel from Rome, here he comes. Do you see the one coming under the arch of San Felipe, on foot, wrapped in a dark cloak, and preceded by a single servant with a lantern? Now he's in front of the altarpiece.

"Did you notice, as he unveiled to greet the image, the insignia shining on his chest? If not for that noble emblem, anyone would think him a tradesman from Culebras Street... Well, that's the father in question; see how the townspeople make way for him and greet him. All of Seville knows him for his colossal fortune. He alone has more gold ducats in his coffers than our Lord King Don Felipe maintains soldiers, and with his galleons, he could form a fleet sufficient to resist the Grand Turk's.

"Look, look at that group of serious gentlemen: those are the twenty-four knights. Hey, hey! The dashing one is also here, they say he hasn't been caught by the lords of the green cross thanks to his influence with the magnates of Madrid... He only comes to the church to listen to music... Well, if Maese Pérez doesn't make tears flow like fists with his organ, it can be assured that his soul isn't in his cabinet but frying in the cauldrons of Pedro Botero... Oh, neighbor! Bad..., bad... I guess we're in for a disturbance; I take refuge in the church, then, for, from what I see, there will be more blows here than *paternosters*. Look, look: the Duke of Alcalá's people turn the corner of San Pedro Square, and through the Dueñas alley, I think I've glimpsed those of Medinasidonia... Didn't I tell you?

"They've already seen each other, they stop, without moving from their positions... The groups disperse... The musicians, whom friends and enemies beat on these occasions, withdraw... Even the attendant, with his staff and all, takes refuge in the atrium... And then they say there's justice! For the poor...

"Come, come, the shields are already shining in the darkness... May our Lord of Great Power assist us! The blows are beginning... Neighbor, neighbor! Here..., before they close the doors. But, hush! What's this? Hasn't it started when they're leaving it? What is that light?... Lit torches! Litters! It's the Archbishop...

"The Virgin of the Amparo, whom I invoked just now in thought, brings him to my aid... Oh! If only people knew what I owe to this Lady!... How much interest she pays me for the little candle I light for her on Saturdays!... Look at him, how handsome he is in his purple robes and red cap... May God preserve him in his seat for as many centuries as I wish for my own life. If it weren't for him, half of Seville would have already burned with these disputes of the dukes. Look at them, look at those hypocrites, how they both approach the prelate's litter to kiss his ring... How they follow him and accompany him, blending in with his entourage. Who would say that these two who seem so friendly, if they find themselves in a dark street in half an hour... That is, them..., them!... God save me from believing them cowards; they have given a good account of themselves fighting on some occasions against the enemies of Our Lord... But it's true that if they were to look for each other..., and if they were to look for each other with the desire to find each other, they would find each other, putting an end once and for all to these continuous brawls in which those who truly bear the brunt are their relatives, their associates, and their servants.

"But come, neighbor, let's go to the church before it gets packed..., as on some nights like this, it tends to fill up so much that not even a grain of wheat can fit... The nuns have a good deal with their organist... When has the convent been so favored as it is now?... I can say about the other communities that they have made magnificent offers to Maese Pérez; true, it's not strange, since even the Archbishop has offered him mountains of gold to bring him to the cathedral... But he, nothing... He would rather give up his life than abandon his favorite organ... Don't you know Maese Pérez? True, you're new to the neighborhood... Well, he's a holy man; poor, yes, but as charitable as no other... With no relatives other than his daughter and no friend other than his organ, he spends his entire life watching over the innocence of the former and composing the registers of the latter... Mind you, the organ is old!... Well, he has such skill in fixing and caring for it that it sounds like a marvel... He knows it so well that blindly..., because I don't know if I've told you, but the poor man has been blind from birth... And with what patience he bears his misfortune!... When asked how much he would give to see, he replies, 'A lot, but not as much as you think, because I have hope.' 'Hope to see?'

'Yes, and very soon,' he adds, smiling like an angel, 'I'm already seventy-six years old; no matter how long my life is, I will soon see God...'

"Poor thing! And he will see Him..., because he is humble as the stones on the street, which let themselves be stepped on by everyone... He always says he's nothing more than a poor convent organist and can give music lessons to the same master of the Primada chapel; as he cut his teeth in the trade... His father had the same profession as him; I didn't know him, but my dear mother, may she rest in peace, says that he always took him to the organ with him to work the bellows. Then the boy showed such aptitude that, naturally, at the death of his father, he inherited the position... And what hands he has! God bless them! He deserves to have them taken to Chicarreros Street and set in gold... He always plays well, always; but on a night like this, it's a marvel... He has great devotion for this Midnight Mass ceremony, and when they raise the Sacred Host, at the exact hour of twelve, when Our Lord Jesus Christ was born..., the voices of his organ are like angelic voices...

