Traditional Music of the Mexican Mestizos
Daniel E. Sheehy

Mexico is a land of many musical traditions. Each of its many Indian groups has its own musical systems, occasions, and repertories. Among large-city dwellers there are many “communities of taste,” ranging from preferences for Western classical music to international popular and protest music. The rural mestizos (a mixture of Spanish and Amerindian populations and cultures) also maintain a variety of musical traditions. Mestizo music, along with related traditions among Mexican-Americans, is included in the 1978 Festival of American Folklife.

The music of Mexican mestizos has many common roots. Language, poetic structures, most musical instruments, and many musical forms derive from Spanish prototypes imported during colonial times. Most other traditional song and dance forms stem from early original mestizo developments (such as the music-dance forms called son and jarabe, first appearing in the late 18th century) or from 19th-century musical importations from Europe (the waltz, polka, and schottische, for example). The music's base in rural Mexican life creates common musical themes, occasions, contexts, and attitudes.

In spite of these common roots and socioeconomic situations, longstanding geographic, economic, and social isolation has given rise to many unique regional musical traditions. In many cases, each region is distinguished by its own instrumentation, musical style, and repertory of compositions. Unfortunately, widespread urbanization and the expanding sphere of influence of the commercial media have encroached considerably on the native “breeding grounds” of many traditions. As a result, some of the local traditions have been shouted out of existence by media-imposed music. On the other hand, a few have not only survived in the wake of rapid social change, but have even achieved a certain degree of international popularity, resulting in the simultaneous existence of rural, urban, and international commercialized versions of a single tradition.

Many full-time professional musicians have left their former work as small-scale ranchers and farmers, fishermen, carpenters, charcoal makers, rural milkmen, and the like. Other musicians have continued in nonmusical professions and perform music for personal enjoyment or to augment their incomes. The most urban, professional, and commercial Mexican folk ensemble is the mariachi. Native to Jalisco in western Mexico, the mariachi has become popular throughout Mexico and the southwestern U.S. Its contemporary form crystallized in the 1930s, when trumpets were added to the basic ensemble of violins, regional guitars, called vihuela, guitarra de golpe, guitarrón, and, in some areas, a large harp.

Closely related historically to the mariachi is the conjunto arpa grande (“big harp” ensemble) from the tierra caliente (“hot land”) of neighboring Michoacán. The conjunto’s instrumentation closely resembles that of the mariachi, but without trumpets. Unlike the mariachi, however, it has not been adopted by the commercial media, and remains essentially a rural tradition.

One step further south is the tierra caliente of the state of Guerrero, home of the conjunto tamborita. Mainly comprised of string instruments—violins, guitars, and a guitarrón—the group is distinguished by an additional in-
instrument, the tamborita, a small drum. The conjunto tamborita has not fared well in the competition with commercial music and today may be included among the many endangered species of folk traditions.

On the coastal plain of the eastern state of Veracruz, most traditional musical life centers around the conjunto jarocho, or "jarocho ensemble." Jarocho refers to the people native to the area. A harp and regional guitars called jarana and requinto form the core of the group. The son jarocho, practically the only traditional music from the area, is recognizable by its fast rhythm, witty texts, and a generous amount of improvisation. The son may accompany the zapateado, a type of dancing involving fast, complex footwork.

The Huasteca region to the north-west is the home of the trio huasteco, comprised of one violin and two guitars, the guitarra quinta and the jarana. The trio's music is similar to that of the conjunto jarocho in that there is a tendency to improvise both instrumental melodies and texts. Also, the main traditional musical genre is the son, although among the Huastecans it is more commonly referred to as the huapango. Finally, another trademark of música huasteca is the frequent use of falsetto in vocal melodies.

The Mexican presentation at the 1978 Festival will include dancers, musicians, and singers from the Mexican states of Puebla, Michoacán, Guerrero, and Veracruz. All the groups come from the central area of Mexico where the largest concentration of colonial population settled and thus one can see a heavy, but not exclusive, Spanish influence in their music. Instruments derive from colonial Spanish prototypes, although the drum used by the Puebla group is a modern variant of the ancient Aztec huehuetl. Melodies derive from Spanish and other European sources, but show the distinct Mexicanization of these musical traditions. Like so much of Mexico's traditional culture, the music presented here is the unique product of its rich historical and regional origins.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DISCOGRAPHY

A conjunto jarocho from Los Angeles in performance at the 1975 Festival. Photo by James Pickerell for the Smithsonian.

Musica Azteca, a chirimia and drum group, participated in the 1976 Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife.