

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, double and triple.
Flutes capable of producing several
sounds. A and B are the sound of the flute.

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and quadruple flutes, highlight the efforts of scholars like Caso, Thompson, Ekholm and others to delve into the order and chronology of those older cultures once dismissed with the conventional labels: Preclassic, Olmec, Occidental, Toltec, Maya, or Teotihuacán. Who these gifted people were, and when and where they first appeared, is a challenging question.

The musicians and artisans who created and played such remarkable instruments as the triple and quadruple flutes obviously had a profound knowledge of acoustics and of the harmonic series, and must have been acquainted with more than a primary five-tone scale. Not only did they know and practice this and other richer scales but they also practiced an embryonic harmony, as well as the traditional free heterophony that characterizes African and Asiatic ensembles. This becomes obvious when we study the giant rasping stick with four different series of notches found by Alfonso Caso in Monte Alban, Oaxaca; the use of trumpet ensembles; the multiple-toned wooden slit drums called *teponaztli* and *tecompiloa*; the groups of flutes, ocarinas, and whistles of the same type but of different sizes; and the double, triple and quadruple flutes and whistles which produce two-, three- and four-part chords. It is also borne out by the historians who invariably describe the collective character of native musical practices and their ability to tune, modulate, and compose music in chosen "puntos" or keys. It is further confirmed by the indications of ensembles of flutes, drums, and singers found in the manuscript of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, now in the National Library of Mexico.

All the chroniclers speak of the musical and dancing ability as well as the great discipline of the natives, commenting upon the facility with which they learned the difficult polyphonic European religious music from the friars. Torquemada assures us (Vol. III, Bk. XVII, Ch. 3) that "there is no genre of Church Music which the Indians do not have and use. . . . Soon they were composing *villancicos* (Christmas songs), four-part organ chants, some masses and other works which, when shown to Spanish musicians, were judged of excellent quality and that they could not have been composed by Indians. . . . One thing I can affirm truthfully, that not in all the Kingdom of Christendom are there as many flutes, oboes (*chirimias*), sackbuts, trumpets, horns and drums as in this land."

Motolinia, in his often-quoted chapter on native music (1903, chapter 26), gives us a remarkably clear picture of the progress of indigenous music. His description implies the use of effects which are known today as

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tonality, modulation, counterpoint, crescendo, diminuendo, accelerando, and rallentando. Sahagún and other historians confirm these practices and stress that it was customary for the Aztec hierarchy to order compositions for special occasions according to the character of the event. As we have seen, these works were not only simple songs and chants but also entire dance dramas with music, songs, dances, and dialogues, performed by the nobleman's own corps of musicians, dancers, and actors.

As in Asiatic and European cultures, music in Meso-America was supposed to have had a divine origin, and according to the *Popol Vuh* (1950, p. 208), ceremonial flutes figured among the ritual objects used by Nacxit (Quetzalcoatl) during the coronation of reigning dignitaries. One of these flutes, probably of Toltec origin, is very old and is made of bone with engravings in which appears the totem—a double-headed deer—of the great Toltec ruler, Mixcóatl.

Precortesian music may be classified into the following categories: magic, hunting or totemic, ritual, therapeutic, war, ceremonial for religious and civic festivals, profane or secular, imitative music (usually of birds), folk music, and religious chants. According to Carlos Chavez, the last of these are the most highly developed. There are also categories of intimate or personal music, such as love and death songs and erotic music.

Study of the surviving indigenous music reveals important characteristics of precortesian music. These can be summed up as follows:

The use of introductions and interludes.

Preoccupation with exact tuning (musicians always retune their instruments before beginning a new tune).

Thematic unity.

Melodic variety.

Use of variation and antiphonal patterns.

Use of accents, usually in the accompanying percussion, which do not coincide with the melodic pattern but which lend zest and variety to the rhythm.

Use of combined meters and accents, but avoiding the exaggerated, syncopated rhythms characteristic of Afro-Cuban music.

Use of cadences, either rhythmical or melodic.

Use of bridges or transitions employing diminuendo-rallentando or crescendo-accelerando effects as a modulatory device (as a rule the rasping stick or drum gradually works up to the new tempo and melody).

Employment of ostinato or repetition of a rhythmical motif.

115. Slave clay flute, producing the
C major diatonic scale. From Isla de Juana
Campeche. Length 11 1/2".

Use of pedal-point, or repetition of the same sound in the bass
 accompaniment.

Use of appropriate melodies which convey the character and mood of the
 rite, dance, or song being performed.

