

Mexico's true heritage of Classical music

by Alfredo Mendoza

Maestro Mendoza directed the Schola Cantorum of Mexico City in a concert of choral music, at the founding conference of the Ibero-American Solidarity Movement on May 19, 1992 in Tlaxcala, Mexico. The Schola Cantorum, a choir of children (boys and girls ages 8-14) and teenaged boys, was founded by Maestro Mendoza in 1988. It grew out of his decade-long experience as director of the famed Boys Choir of the National School of Music at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. They sang a two-part concert: Spanish Renaissance works, and colonial music from 1599 to the early 19th century. What follows is a much-abridged version of a talk he presented afterward.

I would like you to hear a companion piece to what you heard a little while ago. It is one of the first manuscripts which has been discovered written in the local language, Nahuatl in this case. It was the result of the instruction which was given in the early years by the missionaries to the members of the indigenous nobility, who were trained at the Tlatelolco School in the humanistic disciplines, along with religion. The example you will hear is by Don Hernando Franco; the date on the manuscript is 1599. It is a "Santa Maria," the second part of the prayer "Ave Maria," in Nahuatl, with some extra words. This was recorded here in Mexico in 1989.

The music transmitted by the missionaries was suffused with the polyphonic tradition on the one hand, called "organum," and on the other, with the old custom of plainchant, which went back to Byzantium. After only a few years those who had learned to sing polyphonically and to play European instruments were already composing. And within 12-15 years, they were competing with Spaniards for musical jobs in the churches.

Remember, at the outset of the 16th century Spain was

under Charles V. One of his virtues—perhaps he did not have many—was that he loved music and encouraged the development of Spanish music. Spain had an ancient school of composition which had arisen in relation to the form of the villancico. In secular music, the villancico is not just what we now know as Spanish Christmas songs, but a form adapted to many kinds of texts, both narrative and lyrical, such as the religious type suited to the various feasts from Christmas to Easter, Corpus Christi, and so forth. Juan del Encina, who figures at the end of the 15th century as the initiator of many forms of written lyrics, is also a musician and set his own poems, generally in a very simple four-part structure which keeps its freshness right down to today.

The Spanish musicians of the time of Charles V were concentrated in the Spanish Chapel led by Antonio de Cabezón. Spanish classical literature, exemplified by St. Teresa, and painters like Zurbarán and El Greco, had an influence on this school. There is a religious inspiration which is different from Italy's. This is translated into music; although it conforms to the same polyphonic forms, such as the mass with its parts—the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, and so forth, following certain canons of counterpoint common to all of Europe—it had a special imprint; certain melodic and harmonic influences had been left in the peninsula by the long contact with Arabic and Jewish civilization. The melodies and the harmonic cadences give a special quality to Spanish music which distinguishes it from French and Italian music of that period and from the most brilliant school of the day, the Franco-Flemish school of counterpoint.

Charles V was educated in the Low Countries. He set up two chapels in the court: the Spanish Chapel that followed the Castilian tradition, and the Franco-Flemish Chapel which he brought with him. Through mutual contact, Spain then

adopted the new techniques of a more brilliant counterpoint which abounded in imitation, and which had harmonic progressions. Spanish music benefited from this contact with the great Flemish polyphonists.

In the Spanish school three great figures stand out: Cristóbal de Morales, who lived between 1500 and 1553; his pupil Francisco Guerrero, another great polyphonist whose “Prado verde y florido,” a very simple madrigal, we heard in today’s concert; and the crowning figure of this period in sacred polyphony, Tomás Luis de Victoria. These three were widely performed at a very high level all over America. Together with other composers, their works have been found in the archives of Bogotá, Sucre, Lima, Mexico City, and Puebla. These were the common property of many cathedrals, many schools, and many choirs.

These figures in vocal music defined the style which was adopted in our Hispano-American countries and formed an environment in which talents developed abundantly, in a way unexpected by even the Spanish. Thus in the mid-16th century, decrees went out saying that there should not be so many music students—that some people should go to work, that everybody wants to play or sing!