"Well, why do I have to praise what he will hear tonight? It's enough to see how all the most prominent people in Seville, even the Archbishop himself, come to a humble convent to listen to him; and don't think that only the knowledgeable people who understand music know his merit, but even the common people. All those flocks you see arriving with lit torches singing carols with wild cries to the beat of tambourines, rattles, and zambombas, contrary to their usual custom of causing a ruckus in churches, fall silent as the dead when Maese Pérez lays his hands on the organ... And when they raise..., when they raise, not a fly can be heard... Tears as big as fists fall from all eyes, and at the end, there's a huge sigh, which is nothing but the breath of those present, held while the music lasts... But come, come, the bells have stopped ringing, and the Mass is about to begin, let's go inside... For everyone, tonight is Christmas Eve, but for no one better than for us."

Saying this, the good woman who had served as a guide to her neighbor crossed the atrium of the Santa Inés convent, elbowing here, pushing there, she entered the temple, disappearing into the crowd that was gathering at the door.

- II -

The church was illuminated with astonishing profusion. The stream of light emanating from the altars to fill the space sparkled on the rich jewels of the ladies. Kneeling on the velvet cushions laid out by the pages and taking the prayer books from the hands of their ladies-in-waiting, they formed a bright circle around the fences of the presbytery.

Standing next to the fences, in their gold-trimmed cloaks, revealing with studied carelessness their red and green emblems, one hand holding the felt hat with their feather brushing against the floor, the other on the polished hilts of their swords or caressing the pommel of their chiseled daggers, the twenty-four knights, along with much of Seville's nobility, seemed to form a wall, destined to protect their daughters and wives from contact with the common people. The crowd, stirring at the back of the aisles, with a murmur resembling that of a turbulent sea, erupted into a jubilant cheer, accompanied by the discordant sound of rattles and tambourines, at the sight of the archbishop, who, after sitting near the main altar on a crimson throne surrounded by his attendants, blessed the people three times.

It was time for the mass to begin.

However, a few minutes passed without the celebrant appearing. The crowd began to stir, showing impatience; the knights exchanged some words in hushed tones, and the archbishop sent one of his attendants to the sacristy to inquire why the ceremony had not started.

"Maese Pérez is very ill, and it will be impossible for him to attend Mass tonight," was the attendant's response.

The news quickly spread among the crowd. Describing the unpleasant effect it had on everyone would be impossible; suffice it to say that such a commotion arose in the temple that the attendant stood up, and the constables entered to impose silence, walking among the crowded waves of the crowd.

At that moment, a poorly drawn, dry, bony, and cross-eyed man stepped forward to where the prelate was.

"Maese Pérez is sick," he said. "The ceremony cannot begin. If you wish, I will play the organ in his absence; neither is Maese Pérez the world's first organist, nor will the instrument be unused after his death due to a lack of intelligence..."

The archbishop nodded in agreement, and already some of the faithful who knew this strange character as an envious organist, an enemy of the one from Santa Inés, began to express their displeasure when suddenly a terrible noise was heard in the atrium.

"Maese Pérez is here! Maese Pérez is here!"

At these shouts from those crowded at the door, everyone turned their heads.

Maese Pérez, pale and haggard, was indeed entering the church, carried in a chair, the honor of which everyone vied to bear on their shoulders.

The orders of the doctors, the tears of his daughter, nothing had been enough to stop him in bed.

"No," he had said, "this is the last time, I know it, I know it, and I don't want to die without visiting my organ, and tonight especially, on Christmas Eve. Come, I want it, I command it; let's go to the church."

His wishes had been fulfilled; the attendees lifted him on their arms to the gallery, and the mass began. At that moment, the clock in the cathedral struck midnight.

The introitus, the gospel, and the offertory passed, and the solemn moment arrived when the priest takes the Sacred Host with the tips of his fingers and, after consecrating it, begins to elevate it.

A cloud of incense unfolding in bluish waves filled the church's space; the bells rang with a vibrant sound, and Maese Pérez placed his clenched hands on the organ keys.

The hundred voices of its metal pipes resounded in a majestic and prolonged chord, gradually fading away, as if a gust of wind had carried away its final echoes.

