

Tribal Voices in Many Tongues

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I SUSPECT it was on a tourist's visit to Naples in the nineteenth century that some sentimental literary gentleman opined, "Music is a universal language." This absurd notion has bedeviled collectors of folk and primitive music ever since. I only wish I could hold the author's head firmly against the bell of my loud-speaker while I played him a series of albums. Soft-headed as he was, he would be forced to say, "Music may be a universal language, but what a devilish lot of dialects!"

As is so frequently the case, there is a perverse mite of truth in this apothegm. Of course there is no quicker way to establish a primary emotional contact with an exotic culture than through its music. Yet in all exotic music there lies a hard core of meaning and unfamiliar technique which must be absorbed slowly, and often suffered with, before the intent of the musical language comes clear to the listener.

I have never compared notes with my colleagues on the first impression an unfamiliar musical language makes upon their prejudiced collector's ears. I can recall my first six weeks of suffering in Haiti, while I sat next to the ear-shattering battery of vodun drums, blacking out aurally whenever I could endure no more of the high-pitched, hard voices of the female choruses. Then I remember an extended period of suffering with backwoods fiddlers here in the States. I would prefer not to recall certain other experiences. In every case, however, once I got the hang of the music, once I began to hear the nuances of feeling and humanity amid the blare of strange sounds, there began an interest that turned into liking, thence veering wildly to the state of enthusiasm at which every collector arrives, determined to traduce his friends' musical tastes. At such times, we folklorists share the passion that must have fired Sir Walter Raleigh when he introduced tobacco to the court of Elizabeth.

Music is no universal language, gen-

tle listeners, but if you will study certain recordings of African and Indian music, you will come to appreciate the artistry of songmakers who represent millions of human beings, hundreds of years of history. The portable electric recording machine, transported with no end of difficulty to various corners of the earth, has made your education relatively painless. Beauty lies within these unfamiliar continents of music, beauty which can carry you beyond, if not above, the horizons of the three B's, and of bebop too.

Until the early Thirties musicologists struggled with a system of notation unsuited to exotic musical systems or else endured the nerve-shattering surface of the cylindrical record. Nevertheless, Hornbostel, Sachs, and others gathered material that was suitable for study, if not for listening. The appearance in the early Thirties of the portable electric recorder, which engraved with a diamond point

on an aluminum disc, greatly stimulated field recording. Surface scratch was still present, but at least the amplifiers produced a realistic musical sound, sufficient to convince the layman (who financed these voyages) that the results were worth the money.

THE continuing improvement of inexpensive recording devices has further increased the pace of musical documentation. One constantly hears of new batches of records—here a GI back from Micronesia with records, there a linguist with records of the ancient melodies of the Ethiopian Jews. The archives in Washington and, one hears, in Paris, London, and elsewhere, are growing rapidly. A Library of the Music of the World's Peoples—something just dreamed about ten years ago—may soon be a living reality.

Meanwhile many handsome albums of acoustically good records of Afri-



Kouyou musicians from Africa—"Music may be a universal language, but what a devilish lot of dialects!"

—Folkways.

can and Indian music have begun to modify our provincial aural preferences. The collection, editing, and annotation were done, in most cases, by real experts. Several of the albums are the lavish product of the Archive of Folk Lore in the Library of Congress (catalogue available on request) and the remainder mostly the issue of indefatigable Moe Asch, former owner of the Asch and Disc labels, now releasing an "ethnic series" labeled Folkways, at 117 W. 46th St., New York City.

TO BEGIN with, here are some albums of African and Afro-American music:

"*Music of Equatorial Africa*," four 10" unbrk., \$7.33, Folkways, recorded by André Didier on a mission to French Equatorial Africa. This is the best album of African music I know, aside from the now unavailable Belgian Congo records. A wide range of instruments—the drum, the antelope horn, the zither, the xylophone, the musical bow, and the sansa (a sort of abbreviated piano)—and an even broader range of song styles remind one again that Africa may be the most musical continent, a land where all life activities are part of an unbroken stream of rhythmic activity. In a note describing the xylophone record M. Didier says, "... two teams work in relays from sunset to daybreak; not one moment does the music stop while the men and women dance in circles around the xylophones . . ."

"Not one moment does the music stop"—this phrase explains much of the uncanny ease and rightness of African phrasing, whether it occurs in a hot jazz band, in a Brazilian Caboclo ceremony, or in Babinga pigmy chorus (record three) where each singer produces only *one* note in the caracol-like melody. It is a prodigious amount of "practice" that produces the prodigies of polyrhythm, improvisation, and choral polish for which African music is notable. Absorption into the cultural patterns of this hemisphere added color to this music, but did not change its basic design—an impression clearly confirmed by the following albums.

