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The Music of Spain

Carl Van Vechten



The Music of Spain

First published in 1920, *The Music of Spain* deals with historical periods, schools and style and appears to embrace everything related to music provided it affects or is affected by Spain in some degree, no matter how small or insignificant. The period extends from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century and the author encircles his subject in a huge ring or parenthesis that opens with Antonio Cabezon, the Spanish Bach (according to Pedrell) and closes with the gypsy dancer and singer Pastora Imperio, queen of the Spanish “varieties” stage of today. It brings themes like Spain and music; the land of joy; and from George Borrow to Mary Garden. This book is an important historical reference for students and scholars of history of music, Spanish music.



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Carl Van Vechten



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MARY GARDEN AS CARMEN, ACT IV

from a photograph by Mishkin

THE
MUSIC OF SPAIN

BY
CARL VAN VECHTEN

WITH PREFACE AND NOTES
BY
PEDRO G. MORALES

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“ Il faut méditerraniser la musique.”

Nietzsche.

For Blanche Knopf



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PREFACE

BY PEDRO G. MORALES.

THE idea of the author of this book is perhaps better expressed in the title of its first chapter, "Spain and Music," than by *The Music of Spain*, for the author does not deal solely with the subject in relation to historical periods, schools, or style, as is often the case with books of this kind. The present work appears to embrace everything related to music, provided it affects or is affected by Spain in some degree, no matter how small or insignificant. The period extends from the XVI. Century to the present day, or, in order to make the reader realize at once the true character of his work, I should say that the author encircles his subject in a huge ring or parenthesis that opens with Antonio Cabezon, the Spanish Bach (according to Pedrell) and closes with the gypsy dancer and singer, Pastora Imperio, queen of the Spanish "varieties" stage of to-day. The task might seem at first sight injudiciously ambitious, and from the point of view of bibliographical routine, incorrect and perhaps insurmountable, but Mr. C. Van

Vechten has accomplished his purpose with exceptional ability and success within the scope of a comparatively small book. If it is true that he only touches "en passant" many points of far-reaching importance, it is also true that there is not a single point of interest in his wide scheme which he leaves untouched. Those particularly concerned with the study of Nationality in Music and the *musicologue* and folk-lore student in general have to welcome in Mr. Van Vechten's book a work long needed and expected in these days of sudden and ever increasing hispanophilia; a work that constitutes the most complete guide the student of all types of Spanish music could wish for at the present time. It is written in a breathless but well-sustained style, and though essentially non-critical, contains many wise and subtle critical remarks, besides endless reliable and curious information.

Erudites and scholars have had always at their disposal special works, such as *Le Mysticisme musical espagnol au XVIIe. Siècle*, and others mentioned in their proper place, the above being by Mr. Henri Collet, one of the greatest living authorities on ancient and modern Spanish music; but the public in general have been, until recently, in a very different position.

It was only five years ago that, as one of the many curious effects of the universal upheaval produced by the Great War, the attention of the

principal belligerent countries was converted to the long neglected subject of Spanish music. In reality, a European reaction took place on behalf of Spanish art, music specially, as it was then the least known abroad of all the manifestations of our artistic life. Whether such reaction was based on pure motives is a question that does not concern us here, but there are two circumstances in relation to that fact well worth recording. First: The general interest in the music of Spain continues, and is gradually increasing* since the cessation of the war. Second: The said reaction coincided with the breaking into life of the "renacimiento" that Pedrell and Albéniz had initiated years ago, each of them in their respective spheres of action, for Pedrell is essentially a pedagogue, while Albéniz was just the opposite. He had a higher mission; he was an inspirer.

More newspaper articles on the subject of Spanish music and folk-lore have appeared during the last five years in all Europe, than during the previous fifty or sixty years together. Yet the general public is still very far from being properly enlightened on this subject, as the value of the said writings (this being said without

*The modern French composers, especially Ravel and Debussy, had always been particularly interested in the music of Spain. This is confirmed by many of their compositions, and their admirable attitude towards the Spanish composers and students living in Paris before the war. As I have said elsewhere: "Spanish music was performed and acknowledged in France as an artistic achievement before it was recognised as such even in Spain."

malice) is not always in keeping with their profusion. To this state of affairs, other causes have also contributed.

Inaccuracy and misunderstanding is the prominent feature of a great part of the literature on Spain produced during the last eighty years or so, especially in its reference to our folk-lore and music. Travellers and *art-explorers* seem to get always more in touch with our professional exponents of national songs and dances, than with the people, and their observations suffer in consequence. This most regrettable occurrence can be excused and explained, for it is not so easy, for instance, to come across a group of peasants singing and dancing in their native surroundings, as to pay professionals (not always good and genuine) to arrange a "juerga" or "fiesta" for the amusement of tourists. To give a full explanation of all the local terms that appear in the course of this book, to point out the small but important errors in national *nuances* to be found in the many quotations from different writers that the author so wisely introduces in his text, would be beyond the limits and the non-critical character of this Introduction. Nevertheless, I must call the readers' attention to the fact that the appreciations of artists appearing in this book, such as those by Chabrier, Arthur Symons, and especially Raul Laparra, are more trustworthy and useful than those by travellers and literateurs, in the strict sense of

