

Forum:[Hack Forums](#)

Thread: [Could La Folia be history's most enduring tune?](#)

ronnie420 - August 9, 2025, 9:18 pm

Could La Folia be history's most enduring tune?

Andrea Valentino - Features correspondent

Why did this humble tune, first conjured by medieval farmers, capture so many people's imaginations and even feature in *The Addams Family*? Andrea Valentino takes a look.

Checking the pop charts today is simple. Want to know the most popular artist on Spotify? Just a few clicks will take you to Ed Sheeran and his 72 million monthly listeners. What about the most popular song? The scruffy ginger-haired heartthrob strikes again. Sheeran's *Shape Of You* was the first track to be streamed a bewildering two billion times. The numbers elsewhere are even more astounding. Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee's *Despacito* has over 6.3 billion views on YouTube.

But for all that, the internet can't tell you everything. What, for example, is the most popular tune ever? Not the most covered song: that would be *Yesterday* by The Beatles. But rather the most enduring melody, a simple theme that has been shaped by countless hands. One of the strongest candidates is a tune few will recognise. Yet for centuries, *La Folia* has dazzled hundreds of composers and musicians, up to the present day. Its story tells us much about the history of music, and maybe even something about ourselves.

Its name – 'folly' or 'madness' in Italian – refers to the frenzied way peasants twirled to the music

La Folia has a long history. Its distinctive chords first developed out of the folk music of late 15th-Century Portugal, where it was used in popular festivals. Its name – 'folly' or 'madness' in Italian – refers to the frenzied way peasants twirled to the music. In Santiago de Murcia's *Codice Saldivar No 4*, Renaissance writer Covarrubias describes *La Folia* as 'very noisy' while another highlights its 'vivacity and fire', its dancers 'making gestures that awaken voluptuousness'.

This 'voluptuousness' was apparently popular. A century after its invention, *La Folia* spread to nearby Spain and then across the Mediterranean. Like modern hits, it was first diffused by word of mouth. "There were a lot of Spanish musicians that worked in Italy, for instance at the Vatican," explains Alexander Silbiger, Professor Emeritus of Music at Duke University. "The singers and musical directors were Spanish. That may have been a factor in its spread." It helped, too, that Spain then ruled southern Italy, making cultural exchange between the two countries easier.

At the same time, musicians began bending *La Folia* to fit changing tastes. From about 1650, the hectic early tune mellowed into dignified middle age, slowing down and settling on a particular melody (earlier versions had been more fluid). This makes sense: the new Baroque spirit prided elegance and grace above random peasant frolics. Yet *La Folia* was lucky it changed. As Silbiger points out, other dance forms went out of fashion while "the madness" tumbled on past the French Revolution.

Between 1670 and 1700 alone, pieces borrowing *La Folia* were printed everywhere from Zaragoza to Berlin to Oxford

How popular was *La Folia* at its peak in the 18th Century? It's hard to say for sure. Online statistics

were still a way off and composers often referenced La Folia without naming it. Even today, you have to hunt around to learn that a cantata by Bach and a keyboard piece by Handel both used the theme. Simply searching for 'La Folia' is not enough.

Still, there are clues that the theme was a genuine phenomenon. One hint is its vast geographical spread. Between 1670 and 1700 alone, pieces borrowing La Folia were printed everywhere from Zaragoza to Berlin to Oxford. By 1760, it had reached Mexico and Bolivia. Musicians themselves were just as enthusiastic. In the decade to 1710, around 20 composers tried taming La Folia, from Antonio Vivaldi to Arcangelo Corelli.

La Folia on film

Perhaps all this has something to do with La Folia's adaptability. The melody is basic enough that musicians can easily explore it in different ways, adding harmony or fiddling with the speed while always letting the original, haunting theme shimmer through. These so-called 'variations' on La Folia – especially popular during the Baroque period – are some of the grandest achievements in music. Corelli's effort is particularly spectacular, the main violin spiralling on for 11 minutes and 23 variations of the original chords. No wonder aspiring violinists were once expected to learn Corelli's Folia before they did anything else.

Not that La Folia stopped with highbrow musicians. It has been used in a Swedish political ballad and a bawdy English opera. There is even some evidence it slipped back towards its peasant roots, influencing the folk songs of Finland and Norway. While the decline of Baroque music dulled some of its glamour, meanwhile, the theme survived right through the 19th Century. Beethoven, Berlioz, Brahms and Liszt all exploited the tune. Rachmaninoff did too, though he apparently thought Corelli had composed the theme himself.

There's a tinge of the past, of the glories of Spain – it's a haunting melody – Professor Silbiger

The theme flourishes even now. Apart from recording classic Foliass, modern musicians are adapting the theme in striking new ways. Some have played unusual instruments, including the sitar and ukulele. Others have changed genre, swapping Baroque for metal and harpsichords for electric guitars. At the same time, the growth of cinema has opened another door. "La Folia has been used in films a lot of times before in different ways," Adam Grannick, a film-maker and Folia devotee, tells BBC Culture. "There was a version of it used in The Addams Family. In the film 1492, the main theme is a version of La Folia."

Grannick is something of an expert on the interplay between La Folia and cinema. In 2016, his team at Filmelodic used the variations by Francesco Geminiani, a contemporary of Corelli, as the backdrop for an experimental film. Over 12 minutes, it weaves together several stories – a ballet dancer preparing for a show, a mother accepting her daughter's sexuality – all ebbing and flowing as the music spins from variation to variation. "The idea is that I trusted the music to make it work," Grannick says. "In film there are certain rules of narrative arc you want to follow. But by following the dramatic arc of the music itself, I trusted that anything we did would bring the audience along."

Critics agreed: Grannick's film won best experimental short at the 2017 Manhattan Film Festival. Even so, the question remains. Why? Why did this humble tune, first conjured by medieval farmers, grab so many artists and never let go? Experts have their theories. John Williams, a classical guitarist from Australia, emphasises its austerity, writing on a record jacket that its simple melody means it's "no surprise" La Folia has endured. Others are spurred by national pride. Andrés Segovia, another guitarist, called La Folia "Spanish to the core." Silbiger feels similarly when he listens to it. "There's a tinge of the past, of the glories of Spain," he says. "It's a haunting melody."

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