"*Afro-Bahian Religious Songs*," five 12" vinylites, Library of Congress, \$8.25, recorded by Melville and Francis Herskovits in Bahia, Brazil, the "Rome of the Africanos." These records and the fascinating ethnological essay accompanying them document the cult music of the Brazilian Negro of the North. The language is largely African; the melodies with their typically descending cadences are African; but, again, it is the precision of the choral responses, the dominance and virtuosity of the drummers that finally stamp the music.

Dr. Herskovits's Brazilian drummers do not strike me as quite so accomplished as those I recorded in Haiti. Of course, the brilliance of the folk music of this tiny island republic is altogether hard to explain. Perhaps it is a reflection of the revolutionary and independent spirit of the Haitian peasant, who feels comfortably superior to all "foreigners." A number of Haitian albums have been published, including the following:

"*Voodoo*," four 10" shellacs, General Records, recorded in New York and now out of print.

"*Haiti Dances*," two 10" shellacs, \$2.89 (two singles also available at \$1.05), Wax Record Co., New York. Mistakes in labeling and confusion in the explanatory notes detract little



from the technical excellence and the musical interest of these records. The choral performances, taken in the neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, show city influence, but point the probable direction of Haitian folk music as it gains acceptance by the elite and is "refined."

"*Folk Music of Haiti*," four 10" unbrk., \$7.33, Folkways, an early reissue of a valuable Disc album which exhibited much of the variety of Haitian music—mardi-gras drumming, mosquito drumming, and work songs, as well as vodun music. A product of Harold Courlander.

"*Drums of Haiti*," four 10" vinylites \$7.33, Folkways, recorded and edited by Courlander, who is a novelist and one of the best and most active field recordists. It contains a wide range of drum rhythms, with especially brilliant examples of the social dances. On these records the drummers "break away" in superb style. Courlander's best album so far, "*Cult Music of Cuba*," Disc, will also be reissued this year in improved pressings by Folkways. In Cuba, Courlander had to "bootleg" his recording sessions, for there the vodun cults are underground. This must have been an annoying problem for him, but we are the beneficiaries. There is not a careless or unimpassioned groove in the album.

"*Trinidad Steel Band*," two 10" shellacs, Disc, out of print, but worth a search if you want to hear where present-day sophisticated calypso came from. Contrary to the impression of the editor, the steel bands—composed of washtubs, tire rims, biscuit pans, and oil drums (each article chosen so that it is in tune with the others)—were the forerunners of the modern calypsonian orchestra. For the folk music of rural Trinidad we will have to wait until the Library of Congress issues some of the records Herskovits made on his expedition there.

"*Bake the Johnny Cake*," "*Cé la Rage*," one 12", Murray Music Co., New York, is the only record I know of Bahamian folk music. A sophisticated performance by a Cuban style or-

chestra, but none the less genuine Bahamian and a record that will frighten no one.

NEGRO folk music prepared all of us to some degree to accept African music. The story is quite different so far as Indian music is concerned. Since the days when the voyageurs and other frontiersmen lived (and doubtless sang) with the Indians, few Americans have had more than a tourist's acquaintance with Indian singing. The sentimentalized scores of Cadman, MacDowell, and other longhairs, the romantic tomfoolery of popular songs served only to increase our ignorance. Serious musicologists struggled with exotic scales and intervals they could not represent in conventional notation. Now, at last, we can soak in the strident and soaring singing of the first Americans—a style which, to my ear, is surprisingly consistent for all the regions which these records represent.

"*Songs from the Iroquois Longhouse*," five 12" shellacs, \$8.25, Library of Congress, with a thirty-four-page illustrated booklet by the collector, William Fenton of the Smithsonian Institution. Burly Bill Fenton has spent so much time ethnologizing on the reservation of the Five Nations at Allegheny, New York, that the people ac-

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Some Enchanted "Pacific"

WITH or without intention, Oscar Hammerstein 2nd provided, in advance, a proper rebuke to the aspiring reviewer of the "South Pacific" score (Columbia album 850, \$7.12; LP ML4180, \$4.85) in a recurrent couplet of its most memorable song, "Some Enchanted Evening." It is the one that goes, "Fools give you reasons, wise men never try." Being by nature of the former proclivity, inclined to rush in even where angels of the Broadway variety fear to tread, I am impelled to provide some reasons why this version of their latest score is superior to any and all others.