these words. Æsthetic sensibility is a far better medium of judgment in these matters than scientific analysis. In this respect, special mention must be made of Havelock Ellis' subtle observation (pp. 65-119): "The finest Spanish dancing is at once killed or degraded by the presence of an indifferent or unsympathetic public, and that is probably why it cannot be transplanted, but remains local." Such would be the case with the *gauchos* of South America, as they improvise "coplas," or with the Hungarian gypsy as he extemporises his *Czardas*. But is it not after all, the same phenomena that takes place when a great artist finds himself powerless against the disastrous physical and moral effect produced by an indifferent or unsympathetic audience? Real art, both in its most elemental or highest developed form, is the result of inspiration, and inspiration in its turn, the result of undisturbed idleness of mind, unconscious concentration. But let us turn to our main subject. "Spain and Music" represents to-day the most successful attempt made outside Spain to *popularize* the cause of Spanish music, and what is still more important, to foster the understanding of the Spanish character through the most direct, faithful, though subtle and evasive, medium, of popular expression: music, dance, song, something individuals cannot invent: elemental rhythm. Such effort can but inspire the greatest sympathy and gratitude to all those, profes-

sionals or amateurs, who have the progress of Spanish art at heart, for is it not evident that the author has treated his subject not only with efficiency and honesty, but with real "amore" ?

Read the chapter, "The Land of Joy." He works himself up to such a pitch of excitement, that he exclaims : " Let us hope that Spain will have no artistic reawakening (p. 124)." Well, his own enthusiasm makes him forget or ignore that what he has been describing in such fluent and spirited words, is (as well as the whole *raison d'être* of his book) a proof of an artistic reawakening, the manifestations of which are to be found nowadays not only in the concert-room and theatre, but in the music-hall and the "café-chantant" of our country. Popular music in Spain (including dance and song) has undergone a long period of decadence, such as that which we will call here "musica seria" or "musica sinfonica." The two cases, nevertheless, differ in great measure, for the above-mentioned style degenerated through the influence of the can-can and the French "coupletiste" vogue that once swept Europe like a plague, while the latter did not exist in reality (the Sixteenth Century school excepted), until the days of Pedrell and Albéniz, thanks to the incurable "Italianism" from which their predecessors suffered from the beginning to the end of their lives.

One might have wished that the climax of enthusiasm to which we have just referred had

been provoked by Falla's "Noches en los Jardines de España," or Albéniz's "Iberia." (Has the author heard Arthur Rubinstein play any of those piano pieces? . . .) But let us trust the Spanish proverb that says: "All roads lead to Rome," and hope that the spicy "picarismo" of Quinito Valverde will convert Mr. Van Vechten to the exquisite subtlety of Falla and Albéniz, just as the warm, popular "cantares" of my country have led many a foreigner to read and never forget the sublime sweetness of San Juan de la Cruz's poetry. Surely the miracle will take place (if it has not been already accomplished), for everything good can be expected of one who says: "What we have been thinking of all these years in accepting the imitation and ignoring the actuality, I don't know . . . How these devilish Spaniards have been able to keep it up all this time, I can't imagine." (p. 123.)

Bravo! This is the right spirit. This will bear good fruit. What was a dead wall, and could not lead anywhere, was the old-fashioned attitude, with all its natural consequences, of considering "Carmen" the *quintessence* of everything Spanish. Of that quite incontestable truth, Mr. Van Vechten does not seem to be quite fully convinced. He is aware of our views on this point, but does not appear to accept them without a certain amount of reluctance, as he shows (very discreetly indeed) in the last part

of the book, *From George Borrow to Mary Garden*. "Carmen," to begin with, is not a prototype, but a very extraordinary type of Spanish woman. The novel of Merimée, is true to life, but as arranged for the stage, it is only a grotesque display of absurdities, an agglomeration of inaccurate details. The atmosphere thus created is false. The music of Bizet is so original that everybody thought after its first success that it was purely Spanish, and this belief still remains. But the case is that of the immense variety of popular melodies to be found in Spain, the great composer, faithful to the intended local colour of the *libretto*, only used besides a rhythm of Havanera, two or three Andalusian tunes, which in his hands forcibly become French, as the development goes on. Any of the piano music of Albéniz, for instance, "Evocation," which is built on original ideas, is more Spanish in feeling than Bizet's version of themes recognised as popular. The French composer carried the music of Spain in his ear for a certain purpose; Albéniz had it in his heart, by the "gift of heaven." To these words, I had occasion to write some time ago, I may add that the Spanish woman is the most unselfish and enduring being on earth. Every "gitana" or "manola," no matter how low she may have fallen, bears the seed of fidelity, ready to blossom, deeply rooted in her heart. The operatic character, Spanish *par excellence*, is not "Carmen,"