To this first chord, which seemed like a voice ascending from earth to heaven, another distant and soft one responded, growing and growing until it became a torrent of thunderous harmony. It was the voice of angels crossing through space to reach the world.

Then, distant hymns sung by the seraphim hierarchies began to be heard. A thousand hymns at once, when mingling, formed a single one. Nevertheless, it was only the accompaniment to a strange melody that seemed to float over that ocean of mysterious echoes like a wisp of fog over the waves of the sea.

Next, some distant chants began to fade, then others; the combination simplified. There were now only two voices whose echoes merged, then one remained isolated, sustaining a brilliant note like a thread of light. The priest bowed his head, and above his gray head and as if through a blue gauze imitating the incense smoke, the host appeared to the eyes of the faithful. At that moment, the note that Maese Pérez held, trilling, opened, opened, and an explosion of giant harmony shook the church, in whose corners the compressed air hummed, and whose stained-glass windows trembled in their narrow lattices.

From each of the notes that formed that magnificent chord, a theme unfolded, and some near, others far, these bright, those dull, it seemed that the waters and the birds, the breezes and the leaves, men and angels, the earth and the heavens, each sang in its language a hymn to the birth of the Savior.

The crowd listened in astonishment and suspension. In every eye, there was a tear, in every spirit, a deep reverence.

The officiating priest felt his hands trembling because the One he held in them, the One whom men and archangels saluted, was his God, was his God, and it seemed to him that he had seen the heavens open and the host transfigured.

The organ continued to play, but its voices gradually faded away like a voice lost in echo after echo, receding and weakening as it moved away when suddenly a woman's cry was heard.

The organ emitted a discordant and strange sound, like a sob, and fell silent.

People crowded the stairs to the gallery, toward which, torn from their religious ecstasy, all the faithful turned their gaze anxiously.

"What happened? What's going on?" they asked each other. And no one knew how to answer, and everyone tried to guess, and the confusion grew, and the uproar began to rise, threatening to disturb the order and reverence appropriate to the church.

"What was that?" the ladies asked the attendant, who, preceded by the ushers, was one of the first to ascend to the gallery and who, pale and showing deep sorrow, went to the place where the archbishop awaited him, anxious like everyone else to know the cause of that disorder.

"What happened?"

"Maese Pérez has just died."

Indeed, when the first faithful, after rushing up the stairs, reached the gallery, they saw the poor organist fallen face down on the keys of his old instrument, which still vibrated faintly, while his daughter, kneeling at his feet, called him in vain amid sighs and sobs.

"Good evening, Doña Baltasara. Are you also coming to the Midnight Mass tonight? Personally, I had the intention of going to the parish to hear it, but you know what they say... Where Vicente goes, the people go. And, truth be told, ever since Maese Pérez died, it feels like a burden on my heart when I enter Santa Inés... Poor thing! He was a saint!... As for myself, I can say that I keep a piece of his jacket as a relic, and he deserves it because, I swear to God and my soul, if the Archbishop interceded, our grandchildren would worship him like a saint... But how can it be! To the dead and gone, there are no friends... Now what prevails is novelty... You understand, don't you? Don't you know what's going on? True, we are alike in that: from our little house to the church and from the church to our little house, without caring about what is said or not said... Only that I, like this..., a word here, another there..., so that, without even wanting to find out, I usually stay abreast of some news...

"Well, yes, sir; it seems a done deal that the organist from San Román, that one-eyed fellow who is always badmouthing other organists, that braggart who looks more like a beggar from Puerta de la Carne than a music master, is going to play this Christmas Eve instead of Maese Pérez. You must know, because everyone knows this, and it's public knowledge in Seville, that no one wanted to commit to doing it. Not even his daughter, who is a teacher, and after her father's death, she entered the convent as a novice.

"And it was natural: accustomed to hearing those marvels, anything else would seem bad to us, even if we wanted to avoid comparisons. So, when the community had decided that, in honor of the deceased and as a show of respect for his memory, the organ would remain silent tonight, here comes our man saying that he dares to play it... There is nothing more daring than ignorance... True, the fault is not his, but of those who allow him this desecration. But that's how the world goes... And I say, it's not the people who come... Anyone would think that nothing has changed from one year to the next. The same characters, the same displays of wealth, the same pushing at the door, the same animation in the atrium, the same crowd in the temple... Ah, if the dead man could raise his head, he would die again to avoid hearing his organ played by such hands!

