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CHAPTER 12

MUSIC

Precortesian music, closely linked with song, dance and religion, has been largely neglected in Americanist studies. Most writers and musicians still cling to the uninformed dictum of Cortés that native music was dull and monotonous. Even such an erudite musicologist as Curt Sachs states in his *History of Instruments* (1940, Ch. 9) that American instruments were excessively primitive and that our aborigines "remained incredibly backward in music, at least as far as instrumental music is concerned." No wonder practically all that has been said and written about indigenous music is vaguely speculative, romantically enthusiastic, or grossly uninformed.

Indigenous music has an ancient, dynamic tradition and, like the music of other continents, it stems from the mass of the people, reflecting their beliefs, customs, and environment. The aggressive, vital music of the north and the sentimental gay music of the central section of Mexico differ outwardly from the solemn, nostalgic music of the south, but fundamentally they all follow the traits of the pre-Columbian traditions from which they emerged. The antiquity of these traditions is evidenced by the advanced six-tone scale we hear in a millenary Preclassic flute; the seven-tone scale similar to the European diatonic scale produced by a Maya flute from the Island of Jaina; the whole-tone scale produced by Tarascan flutes and the extraordinary triple and quadruple flutes from the Gulf of Mexico which play three- and four-part chords.

Due to ignorance of these and similar instruments, it is generally held that native music is mainly percussive. This is belied by the number and variety of flutes, essentially melodic instruments, to be found in museum and private collections. Many of these instruments, like the double, triple

113. Maya pottery flutes in the form of a person playing a triple flute producing the sounds A and B a tone and a fourth apart.

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