

ON MEXICO'S POPULAR MUSIC*

PAUL BOWLES

THERE exists a state of great confusion about the factors that differentiate the various forms of Mexican popular music, even in the minds of Mexican musicians. The best a non-Mexican can do, outside of serious musicological research, is to record the confusion by stating what is known. No one has yet done the work which will enable future listeners to know they are hearing a *Son* and not a *Huapango*. The name *Son* has been applied to practically everything, even in the few recent musicological books brought out in Mexico, and terms are used loosely and with complete interchangeability. (There is also the custom of calling various dances in different regions by the names of the Spanish ancestors from which they may have in part developed: one hears *Fandango* used in connection with the playing of *Sones*, *Huapangos* are called *Rondeñas*, *Malagueñas*, and so on.)

Last year Chavez pointed out that this state of confusion must come to an end. The trouble is that the music may come to an end before the confusion does. The really fine Mexican music is naturally intensely regional. Talent scouts from Mexico City radio stations are fast destroying the local cultures by carrying away the best musicians from their villages. They teach them the monstrous bastard *kitsch* which now passes for music all over Central America (Cuba, Argentina and Hollywood all in one dish) and then allow them, in their program of broadcast horrors, to perform one or two of their own already damaged native songs. This is true particularly of players of *Huapangos*, whose collective rhythmical devices are so delicate that Blas Galindo, the young Indian composer, assures me a week of radio work is sufficient to ruin a group forever.

There are two types of *Huapango*: the *Huasteco* and the *Veracruzano*. They are both in 3/4 or 6/8 and lack the frantic repetitiousness of most Mexican music. Both have in common an extremely successful exploitation of *contretemps*: the voices go along seemingly unaware of each other or of the rhythmical variations in the accompanying bass. The *Huasteco* is the simpler of the two, the disparity in rhythm between the melody and ac-

*The word "popular" is used in the strict sense as opposed to commercial music which unfortunately is quite another thing.

companiment is less, and the melodies themselves are less involved and less soaring. Often the second chorus is in the supertonic instead of a related key, the choruses thereafter alternating between tonic and supertonic; doubtless this is a guitaristic device.

The *Veracruzano* probably has the distinction of being the most complicated folk music in the country. There is no doubt in my mind that certain ones I have heard have Negro influence, a thing made noticeable in the rhythms of the counterpoint invented particularly by the harpist. Certain Negroisms in the singers' intonations can be detected as well. The music however remains overwhelmingly Spanish, but not like any folk music one can hear in Spain today. The hands of the performers being occupied in playing their guitars and harp, the singers' feet often take over the job of making the rhythm more incisive, of emphasizing certain offbeats for the sake of variety, which the clapping hands do in Andalusía. Sometimes at the end of a chorus comes a *desplante* during which the dancers, if any, rest or sing falsetto allusions of a challenging or insulting nature regarding each other's defects. (This happens in the *Fandango* in Spain.) Along the Gulf Coast yearly regional contests are held. Participants are usually fishermen, some of whom have attained an unbelievable proficiency not only in the pure technic of their instruments, but also in the art of melodic and rhythmical improvisation. In 1937 Gerónimo Baqueiro Fóster brought back from the region of Alvarado two such men to his home in Mexico City where I heard them. Their improvisatory genius and their ability to sustain not alone interest but prolonged excitement in the listener was comparable only to that of the best swing men. There seemed to be no end to their contrapuntal inventions. Two voices, four hands and four feet managed successfully to contrive more complications than one would have thought humanly possible.

The *Son* (to be kept absolutely apart from the Cuban *Son*, of course) is still the most mysterious of the forms. One writer claims the *Huapango* is a variety of *Son*, another that the *Son* is part of the *Jarabe*; no one can give its particular characteristics. (Galindo is preparing a thesis on the *Son* proper, the first work of its kind.) Although *Sones* of a degenerate and indifferent sort can be heard pretty generally, actually good *Sones* are extremely rare, their point of origin being restricted to the region of Jalisco and Michoacan. The interest of the piece lies completely in its rhythmical complication; the more complex and varied the accompaniment, the purer the *Son*. The easiest distinguishing feature is the so-called

alternate 6/8 and 3/4 metre, proper to the *Son* alone. Galindo prefers to consider the entire piece as being in 6/8, and gives me the following examples of rhythms from his native Jalisco. The lower notes represent the percussive section, as played by the guitarron and sometimes drum, the middle notes are the harmony section carried by guitars and jaranas – small guitars, from which the Yucatecan dance takes its name, also called *vihuelas*, depending upon the region – and the top line is that of the instrumental melody played by violins. The vocal line is sung above and apart from this fundamental accompaniment.

