Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From Aztec to NAFTA

Reviewed by Lauryn Salazar

As one of the world's largest cities, Mexico City has long been a place of musical innovation and tradition. It is home to practically every Mexican folk and urban style and a point of entry for international genres such a western European classical music and rock. In his book, Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From Aztec to NAFTA, Mark Pedelty has undertaken the colossal task of constructing a comprehensive history of Mexico City's entire repertoire of musical traditions in a mere fifteen chapters.

Ritual comprises one of the book's overarching themes. While Pedelty does not discuss explicitly what he means by ritual in the narrative (said discussion is deferred to Appendix 1: Theory and Methodology), it becomes clear that, in his opinion, particular modes of listening and symbolic behavior constitute ritual participation at some level. Religious, dance and other secular song genres provide the bulk of the book's examples of musical ritual.

Pedelty organizes his book into fifteen chapters. The chapters are grouped into six parts, organized chronologically:

Part I: The Mexica: 1325-1521 begins with a discussion of pre-Columbian Aztec/Mexica music. Pedelty's account of religious ritual music provides an interesting social analysis of the role of human sacrifice. He explains that, "the tens of thousands of sacrificial deaths that took place during the Mexica rule were demanded by the natural world and the god-spirits of that world, not by the priests, emperors, and warriors who carried them out" (p.9).

Part II: New Spain: 1521-1821 describes the musical and cultural clash between the Spanish and Mexica following the European conquest of Mexico. Music and ritual, in the colonial period, became an instrumental tool for the Spaniards in asserting their control over the Mexica and other tribes.

In Part III: The New Nation: 1821-1910, Pedelty explains that, once Mexico gained independence from Spain, a process of Hispanicization began to take place; however, various forms of resistance to cultural domination were demonstrated by the banning of the popular jarabe and the controversial waltz. A discussion of the son is also included in this section. Pedelty argues that, "although the son was brought to the New World via Mexico City, it eventually settled in the countryside" (p. 90). If this is the case, where did the son come from? Most Mexican genres have their own distinct sones; son Jalisciense of the mariachi genre is perhaps the most well known. The word son is a generic term, while complex sones can be distinguished geographically and by instrumentation (Chamorro 2000: 28). Pedelty's discussion of sones and other musical styles might benefit from reference to musical transcriptions, through which he could better demonstrate stylistic differences in various types of son.

Parts Four through Six are devoted to the twentieth century. Part IV: The Revolution: 1910-1921 focuses almost entirely on the corrido. The corrido is similar to the ballad in form, and was used to disseminate news of the Mexican Revolution. Pedelty chronicles the development of the corrido to its most recent incarnation, the narcocorrido, which often takes up the subject matter of drug trafficking.

Bolero, danzón, nationalism and ranchera are discussed in Part V: Modern Mexico: 1921-1968. Although of Cuban origin, Pedelty explains how both the bolero and the danzón evolved into distinctly Mexican genres. He highlights the work of renowned bolero composer Agustín Lara, who helped define early Mexican modernism. In his chapter on classical nationalism, the author discusses how composers Carlos Chávez, Manuel Ponce, Blas Galindo and Silvestre Revueltas used indigenous and folk music within a classical idiom in accordance with post-revolutionary ideology. Part Five ends with a discussion of ranchera and mariachi music. While Pedelty refers to mariachi as an ensemble and ranchera as a musical style, he still tends to use the two terms interchangeably. The mariachi repertoire is vast and includes many musical styles, such as ranchera, the son jalisciense, the jarabe, polka, etc. The ranchera style is primarily a sung genre, meaning that a ranchera singer is not necessarily a mariachi (Sheehy 1999: 46). Nonetheless, in light of the paucity of written materials on the subject, Pedelty's discussion of mariachi constitutes a valuable and much-welcome contribution.

Part VI: Contemporary Mexico: 1968-2002 concerns rock bands such as El Tri and Café Tacuba, and their socially-minded lyrics. Pedelty notes that, "rock in the United States now consists of a diversified set of loosely related subgenres rather than a single discernible cultural movement. Mexican Rock, however, has retained its

ritual intensity and political focus" (p. 270). Northern Mexican genres such as norteño and banda are also briefly discussed in this section. While norteño and banda are not as popular as other genres in Mexico City, they do enjoy a following, particularly in northern Mexico.

Pedelty peppers his account of ritual music in Mexico City with interesting anecdotes and insights attained through fieldwork. While his historical analysis strikes the reviewer as fair and thorough, his musical analysis seems weaker by comparison. The book's lack of detailed musical analysis defies musical clarity. A chapter or appendix devoted solely to the various musical genres, forms and styles he addresses might have provided further evidence for the author's cultural and aesthetic arguments. To make his book as accessible to a lay readership as possible, Pedelty chose to discuss his methodology and theoretical frameworks in the first appendix. Those readers wishing to know more about his fieldwork and research should therefore refer to the three appendices. Overall, the broad scope of material covered make this book a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the music of Mexico.

References

Chamorro, J. Arturo. 2000. *Mariachi antiguo, jarabe y son: símbolos compartidos y tradición musical en las identidades jalisciense*s. Jalisco, Mexico: El Colegio de Jalisco.

Sheehy, Daniel. 1999. "Popular Mexican Musical Traditions: The Mariachi of West Mexico and the Conjunto Jarocho of Veracruz." In *Music in Latin American Culture: Regional Traditions*, edited by John M. Schechter, 34-79. New York: Schirmer Books.

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