

SOME CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN MEXICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS MUSIC

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The renewed religious activity which has been gathering national momentum over the past decade has deeply affected Mexican Americans and other Spanish speakers in the United States. For Catholics one may perhaps date the resurgence as commencing shortly after the Second Vatican Council of 1963; Protestant growth seems to have begun at approximately the same time, somewhat in parallel with the La Raza Movement. It is rewarding to analyze developments among the various denominations because of what is revealed about the diversity of Mexican American outlooks, because of the interesting leadership activities of church groups, and because of the musical trends which are appearing in worship.

This research is in its early stages and offers only a few preliminary conclusions. The study grew out of an interest in Latin American religious music and a desire to view religious music in a more hemispheric and even "Western" sense, while at the same time trying to gain a musical perspective concerning Hispano-Mexican cultural influences. Materials have been gathered over the past three years. The first part of the study was developed during a leave from Northern Arizona University during the 1972–73 academic year, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to study Mexican American Creative Arts. Correspondence with some two hundred priests who were conducting masses in twenty-seven dioceses of the Southwest provided a broad foundation for study of Catholic worship, and I was later able to visit many of these priests and record their services. On 15 March 1974, a presentation of the Catholic portion of this survey research was given at the Rocky Mountain Council of Latin American Studies Conference in Lubbock, Texas, and included a tape of twenty selections which provided a panorama of musical styles to be heard in worship from Texas to California.

Meanwhile, it had taken somewhat longer to develop contacts with Spanish-speaking Protestant and other Christian denominations—they were not all neatly listed in one directory as were their Catholic counterparts. However, two approaches yielded good results. Letters to the headquarters of forty-eight denominations inquiring about the extent of activities among Spanish speakers in the United States helped to initiate productive correspondence with appropriate

program directors who were very helpful in providing data and publications. Secondly, a review of broadcasting statistics indicated that about 350 radio and television stations in thirty-five states were airing almost seven thousand hours of Spanish language programs per week. (The number two language was Polish at three hundred hours per week!) Letters to some eighty stations netted the names of approximately forty-five religious programs. I am indebted to the many directors and producers of these programs who have been generous with their time and who have sent me tapes and records of sermons, "platicas," and music.

The range of religious broadcasts varied greatly: Some originated with individual clergymen who went on the air at a local station with what was essentially a "home-made" program; others, such as "La Biblia Dice" (known in English as "Back to the Bible") were essentially mass-distributed translations; still others were sponsored by the national denomination headquarters but written and produced locally; and yet another series was professionally produced in radio-TV centers and distributed both nationally and internationally.

The greatest degree of Spanish-speaking evangelical activity seems to be occurring among Lutherans, Baptists, Nazarenes, Seventh Day Adventists, World Missionary Gospel, Church of Christ, Evangelical Spanish Missionaries, Assembly of God, Christian Reformed, and Jehovah's Witnesses. However, this list is incomplete—Presbyterians, Methodists, Latter Day Saints, and other groups are definitely involved, but as of April 1975 I have not yet received replies to all my inquiries.

Interestingly, interviews with several ministers produced candid remarks. The Spanish speaker was somewhat generally viewed as an important target group for current activity—disenchanted with Catholicism and available for affiliation in a new church or for rededication to a more liberated and socially active Catholicism. It is perhaps hard to say this with a proper and judicious perspective. I was impressed with the zeal, hard work, and sincere devotion of ministers in their quest to bring the word of their particular denomination to Spanish speakers. Some were themselves of Hispano-Mexican descent, while others had learned about "Latino" culture and were trying to relate their approach and materials in a cross-cultural fashion. A few were striving to develop bilingual and bicultural congregations. All talked about the importance of their particular denomination and the inspiration and peace of mind that it could bring to the new Spanish-speaking convert. Some pointed out that the strict, fundamental interpretation of the scripture would be vital in maintaining the traditional Mexican American solidarity of the family and paternal authority in today's permissiveness—thus curbing creeping (and undesirable) acculturation.

