

POPULAR MUSIC IN MEXICO

POPULAR MUSIC IN MEXICO. By CLAES AF GEIJERSTAM. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976. Pp. 187. \$10.00.)

In 1947 I went to summer school in Guadalajara. Having just completed the tenth grade, I was enthusiastic about Mexican music and singing and absolutely wild about dances. Before the summer was over I learned to perform folk and ballroom steps and was taught basic guitar chords and strums for playing "Mexico's greatest hits." My last dollars were spent on a Paracho guitar and a stack of 78s in order to perpetuate the Mexican experience after returning home to the San Fernando Valley.

At that time the goal was simply to have fun. I had no idea that all those enjoyable activities were a "developmental chapter" and a "significant transitional stage" in the epic of twentieth-century popular music. But, times have changed: the 78s have been superseded by LPs and tape in stereo; I can still listen to the same old tunes (in higher fi), but they are no longer what they used to be. Then I was a student, studying history but living culture; now I am a university professor, teaching culture and trying to interpret history with it. What I sang and danced and played are now the subjects of serious scholarly research and publication.

This scope makes current humanistic study rather different from my college days in the 1950s. In my recollection, it was never mentioned that the origins and transformations of dance steps were historically significant or that the forms, lyrics, and instrumental combinations of music revealed ethnicity, development, values, and sociocultural outlook. And, of course, there was no textbook available to familiarize a reader with an overview of this interesting and complex subject. Therefore, the publication of Claes af Geijerstam's *Popular Music in Mexico* was a welcome and important step in promoting visibility, accessibility and broad academic prestige.

The book has been helpful in my own teaching situation—the students now have a text for their humanities course, "Mexico's Musical Culture," which is offered regularly as part of a field-based degree program. Some thirty adults, aged 25 to 70 and representing education, medicine, business, government, the military, and various other professions, enroll each semester. Some are Mexican Americans, and the Anglos come from all parts of the country; about half are recent arrivals in the "old West." Many are well-traveled, some sing, dance, and play guitar, though few have had musical training. All, however, are glad to have a textbook they can learn from and quarrel with.

They have done both. Definitions, apparent contradictions, utilization of resources, value judgments, and numerous other factors have been important areas for class discussion. Many of the older students have experienced the very changes in musical culture described by Geijerstam. Their reactions, questions,

and assertions have been interesting and productive. Why, some of them ask, is so little attention given to *música nortea* (that special, up-beat style of accordion, saxophone, twelve-string guitar, and rhythm)? The Mexican radio stations we can hear in central Arizona play mostly *nortea* plus a little mariachi and a lot of Mexican M.O.R. (Middle-of-the-Road: international sound, rhythmic, sentimental and sweet, sung in Mexican). Most of the local restaurants and cantinas that cater to a Mexican and Mexican American clientele also play *nortea* and it is the BIG sound along the border all the way from Brownsville to California. Without *nortea*, they claim, the book gives a distorted appraisal of Mexican music.

We decided to examine the text for possible causes of this imbalance, and class members began to come up with reasons: the author was young, this book was his dissertation, and he did not travel to Northern Mexico; he had done his research exclusively in Mexico City, had been there for little more than one summer, and had relied primarily on interviews with only two resource persons; also, he was unfamiliar with the language, had no background in Mexican popular music, and ran into many complications in securing information.

What a bonanza for class discussion! Why did the author have such problems? Is it different to do research abroad? Many answers came readily from personal experiences. Anyone who does not allow extensive amounts of time, who does not adequately pave the highways of social and political contacts, who does not engage in voluminous anticipatory correspondence to secure permissions, and then carry with him a briefcase full of letters of introduction—that person will spend much of his time out in the street.

Moreover, those very frustrations would intensify the attractiveness of relying on a few, high-class, knowledgeable persons. One may become entranced and even trapped by genial, foreign hospitality: a never-ending flow of fascinating and apparently reasonable information is comfortably provided, often in the guest's own language. The anguish of pounding the sidewalks and encountering locked doors becomes remote, and, as one imbibes the Lethean cordiality, it is easy for the ideal of diversification of sources to slip away.

