

IN THE ARGENTINE

LAZARE SAMINSKY

«THE artist who hath true knowledge of his art . . . can by his good wit and godlike understanding discover an infinity of noble conceptions, in whatever kingdom he may be. And the best inspiration cometh from the things that are natural to the country where they live: by imitating and interpreting the nature which God hath created, His trees, His birds, His beasts. . . .”

I thought of these words of Philibert de Lormes, the great architect of Francis I and Catherine Medici, builder of the Tuilleries, as my plane carried me over the curious miniature plateaus and small round hills of red clay so peculiar to eastern, that is, cultivated Brazil – toward the infinite expanse of the pampas and broad silver rivers of Argentine. From a land not unlike Japan, intimate in its nature in spite of its size, with a race comparatively homogeneous, mainly Latin-Negroid, to a country of endless variety of racial streams not yet chemically and closely mixed but moving unhindered, in individual fluxes, over a vast flat expanse.

The stones explain the men. The residences of the coffee barons of San Paulo with their delicious and peculiarly Brazilian romanesque-baroque, make us understand the folk-melos of Eastern Brazil as much as do the round hills of red clay. And the gigantic new mansion of the Press Association in Rio de Janeiro, the huge vertical tiers of windows hemmed in by square beams of concrete, all of it suggesting some ancient Egyptian headgear, may be the key to the tonal mind of Villa-Lobos.

The same holds for Argentina. Both through contrast and affinity, one becomes aware of the peculiar cosmopolitan traits in Argentine art; one understands the cultural tolerance and all-embracing tendency in its music.

Buenos Aires is the Chicago of Latin America, a huge commercial cosmopolis and vortex of most dissimilar cultural currents. One must not, however, be deceived by the wealthy-bourgeois, levelled Americanism of

its exterior. Even in Buenos Aires it is possible to watch, in music as elsewhere, the struggle for survival (in creation) of the deepest racial strains still rising to the surface.

The solitary warrior of left-wing Argentine music, a fanatical twelve-tonalist and *Schönbergista*, Juan Carlos Paz, composer of orchestral and chamber works which have reached the International Festivals in Paris, Brussels and elsewhere, a musician of high intelligence and a mind of finesse, has revealing things to say of the racial ingredients in Argentine music. Paz maintains that the ancient Indian (Incaic) melos that sifted from the Eastern Santiago and the Northern provinces, as well as the later tonal cultures, Indo-Spanish and Indo-Creole, were not vital enough to resist the formidable emigrant waves of the nineteenth century. This is how the land lost its own expression in poetry and music. When the Argentine composer tries to be national, says Paz, and invokes the early folklore of Argentina, his language seems dead, his folkloric style superficial, his creative impotence only too obvious and pathetic.

It is true that some of the younger Argentinians resort to a procedure much subtler and, under the circumstances, more proper: they marry literary nationalism or archaism to a frankly modernistic musical dress, exactly as Stravinsky did in the *Sacre*. Thus the very young, Argentine-bred and taught Alberto Ginastera, author of *Panambi*, a ballet on an Indian subject whose premiere I attended in Buenos Aires last July, uses freely the arsenal of modern poly-harmony with many Stravinskian strokes in almost flagrant evidence.

Another young nationalist is Luis Gianneo, director of the State conservatory and orchestra in Tucuman, a North Argentine center almost on the fringe of the tropical jungle. Gianneo, too, plays with nationalist subjects and titles (*Turay*, an orchestral poem, *Cantos Incaicas*, *Pampeanas*). But when it comes to chamber music he is just as cosmopolitan as any other Argentinian. Gianneo's string trio is marked by a certain naive dynamism; but its andante is not without invention and emotional depth, and there is grace and distinction in the finale.

As to the most mature group, the truly significant composers of Argentina, they are as frankly anti-folklorist as the radical Paz is, and cosmopolitan to the core. I speak of the *Grupo Renovacion* and the gifted Castro brothers.

Juan José Castro, the premier composer of Argentina, is a brilliant musician of remarkable versatility, armed to the teeth with high practical

musicianship, an admirable pianist, a magnificent conductor and one of the Colon Opera House directors. He is best known for his *Sinfonia Biblica*, a spacious and luminous work somewhat on the Malipiero oratorio lines. His new ballet *Offenbachiana*, also recently premiered at the Colon, shows, however, the whim and agility of Juan José's musical mind. This delicious piece, full of verve and enchantingly orchestrated, contrives to give a kind of truculent and new, a "to-day" vitality to an idiom already in the museum.

The lesser known and younger Castro, José Maria, also a most gifted and competent practical musician, outstanding cellist, prominent conductor, leader of noted chamber ensembles, is a creative nature of an entirely different kind. His gift lies in the domain of expression rather than description.

In the *Sonata de Primavera* for piano, one senses at once the delicate romantic climate of José Maria's music. This restrained romantic tone precludes neither force of utterance, nor classical transparency of line. In the opening movement of the sonata the thematic juggling and the varying of the attractive main subject reveal a supple craft and exquisite sensibility. The delicacy of this *allegro* is indeed, touching. The *andante* is even more *recherché* and original, its closing section striking in power and uncommonness of diction. And the attractive finale of this work is notable for its rhythmic effervescence. As to the two-cello sonata by José Maria Castro, it is marked by its unusual formal outlay, resourcefulness of sonority and contrapuntal use of the two voices.

The other leader of the *Grupo Renovacion*, Jacobo Ficher, is not a man of theories, either. He, too, is an excellent cellist, a highly competent conductor and a composer with a broad and sturdy craft. He is the author of symphonic and chamber works, one of which was honored by an Elizabeth S. Coolidge prize. His music shows a certain melange of neo-romantic and neo-classical traits; the clear polyphonic molds are touched here and there with polyharmonic acid, à la Hindemith. And in *Variations on a Hebraic Theme*, an imaginative structure that opens with a vivid fantastic prelude to a slow theme, new pictorial elements enter into his vocabulary. Still one finds an emotional and thematic unity in Ficher's music. There is a melancholy stateliness in the broad, fertile main theme in his *Second Symphony*; the exotic tinge of his melos gives an air of spontaneity to the set transitional element, imagination and power mark the transitional climax leading to the finale and the closing section itself. Ficher's oboe sonata, perhaps, his best work, is in an even more "neo-classical" vein than the sym-



SKETCHES FOR OFFENBACHIANA
Ballet by JUAN JOSÉ CASTRO
World Premiere at the Colon Opera House,
Buenos Aires, July 1940
Décor by HECTOR BASALDUA

SIC in the ARGENTINE



HONORIO SICCARDI
Sketch by Muñoz Azpiri



JOSÉ MARIO CASTRO
Sketch by David Willment



JACOBO FICHER
From a painting by E. Lucas

phony. With all the peculiar whim of his tonal material and a certain distant exoticism of diction, his thematic woof is clear and the rhythm graceful and alluring.

Still another figure in the younger Argentine group is Honorio Siccardi. His style is pegged to the old quasi-Latin lyrical and vocal tradition. But at times something very personal and highly attractive breaks the bonds. We then listen to so delicately fresh and individual an utterance as the delightful songs from the *Triptico Floral*.