INDIAN MUSIC OF MEXICO
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Introduction and Notes on the Recordings
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The Indians of Mexico were conquered by Spaniards in the 16th century and have now been living and mixing with these alien people for over 400 years. Because they originally existed in very large numbers, they were not submerged and destroyed as were many of the Indian tribes of the United States, and Indian blood exists in large proportion in the present Mexican population. Indian culture, on the other hand, has largely disappeared. In religion, social organization, and in most technological fields European traditions have overpowered those of the Indians and have in most cases replaced them.

Although this is the general picture, the racial and cultural intermingling of European and Indian has not proceeded everywhere in Mexico at quite the same rate, and it has been relatively slow in those more mountainous, arid, or remote regions less attractive to the dominant culture. It is in such areas that we now find those communities we can refer to as Indian—Indian, that is, because Indian blood predominates, Indian languages are still spoken, and their ways of life include some components of aboriginal custom. A recent study has shown that approximately 27 per cent of the total Mexican population belongs to Indian communities who think of themselves and are thought of by others as being communities apart from those of the Mexicans.

For parts of Mexico we have some knowledge of the nature of Indian music as it existed previously to the Spanish Conquest. We know from the 16th century accounts that music played an important role in all kinds of religious ceremonies and from the same sources and from archaeological finds, we know what kinds of musical instruments were used. These included drums of several types, the two-toned wooden gong (teponaztli) and the upright drum with skin head (huehuetl), as well as clay whistles and flutes, rasping bones, and conch shell trumpets. These would indicate that native music was overwhelmingly rhythmic in character with little tonal variation. Stringed instruments were unknown except for the single-stringed musical bow which had a limited distribution among the more primitive tribes.

It is not strange that native Mexican music has so largely disappeared when we consider how systematically and successfully the Spaniards of the Colonial period proceeded to eradicate the pagan religions with which it was so closely connected. At the present time most Indians are Catholics and their ritual as well as their secular music is the same as that of their Mexican neighbors. It is only among a few groups, such as those included in these selections, where one can find some retention of aboriginal elements.

The Seri are one of the most primitive groups of Mexico. Numbering at present not more than about 500 individuals, they are the remnants of several related tribes native to Tiburon Island and the shores of the nearby mainland of Sonora. Like a number of other native groups who formerly lived in this arid coastal area and on the peninsula of Lower California across the Gulf, they were without agriculture and lived the precarious life of hunters and fishers and gatherers of wild foods. All of these groups, except the Seri, have disappeared, as usually happens when the more primitive peoples come in contact with European civilization. Probably it is due only to the isolated position of Tiburon Island which has allowed the Seri to exist up to the present time.

Little is known of serí music. It is reported that dancing consisted of a solo performance on a plank laid over a shallow pit, while several singers sat by beating or rattling anything convenient. It is also reported that rattles were made of gourds and of cocoons. The latter is a custom found among various tribes of northwestern Mexico. Certain large cocoons, with a pebble in each, are tied in long strings about the legs and give a dry, rattling sound during the dance.

The Yaqui are the northernmost of a group of related tribes known collectively as the Cahiya, formerly living along the coastal lands of southern Sonora and northern Sinaloa in northwestern Mexico. They are a farming people occupying for the most part the extremely rich river bottom lands along the lower reaches of the Yaqui River. Even at the remote regions less attractive to the dominant culture the Yaqui people had become influenced by the Spanish and Mexican influences that had filtered up to quite recent times. Despite this opposition, however, the original Yaqui cultural pattern has largely disappeared with very few either material or spiritual elements remaining.

The dances of the Yaqui are among the best known and spectacular of those of any Mexican Indian group. Dancing occurs at all of their fiestas, most of which are on Christian holidays and occur in connection with Christian rites. The accompanying music is largely of European or Mexican origin as are, of course, the harp and violin which are among the instruments most commonly used.