The charming humor and irony of a Quiché, Tzeltal, or Ch'orti car-
 nival tune is evident to any attentive listener. The emotional impact of
 melodies used during Holy Week or in ecstatic rites can only be appreci-
 ated by actually hearing them, following long days of processions, all-
 night vigils, and dancing in a native environment deep in the mountains
 or in the midst of the jungle. Sometimes one finds unusual instruments or
 combinations of instruments, like the *Chirrita* of Guerrero, Puebla, Oax-
 aca, and Mexico, which is similar to the Argentinian *Lolín* and Peruvian
Clarin. This trumpet is made of a long reed or bark tube like the Chilean
Torotraka or the Swiss and Tibetan metal trumpets, but it has a unique
 mouthpiece and is played by inhaling the column of air instead of blow-
 ing into the tube in the usual manner. Water resonators, rattled drums,
 and groups of drums that play around music are also used with effect.

Aboriginal music has a dynamic quality that assimilates exotic rhythms
 and melodies; thus the apparent paradox of native versions of European
 forms and melodies as well as of contemporary commercialized songs. The

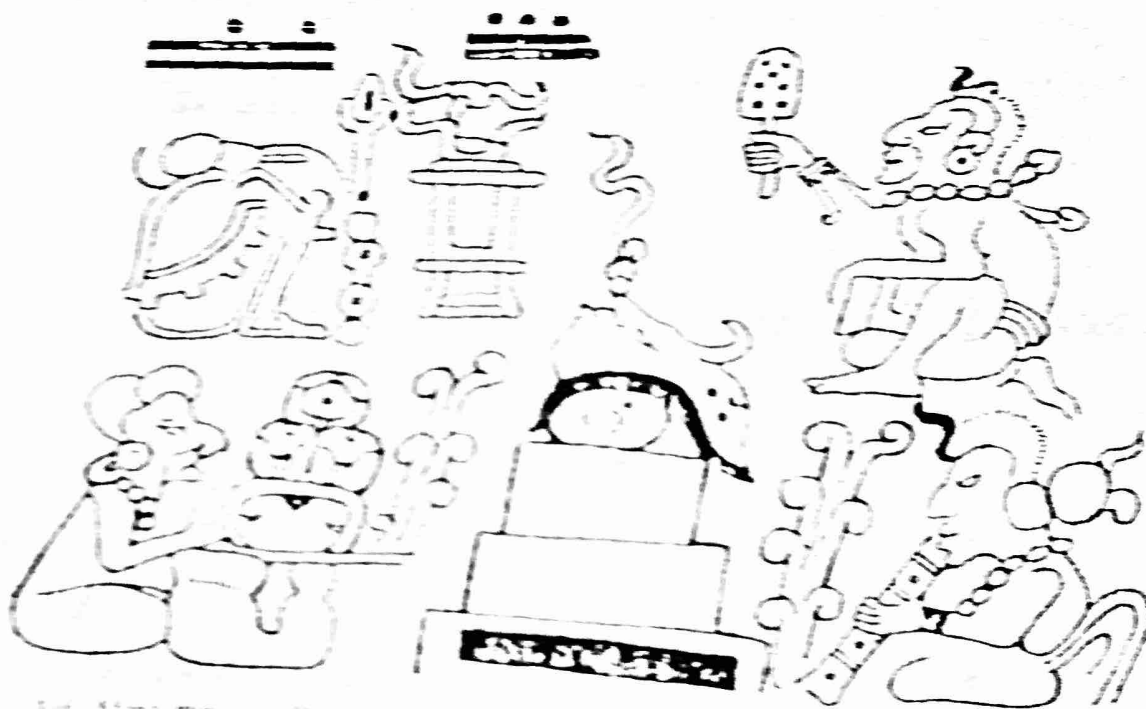


Fig. 1. Musical instruments. Drawing
 by J. J. J.

Fig. 2. Musical instruments. Drawing
 by J. J. J.

forms are alien but the spirit and interpretation are indigenous. The same is true of instruments. Huichol, Tarahumara, or Chamula guitars or violins may look like their sixteenth-century European forebears, but it is practically impossible to play European music on them, since their makers have only their own music in mind in their tuning and construction. The same is true of the native's peculiar guttural voice production, meant for spontaneously impressive effect and not for high C's and roulades. It is this native essence, color, line, and style for which we should look when studying native music, and not its similarities with European music. Some Yaqui *Pascolas*, Otomi and Zapotec tunes or *sones*, Maya *bolonchons*, and even Chinantec music for the "Musical Bow" are inspired by past and current European popular songs.

The churchyard may have replaced the temple square; the jewels of contemporary dancers may be of tin and glass instead of precious stones, gold, and silver; sandals of soft deer-skin embroidered with gold may now be rough, heavy-soled boots—but the sense of line, color, and style of movement and the devotion that animated their ancestors is ever present.

Many musicians and dancers today keep the flame of ancient tradition alive. These artists create new tunes based on the old and preserve traditional steps, dancing patterns, and style of movement. Every dance or instrumental ensemble includes young men and children who absorb and carry on the old traditions. When asked how they were taught, they usually answer, "By listening, Señor. By listening and watching the Old Ones."