Se presenta asi o

asi

(A)

(B)

(C)

(D)

(E)

(F)

NOTE: D, E, F are the most common rhythms; A, B, C are the more pure and Galindo gives the variant of each of these three types.

The tempo is far more frantic than that of the *Huapango*, and certainly the rhythms are much more indigenous, making the consequent general effect nearer the primitive side. *Sones* and the Mariachi orchestras which play them are inseparable. (Revueltas once told me that during Maximilian's time these little instrumental groups were called in to assist at weddings which were then known, by a current snobism as *mariages*; but since the Mexicans' French pronunciation was far from perfect, the orchestras came to be known as Mariachis. It may be a legend.) There is no fixed recipe for the composition of a Mariachi. A fairly classical arrangement of instruments would be: violins, harp, jaranas, guitars and guitarrones (enormous guitars played pizzicato on a single string). Vicente T. Mendoza, Mexico's foremost musicologist, gives the following list as comprising a typical group in Guerrero: two violins playing in thirds (participating only between choruses), two vihuelas, whose players sing as well in the form of responses to the principal singer or go along with him in thirds, and a drummer who plays a cylindrical-shaped instrument with two different sticks, one short and soft for the membrane and the other long and hard for the rim. The drummer is the principal singer. In cities a trumpet is often added and there are generally more of each kind of instrument.

Two forms whose interest lies principally in their lyrics are the *Canción Ranchera*, or Mexican *lied*, which comes in two varieties, amorous and zoological, and the *Corrido*, an endless saga, differing from the former in that its choruses are generally shorter and repeated practically forever or at least until the tale is told. The *Corrido* may be military, religious, criminological (these are called *Tragedias* in the North of Mexico) or may deal with the less heroic things of life such as adultery, deception, jealousy, ridicule; or just important events like the installation of electricity in a town, or the inauguration of a new busline. It is not a localized phenomenon, although the region richest in *Corridos* as well as in a good many other musical manifestations, both indigenous and transplanted, is the state of Michoacan. The metre is generally ternary, although like the *Canción Ranchera*, it may be binary. Occasional measures of 7/8 and 5/8 appear. A good deal of study has been done by Mendoza, tracing the development and metamorphosis of the old Spanish *Romance* and the *Corrido Andaluz* into the *Corrido*. It is certain that a great many of the songs are practically identical even after three centuries or so, although the tessitura of the *Corrido* is definitely greater. An interesting note is that practically

sixty per cent of all *Corridos* end on the mediant of the scale. *Corridos*, like *Sones*, are rendered by Mariachis or by anyone with a guitar who feels like singing about something in particular.

Mendoza has the following to say of the *Corrido*: "In cases where there exist irregularities of form, whether in the number of syllables which make up the line or in the number of lines which form the chorus, there frequently appear *estribillos*" (the *estribillo* is that part of any song which can be considered as a refrain – a recurrent theme, as in a rondo), "interspersed, perhaps as exclamations, as spoken words, or as phrases which break up the symmetry of the literary or musical forms. In some cases these *estribillos* develop in such a way that they are not simply one or two lines but constitute independent verses of four or more lines, sometimes having a different meter from the *Corrido* proper. The purpose is to achieve more rhythmical variety or greater emphasis, and it does give the form an extraordinary liberty. In this way the *Corrido* acquires a wealth of forms, metres and rhythms, developing as time goes on into a true work of art." He adds that if one will trace the history of one individual *Corrido* from its earliest rudimentary state up to its most complex form, he will at the same time have followed the historical development of Mexican music.

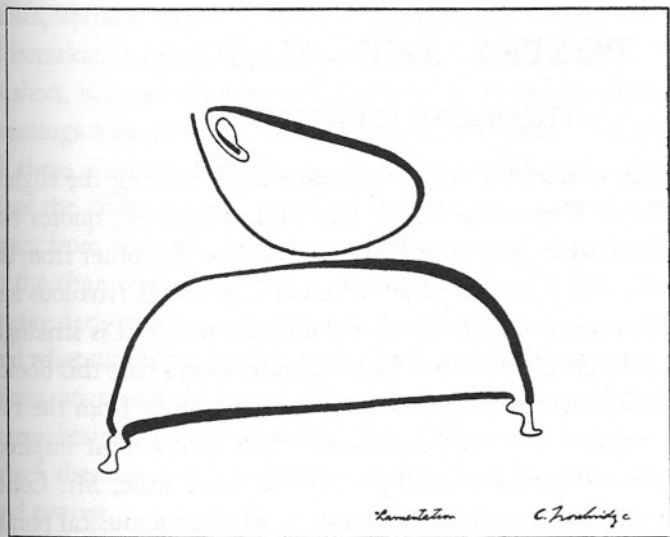
The *Jarabe* is primarily a dance form, and is usually a suite (rather like the classical suite) of short pieces played in rigorously fixed sequence, leaving a certain leeway at one point in the choice of a section (as between the *Sarabande* and the *Gigue*). There is no doubt that the *Jarabe* (originally *Sarao*) was brought over whole from Spain in the form of *Seguidillas*, *Zambras*, *Fandangos* and *Jarabes Gitanos*. All these are *danzas zapateadas* (shoe or tap dances) which arrived in New Spain in their pure state but were gradually molded, sometimes even consciously by means of straight ridicule, by those to whom they were brought, into something quite different. The melodies are lively, nearly always in major, with a good deal of changing of key, not only to the relative dominant and subdominant, but also to the related keys of these in turn. The metre may also change between sections, although it may remain one of $3/4$ or $6/8$ all the way through. The *Jarabe Tapatio* of Querétaro (which Saldívar suggests should be called the Official *Jarabe*) includes both binary and ternary metres. Another more vulgar *Jarabe Tapatio*, the best-known outside Mexico, uses in turn sections in $6/8$, $3/4$, $2/4$ and $2/8$.

All this music certainly started out Spanish and ended up Mexican, and the two sound very little alike. Most Mexican forms are Spanish

melody-types encased in indigenous rhythms, but that is not all that is different. Mexican music is insistent, childlike, impersonal, and lacks, except in rare cases, just those qualities of subtlety, hauteur and brilliance which characterize the music of Spain. Listen any evening in the Plaza Garibaldi to the simultaneous playing of six or seven groups of ordinary Mariachis. The rhythms are unpredictable but earthbound. Nothing could be much farther from the hard, circumspect precisions of: Andalucía or Asturias. But the great differences lie not primarily in the melodies, nor in the harmonic progressions, nor yet in the rhythms, but rather in a whole mass of innumerable details affecting all these things, details which when combined make a result distinct from the original music. What remains is as much a direct product, I think, of the climate and topography as of the civilization these have helped to engender. The voice and intonation of the Indian and mestizo are not the same as those of the Spaniard. Guitar technic is very different. The Indian taste for falsetto singing and whooping helps to carry the music in the opposite direction from Spain.

The interest for the foreign musician certainly does not lie in the music proper or its text, be it ever so authentic and touching, but rather in the special charm inherent in the playing of each kind of performing *conjunto*. The same piece rendered by a group of Mariachis in Guadalajara will sound very different in Cordoba when given by a Veracruzano harpist and guitarrist (and will probably be unrecognizable if played by a rural Indian band anywhere.)

Here is a whole national music dying before it has been made known to the cultured world. Even the strictly indigenous music may survive longer than this popular mestizo, because it is more protected from degeneration through contact. There are no recordings available of good Mexican popular music. Men like Daniel Castañedas, Mendoza, Fóster, Luis Sandí, Ruben M. Campos and Saldívar have initiated in the last ten years a study which should be carried on tenfold in the years to come if the musical heritage of four centuries is not to be lost.



MARTHA GRAHAM
A drawing by
CHARLOTTE TROWBRIDGE