This happened in Mexico and the other colonies, because there was a natural willingness to assimilate what the natives viewed as a miracle because it was different. The missionaries realized that when they sang a prayer to the natives, they would pay attention to the music, and that sometimes people would later stay for three or four hours in a house studying the song until everyone knew it.

This was an important vehicle of the Evangelization. It also led to the development of music itself, because people had an immediate interest in assimilating what they saw: They saw a violin, they started to play it, then they started to build them. Under the viceroys all the orchestral instruments were built here in Mexico: violins, violas, flutes, oboes, bassoons. In contrast, today, if someone wants to study, find out what it costs to buy a bassoon and where you have to go to buy it. The only thing made in Mexico is guitars for parties and students; a few luthiers make fine concert guitars and violins, and that’s it. We don’t make any orchestra instruments here. All the orchestral instruments have to be bought in the United States or in Europe, Japan, and China. But in the past all those instruments, including organs, were manufactured by natives—supervised by artisan-entrepreneurs who took the economic responsibility for building the big organs, but the craftsmen who worked on them were natives.

Archival work has just begun

Real interest in the colonial music of Latin America is only a few decades old. Prof. Robert Stevenson of California first drew our attention to the treasures which we had piled up and rotting in our cathedrals, in the archives, and which have been saved from destruction. The old custom was that when they had some piece of music from the 16th or 17th

century and they were in the 18th, they would say it was obsolete and burn it. In the Cathedral of Mexico there was a kind of cleanout during the 17th century, where they burned all the old stuff, and incredible treasures were lost. For example, here in Mexico the first opera written in North America was produced, the “Partenope” by Manuel de Zumaya. We know that it was very famous and very good; but no one knows where the notes are. No one preserved it.

So archival research has just barely begun. What we have been talking about is the little which has been salvaged, and it involves just a few specific archives. In South America, these are the Cathedral of Santa Fe in Bogotá [Colombia]; the Archbishop’s Archive in Lima [Peru]; the Seminary of St. Anthony Abbot in Cuzco [Peru]; the Cathedral of Sucre [Bolivia]; the monastery of St. Clare in Cochabamba [Bolivia]; Santiago in Chile; Montevideo [Uruguay], and La Paz [Bolivia]. In addition, everything is there waiting for a very specialized work of transcription into modern notation, and sometimes the work of joining the parts, because they did not have the habit of making full scores. The score appears only at the end of the 18th century or at the start of the 19th, when you begin to have the part of every instrument and every voice written out together. Previously, the composer had it all in his head and he would write out parts—the soprano part, the violin part, the bass part. If you have lost one of them, it is an impossible job to reconstruct.

Besides, if you don’t know the work you have to really puzzle over it to make it fit together. This is very laborious, and since in our countries there is hardly ever a budget for anything, what this all implies is that very little has been published of what there is.

What is sure, though, is that visitors, including very distinguished, well-traveled persons, listened with delight to the musical level which the principal cities—such as Lima, Bogotá, Cuzco—enjoyed. This was not just in the viceregal seats and provincial capitals. In Mexico for example not just Mexico City, but Puebla, Guadalajara, and Oaxaca were major centers. Puebla directly competed with Mexico City for teachers and directors.

There was great zeal to cultivate music as a discipline, and original compositions were in demand for special occasions. The chapel master was thus obliged to compose as a matter of routine, while special compositions were required of him to mark certain occasions with novelties for the people. There was a great audience. Remember, there was no television; so, the brain still worked.

I am speaking mainly of sacred music because it was what has been best preserved, thanks to the internal rules of convent and cathedral archives. But secular music had a tremendous development as well. When the bowed instruments developed in the 17th and 18th century with the Italian Baroque, here too they were composing with the same techniques, works which can be said to rival composers like Handel and Corelli.

