

# MODERN MUSIC

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## THE COMPOSERS OF SOUTH AMERICA

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**M**OST musical people want to know whether there are any interesting composers in the southern part of our hemisphere. They are willing to take yes or no for an answer and let it go at that. For the musician who has been visiting the composers in South America, as I have been, the answer is not so simple. Present accomplishment is completely overshadowed by the tremendous possibilities of the future. Of course your interest in that fact will be determined by the degree of your interest in things that are in the process of becoming. Those who thrive exclusively on masterpieces should stay away; South American music is a growing thing. I examined the work of about sixty-five composers in seven countries and didn't find a Bach or Beethoven among them. But I did find an increasing body of music, many well trained composers, a few real personalities and great promise for the future. Enough to make apparent the value for both North and South America of closer, more permanent musical ties, beyond any question of political expediency.

To see the field of composition as it actually is down there we should of course stop thinking in terms of The South American Composer. No such person exists. South America, as we are often told but never seem fully to comprehend, is a collection of separate countries, each with independent traditions. Their musical developments are various and there is little or no musical contact between them. Brazilian, Colombian, Peruvian composers are just as different from each other as are Dutch, Hungarian, or Yugoslav composers. European music covers a lot of territory, and so also does South American.

Certain generalizations are possible, however. The countries that have developed most quickly are those with the richest folklore. But whether folklorism is strong or not, the influence of the modern French school is predominant everywhere in South America. This is true of all the arts, but particularly of music. Modernism is generally taken to mean the Debussy-Ravel esthetic. A few of the more sophisticated composers are thoroughly familiar with early Stravinsky and are at times influenced by what they know. As for Schönberg or Hindemith, their names are known and their music admired, but they have as yet left very few traces. The Latin strain in South American art is a strong one, and it will undoubtedly continue to be so.

All contemporary composers in South America produce works under serious handicaps. Only five or six first-rate orchestras function on the entire continent. Comparatively few performances of new works are given by these orchestras, and the same holds true for the local radio stations. Shorter pieces have been published from time to time, but publishers are entirely lacking for long and serious works. Many composers labor in isolation, with little hope of reaching any live audience. The wonder is that, despite these conditions, so many new works are written each year.

The degree of musical progress differs in each country. In some the composers are more personalized, in others musical organization is better, in still others it is the concert activity that is richest. In general, the countries with the deepest Indian strain seem to promise most for the future. The best way to look at South American composition is to approach it, country by country, starting with those known as the ABC group, where most musical activity is centered.

#### ARGENTINA

There has been a tendency, it seems to me, to underestimate the music written by Argentina's composers. As yet, one cannot honestly speak of an Argentine school since a strikingly indigenous profile is lacking. Nevertheless, as a whole, composers of the Argentine are more cultivated and more professionally prepared than any similar group to be found in Latin-America. Moreover, musical life in Buenos Aires is really cosmopolitan in scope – all the finest artists are heard and a considerable amount of unfamiliar music is performed each season.

Contemporary musical effort suffers considerably because of a small group of conservative musicians who completely control government musical policy. That is very serious in a country where so much activity is

subsidized through official channels. Much harm has also been done by a superstition current in polite musical circles that only compositions inspired by Argentine folklore can possibly be any good. The composer who dares to ignore that unwritten fiat is likely to see his works go unperformed.

Most of the new music heard in Buenos Aires is presented in concerts of the Grupo Renovación or La Nueva Música, two modern music societies comparable to our own League of Composers. The older is the Grupo Renovación, whose principal composer members are Jacobo Ficher, Honorio Siccardi, Luis Gianneo and José María Castro. Of these, Castro seems to me to possess the strongest creative instinct. (It should be explained that José María is the oldest of four brothers, all musicians, of whom Juan José is the well-known composer-conductor recently active in this country.) José María's music, practically unknown here, fits easily into one of two categories: it is either neo-classic of the bright and happy kind – a rare phenomenon in South America – or it is neo-romantic with a bitter-sweet flavor entirely personal to the composer. In either case the music he writes is entirely without affectation – refreshingly simple and direct, reflecting the impression he makes as a human being. Castro ought to be much better known not only in the United States, but also in his own country.

La Nueva Música, the second of these organizations, is headed by the Argentine composer Juan Carlos Paz. Paz has a broader acquaintance with the literature of modern music than any other musician I met in South America. He is an indefatigable worker – serious, learned, solitary, and something of a martyr to the "cause." Paz is the only mature composer in South America who has attached himself to the Schönberg twelve-tone line. This attachment is mental rather than emotional and may therefore come to an end at any time. It is characteristic that there is no faintest suggestion of caterwauling in Paz's twelve-tone system. It is as cool and detached and precise as any diagram, the kind of music that is always a pleasure to look at, if not always a pleasure to hear. What he lacks most as a composer is the real lyric urge; much of his work takes on a greyish pallor that in the end is tiring. Technically it is first class, but artistically it is distinguished rather than exciting.

All groups are agreed, however, that the white hope of Argentine music is young Alberto Ginastera. Ginastera has a natural flair for writing brilliantly effective, sure-fire music of the French-Spanish persuasion. Some-

times it acquires an increased charm through a well placed use of local melodic phraseology. He also possesses an unusual knack for bright-sounding orchestrations. Later Ginastera may become more ambitious, and learn to look inside himself for deeper sources. But already, no report of music in the Argentine is complete without mention of his name.

#### BRAZIL

The name of Heitor Villa-Lobos dominates all talk of musical composition in Brazil. Villa-Lobos is, of course, the dominating figure not only in Brazil, but on the whole South American continent. Still this fact should not obscure the existence of other worthy men in his own country. Brazil, like Mexico, boasts a full-blooded school distinguishable from the European or any other model. This comparatively recent emergence is to be attributed to the fact that almost without exception Brazilian composers have frankly addressed themselves to their folklore which is unusually rich, being based on four different sources – Negro, Indian, Portuguese, and even Spanish. Combine this with the sharply defined features of the Brazilian temperament which is uninhibited, abundant, non-critical, romantic, and you get a music with more "face" than that of any other Latin-American nation.

But the blanket use of folk material carries with it certain dangers. In Brazil it narrows the field of action, for most composers confine themselves to the languorously sentimental or the wildly orgiastic mood, with very little between. Moreover, it encourages a type of romanticism that gives much of their music an old-fashioned touch – as if the essence had all been stated before, though not with the particular Brazilian twist. In this respect Mexican composers are more fortunate. The Mexican temperament is far more disciplined and therefore closer by nature to the generally sober line of new music.

Aside from its exclusive folklore bias, Brazilian music suffers at present from a lack of what is called musical *ambiente*. The *ambiente*, or atmosphere, is definitely provincial, lacking stimulus for the wide-awake composer who wishes to keep abreast of the times. As a result, surprisingly few long or elaborate works are composed. Some ballets and a few operas have been written, but the balance sheet is weak as regards orchestral scores. On the other hand, literally hundreds of attractive songs and piano pieces have appeared in recent years, many of them have been published, and some few have even begun to find their way on American concert programs. That is where one hears the distinctive Brazilian note

most easily – the sinuous melodies, the Negroid background rhythms, the peppery repeated notes, and the peculiar brand of nostalgia they called *saudade*.

For Brazilian art in general, it is hard to find a more representative figure than Villa-Lobos, yet anyone evaluating his work takes on a heavy job. He has written hundreds of pieces in every category. As I see it, the Villa-Lobos music has one outstanding quality – its abundance. That is its primary virtue. It is also at times enormously picturesque, free of musical prejudices, full of rhythmic vitality, sometimes cheap and vulgar with an overdose of figuration formulas – and sometimes astonishingly original. It has a way of being most effective on first hearing. Structurally the pieces are often loosely thrown together, making the impression of an inextricable *mélange* of authentic Brazilian atmosphere plus a full quota of modern French compositional processes. At his finest, Villa-Lobos is a kind of zestful Brazilian Falla. His worst may be straight café concert music. He is always an absorbing composer because of his extraordinarily instinctive gift, which makes each composition unpredictable, full of surprises. Unfortunately in the last few years, he has practically abandoned serious composition to devote all his energies to his job as head of music in the public schools of Rio de Janeiro.

Some of the attention lavished on the work of Villa-Lobos could profitably be diverted to the music of Francisco Mignone, Camargo Guarnieri, or Lorenzo Fernandez. Mignone is the best known of these three men, but since he is shortly to visit the United States, we will soon have adequate opportunity to become acquainted with his output.

Camargo Guarnieri, who is now about thirty-five, is in my opinion the most exciting “unknown” talent in South America. His not inconsiderable body of works should be far better known than they are. Guarnieri is a real composer. He has everything it takes – a personality of his own, a finished technic and a fecund imagination. His gift is more orderly than that of Villa-Lobos, though none the less Brazilian. Like other Brazilians, he has the typical abundance, the typical romantic leanings (sometimes, surprisingly enough, in the direction of Ernest Bloch), and the usual rhythmic intricacies. The thing I like best about his music is its healthy emotional expression – it is the honest statement of how one man feels. There is, on the other hand, nothing particularly original about his music in any one department. He knows how to shape a form, how to orchestrate well, how to lead a bass line effectively. The thing that attracts one

most in Guarnieri's music is its warmth and imagination which is touched by a sensibility that is profoundly Brazilian. At its finest, his is the fresh and racy music of a "new" continent.

#### CHILE

The fact that Chile is on the west coast of South America has made a great deal of difference in its musical history. It has lived a comparatively isolated musical life, maintaining only superficial relations with other South American countries. As a result, the capital city, Santiago, has developed a remarkably self-reliant and well integrated musical existence, in which the composers have taken a leading role. So far as musical organization goes, Chile is far in advance of the other Latin-American countries. Most interesting musical events take place under the aegis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Chile. Since the University is an autonomous body, subsidized by law, but under no governmental control, the Dean of the Faculty is in an excellent position to carry on important cultural work in music. For example, the Orquesta Sinfonica de Chile is managed by the Fine Arts Department, which has allotted all the administrative posts to composers. The conductor is a native Chilean, the gifted Armando Carvajal. Obviously, things are done differently here. Most of the set-up is due to the efforts of the present Dean, Dr. Domingo Santa Cruz, a very energetic and competent musician.

So far as composition goes, one continues to see the group tendency strongly in evidence — this time, however, with less good results. Chilean music lacks outside air. Forming only a small circle (though surprisingly numerous in relation to the size of Santiago), Chilean composers influence each other too much. Their music is not as fresh as it might be. There is a definite overstressing of the nostalgic note — a kind of Ravel-like nostalgia, thickened by complex chromatic chords that seem more complex than is absolutely necessary. I miss the bold and affirmative note that one expects in the music of a newly developing country. I hasten to add, however, that the composers with whom I spoke seemed well aware of these limitations and intent upon developing the national musical creativity along broader lines.

Since an extensive review of Chile's composers was published in the last issue of MODERN MUSIC, I shall discuss them only briefly here. The outstanding composer is, without doubt, Domingo Santa Cruz. His technic is extremely solid, far in advance of most composers on the West Coast. But like our own Roger Sessions, Santa Cruz is more the philosopher-composer

than the composer pure and simple. This gives his music, particularly the recent examples, a scholarly look that makes one respect rather than love it. Still, the recent *Five Short Pieces for String Orchestra* had warmth within the neo-classic frame that inspire renewed interest in the working of this inquisitive mind.

