Indian Music of Mexico

AN ALBUM BY
Laura Boulton

Folkways Records & Service Corporation, NYC, USA   FW 8851
Indian Music of Mexico

An Album by LAURA BOULTON

Mrs. Boulton Recording Yaqui Music
FOREWORD

March 17, 1942.

Blessings on the phonograph! How otherwise can we hear the music of other civilizations than our own? Therein lies the fascination of these records. They give us a glimpse into the primitive musical world of the Mexican Indian. And they show us the source from which the Mexican composer of today derives his inspiration.

AARON COPLAND.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For valuable assistance and co-operation grateful appreciation is due to the following:

The friends and performers who gracingly provided the music and information for this album.

The officials of the Mexican Government whose wonderful co-operation made this work possible.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs of the U. S. Department of the Interior for cooperation while I was a delegate to the first Inter-American Congress on Indian Life and Culture, Pátzcuaro, Mexico, April 1940.

Mrs. W. Murray Crane, a Trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, and other members of this Museum, for financing the expedition.

Bodil Christensen and Oscar Straus II for photographs of the expedition.

Copyright, 1941, Laura C. Boulton.

COMMENTS

By

LAURA C. BOULTON

PREFATORY NOTE

MEXICAN MUSIC, like Mexican art, is vigorous and stimulating. We may mention four general divisions: (1) that of the pre-Conquest period, (2) the indigenous music of present-day Indians, (3) music brought in by the Spaniards or strongly influenced by them, and (4) the modern Mexican music which has evolved from these sources.

The first period we know only from the early illuminated manuscripts, from the records of the first Spanish missionaries, and from the actual musical instruments, many of which have been found while excavating among the ruined temples and tombs of ancient civilizations. The Aztec music described by the first missionaries consisted of not only impressive ceremonial music but also military and lyrical songs, and narrative songs which were compared to the Spanish Romance and the music of the troubadours. Some feeling of the earlier music has been preserved in the indigenous music of certain groups still practicing their traditional rites in remote localities of Mexico, for instance, the Yaqui, the Seri, and the Huichol Indians.

The musical tradition of the Indian was so strong and so deeply rooted that when the Spaniards came, they could not destroy it. They accepted it and adapted the pagan ceremonies to Christianity. The Yaqui music recorded in this album is an excellent illustration of the combination, — for example, the ancient Deer Dance adapted to the Easter week celebration of the Catholic Church.

A vast amount of new music came into Mexico with the Spaniards. The church plain song was taught to the Indians from the beginning of the Conquest. Secular Spanish music was also introduced widely and is no doubt the origin of popular peasant dances today such as the jarabe, huapango and others. The melodies from Spain were transformed by the Indians into something typically Mexican. The corrido or folk ballad in Mexico grew out of the Spanish romance. Even courtly dance music, European chamber music and, in the 18th century, operas (Spanish, Italian and French) influenced Mexican music tremendously.

In recent years a new musical movement has been initiated by Carlos Chávez, the eminent composer and conductor of the Symphony Orchestra of Mexico. In 1921 he began writing compositions based on the ancestral Indian music of Mexico. The legends, paintings, sculpture and architecture of the ancient people and the aboriginal melodies still to be heard in certain remote regions have been a great source of inspiration to him and his colleagues in their effort to create a new musical art which is truly Mexican.

During the Mexican Renascence many young musicians became fully aware of the vital importance of their native traditions and nourished themselves from these fertile sources. This racial heritage, raw material with its roots deep down in the earth, has given sincerity and force to modern Mexican music.

In this album emphasis has been placed on the music and instruments indigenous to Mexico. Those of Spanish origin are used only where they are combined with typically Indian music or ceremonies. The elemental and universal qualities of this music give it significance and virility. It has been called "the living voice of an ancient culture."
DESCRIPTION OF RECORDS

ZAPOTEC—Teotitlán, Oaxaca

Record 96A. FIREWORKS MUSIC (Trumpet and Drum).

