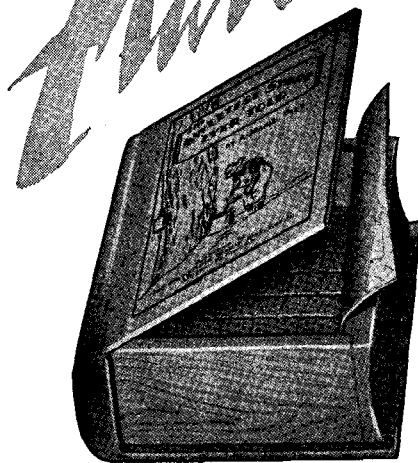


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## Cortesian Epic

*HERNAN CORTÉS: Conqueror of Mexico. By Salvador de Madariaga. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1941. 553 pp., index. \$4.*

Reviewed by WILLIAM LYTLE SCHURZ

THIS is the second in Salvador de Madariaga's biographical trilogy. Columbus was the subject of the first of the series; the third will treat of Bolivar. It is ninety-eight years since Prescott published his "Conquest of Mexico," and in the meantime the scientific historians have done their work on the classic version of the Cortesian epic. Since Señor Madariaga set out to write of the three preëminent figures in the history of Latin America, it was inevitable that he should include the man whom Edward Gaylord Bourne called "easily the greatest of the conquistadores, if not the ablest man that Spain produced in that age." And if Cortés was the ablest Spaniard of "the Spanish century," he was, by that token, the ablest Spaniard of all time. To Madariaga he was "the finest leader of men that Spain has produced" and "one of the greatest and one of the most attractive captains in history." But, he was "not merely a man, a soldier, a captain; he was a state." It was his superior statesmanship that set Cortés off from the rest of the conquistadores. He not only conquered the formidable Aztec "empire," but he laid the foundations of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, whereas the Viceroyalty of Peru was founded in bloodshed on the wreckage left by the political ineptness of the Pizarros. As his biographer says of him, "he was preëminently a military chief engaged in a masterpiece of political creation." He was not only "a seasoned statesman," but, something even rarer in the *conquista*, "a sound, if intuitional, economist."

Señor Madariaga makes the most of the superb drama that is the life of Cortés. For this overthrow of a redoubtable military power by a handful of magnificent, if at times very scared, soldiers is one of the supreme gesta of history. Bernal Diaz, one of them, mused in his later years "whether there were ever in the universe men who had such daring." And their leader once asked himself "if there was anything in the world so difficult that men of brain and valor could not achieve it." The biographer draws liberally on the chronicle of Bernal Diaz and the letters of Cortés to the King-Emperor, as anyone must, but he has also used all the other available contemporary sources and the commentaries of later writers, such as the notes of Pascual de Gayangos. The composition is handled with consummate skill.

Though Cortés dominates the scene, the multitude of other characters are portrayed as the vivid individuals they were. Especially effective are the pictures of Velasquez, the fuming and frustrated Governor of Cuba, of Montezuma (whom the author insists on calling Motecucuma, to the despair of custom and of printers who don't carry cedillas in their cases) and of the little men who followed in the wake of the conquerors.

We are doubly fortunate in having an authoritative biography of Cortés written in English by a Spaniard. Madariaga's command of English is so finished that he dares to indulge in verbal tours de force, such as translating Bernal Diaz's rendering of Huitzilopochtli as "Witchywolves." And it is Don Salvador de Madariaga, Spaniard, who says: "The Spanish character . . . cannot bear success . . . in someone else. The Spaniard suffers from sadness at his neighbor's rise," and "Seldom does a Spaniard attain recognition by his fellow men till he is dead." Which would explain many things in the history of the Spanish peoples. He emphasizes time and again the essential democracy of Spanish institutions, to which an end was put by Cortés's imperial correspondent and his successors. He quotes the comment of Bernal Diaz at the first sight of the Aztec capital: "There were some soldiers who even asked whether all that they saw might not be a dream." Then, in the mood of Calderón's "La Vida es Sueño," he adds: "A truly Spanish reaction, this doubt whether life is a dream or dreams are life. And who knows?" Spanish, too, as Unamuno's "Tragic Sense of Life" is the final sentence of the book: "Cortés, great in his achievement, was greater still in that his tragic life is a fit symbol of the tragedy in man on earth."

Though Señor Madariaga's life of Cortés has not supplanted Prescott, it has supplemented him.

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Music Criticism and Literature

OUR NEW MUSIC. By Aaron Copland. New York: Whittlesey House. 1941. 305 pp., with index. \$2.50.

MEMORIES OF OPERA. By Giulio Gatti-Casazza. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1941. 326 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by PAUL HENRY LANG

IF one of our distinguished composers decides to survey the musical panorama about him it behooves the critic and writer to listen with care. One of the corollaries of the romantic era was literary activity on the part of creative musicians; from Weber to Liszt composers were men of considerable humanistic training, and in many instances their writings exerted great influence on musical and literary life. Mr. Copland's book, little more than an extended pamphlet, is too sketchy to be considered as bona-fide literature on music. It is rather written in the manner of good-natured shop talk, interesting and quite to the point when dealing with a few representative American composers, but, when the author attempts to give a bird's-eye view of the prelude to the "modern era," disclosing unfamiliarity with the history of music, and a surprisingly insecure judgment. Whenever we reach a point requiring some concrete comments we are confronted with "to be more specific would lead us into too many technicalities"; thus the author conveniently stops at generalities. German romanticism is the *bête noire* in his eyes, and the uninitiated, reading his matter-of-fact remarks on the pernicious influence of the unfortunate composers who make up the galaxy of nineteenth-century musicians, will be rudely shocked when they discover that Mahler emerges from this short sketch as the worthiest of the worthies. The autobiographical essay, which makes up the third part of the book, is naive and rather commonplace. Mr. Copland is decidedly more competent when examining his confrères, the nature of whose art he has grasped with shrewdness and sympathy.

The second work is again a book without literary distinction. The late manager of the Metropolitan Opera was undoubtedly a first class executive, ably carrying out the mandate received from the American aristocracy to run their theater. From the pages of this book emerges the extraordinary recent history of opera in America—of opera in America even though, of course, New York City is not synonymous with America and the Metropolitan Opera House could hardly be taken to represent the nation. It is not our duty

here to meditate on the lamentable fact that this democratic Republic sported a *Hofoper* more exclusive, autocratic, uneconomical, and—brilliant, than many a real court theater in Europe, so we shall not take issue with the many implications crowding

to the fore in this book. Instead we shall merely call attention to the numerous stories, episodes, and anecdotes which will interest the operagoers and the historians of that fabulous era of the "Diamond Horseshoe." Mr. Taubman, we suspect, has lent more than a helping hand in putting together this "autobiography," and due credit should be given to his labors.

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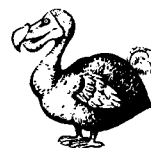


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