The book's focus on Mexico City was explained somewhat more caustically. Those who had lived and worked in Mexico described social attitudes and taste preferences as being rigid and hierarchical. Residents of Mexico City take for granted that their capital provides cultural leadership in setting styles and developing trends. They regard the provinces as culturally backward and provincials have apparently accepted that assessment. The young and industrious North is thought to be inferior, rustic, and tainted by foreign influences, while Mexican Americans are beyond all hope of salvage. One could thus not expect the provincials to have developed high-quality arts and music. Consequently, the impropriety of suggesting in Mexico City that regional musics could be important, locally derived, and stand on their own merits is affirmed and exemplified by the almost total absence of *nortea* selections in the latest multi-volume official record anthology published by the National Museum of Anthropology.

Once given that outlook, the discussion continued, the nature of Mexico's

music business took care of the rest. Concentration in Mexico City of the various arms of the entertainment industry could not help but encourage the production of music conforming to consumer standards in the capital. Provincial talent is scouted and the best is drawn to Mexico City, where the big money deals are made. Promotion of regional sounds does happen, mostly with mariachi, harp, and marimba, and even those are conventionalized. As we considered possible consequences for the future it was generally assumed that things would stay as they were until entertainment entrepreneurs changed their focus or record production decentralized into the provincial cities. Considering the status of current internal migrations in Mexico and entertainment trends along both sides of the border, the latter might happen before the former.

Concern was expressed over the accuracy of research based upon statistics, statements, and publications provided by Mexican record companies, motion picture studios, radio and television stations, musicians' unions, and theatrical agents. These businesses are highly competitive, famous for fictionalizing, dedicated to exaggerated self-promotion, and uncommitted to open research. They might be valuable for providing handsome photos, some specific facts, and accumulations of releases, clippings, and other public reaction material, but they would have to be evaluated carefully and used with restraint.

Much comment arose from the text assertion that mariachi with trumpet was invented by Emilio Azcárraga in 1930 over Mexico City's station XEW. Various class members either were related to or knew someone who had been a soldier with Villa or Obregón. It was their understanding that the invention of the trumpet mariachi "happened" countless times during the Revolution, and anything to the contrary was merely radio station hype or "official" Mexico City history.

Terminology and definitions also provoked reaction. Many, including older students who have listened to Mexican music most of their lives, stated that the author often used musical terminology that was somewhat meaningless to them. And, when it came to differentiating among the sones, huapangos, corridos, jarabes, and canciones from the text, there was quite a bit of confusion. The definitions were contradictory or ambiguous, often inconsistent with statements in other sources, and frequently out of line with the experiences of the listeners.

On the other hand, the biographical information about such renowned individuals and groups as Agustín Lara, the Trio Los Panchos, Guty Cárdenas, and José Alfredo Jiménez was appreciated. So was the information about the growth and development of radio and the recording industry. Class members had found that their research in local libraries did not produce this type of information, while record jackets generally were more hyperbolic than factual. Most of them wished that Geijerstam had spent more time telling about the various performers, their careers, and their impact on Mexican music; they would have liked more maps, photographs, illustrations of instruments, and a glossary; and they would have been very happy with a record or cassette package keyed to the book's chapters and providing instrumental, rhythmic, and stylistic examples.

The past semesters have been an interesting experience and the discussion of this text with classes has been rewardingly positive. Whatever shortcomings there are—errors, confusions, misprints, imbalances, and incompleteness—are outweighed by the book's very existence. They considered the book to be fundamentally valuable to them as students, providing a somewhat different approach to what they got in class, and giving ammunition and points of departure for their individual projects. They concluded that Geijerstam has written an interesting textbook in English which is accessible, straightforward, reasonable in price, and provocative. It is now up to someone else to develop a better one.

GUY BENSUSAN

Northern Arizona University