Long before Columbus discovered America there flourished in Mexico great civilizations which modern scientists are learning to interpret and relate to each other. The traces of these ancient races are especially numerous in the Oaxaca north of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Here are the renowned ruins of Monte Alban, where scientists have recently found beautiful frescoes and the far-famed “jewels of Monte Alban.” Not far away is Mitla, “the town of souls” or “the place of the dead,” whose ruins demonstrate so marvelously the building genius of the early Toltec. Mitla was the burial ground for early Zapotecan kings.

The Zapotees are the largest of the seventeen groups which now inhabit this region. The Zapotecas and Mixtecas are thought to be the descendants of the great Toltec nation which disintegrated in the twelfth century. Historians tell us that several groups of exiled Toltec warriors migrated southward and settled in Teotitlán, where they established their first capital in the thirteenth century. These settlers were called Zapotecas, “people from the land of the Zapote trees.”

ZAPOTEC—Teotitlán, Oaxaca

Record 96B. FIREWORKS MUSIC (Chirimia and Drum).

In a Zapotecan community the musicians have considerable prestige. They are exempt from taxation and from all other public service—thei payment consists of food, drink and tobacco. When, as usual, they are entertained at supper before they come out to play for the fireworks, they consider themselves well paid.

There is usually at the fiesta in addition to the musicians playing the trumpets, chirimia and drums a band of from twelve to twenty musicians who play modern instruments rather than the chirimia and drum. Musicians may play for secular occasions, such as weddings, or for a distinguished guest. However, they are regarded as absolutely indispensable for religious occasions, such as church rituals, funerals, and fiestas for the village patron saint.

The chirimia and drum are played together for church feasts primarily. They play during the days of preparation for the feast day, and then for the fiesta they play all day long in the plaza.

Very early in the morning “about four o’clock” the fiesta is announced to the village by the playing of the chirimia and drum. Record 96B presents the early morning music announcing the fiesta. The modern chirimias are thought to produce the same notes as the ancient flutes which they have replaced.

ZAPOTEC—Teotitlán, Oaxaca

Record 97A. FIREWORKS MUSIC (Chirimia and Drum).

The fireworks figures of paper mache are made by men working with great speed and skill who are paid by a tax collected from the other villagers. Using a large knife they make the large cane frames of the figures and the “castle.”

At night when the fireworks begin, the “castle” has special duties and must start playing vigorously as each fiery figure appears. After the “little bull” has charged among the crowd until he goes up in flames, the “giants” appear, male and female. As their firecrackers go off, they dance opposite each other. The “dwarfs” dance, usually the fandango, and finally the great “castle” appears and goes off in a blaze of glory, the grand finale of all Mexican fireworks. The “castle” music is heard on Record 97A.

OTOMI—Honey, Puebla

Record 97B. FLYING POLE DANCE (Flute, Drum, Rattle).

The dance called Los Voladores, the Flyers, of the Otomi people goes back perhaps to a very early period in Mexican history. In a symbolism centuries old, the performers dance at the top of a pole as tall as a ship’s mast, then “fly” to earth on long unwinding ropes. Most of the Indians have forgotten the symbolism of their sky dance but the old men remember. The flyers are dressed as birds, wearing tall feather headdresses, and represent the sacred birds which guarded the points of the compass. The ceremony is intimately connected with the old calendar, representing the Indian “century” or cycle of 52 years which was divided into four groups of thirteen years each. The dances and songs are in groups of four. The four flyers make thirteen rounds each while flying to the ground, that is, four times thirteen or forty-two, the number of years in the cycle.

The dance itself is a thrilling spectacle which has been forbidden in many parts of Mexico because it so often ends in tragedy. Intensive studies of Los Voladores were made by Mrs. Helga Larsen and her sister, Mäa Bodil Christensen, who has actually taken part in this dance. Before their studies the Totanes Indians of Papantla in the State of Vera Cruz were known to have the “flying” dance but the research of these Swiss sisters revealed that it is performed in many villages of the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, and Vera Cruz. The Volador is also known in northern Guatemala.

