

La Música de los Viejitos: The Hispano Folk Music of the Rio Grande del Norte

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Spanish culture came to northern New Mexico with a musical heritage whose wellsprings lie in European antiquity. Its traditions continued to evolve as descendants of the Spanish colonists melded into the *mestizaje* of *La Raza*.

The mountains around the Rio Grande del Norte still ring with echoes of songs sung in Spain hundreds of years ago in narrative ballads called *romances*. This musical form branched off as early as the 12th century from the tradition of epic poetry and bloomed in the 13th century when *juglares* — wandering acrobats, jugglers, poets, dancers and musicians — performed in public squares and noblemen's houses. Passed down through generations, these ballads generally exalted the deeds of warriors, kings and the gentry. They were eagerly listened to by everyone including chroniclers and historians, who regarded the romances as popular accounts of significant events.

Traditionally, the melodies of the romances are 32 notes long. This conforms with poetic stanzas comprised of two rhymed or assonated lines of 16 syllables. A few of these old romances are still to be heard in New Mexico and southern Colorado. One of the best known is "Delgadina," a tragic ballad of incest and death,

Delgadina se paseaba
de la sala a la cocina
Con vestido transparente
que se cuerpo le ilumina.

Romances can also be extremely humorous as is the case of *Don Gato*, "Mr. Cat," who was chasing a beautiful Moorish pussycat when he leapt and fell, mortally injuring himself much to the

delight of local mice. A form related to the romance is the *relación*, a humorous narrative ballad still popular. One of the best relaciones is entitled *El Carrito Paseado*, which was written in the 1920s and tells the tale of an old, broken-down jalopy,

Tengo un carrito paseado
Que el que no lo ha experimentado
No lo puedo hacer andar

Tiene roto el radiador
Descompuesto el generador
Se le quebró la transmisión.

A form of narrative ballad that has evolved from the romance is the corrido. Vicente Mendoza, the late, eminent Mexican ethnomusicologist stated, "The Mexican corrido, a completely popular form...is an expression of the sensibility of our people, and its direct ancestor, both literary and musical, is the Spanish romance." Where the romance mostly treats the exploits of the gentry, the corrido describes events, often tragic and violent, in the lives of common people. This form achieved great status in the New World during the last century, when Spanish-speaking people struggled for collective survival in a social environment far distant from the Iberian peninsula. When the corrido came into currency, the international boundary between Mexico and the United States was drawn further north, and present-day New Mexico lay south of that boundary. Music, like the wind which carries it, is stirred by a myriad of forces.

Corridos usually include the date and time of the event described and often the name of the composer. Sometimes they end in a *despedida* or concluding refrain with the words "*Vuela, vuela, palomita...*" "Fly, fly, little dove..." The corrido is generally composed in stanzas, comprised of four lines of eight syllables each.

During the many decades of conflict that culminated in the Mexican Revolution, the corri-

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Pedro Casias teaches the dance music of the Northern Rio Grande Valley to his grandson, William Pacheco. Photo by Jack Loeffler

do became something of a journalistic device whereby the people learned of recent events and popular opinions about them. It has been said that the history of Mexico from 1845 may be traced from the texts of corridos. Recently in northern New Mexico, corridos have been written about a soldier in Vietnam, the courthouse raid in Tierra Amarilla in the late 1960s, and the great prison riot near Santa Fe in the early 1980s. The author of some of these is Roberto Martínez, one of New Mexico's most celebrated folk musicians, who performs with Los Reyes de Albuquerque.

Another form of narrative ballad, of great importance in the past but now rarely heard, is the *indita*, a form that combines Hispanic and Indian elements. While the *indita* is thought to have originated in Mexico, it came into prominence in New Mexico in the 19th century, when Hispanic and Indian cultures contended for territory in the hinterland beyond pueblo and village. Some of the *inditas* told sad stories of Hispanics captured by the Indians, wrenched from their families never to be returned.

The *canción* is yet another musical form that

is still popular among *la gente* of the Rio Grande del Norte. The *canción* is not restricted to a particular meter, a freedom not available in the forms mentioned earlier. According to Arthur Campa, "The subjective quality of the *canción* reveals more readily the fine nuances of folk sensibility in outpourings of the lovelorn, in candid denunciations of unrequited lovers, in sincere expressions of undying affection, and in melancholy murmurings of the introvert." Almost any theme can become the subject of a *canción*. One of the most popular of the *canciones* is entitled "Don Simon" and is an elder's lament on the conduct of the younger generation. Even though this song appeared in print as early as 1888, it is still sung today — several younger generations later!

Many of the vocal forms that were still popular at the beginning of World War II are now moribund. There was the *décima*: traceable to 15th century Spain, the form ordinarily has introductory *planta* of four octosyllabic lines followed by four stanzas of *ten* octosyllabic lines — hence the word *décima*. Aurelio Espinosa once regarded the *décima* "as one of the outstanding

examples of the persistence of Spanish tradition in New Mexico." The *trovo* is a poetic contest in which two or more poets sing alternate verses. In this dialogue a wide range of themes may be addressed, from philosophical to insulting. Rubén Cobos regards the *trovo* as a poetic joust. Few recall these latter musical forms, but Cipriano Vigil — one of New Mexico's great folk musicians and one of the greatest tradition keepers of his time — includes fine examples of each of these forgotten forms in his enormous repertoire.

The brothers of the *Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno*, popularly known as the Penitentes, are greatly misunderstood by those who live outside their religious practice. It was the *hermanos* who helped sustain the Christian tradition in the Hispanic villages of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado through their long period of isolation from trained clerics. The *hermanos* perform functions vital to the well-being of their respective communities throughout the year, although they are most commonly associated with the rites they observe every Lent. The *hermanos* conduct funerals, aid those in need, minister to the distressed and in general assume responsibility for the good of the community. They maintain a web of mutual aid that helps the community endure.

The *alabados* is a musical form sung by the *hermanos* and some lay people. The *alabados* are sung to a very slow, mournful tempo, and the modal structure of their melody lines suggest a medieval influence. The only musical instrument played while singing the *alabados* is the *pito*, a wind instrument similar to the soprano recorder.

Two musical instruments have come to prevail at the *bailes*, or dances, in the villages of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado — the violin and the guitar. At the time of the Spanish Conquest, neither the violin nor the guitar had assumed its current form. The modern violin came into currency in Europe in the opening years of the Baroque era, which spanned the period from 1600 to 1750. The modern guitar took shape nearly two centuries later. However, the conquistadores and early colonists were accustomed to viols and vihuelas and to traditions of dance that extended deep into European antiquity.

Dance music of the Renaissance has long since disappeared from the collective memory of *la gente* of northern New Mexico. However, one active and rich dance tradition extends back at least to the beginning of the 19th century. *La*

Varsoviana, one of the most popular dances in the Rio Grande del Norte region, evolved from the mazurka, which originated in the plains of Mazowsze, the area where Warsaw is located. It was apparently introduced in the salons of Paris by the dance master, Désiré, in 1853 and is purported to have gained great favor with the Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III. It is known among English-speaking people as "Put Your Little Foot."

Napoleon's agent, Archduke Maximilian, briefly presided as Emperor of Mexico from 1863 to 1867 when Mexico was under French domination. The Archduke's wife was caught within the sway of the Empress Eugénie and was anxious to enliven the salons of Mexico City with the latest Parisian fashion, so she imported dances and melodies with a swift grace. Many of these dances found their way northward to become part of the evolving tradition of the Hispanic Rio Grande del Norte.

The waltz, which originated as an erotic spring dance in the Bavarian Alps, lent itself to several graceful dance forms in New Mexico including the *redondo* and the *valse de los paños*. Both of these are danced not in couples, but in small groups. The *chotiz* is a two-step derived from the schottische, itself thought to be a German transmogrification of a Scottish folk dance. The polka entered New Mexico from both the south and the east during the presidency of James Knox Polk, and polka jokes are said to have run rampant. *La Camila* came straight from Paris, and *las cuadrillas* are directly descended from the French quadrille, a form of square dance. *El talean* is also a form of square dance, but its name suggests Italian provenance.

Some dances actually originated in New Mexico. *El vaquero* implies the presence of the cowboy whose history long precedes that of his Anglo counterpart. Some say that *la cuna*, the cradle dance, originated in New Mexico, as did *la indita*.

One of the most interesting dance traditions in the New World is *Los Matachines*, a dance drama which I believe combines characteristics of both European and Indian origins. It is danced both in Indian and Hispanic villages to music performed on the violin and guitar.

Musical forms appear and become aligned with a prevailing culture and then wane with the passage of their season. This loss does not necessarily impoverish a tradition that continues to evolve, as does the musical heritage of Hispanic America. The advent of electronic instruments

and modern media may well hasten the pace of change, but the tradition continues to build upon itself, chronicling the spirit of its time in new ballads, accommodating the frenzy of the late 20th century with different dances, and even challenging the political system and its bureaucracy in a recently created musical form known as *nueva canción*.

The musical heritage of the Hispanic Rio Grande del Norte has as distinguished an ancestry as the culture has of which it is part. This music is an expression of a people from whose soul pours forth song with passion and poignance — it is the music of la gente.

Further Readings

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Suggested Viewing

- "Los alegres," 1977. 30 minute documentary. Producers Jack Loeffler and Karl Kernberger.
- "La música de los viejos." 30 minute documentary. Producers Jack Loeffler and Jack Parsons.