Humberto Allende, now a man of about sixty, is one of South America's most sensitive composers. It is easy to enjoy the best of his music, but it undoubtedly lacks variety. His most famous composition, the twelve *Tonadas* for piano, are all sad and poetic. But the sadness and poetry are real, underneath the Parisian veneer, vintage 1923. He has taught many of the younger men, and is looked upon with much affection by his confreres.

Carlos Isamitt is both painter and composer. His musical works may be divided briefly into those based on Araucanian Indian melodies, and those without any folk material. Personally I much prefer the Araucanian works. The others suffer badly from a type of harmony that is far too peculiar to be real. Isamitt's music would improve if he were able to inject into his work some of the quiet charm of his personality.

The younger generation is best represented by René Amengual and Alfonso Letelier, both in their early thirties. Letelier has the more spontaneity, but Amengual has more technic. What they both need is a larger experience of the whole field of modern music.

#### OTHER COUNTRIES

Uruguay has an active musical life though it is confined almost entirely to the capital city of Montevideo. Unfortunately it has failed to exploit its composers, of whom there are very few. But one of the most impressive new talents in all South America is a Uruguayan, Hector Tosar, a quiet, nervous youth of eighteen who is studying law and music simultaneously. He has a vivid imagination, dash and élan; his music reminds me a little of Shostakovich. It is still student work, naturally, but very promising.

In Colombia, Peru and Ecuador musical composition is still in its infancy. (This is said to be even more true of Paraguay, Bolivia and Venezuela, a report I was not able to verify by personal observation.) Several factors account for this – the lack of any rigorous training for composers, a *dolce far niente* attitude on the part of the students, and a generally low ebb of musical activity. The only composers whose work is worth serious consideration, Guillermo Uribe Holguin in Colombia and André Sas in Peru, are European-trained.

Sas is a naturalized Peruvian, who was born in Belgium, but has lived in Lima for almost twenty years. He has written mostly songs, piano or violin pieces, tastefully done in the Gallic manner. He claims to be too busy with his teaching to engage in longer works for orchestra. Many of his pieces are based on Inca material but this is no more than a detail, since in spirit Sas can only be thought of as European. While in Lima I was fortunate in hearing a group of native performers called the Conjunto Vivanco, who produced a fascinating music on home-made harps, violins, flutes, rattles and rams-horns. Someday a Peruvian composer will be able to recreate the music I heard in terms of a symphonic combination, in the way that Chavez has done for Mexican native music.

Uribe Holguin has been Colombia's outstanding musician for a good many years. At sixty, he has a long list of works to his credit, only a very few of which I was able to examine. These seemed definitely on the French side, as would be natural in a man who trained in Paris under d'Indy. They did not, however, give the impression of being carefully done, though the musical quality was pleasant enough.

A musical round-up of South American composers would not normally include Cuba, but there is no doubt that culturally and musically Cuba belongs with the Latin-American countries. Serious music in Cuba suffered a set-back in the death of its two leading men — Amadeo Roldan in 1939 and Alejandro Caturla in 1940. The only composer of importance now writing works there in the larger forms is José Ardévol, a naturalized Spaniard of thirty, who has taken Roldan's place as the teacher of most of Havana's young composers. He is a very intelligent musician and a gifted artist. His recent works stem directly from the neo-classic esthetic, giving them at times a too great similarity of style and emotional content. Still, they are well worth exportation, and should be heard in this country.

Cuba has a folk music comparable in interest to that of Brazil. No one seems to be carrying on the tradition set by Roldan and Caturla of using that material as a basis for serious composition. Gilberto Valdés, who composes *musica típica* for his radio orchestra comes closest to fitting into this category. With more training and greater discipline he might even become the Gershwin of Cuban music.

Today one may wonder why we have been so little conscious of the music of South America. But from now on, whatever other result the world crisis may bring, it is a safe bet that musical relations with our southern neighbors will be different.