The dancers scramble up a seventy-foot pole to a tiny platform twenty-four inches in diameter. One by one, they dance at this dizzy height while the others sit precariously on a fragile framework around the dancing platform. Each man performs for about two minutes. The last dancer is Malinche, the man-woman who dances twice as many dances as the others. Finally ropes, which are wound around the pole on a type of spool below the platform, are tied around and the dancers suddenly dive from their seats on top of the pole. As the ropes unwind, the men descend in ever-widening circles until they reach the ground. This ceremony requires great courage and the dancers usually drink a considerable amount of tequila beforehand in order to be bold enough to begin. Consequently they sometimes lose their balance and fall to earth while dancing and are, of course, killed instantly. Or the framework on which they rest on top of the pole may break and let them crash. The ropes sometimes break or the pole itself may snap. The Otomi villagers watch breathlessly during this daring performance, ready to reveal applause when it is successfully finished. Some of the men have been flying for thirty or forty years and are famous throughout the whole countryside, given the same adoring worship as a famous bull-fighter in Mexico City.

The music is furnished by an older man who plays a flute and a little drum simultaneously. I recorded the different melodies for each phase of the dance, ending with the flight song recorded here which the musician actually plays while flying to the earth. He dives off into the air, throwing himself head downward in order to catch the rope with his feet. There are 13 melodies, two for each of 4 flyers, 4 for Malinche, and one for the flight. The first 12 tunes
are played while the dancers are performing on top of the pole, the last while they are flying to the earth. There are six fliers. The musician does not dance on top of the pole but plays for the other five dancers, including Malinche. In some places, as in Papantla, there are only four fliers and the musician remains on top of the pole during the flight. In Guatemala there are only two fliers.

The old man who played the flute and drum of the flight song of this record is very famous throughout his region because he has survived more than thirty years of these precarious dances. His son, Malinche of the dance, plays the rattle in this recording. They live in the State of Puebla in Huachietilla near Pahuatlán. They dance in their own village on the Saint's Day in February, and again in Honey, some distance away, on the Saint's Day of that village in March. They used to dance in Pahuatlán in September and during Holy Week, but recently this dance has not taken place because the Presidente Municipal of Pahuatlán was not sufficiently interested to raise the money for the fiesta.

YAQUI—{

Las Voladores (The Fliers)

Record 98A. DEER DANCE (Notched Stick, Rattles, Water Drums).

The Yaqui, a proud, courageous, resourceful people living on the Yaqui River in Sonora, northern Mexico, were formerly very powerful. When the Spaniards came, the Yaqui fought for their independence. Ever since the arrival of the earliest invaders, they have resisted the attempts of landholders to take their land. Yaqui history, dramatic and heroic, consists of a long series of wars, for they refused to submit to the political domination of the Mexican government. It is only since the Presidency of Cárdenas (1935) that the policy of the government has been friendly to them. During the long period of persecution many rebels escaped to the Sierras, and some of them crossed into southern Arizona, where there are approximately 2,500 living near the Pima Indians, to whom they are related. There are several thousand Yaqui still living in Sonora but practically the whole male population has been enrolled in the Mexican army, and three exclusively Yaqui regiments have been deported to other states in southern Mexico and Yucatán.

Their tribal unity, however, has survived all of these trials—they have retained a great deal of their primitive culture, for they are extremely conservative and distrustful. They cling to their ancient customs and ceremonies and long to return to the homeland in Sonora, particu-

larly to be buried with their ancestors. Recently when recording among the Yaqui of Arizona, I played for them some of the music which I had recorded among their people in Mexico. They were very moved.

