

CATURLA OF CUBA

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WHEN a package of music arrives, covered with picturesque stamps showing exotic scenes, we justly expect to discover fascinatingly fresh melodic treasures. On examination, the music generally disillusion us – it is too often the product of a mediocre European conservatory. Why do so many musicians from exotic lands emulate Europe instead of exploiting their native melodic resources? In a world where everybody speaks English the second-generation immigrant child is ashamed of his mother tongue. So, too, most composers of countries that are musical minorities appear reluctant to use their native modes and rhythms, and take particular pride in learning to write “like everybody.” In every town there is of course some hack instructor with an antique Conservatory education who monopolizes the music market and successfully stifles individuality in talented students. At least fifty per cent of all non-European musical production is ruined by such schooling. Luckier students, whose families have means, go to Europe to acquire a technic of composition; the more conservative to Berlin, the more advanced to Paris. From Berlin they come home armed with polyphony à la Reger; from Paris decked out in impressionistic finery. After that, they go on composing German music or French music. In rare cases they apply their knowledge to the shaping of native melos; the exceptional ones modify their technic and fuse it with the rhythmic and melodic forms of folksongs in their own countries.

Alejandro García Caturla of Cuba, has gone through all that is necessary to qualify him as a modern composer. He has studied with Nadia Boulanger; several scores have been published by Sénart in Paris, his works or fragments of works, have been performed by Stokowski, and he has received the usual humorously benevolent write-up from Olin Downes. Articles about him have appeared in special magazines with limited circulation, and he has finally broken into some up-to-date American dictionaries. Once in a while, performances of his more ambitious works are

announced and hurriedly shelved. But whenever the music of Cuba, or even of Latin America, is mentioned, his name comes up. Most important of all, he goes on composing and is perhaps unaware that in a world of commercial success his music has a serious drawback: it is non-conformist.

He has only one typical trait — he follows the rhythmic and melodic modes of the Cuban *Son*, which is neither a song nor a dance but a composite form of national folkmusic. One might analyze his melos as essentially pentatonic without distinguishing his music from any other which is based or modelled on native Indian motives. Caturla's polyrhythms are also common to most Spanish Latin-American countries (triple time against duple time). As to harmony, any attempt to analyze this structure as a system, whether quartal or tertian, collapses before Caturla's use of constructions by third or fourths, tritones or semitones, according to his needs. When pressed for self-analysis, he will say that his favorite composers are Debussy, Stravinsky and Ravel but that he does not believe their influence shows in his music. For the rest, he insists that in his works, particularly the most recent, he has tried to be his own free self — without scholastic or other prejudices, to express only the melos of the Cuban people.

By Cuban people he means of course, the Afro-Cubans. Caturla is of pure Spanish blood, but his selective affiliations with the Afro-Cubans are intimate. In Cuba, native music is the creation chiefly of Cuban Negroes. The native dances and legends bear African names. Among Caturla's works, *Bembé* and *Yamba-O* and *Three Cuban Dances* are based on Negro folklore. The story of *Yamba-O* is interesting. Eleven years ago in Paris, Caturla's friend, the Cuban poet Alejo Carpentier, gave him a poem, entitled *Liturgia*. Caturla undertook to write to this text a work for eight voices and a soloist. As he proceeded, it became clear that the music was unperformable; the conflicting lines of declamatory song would inevitably be confused while the Afro-Cuban rhythms doubled the difficulties of execution. Caturla abandoned the choral project and transferred the themes to a symphonic poem. Instead of picturing the initiation dance *Ñañiga*, which is the main subject of Carpentier's poem (*Yamba-O* is a ritualistic howl recurring in every stanza), Caturla decided to give an "impression" of the dance, thus acquiring more freedom for the composition's design. *Yamba-O* is, indeed, an extraordinary palimpsest of motives, rhythms, and block harmonies, possibly the freest orchestral work ever to be performed. (It was given by the Havana Philharmonic on

Ball - Ball - Ball

Flute
Oboe
Cl.
Bassoon
Piano
Trumpet
Trombone
Tuba
Snare
Cymbals

V. race

Flute
Oboe
Cl.
Bassoon
Piano
Trumpet
Trombone
Tuba
Snare
Cymbals

FROM THE MANUSCRIPT OF CUBAN DANCES

Signature and Sketch Of

ALEJANDRO GARCIA CATURLA

October 25, 1931.) It is quite possible, of course, to "analyze" the melodic line of *Yamba-O*, as derived from the pentatonic, but it is more difficult to find a formula for its rhythmic diversity, and it is virtually impossible to account for its harmonic system. The only refuge for annotators is to go literary and speak of "jungle sounds," "animal voices," etc. Yet the meaning of *Yamba-O* is clear, the rhythms are potent, the harmonies fitting, though crude. Perhaps Caturla does know what he is talking about when he says that he is trying to liberate himself from all scholastic prejudices (*all* is emphatic and includes all the scholasticism of modern trends) and express himself in terms of Cuban song in the freest possible manner.

The *décousu* quality which performers seem to find in Caturla's music is responsible for the infrequency of its performance outside of Havana. One can understand the dismay of a conductor trying to figure out the counterpoint and the chords, even in the more innocent works of Caturla, such as his *Cuban Dances*, for there is no counterpoint and the harmonies are not recognizable, even to a musician versed in the chords of the eleventh and the thirteenth. As for the members of the orchestra they find it hard to follow the unsymmetric rhythmic line, where syncopation is itself syncopated and the sixteenth-note rests are hazards. Your orchestra musician is a man of law and order; he can stand a large dose of dissonance but he balks at unperiodic rhythms which upset the physiological oompah pulse. Whether this lack of organization is really a fault in Caturla's music, is debatable. His splashy rhythms and lump harmonies may well be perturbing to the players but the players must advance to a freer use of their faculties. Cuban orchestras have no difficulty in playing Caturla right. I have had my share of experience in dealing with the practical problems of Caturla's music, having conducted his orchestral works in various cities of the old world and the new. They are easiest to play with Latin American musicians, who at least do not raise fundamental objections. There is no shaking of heads, no look of insulted submission. To a Cuban orchestra player the uncomfortable syncopation and mixed rhythms are merely written signs for a familiar dance. When played freely, Caturla's music sounds enticing; when played note by note it may appear turgid. Hence, the difference of effect.

Caturla is now thirty-three years old. He was born on March 7, 1906, in Remedios, where he lives today, discharging the office of a judge. This brings him security: musicians in Cuba, like those elsewhere, cannot live

by composing orchestral music. At one time Caturla organized an orchestra in the town of Caibarien, and in the seasons of 1932-33 presented programs of modern music: Ravel, Falla, Stravinsky, Gershwin; there was classical music, too, but contemporary composers predominated. It is characteristic of Caturla that he has never changed his faith, never experimented in eclecticism, and studiously shunned all fads and current musical infatuations. He is apparently little concerned with self-promotion, and it takes a great deal of effort to interest him in arranging a performance of his work. But he is full of devotion to a cause, and his cause is glorifying Cuban music. For those to whom Cuban music begins and ends with rhumba, Caturla wrote (in 1933-34) a magnificent one, with enough Cuban percussion to satisfy the most exacting. But this rhumba is not the cut-and-dried syncopated affair familiar to enthusiasts. It is rhumba à la Caturla, with a lilt and an accent all its own, and the rhythms are not shaved down to uniformity. Perhaps his most playable piece, it may even become his *Bolero*.