

RECENT BOOKS

A SOUTH AMERICAN FISHING TRIP

THE indefatigable and smiling globetrotter, Nicolas Slonimsky, has recently completed a volume of 374 pages entitled *Music of Latin America* (Thomas Y. Crowell). This is an account, on the whole profitable, of a Pan American musical "fishing trip." Slonimsky, undertaking the task rather as an adventure, unexpectedly uncovered a musical goldmine.

In a witty style, spiced with amusing anecdotes, Slonimsky describes his journey through twenty republics as a suspected collector of music manuscripts, and his official visits with the more representative figures – the octogenarian Alberto Williams in his mansion, Carlos Chavez in his formidable tower-studio in the suburbs of Mexico City, Humberto Allende, the Chilean patriarch, surrounded by Indian drums and modern sculpture, the affable and romantic Alberto Leng in the waiting-room of his dental clinic, the charming Alfredo de Saint-Malo whose piano suddenly collapsed because of the ravages of white ants.

With amiable humor, Slonimsky offers a bird's-eye view of the Latin American musical scene, and for all his jesting, almost always puts his finger on the sore point, detects the problems which preoccupy our professional musicians, especially composers.

The lack of public libraries and

special archives, to which officialdom is indifferent, makes contact with the work of many composers almost impossible. By far the largest part of Latin American music remains unpublished. When composers die, their work is lost. Sometimes it reappears on an antiquarian's shelf. In exceptional cases, as with Revueltas, relatives recognize the value of the manuscripts, but generally they store them in the attic or sell them indiscriminately.

If there were publishers interested in serious Latin American music, this situation would not exist. In order to circulate, a work must be printed. A great master's fame is always bound up with the name of a publishing house. Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Falla, Debussy and Ravel owe much to the propaganda of their publishers. The widespread circulation of the Shostakovitch symphonies can be attributed to the action of the State Publishers of Moscow. Of course, this in no way lessens the musical merits of these composers. Slonimsky asserts that the Latin American publishers are niggardly, out of touch with the flourishing growth of their native music.

One must pay a tribute to Slonimsky. His work has resulted in sending more than three hundred orchestral scores to the Fleischer Collection in Philadelphia. There these works, from

a little *Gavotte* by Manuel Ponce to "huge symphonic edifices" like the *Chôros Number 11* by Villa-Lobos, are ensured against loss and available to students and conductors.

Slonimsky has been reproached for listing Latin American composers without any apparent criteria. He seems to think a composer is anyone who writes notes on ruled paper whatever his esthetic intentions and the technical results. To my mind, he could not have proceeded otherwise. No more than twenty names in all Latin America would have passed a fine screening. Nevertheless, all the composers cited, even the most modest ones, have made valuable contributions in their respective countries. And that is what Slonimsky describes with the interest and exactitude of a naturalist classifying the variants of a certain species. Had he limited himself to the great figures without investigating their background, his book would have been less interesting. Moreover, it must be realized most Latin American republics have no musical cultural tradition. For a long time composers, great or small, have had to improvise, as far as possible, all the constituents of a musical culture — technical skill, appropriate interpretation, performing groups, qualified listeners and, most important and difficult, an original style. The last is beginning to take form; it has developed well-defined characteristics in several countries, notably Mexico and Brazil.

The lack of a musical tradition in Latin America is compensated for by a musical folklore often dating back

to pre-Colombian cultures. Carlos Vega, who has collected native songs in various South American countries, has correctly observed, "When an illiterate oldster dies, a library burns." The richness of the folk music, with its pentatonic scales and autochthonous rhythms, its African and European influences, is described by Slonimsky with reserve. He takes more pains to show how composers — Revueltas, Chavez or Villa-Lobos — often use this folklore tradition to achieve characteristic, earthy melodies. Once Villa-Lobos said, "I am folklore!" And he added, "A truly creative musician is capable of producing, from his own imagination, melodies that are more authentic than folklore itself."

Music of Latin America is on the whole an indispensable reference work. It contains first-hand objective information about the musical culture of the different republics, the relationship between composer and society, Spanish-Portuguese and African influences, folklore material and an adequate dictionary of Latin American musical terms, composers, instruments, songs and dances. The zeal of the author goes to the extreme in establishing the number of living composers per square mile in each country. Let us hope that the book will increase interest in Latin American music, especially in the serious music which, in the short space of a few years, has outgrown the first shallow adaptations of current European post-romanticism and has developed a clear profile of its own.

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