The songs, dances and ceremonies are a common treasure and have preserved the unity of the Yaqui wherever they have gone. By meeting and celebrating the festivals of their ancestors they have maintained the tribal traditions. In the 17th and 18th centuries the Jesuit priests who were active among these people realized that it was impossible to uproot the old Indian practices. Recognizing that the Yaqui, like all Indians, love their dancing and pantomimes, they allowed church rites to fuse with the indigenous festivals and an interesting mixture of Christianity and paganism evolved. For example, when I was in Arizona recently I went to the funeral celebration for a young woman who had just died in a Yaqui village near Tucson. Many hours were spent in making rosaries and placing them on the corpse, which was placed near an altar with candles, erected for the occasion. The old women chanted religious music which was reminiscent of Gregorian chant. But the old tribal dances went on all night, and one had the feeling that if one should scratch the surface of this Christianity, the pagan beliefs would be much more fundamental than the imposed ideas of the newcomers.

Nowadays the Yaqui dances are connected with Catholic Church festivals and the principal festival is during Easter Week. The first week of Lent starts the preparations for this fiesta. During Holy Week the Chapayecas, or Pharisees, in impressive masks rule the village absolutely from Ash Wednesday until Saturday of Glory. When they go through the village, they take anything they find and exchange it for alms for the festival. Anyone trying to reclaim his property would be severely whipped by the Chapayecas.

During the Saturday of Glory and Sunday of the Resurrection there is a great festival during which the Pascolas, Deer and Coyotes dance in the enramada, a specially prepared arbor.

The principal dancer is the Deer, or el Venado. On his head he wears or carries a stuffed deer's head, decorated with ribbons and flowers. A cloth (a woman's rebozo) hangs down to the knees and is held on by a belt which has attached to it many deer hoofs. Anklets of dried butterfly cocoons full of pebbles produce a pleasant clicking sound while he dances. In each hand he carries a large gourd rattle. The dance-pantomimes the hunt and death of the deer. Village dogs were running about the dancers and can be heard barking toward the end of the recording. El Venado roams around, stops, scents danger, rushes away, stops again, groans calmly or drinks. But the Coyotes, represented by Pascolas, discover him, pursue him and finally kill him.

The drum begins a rhythm, soon followed by a weird melody on the flute, while the deer dancer wraps his head with a white cloth, puts on the deer's head, and takes up the rattles. Then the dance begins.

These recordings were made among the Yaqui at Tlaxcala where a Yaqui regiment was stationed.

YAQUI—{

Record 98B. LAS PASCOLAS (Flute, Drum, Bells).

The Pascolas are inseparably connected with the Deer Dance. The entire group or dance is sometimes called El Venado or Las Pascolas or La Pascola. The Pascolas do a good deal of clowning but they are associated with all ceremonies, including those of the most solemn nature. I have seen them dancing with great seriousness at a funeral ceremony. The steps are very intricate, and an intensive training under a severe tutor is necessary for the boys who are to become Pascolas.
There are usually three Pascolas in the dance. Each Pascola dancer wears instead of trousers, a sarape or blanket around his hips and thighs (held in place with a belt from which very musical bells are suspended and bound around the knees tightly like riding trousers). Around the ankles are worn several coils of cocoons rattles filled with pebbles. The hair on the top of the head is tied into a tuft which is called evel or candle. The dancer wears a mask to cover his face during certain steps and at other times wears it on the back of his head. Each Pascola dancer has a rattle, a rectangular wooden frame inside of which brass or bronze discs hang on rods and give a loud jingling sound when shaken. It is suggested that perhaps certain discs of shell found by archeologists may have served a similar purpose in ancient times. The accompaniment consists of harp and fiddle alternated with flute and drum. Beside the drummer there is a small fire where he can tune his drum by heating the membrane over the embers in the same way that African drummers tune their drums.

The drummer is an excellent musician, playing both flute and drum simultaneously. The little finger of the left hand holds the strap of the drum which rests against his knees. He supports the flute with the ring finger and small finger of the left hand, fingering with the other three. With the right hand he beats the drum.

On this record the bells suspended from the dancer's belt are clearly heard.

**YAQUI—Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala**

**Record 99A. LAS PASCOLAS (Harp, Fiddle, Bells, Rattles).**

The Pascolas perform sometimes before musicians playing the harp and fiddle and sometimes before the drummer playing the flute. The harp and fiddle are of somewhat primitive manufacture but produce charming music which reminds us of Spanish quadrilles and other early Continental dance music. It is interesting to find these highly developed instruments in the same ceremony with the water drum and notched stick.

