

MUSICAL FINDS IN THE SOUTHWEST

OTTO LUENING

THAT there is a musical life of considerable importance in Arizona may surprise many. Let it be said, then, at the outset, that if the virile activity of the Southwest were universal in America our national scene would be greatly enriched musically.

The marvelous climate which is Arizona's during six months of the year, its turquoise sky, grand, stark mountains, the desert, the palm trees, the cacti, the cliff dwellings, all provide a fantastic and exotic background which yet is natural and appropriate to the musical life that exists there. This activity has its roots in a folk-music, rich, authentic and different from that of any other section of the country. It is a blend of Mormon influence, cowboy and other wandering minstrelsy, Spanish and Mexican music and the still surviving early Indian ritual.

Here we may find the native folk-singer who knows innumerable songs for whatever occasion arises. I recall a meeting in Tucson with an old man of eighty who had traveled through the West, all over Central and South America and as far as British Columbia. He had been a railroad worker and miner and had a long repertoire of songs in which he told the story of his time and all the places he had seen. The best one was *The Burning of the Four-X Mine*, a "mass song" of yesteryear in which the workers were heroes and the mine owner came off a very poor second. His songs were chiefly in irregular rhythms and meters and, although sometimes superficially Irish, Scotch or Spanish in flavor, they had undergone so many changes that the result was an authentic American utterance.

There exist also a number of cowboy songs, many of which are variations of familiar tunes known to wider audiences through the collections of Lomax and Sandburg. Cowboy sing-

ers can be found in road houses and at the small radio stations and occasionally on ranches. The Arizona cowboy-musician seems to have been influenced by Mexican music and some of the Indian rituals and because of this his musical taste is different from that of the man who rides the Montana and Wyoming ranges.

Indian rituals in Arizona are remarkable in many ways. Each year the Papagos conduct a series of dances which lasts two days. The music, sung or chanted, has marked individual character; at times it is sensuous, at times (with the dance) mystic and hypnotic.

Once I had the good fortune to celebrate Christmas eve with the Yaquis. These Christian Indians (a tribe exiled from Mexico many years ago) sat before a fire on the desert while their elders told the story of Christ's birth. A fiddler played some tunes and later some of the others sang. The tunes were a merging of Catholic, Mexican and Indian melodies and had become decidedly Arizona music. The Easter dances of the Yaquis are equally strange. For forty-eight hours the dancers go on in a frenzy to the music of a few violins, guitars and a Mexican harp—again a strange merging of Mexican, Indian and cowboy tunes which produces something distinctly American in feeling.

The Mexicans of the vicinity restrict their musical activities for the most part to guitar, violin and song, but their tunes are neither entirely Mexican nor Spanish in character but again something that can only be described as Arizona music. On the Papago reservation, in the Mission of San Xavier, one can hear an Indian chorus sing the Catholic Mass on holidays. Here again there is a merging of two opposed musical backgrounds, for the Indian has to temper his singing and soften its harsh quality, and he carries a new tonal conception back to his own music.

Among the Mormon communities the pursuit of music survives as a very real activity. For in the Eastern-Central part of the state, where they are largely situated, radio reception is very poor. In such settlements as Eager, Snowflake, Holbrooke, St. John, in the "hoedowns" with their tawdry names "Rattlesnake" and "The Drunkard's Hiccough," if the people are to have music at all they must make their own—and make it they do with a

vim. Singers and performers are everywhere plentiful. Several times each year there are gatherings at which the best performers appear. Choral singing is improvised with fiddles, guitars and accordians as accompaniment. Performers often reveal remarkable virtuosity. Their music is unusually fresh and vital in melody, rhythm and harmony.



A significant contribution to Arizona's musical life is also made in its educational institutions. The State University in Tucson trains most of the public school teachers who then get jobs in the towns and villages of Arizona. In the smaller places they become virtually the village directors of music, for they are expected to teach band and orchestral instruments, voice, piano, theory and also to conduct the chorus, the band and the orchestra, the church choir and perhaps even to play in the dance orchestra. In Arizona a music teacher is expected to teach music with a capital M.

In the classes at the State University native musical talents have a chance to develop. Here those who have felt the musical influences of the various Arizona localities can acquire technic and express their ideas.

Three years ago while reorganizing the theory and composition department of the State University I found an unusually rich field in which to work. The problem was simply to emphasize to the young musicians the validity of their own background and the impossibility of absorbing the entire musical culture of Europe in four years. Slowly gaining self confidence the students, relying increasingly on the authority of their own ears, began to write music and found it both interesting and helpful in their other musical work. An excellent college of music provides the necessary vocal and instrumental training for the students to perform their work.

In a very short time there developed a group of young composers whose music showed considerable originality and vitality. Several young personalities emerged who have already done valuable work in various fields. One of them conducts the Symphony Orchestra in Tucson and also the University Chamber Orchestra. Another prepares program notes for the orchestra,

and writes criticism of music. Several from this initial group are teachers in charge of musical activities in different parts of the state. They all actively promote and support contemporary American music whenever possible. The compositions of one outstanding individual, Robert McBride, have already attracted attention in New York and other Eastern cities and in the West.

In the Tucson public school system there are tireless workers such as W. Arthur Sewell, who encourage the playing of good music in the band. In the grammar and high-school courses Mr. Sewell invites students to write original marches for his band which are never shelved but always tried out; some are rehearsed and given public performance.

At the college, in 1932, after five months of reorganization in the theory and composition department, raw recruits produced a program of original works, with a curious audience enthusiastically acclaiming their efforts. The students did not try to imitate Brahms or the style of their instructor. They were encouraged to be themselves with the result that a significant number of individual styles emerged. Indian, Mexican, jazz, hill-billy, cowboy and other strains were represented. The new composers reflected the different localities of Arizona where they had lived. They wrote for the voices or instruments which were available and played the works themselves when possible. Six weeks after the first program this group presented a second one with even greater success. An interested audience attended regularly and grew in number. The performances were well rehearsed and showed a growth in performing ability as well as in composing. The Glee Clubs and smaller instrumental combinations of the College of Music made tours about the state, including some of the original pieces in their programs.

The second year again brought about several group concerts and a one-man program; a star athlete of the University, David Murdock, completed his B.M. degree in theory by presenting a concert of his own works. There was such rugged individuality in his style that he was popularly regarded as a sort of Arizona Moussorgsky.

More original works appeared the next year, with a wider range of performances. An entire program of new compositions

was sent to several larger towns in the state. Music fraternities sponsored several concerts and the usual ensemble groups went on studying the new material. At the end of the year, a chamber orchestra gave a concert of all new works, and another one-man program was given of McBride's music. A distinct step ahead was the orchestral venture. Young orchestrators heard their own work in the rehearsal routine of "blue notes," left-out measures, wrong transpositions and so on. Henry Johnson, a teaching-fellow in the college did the conducting very ably, respecting the individual style of each composer.

No one who has lived, studied or taught in this atmosphere can leave Arizona without the conviction that there is a great abundance of natural musical resources in that country—which is destined to make a unique contribution to the culture of America.