The fundamental reason comes from the records themselves, not merely this one by the original cast—Mary Martin, Ezio Pinza, Juanita Hall, etc.—but all the others, of whatever company. Having listened, in an interim since seeing the show, to endless versions of "Some Enchanted Evening," "Wonderful Guy," "Happy Talk," "Bali Ha'i," "This Nearly Was Mine," and all the rest, it was something of a shock to re-live the original experience in the chosen voices, to observe the extent to which the ideas, purposes, and emotions of the creators are more properly embodied in these than in any other interpreters.

I trust that this discovery, and the proclamation of it, will not prove too distressing to composer and librettist; after all, they like to sell as many records as possible, regardless of origin. But I am a strong proponent of the viewpoint that unless you hear Miss Martin sing "Cockeyed Optimist" you haven't heard it at all; likewise for Pinza in "Some Enchanted Evening" (although any hearty baritone from Igor Gorin to Leonard Warren might do as well); and particularly Juanita Hall in "Happy Talk." "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair" sung by Fran Warren or Jo Stafford is a dubious bit of fluff, largely mannered and mostly insincere. Sung by Mary Martin and commented upon with ironic disbelief by the corps of nurses, it has character, dramatic point, and a good deal of zest.

At an opposite pole is "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy." Your average Alexander Graham Belle-voice is as corny as the field of Kansas grain wryly exposed by Hammerstein; but with Martin the corn is as high as an elephant's eye. She gets right to the kernel of the meaning. Likewise Miss Hall's heartfelt "Bali Ha'i," in contrast to the mere sentimentality of others, or her buoyantly naturalistic "Happy Talk," to my mind the most charming single thing in the score.

What is involved here, I think, is

something even more accentuated than the partners achieved, concerning dramatic point and suitability, in "Oklahoma!" and "Carousel." Just as no other singers of "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'" and "Summertime" ever approached, for reality and style, the work of Todd Duncan and Anne Brown—not to mention the incomparable Bubbles in "It Ain't Necessarily So"—, so there are values in the matters cited above which can only be found in the work of those steeped in the manner prescribed by the authors. The old notion of musical comedy, in which a "hit" song could be sung by a soprano or a tenor, a crooner or a voiceless "personality," has been here replaced by a play-in-music, in which some identity of equipment with material is involved. Nobody else is going to manage the guttural inflection of Juanita Hall in "Happy Talk" for the simple reason that she is Bloody Mary; while nobody else can do justice to "Wonderful Guy" for the parallel reason that it is Ensign Forbush, in the person of Miss Martin, who is in love, in love, in love, in love, in love with the aforementioned W. G.

OF Pinza, it is possible—not to say necessary—to speak with more restraint. I suppose it was mere *amour propre* which made it necessary for him to prove, beyond contest, that he is the one of the cast with a legitimate voice. But what is thrilling and satisfying in the theatre is slightly bumptious on the record, where he delivers the clinging phrases of "Some En-

chanted Evening" and "This Nearly Was Mine" (a superb melody, incidentally) in a manner more material to "Il Lacerato Spirito" from "Simon Boccanegra."

It is hardly necessary to add that none of this would be so sharp a reflection of the original experience were it not for the lusty brilliance of the Columbia recording, in which much of the original spirit and characterization of the life-size production is recreated. Much? Let us say more; for the resources of the microphone, its tricks and wiles, permit a multiplication of virtues not possible on the less flexible stage. This is especially true of the orchestra, which fulfils its role in a way that Russell Bennet, the predestined intermediary of the writers, could only have imagined or Salvatore Dell' Isola, the able conductor, hoped for.

In a year which has produced both "Kiss Me, Kate" and "South Pacific"—each with its tenacious adherents, both matters about which few are impartial—some comparisons or clarifications are, I suppose, in order. The difference, it seems to me, can be summed up in a phrase: the Porter score is as good as he has ever done—smart, topical, breezy—without shedding any new light on his talent (or, perhaps, too bright a one). "South Pacific," if not a headier brew or a deeper draught than "Oklahoma!" or "Carousel" (its likeliest comparisons), is full not only of present pleasure but of suggestions for the future of Hammerstein and Rodgers, of new resources to meet old problems, and—above all—an awareness of the new problems that must be met if the magic of the theatre is to be kept potent and alive. —THE EDITOR.



Mary Martin, Richard Rodgers, and Ezio Pinza listening to a playback—"a shock to re-live the original experience in the chosen voices."