Yaqui music is surprisingly varied. (1) First is the music, as of the Deer Dance, which preserves its aboriginal purity. (2) Then there is the religious music which is chanted in Latin and Spanish by the Maestro, men well versed in the rites of the church. There is also a group of about 20 women cantadoras or singers who answer the litanies and sing during the ceremonies. A group of little girls sing the "songs of the angels" on the Saturday of Glory and during wakes for children. (3) Among the Yaqui there are many chulas and ballads (Cancioneras and corridas)—typical mezcal music and widespread throughout the Republic of Mexico. These songs are sung in two parts, with or without the accompaniment of the guitar. Apparently the Yaqui like to sing these ballads, especially after considerable drinking, but I have made excellent recordings of this type of Yaqui singing without the aid of alcohol. (4)

---

**YAQUI—Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala**

**Record 99B. DEER DANCE (Notched Stick, Rattles, Water Drum).**

The Deer Dance is perhaps the most primitive and dramatic of all the Yaqui dances. It is thought to go back to an ancient magical ceremony to charm the deer and assure a successful hunt. The accompaniment for this dance is provided by a whole orchestra of percussion instruments, each of which has its distinct rhythm. There is a drummer who plays a flute and drum simultaneously. Then there are the gourd rattles, deer-hoof belt and cocoons-rattle anklets of the dancer. In addition there are two ancient rasps and a water drum which bear further witness to the antiquity of the performance. The water drum consists of a huge container of water in which floats a large gourd. The gourd is struck by the musician with a stick wound with straw or cornhusks. This stick is called a serpent, and one author suggests that the water drum may have been connected with some kind of rain ceremony in ancient times. The rasp used for this dance consists of a notched stick which is rubbed vigorously with another stick. A gourd resting on the ground serves as the resonator. Undoubtedly this is the descendant of the omichicaballi used by the Aztecs in their death cult. I have recorded a relative of this rasp in the ceremonial music of the Hopi and Navaho of our Southwest. The musician holds one end of the notched stick with his left hand, pressing the other end against the gourd, while with the right hand he moves the rubbing stick over the notches or grooves.

While playing the rasp, he sings in the Yaqui language very primitive songs, simple melodically and interesting rhythmically. Their texts are meager but expressive; for instance in one song called Tenabari (Butterfly cocoon) the words are: "This is the Tenabari that is caught in the tree and when the wind blows it moves." The singing technique, typically Indian, produces sounds forcefully ejected with the mouth almost closed. It is like that of certain of our Indian tribes. The songs of the rasp-player are alternated with the flute melodies of the drummer.

Primitive melodies such as these have been a source of inspiration to modern Mexican composers. The theme heard in this record reminds us of an arrangement by Luis Sandi which was played at a concert of Mexican Music conducted by Carlos Chavez at the Museum of Modern Art in connection with its exhibition of Mexican Art.

---

**YAQUI—Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala**

**Record 100A. MATACHINES (Harp, Fiddle, Stamping).**

The dance of the Matachines, like the Pascolas and Deer Dance, is a ritual dance performed as a part of the Easter Week celebration. It is danced partly inside the church and partly outside, especially in parades. During Saturday night before Easter, they dance in the church, later they dance in the arbor or carpa until noon of Easter Sunday.

The dancers form in two lines, and the performance consists of various steps, fairly simple but beautiful dance figures which remind one of the quadrille. Ordinarily the musical accompaniment for the Matachines is furnished by two violins answering each other in a very interesting way. In this record a Mataches melody is played on the fiddle and harp instead of the usual two violins. Each dancer carries a gourd rattle in his right hand, a feathered stick in the left. On his head he wears a headdress of bright paper flowers. This dance is performed by a group whose members join for life, often vowing to become members if they survive a serious illness or avoid a great tragedy.