"What's more, if what the neighborhood folks told me is true, they're preparing a good reception for the intruder. When the moment comes to put his hand on the keys, a commotion of rattles, tambourines, and zambombas is going to start that you won't believe... But, hush! The hero of the show is entering the church. Jesus, what a colorful little cloak, and that pleated collar, what an air of importance! Come on, come on, the Archbishop arrived a while ago and the Mass is about to begin... Come on, it seems to me that tonight is going to give us something to talk about for many days."

Saying this, the good woman, known to our readers for her loquacious outbursts, entered Santa Inés, making her way through the crowd with pushes and elbows, as usual.

The ceremony had already begun. The temple was as bright as the previous year.

The new organist, after making his way through the faithful occupying the naves to go and kiss the prelate's ring, had gone up to the tribune, where he touched the organ registers one after another with a seriousness as affected as it was ridiculous.

Among the small crowd in the church, a muffled and confused murmur was heard, a certain omen that the storm was beginning to brew and would not be long in making itself felt.

"He's a scoundrel who can't do anything right, not even look straight," said some.

"He's an ignoramus who, after making his parish organ worse than a rattle, comes to profane Maese Pérez's organ," said others.

And while one removed his cape to shake his tambourine, the other went to reach for his rattles, and everyone else was getting ready to make more and louder noises, only a few ventured to defend the strange character, whose proud and swaggering demeanor made a notable contrast with the modest appearance and affable kindness of the late Maese Pérez.

Finally, the long-awaited moment arrived, the solemn moment when the priest, after bowing and murmuring some holy words, took the host in his hands... The little bells rang, their ringing resembling a shower of crystal notes; the diaphanous waves of incense rose, and the organ played.

A thunderous uproar filled the church's spaces at that moment and drowned out its first chord.

Panpipes, bagpipes, rattles, tambourines, all the instruments of the common people raised their discordant voices at once; but the confusion and the noise only lasted a few seconds. All at once, as they had begun, they suddenly fell silent.

The second chord, broad, bold, magnificent, held, flowing from the metal pipes of the organ like a cascade of inexhaustible and sonorous harmony.

Celestial chants like those that caress the ears in moments of ecstasy; chants perceived by the spirit and that the lips cannot repeat; isolated notes of a distant melody, sounding at intervals, brought in the gusts of the wind; the sound of leaves kissing on trees with a murmur like that of rain; lark trills rising, chirping among the flowers like an arrow shot into the clouds; nameless, imposing roars like those of a storm; choirs of seraphim without rhythm or cadence, unknown music of heaven, understood only by the imagination; winged hymns that seemed to rise to the Lord's throne like a burst of light and sound..., all were expressed by the hundred voices of the organ with more power, with more mysterious poetry, with more fantastic color than they had ever been expressed before.

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When the organist descended from the tribune, the crowd that rushed to the stairs was so great, and their eagerness to see and admire him was so intense, that the attendant, fearing, not without reason, that he would feel overwhelmed, sent some of the ushers to open a path for him with their staffs so that he could reach the high altar, where the prelate awaited him.

"You see," the latter said when they brought him into his presence, "I came from my palace here just to hear you. Will you be as cruel as Maese Pérez, who never wanted to spare me the trip, playing on Christmas Eve at the cathedral mass?"

"Next year," replied the organist, "I promise to please you, for all the gold on earth I would not play this organ again."

"Why?" interrupted the prelate.

"Because..." added the organist, trying to control the emotion revealed in the paleness of his face, "because it is old and bad and cannot express everything one wants."

The archbishop withdrew, followed by his attendants. One after another, the litters of the gentlemen filed past and disappeared around the bends of the neighboring streets; the groups in the atrium dissolved, the faithful dispersing in different directions, and the gatekeeper was about to close the atrium entrance doors when two women were still visible. After making the sign of the cross and murmuring a prayer before the altarpiece of the San Felipe arch, they continued on their way, entering the alley of Las Dueñas.

"What can I say, Doña Baltasara?" one of them was saying, "I'm from this neighborhood. To each his own... Capuchin barefoot friars would have to assure me, and I still wouldn't believe it completely... That man cannot have played what we just heard... I heard him a thousand times in San Bartolomé, which was his parish, the priest there had to throw him out for being bad, and you really had to plug your ears with cotton... And then, if you just look at his face, which, they say, is the mirror of the soul... I remember, poor thing, as if I were seeing him now, I remember Maese Pérez's face when on a night like this he came down from the tribune after stunning the audience with his wonders... What a kind smile, what lively color!... He was old and seemed like an angel... Not like this one, who came down the stairs stumbling, as if a dog were barking at him on the platform, with the color of a dead person and some... Well, Doña Baltasara, believe me, and believe me wholeheartedly..., I suspect there's something fishy going on here..."

