



From engravings by the great Mexican artist

JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA

Used recently as costume designs
for the Mexico City production of
LA CORONELA, ballet by
SILVESTRE REVUELTAS

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

THE SURVIVAL OF TRADITION

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WHAT is the future of that "European musical tradition" which is presumably endangered now that so many leading musicians of the old continent have been transplanted to the new one? This question, put to me recently, is of course not concerned with the individual fate of the musicians and with their problems of "adjusting," "adapting," "assimilating" — all those unfortunate verbs which seem to be synonyms for "giving up" something or other. In this connection, the musicians who have come over here during the last years are held to be the living European tradition, the bearers of the original flame kindled in the old countries many centuries ago and handed down through generations of teachers and pupils; personifying that "continuity" which seems characteristic of European culture. What indeed is left of that continuity when its carriers are transported in a swift and arbitrary move to new and strange places?

As I am addicted to logical approach, I decided, before answering, to probe deeper into the meaning of the terms "European" and "tradition." Since my arrival in this country, I have heard much about European and American music. But I wonder whether this distinction should be taken for granted. Some American musicians do not like to think of themselves as descendants of European masters. Be that as it may, they certainly cannot deny that America is a participant in, and today most probably the heir of Western civilization, which is a much broader concept than European culture. Personally I have never felt that American music was essentially different from European music except where it places excessive emphasis on exotic raw material. But music that dwells on tribal idiosyncrasies appears to me "un-European," or rather "un-Western," even when it is manufac-

tured by Europeans whose horizons are limited by their own church steeples. "European," in this connotation, is obviously no geographic designation of the point of origin, but means the state of mind in which the music is conceived. The antonym of European or, as I prefer to say, "Western," is not American, but "provincial," regardless of the hemisphere in which the province may be located. No matter how the ratio of universal to provincial attitudes in American civilization compares to the corresponding ratio as it existed in Europe during the last twenty years, there is little reason to presume that European contemporary music of the universal kind would be less at home in America than in those countries from which it has been driven by a high tide of provincialism.

Now, what is tradition? Gustav Mahler whose directorial *furioso* was alien to the humdrum atmosphere of the Vienna Opera House once said, when taken to task for destroying hallowed traditions: "*Tradition ist Schlamperei*" – *Schlamperei* meaning an ugly compound of sloppiness, callousness, indifference, laziness and disorder. Does this seem to be anything worth preserving? I know that is just one side of the picture. The attitude of the progressive artist towards tradition is necessarily dialectic. On the one hand, we are anxious to uphold the idea of tradition since it is the tangible form of that immortality which is a constant concern of those composers especially who feel that their most significant works go from the desk straight to the sanctified burial grounds of the library without becoming audible in their own time at all (except for a few very rare, ephemeral performances). The very fact that we still study and enjoy Okeghem and Palestrina makes us all hope that our music, too, will be studied and enjoyed in far distant centuries. On the other hand, we wage war against tradition with some zest because it is precisely this bulk of venerable material, firmly entrenched in contemporary musical life, that relegates us to its periphery.

As far as musical life is concerned, we find alas! more than enough European tradition in this country. Established performing institutions in America are just as reluctant to accept novelties as those of Europe to say the least. But the aspect of tradition which is held to be in peril here is that evidence of continuity with which the European musician grows up. He sees and touches the old houses where the great masters were born, worked and died. He hears music in the same places where Bach's, Haydn's, Mozart's, Beethoven's compositions had their first auditions. These are circumstances which we once took for granted. How awesome can be the

implications of this continuity I first realized when I was shown a private home in Amsterdam with a painting by Rembrandt still hanging in the same place, on the same wall, for which the master and his sponsor had destined it.

Having lived for three years without such symbols of continuity, I must confess that I have not yet missed them much. Of course the attitude of the present generation which is immediately affected by the violent changes may not be conclusive; we had absorbed all the available historic experience before coming here, and are now so busy "adjusting," "assimilating" (that is: rebuilding material existence) that we may be rather light-hearted about what is lost. Yet the problem does boil down to the problem of the transplanted composers, because what they hand down to posterity, what they contribute to the foundations of future tradition, depends on what they are doing, here and now.

Granted that we are now living through one of the most spectacular upheavals in history, we should still remember that almost every age has had an experience that was felt at the time to be "the worst." Those exposed to the calamities of the Thirty Years' War were in no position to be grateful that they were spared submarine and air attacks. From history, I gather that violent circumstances have affected the evolution of music surprisingly little. For instance, does Bach's work inspire us to find out whether his period was peaceful or restive? Do we realize, in evaluating Beethoven, that the country in which he lived was involved in almost continuous warfare for twenty years, that Vienna was occupied for a considerable time by the enemy, and that the complete financial collapse of Austria ensued in 1811? And yet such events must doubtless have had quite an influence on the daily life of the contemporaries to whom they certainly appeared as cosmic catastrophes. Still more to the point — is there any evidence of a musical kind to indicate that four years of world war separate Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* from his *Quintet for Wind Instruments*? And in my opinion, nothing in his *Violin Concerto* shows that he had migrated to Southern California before writing it.

Certainly, outward conditions influence the work of a composer, but on the outer surface only. When we ask why Monteverdi's last operas have a small cast of principals, almost no chorus, and an orchestra dominated by strings — in contrast to the pompous accoutrements of the *Orfeo* of 1609 — we learn that the change was due to the considerable shrinkage in financial outlay for operatic production. But we have to dig out those facts

from archives, while the evolution of Monteverdi's musical style appears perfectly logical in itself, just as the evolution of Stravinsky is manifest in *L'histoire du soldat*, whether or not we know that the fancy, miniature investiture of this play was an emergency venture of the first World War. I am about to complete an operatic play with a very limited apparatus because American conditions favor such an arrangement; I might not have had that idea had the former conditions in Europe prevailed. I do not see, however, that my purely musical intentions have been to any extent altered by these considerations.

It sounds a little old-fashioned to conceive of art as something having its own life. Sociologists have tried hard to teach us that art and all other spiritual activities react to political and economic quakes like so many oscillographs. The more terrifying the concussions from the earthquakes raging around us, the more I doubt the value of this interpretation. As to future potentialities, I prefer not to venture into prophecy.

In general, I am inclined to belittle the impact of outer events on a composer's work. What he needs is shelter, food and time to write music. Nothing short of the physical lack of these admittedly primitive prerequisites can seriously disturb him, not because he is an unfeeling brute, but because he lives under the imperative obligation to use the short time allotted him to perform his task as well as he understands it. History would not forgive his neglect of that task because of temporal entanglements.