There is no historical data to tell us how long the Yaquis have been performing this dance, but it is thought to be of Colonial origin.
The study of astronomy began among the Maya probably several hundred years before Christ. They were primarily farmers and so were vitally concerned with the measurement of time. The Maya priest-astronomers, sometimes called the Greeks of the New World, far excelled the Egyptians and Babylonians in their knowledge of the movements of the sun, moon,

... and other heavenly bodies. Their greatest achievement, however, was the invention of a calendar as accurate as our own.

The Maya civilization was founded on corn. The ancient priests were so successful that weather bureau officials that corn production was greatly increased. This wealth of corn meant that more time could be spent for other things than the business of keeping body and soul together. Architecture, sculpture, painting, feather-working, music and other arts were developed.

Uxmal (pronounced O-chmal) and Chichen-Itzá were great centers of early Maya civilization. The Mexican Government as well as the Carnegie Institution of Washington (with Dr. Sylvaus Morris in charge of excavations) have reconstructed many remarkable ancient structures which can be seen by the modern traveler in Yucatan. In Uxmal one of the most famous ruling families was the family of the Xiu (pronounced Shoo). The genealogy of this family has been traced back accurately to the year 1400. The descendants are now living near their former capital in the village of Ticul where I visited them. The old slit drums formerly used as signaling were brought forth, the musicians were called out, and true Maya hospitality was offered. I witnessed the modern Maya fiesta spirit and recorded Maya music. No one knows what the ancient music was, but the numerous musical instruments shown in early Maya sculptures reveal that music was not neglected.

Nowadays the fiddle and the guitar are popular in Yucatan villages. However, there are many of the ancient slit drums which have preserved their beautiful resonant tones. The rhythms of the drums heard in this record are played by present-day Mayan musicians who perform with the dignity and solemnity of their remote ancestors. The first rhythms are played on the to'ok'ul or slit drums of the family of the Xiu at Ticul. Two drums (one large, one small) with two tones each, are played simultaneously by the same man. The to'ok'ul, similar to the teponazte of the Aztecs, is made of chuño xute (wood, the tree which furnishes chicle). It is played with the butt of the palm leaf to "give it a better sound." A large and small to'ok'ul are always played together. I was told. Another drum called the xatun is played, following the to'ok'ul.

The second group of rhythms were recorded on slit drums from the museum in Mérida, Yucatan, where there is a very interesting collection of early Mexican instruments.

The playing of the ancient instruments, the singing and dancing of early pagan rites among certain Mexican Indian groups, carry us back to the centuries and at the same time make a bridge from the past to the present.

OTHER RECORDS BY LAURA C. BOULTON

FP612 SONGS AND DANCES OF TURKEY, recorded by Laura Boulton in Istanbul in 1951-2 in Turkey. Includes popular songs and dances from: Bursa, Hacettepe, Gawias, Adana, Izmir, Ankara, Nemrut Dagi, Konya, Gallipoli, Thrace, Sivas, Gokceada, etc. Complete transcription and English translation.

FP605 SONGS AND DANCES OF YUGOSLAVIA, recorded by Laura Boulton in 1951-2 in Yugoslavia. Includes popular traditional songs and dances from: Bosnia, Hercegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, etc. Includes instrumental music, folk songs, wedding songs, etc. Complete transcription and English translation.

FP607 SONGS AND DANCES OF SWITZERLAND, recorded by Laura Boulton in 1951-2 in Switzerland. Includes folk songs and dances from: Bern, Zurich, Basel, Geneva, etc. Complete transcription and English translation.

FP609 UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS SONGS, recorded by Laura Boulton in Canada. Includes popular songs and dances from: Ukraine, Russia, etc. Complete transcription and English translation.

FP610 CHRISTMAS SONGS OF SPAIN, recorded by Laura Boulton in Spain. Includes: Viva Pascaclon, Esté noche, A Belen, A la Porta de Nostres, La Virgin Llambada, etc. Complete transcription and English translation.

LITHO IN U.S.A. 1954