Some would have us believe that our national music began in the 20th century when a few ideologues like Diego Rivera created their own brand of nationalist modernism. Almost everyone swallowed this story because we did not know that we had a past, that there was something of our own which had a respectable production, good composers, a legacy of written music—that there was a certain pride in the level which was attained. This music is waiting for its audience. It is just starting to be recorded, in the last 30 years, and it is just starting to be published. This heritage is well worth researching and reviving, so that this music is heard again. We are going to find examples from the Renaissance, i.e. a *cappella* polyphony in the imitative style, down to the Baroque with the homophonic forms with instrumental accompaniment, and the real splendor which is found in the 18th century with various masters.

The Ibero-American colonial composers

There are great names which must be mentioned:

In Peru, there is Juan de Araujo, who was not born there but lived there from the age of 15 and was trained in Lima. He was a great master in music, both strictly vocal, and instrumentally accompanied. Araujo was born in 1646 and died in 1702. He arrived with the Count of Lemus, the Viceroy of Peru, who brought him as a protégé, and arranged opportunities for his professional development.

Next came Maestro Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco, another Spaniard who was a great figure in Peru. He was in Bolivia for some time too, and his works were very widespread. Torrejón y Velasco is a follower of the Spanish school and left behind a school of students.

There is the special case of José de Orejón y Aparicio who was born in Peru, a representative of the new style, which is Neapolitan music, which reached the colonies with the advent of the Bourbons, especially when Charles III came to power. This marks a definite Italian influence, especially from Naples, because Naples was a Spanish dominion. These masters adopted the Baroque instrumental style, the forms of the cantata and opera, with the combination of recitative and aria as we know them in Bach.

In Mexico, there is also splendid music. First, the era of the Spanish style goes down to Zumaya and his teacher, Antonio de Salazar, and other forerunners like Aburto and Loaiza, at the end of the 17th and the early 18th century. Zumaya, for unknown reasons, leaves Mexico City and goes to Oaxaca to a lesser position, perhaps out of friendship for the bishop who invites him there. With his withdrawal a purely Italianate master comes into the Mexico City post, indeed of Italian origin, Ignacio Jerusalem. He was a very inventive composer, with a very good style, and he succeeded in making the Italian forms totally at home in Mexico.

Let us summarize the advances in instrumental music. First, in the 16th century, the instruments most built and played were wind instruments (metal and wood). In the 17th

the plucked stringed instruments appeared (vihuelas, lutes, guitars). In the 18th century comes the apogee of the bowed instruments like violins, violas, cellos, and all the typical ensembles of the Italian Baroque which were found here as well.

The challenge today

I would like to end with a reflection. The works you have just heard are ones which were written one day and sung the next. That is, there was a level comparable to Germany or any other place. There were people who read music, who had vocal and instrumental technique, had string instruments, keyboards, and so forth. Then look around at the “great masters” we have today. These are the educators of our children, if you leave them a free hand to play records, watch television, or read magazines.

It is our challenge to save, among others, the Church from musical decadence. Out of a desire for gate receipts, have we not seen how the music of the level I have described is no longer known to anyone? And what do we hear? Rock and salsa in the churches.

I propose that we get back to giving this music its rightful place. Let us create the environment so that those teachers who are around and who are going crazy working all alone, find an echo in the population; that they find students who want to work, parents who want to give their children a moral future and to procure for them a harmonic development of their abilities.

The great music of the past flourished because there was an environment, there was official support, there was an audience, there were families who said, “Here is my child to be trained.” That is what we need now. It is easy for us to stay at home and switch on the television and let the kids fend for themselves.

But we need to get them out of this. Let the youth, the adults, everyone take part in some kind of activity like this. Only in this environment can the kind of talents that once existed arise again. They read music, they sang solfege, they played instruments, or they at least sang in a chorus. This has to be revived. The ordinary citizen has to get back to knowing music as it was known in the Renaissance, when a person who did not write poems and compose music was a nobody. We have to go back to this, so that our schools, our churches, and our surroundings are full of music.

In my personal experience in teaching, I have always bucked the environment. When people have the choice, they will naturally choose the best. I hope that all of you, having heard the concert and this little talk, will be concerned enough to surround those who have the ability, with the support they need to be teachers and artists. This will give a new environment to what is now considered as Latin American. What most people think is “Latin American,” is a very poor form of art. I think we can make our art equal to the best in the world.