The Huichol and Cora live in the remote mountain districts of the State of Nayarit in the western highlands of Mexico. The two groups are related linguistically and culturally, but the Cora have taken on less of Mexican custom than the Huichol and retain an idea that native music was overwhelmingly rhythmic in character. Both groups are agriculturists and also have cattle. The Huichol are especially noted for the picturesque costumes worn by the men; these include elaborately embroidered girdles and bags and a tri-cornered flat straw hat decorated with flowers and feathers. Embroidered bags are also worn as ornaments, with one or more strings of them—too small to be of any use—tied about the waist.

Huichol religion and ritual are an elaborate complex of aboriginal and derived custom, in which dancing and music play an important role. Singing by a shaman is most common, either without accompaniment or with a drum, the latter a large instrument of the huehuetl type very similar to that used in pre-conquest times in Mexico. Other instruments are gourd rattles and notched deer scapulae and the violin and guitar, the latter two being important in certain ceremonies but more commonly used for purely secular music as they are by Mexicans in general.

The Totonac are a Maya speaking people, living in the highlands of the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico and are generally similar in
Each saint has his own special song. Although these are familiar to everyone it is the fiscal, the Catholic priest's assistant, who knows them best of all. In this recording the fiscal of the town of Chamula sings assisted by his wife, a rare occurrence as women seldom sing in this region for any formal occasion. It is sung as a canon, one voice alternating with the other, the style typical of this region.

SIDE II, BAND 1: YAQUI--PASCOLA DANCE. This is the flute and drum combination as played in the other portion of the Pascola dance. Both instruments are simultaneously employed by one performer, the drum struck by a stick held in the right hand while the flute is held in the left and played in a different rhythm from that of the drum. The rhythm gains speed as the dance proceeds and periodically drops down to a slower tempo.

SIDE II, BAND 2: YAQUI--DEER DANCE. The Deer dancers perform along with the Pascola dancers at all Yaqui fiestas. They have a varied repertoire of dances, both serious and comical, in which a dancer mimics a hunted deer. Deer antlers are fastened to his head and he has large gourd rattles in his hands which he shakes continuously. The movements of the deer antlers is generally imitated as he grasps and then throws up his head and looks about or violently leaps away, always with the tense nervousness of a frightened animal.

Three or four musicians accompany the Deer dancer, playing on notched rasping sticks and the water drum and all singing the deer songs in unison in rather low-pitched voices. The rasping stick is a notched strip of wood played by placing one end on an inverted half gourd and rubbing it with another stick. The water drum is a curious instrument, consisting of a half gourd floated with the open side downward in a wooden bowl of water and beaten in time to the rasping sticks.

Free translations of two fragments of Deer Dance songs are as follows:

The mountain grass
Moved with the gently blowing breeze
And whistled softly.

The grass grows on the mountain top
And blows with the wind.

Deer, deer, deer.
Coyote is hunting you.
Place yourself in the water,
No harm will be done to you.

SIDE II, BAND 3: HUICHOL--PEYOTE DANCE. The eating of the narcotic peyote root in an important feature of Huichol religion and an expedition far to the north is made every year during the dry season to obtain it. The peyote cult has its special fiestas when singing and dancing may continue for many hours. The chant heard here recounts one of the many myths of the tribe and is sung without instrumental accompaniment. A shaman performs assisted by two singers and with the occasional participation of all those
assembled, while the dancers beat out the rhythm with their feet.

SIDE II, BAND 4: HUICHOL—SQUASH DANCE. An important feast for the Huichol is that to celebrate the ripening of the first fruits, occurring toward the end of the wet season in November. Singing and dancing, accompanied by the drum, may go on for a number of days.

SIDE II, BAND 5: SERI—RELIGIOUS SONG. The song in this recording was said to be religious in nature, but information as to its use or significance is lacking.

SIDE II, BANDS 6 and 7: CORA—HARVEST CHANTS. These two chants are part of a large repertory of songs sung during the harvest festivals. They are sung during the preparations of the feast and for the dancing which goes on all night. The singer, a native priest or shaman, accompanies himself on an instrument called the mitoce, a word which also signifies dancing. The mitoce consists of a long hunting bow with a gourd resonator. The taunted stringed bow is set on a gourd which rests on the ground, while the performer holding the two together with his foot while striking the string with two wooden sticks.

READING LIST

General


SERI


YACUI


HUICHOL AND CORA


TSOCELZ


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