Commenting on the last words, the two women turned the corner of the alley and disappeared.

We think it unnecessary to tell our readers who one of them was.

- IV -

Another year had passed. The abbess of the convent of Santa Inés and Maese Pérez's daughter spoke in hushed tones, partly concealed in the shadows of the church choir. The bell rang with a wounded voice from the tower calling the faithful, and the silent and deserted courtyard saw the occasional rare person passing through, taking holy water at the door and choosing a place in a corner of the aisles, where a few people from the neighborhood calmly awaited the start of the Midnight Mass.

"You see now," said the abbess, "your fear is overly childish; there is no one in the temple; all of Seville is flocking to the cathedral tonight. Play the organ, and play it without any distrust; we will be together... But... you continue in silence, and your sighs do not cease. What is happening? What ails you?"

"I have... fear," exclaimed the young woman with a deeply moved tone.

"Fear! Of what?"

"I don't know..., something supernatural... Last night, look, I had heard you say that you were determined to have me play the organ at mass, and proud of this distinction, I thought to adjust its registers and tune it so that I could surprise you today... I came to the choir... alone..., I opened the door that leads to the gallery... At that moment, the cathedral clock was striking an hour..., I don't know which... But the bells were very sad and they rang and rang...; they kept ringing the whole time I stood there, and that time seemed like a century to me.

"The church was empty and dark... Far away, in the background, a dying light shone, like a star lost in the night sky... the light of the lamp burning on the main altar... In its very weak reflections, which only served to make the profound horror of the shadows more visible, I saw..., I saw him, Mother, don't doubt it, I saw a man who, silently and with his back turned to where I was, ran his hand over the organ keys while manipulating its registers with the other... and the organ played, but it played in an indescribable way. Each of its notes seemed like a stifled sob inside the metal pipe, which vibrated with the compressed air inside, reproducing the muffled, almost imperceptible, yet accurate tone.

"And the cathedral clock kept striking the hour, and that man continued running his fingers over the keys. I could even hear his breathing.

"Horror had frozen the blood in my veins; I felt in my body a freezing cold, and in my temples, fire... I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. That man turned his face and looked at me...; but that's not correct, he didn't indeed look at me because he was blind... It was my father!"

"Pshaw, sister, dismiss these fantasies with which the wicked enemy tries to disturb weak imaginations... Say a Our Father and a Hail Mary to Archangel Saint Michael, leader of the heavenly militias, so that he may assist you against evil spirits. Wear around your neck a scapular touched to the relic of Saint Pachomius, advocate against temptations, and go, go to take your place at the organ gallery; mass is about to begin, and the faithful are already waiting impatiently. Your father is in heaven, and from there, before giving you scares, he will come down to inspire his daughter in this solemn ceremony, for the purpose of such special devotion."

The prioress went to occupy her seat in the choir amidst the community. Maese Pérez's daughter opened the door to the gallery with a trembling hand to sit at the organ bench, and the mass began.

The mass began and continued without anything remarkable happening until the consecration. At that moment, the organ sounded, and at the same time as the organ, a scream from Maese Pérez's daughter...

The prioress, the nuns, and some of the faithful rushed to the gallery.

"Look at it! Look at it!" said the young woman, fixing her disheveled eyes on the bench, from which she had risen astonished to grasp the gallery railing with her convulsive hands.

Everyone fixed their gaze on that point. The organ was alone, and yet it continued to play..., playing as only the archangels could imitate in their raptures of mystical joy.

"Didn't I tell you a thousand times, my dear Doña Baltasara, didn't I tell you? There was something fish going on here! See! What? Weren't you at the Midnight Mass last night? But, anyway, you'll know what happened. All of Seville is talking about nothing else... The Archbishop is furious, and rightly so... To have missed going to Santa Inés; not being able to witness the miracle... And for what? To hear a cacophony of noises; because those who heard it say that what the famous organist of San Bartolomé did in the cathedral was nothing else... I knew it, the cross-eyed organist could not have played that, it was a lie... There was something going on; and that something was indeed the soul of Maese Pérez."