However, while nearly everyone mentioned Ecumenism as a significant value, definitions varied. To some, Ecumenism meant the "adaptation of other denominations to that of the True Church." For others, it meant multidenominational modification of doctrine through conciliar consensus. Very few seemed to stress tolerant acceptance of other organized outlooks or really wanted to talk about it in any depth. Only two broadcasts appeared not to have an evangelical purpose, either through "hard" or "soft" approaches; they stressed ethico-moral action and

meditational peace of mind without being denominational—that is, the impression was created that they were more interested in the well-being of the listener than in equating the message with a particular “sponsor.” In both cases these were programs developed by individuals, one of them a retired Catholic monsignor.

However, it must be stressed again that these are the most preliminary findings from the earliest stage of a young research project. What appears obvious is a rapidly accelerating religious evangelism emanating from many denominations. The field is expanding and there is room for much research, data gathering, and interpretation on many facets of the larger topic.

But let us consider the music itself. The Catholic “New Mass” represents an innovation of the past decade. In December 1963 the Second Vatican Council authorized the use of vernacular worship in regular services. Latin American churches were quick to respond, giving rise to the Argentine *Misa Criolla*, *Misa Chilena*, *Missa do Morro* from Brazil, *Misa Típica de Panama*, *Misa Criolla Venezolana*, *Misa de México*, the well-known *Misa Panamericana* synthesis, and others. Mexican American and other Spanish-speaking Catholic congregations in the United States began developing new masses about the same time, though at a slower rate and with a somewhat different approach. A vast spectrum of music was gradually appropriated and adapted from Latin American, North American, and European sources. This was partly due to the desires of individual priests, the location and degree of acculturation of the parishioners, and, to some extent, the styles of music of the Mexican region from which the parishioners or their antecedents originally came. However, it does not appear that a *Misa Mexico-americana*, *Cubanoamericana*, or *Boricuoamericana* has yet been composed.

The vernacular approach to worship has had a definite impact upon Mexican American parishes but differs from place to place, posing numerous questions which priests, parishioners, musicians, and clerical administrators are trying to resolve. Key among these are considerations of whose music should be used, how appropriate are the different rhythms and songs for worship services, and who should play them. Parishioners and clergy are torn between tradition and innovation, between emulating Protestant congregations and steering their own course, between a desire to recapture the straying young and a fear of alienating older members, and between stressing “Mexican” as opposed to “Spanish Speaking” and “Cosmopolitan Catholic” elements.

Moreover, in many churches the priest who wants to encourage one of the Second Vatican Council goals in promoting participatory worship from his parishioners finds they are more willing to follow than to lead. A majority of priests mentioned three basic problems: (1) Priests had little or no musical training; (2) it was very difficult to secure volunteers to provide satisfactory musical performances every week; and (3) many of the parishioners complained that the Church’s prime interest in promoting the “new” music was to increase attendance, with the result that much of the music really did not fit the sacredness of the occasion. However, most priests consulted were somewhat resigned to the criticism, saying that except for an occasional, important, musically-oriented parish family, or a strong, musically-oriented women’s group, the parishioners left practically every-

thing in the hands of the priest. Conversely, many parishioners complained that priests did not really want leadership to originate with the parishioners, discouraging it in numerous and sometimes devious ways.

The Protestant musical spectrum involves many of the same considerations. A large body of worship music has been borrowed from European, North American, and increasingly, Latin American sources. Moreover, the matters of appropriateness of hymn and song, the musical "generation gap," and leadership in providing music are also discussed, though they are less divisive due to the difference in traditions and the nature of congregational participation. Perhaps because of these features, one finds a yet greater variety of musical heritages in use among the numerous Protestant denominations. The grand old European hymns, such as "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" and "Te Deum Laudamus," are frequently used. Translations of "Rock of Ages" ("Roca de la Eternidad"), "Bringing in the Sheaves," "Jesus Loves Me," and "Talking to Jesus" have almost universal popularity among Spanish-speaking Protestant congregations in the United States; and all the new electronic sounds, country and rock rhythms, and innovative instrumental combinations which are developing in "Anglo" Protestant worship are also generating developments among the Spanish speaking.

However, just as it is hard to study the Spanish-speaking Catholic music in the United States without reference to Latin American developments, the same is true for the Protestants, only more so. Since 1953, when Protestant radio programs began to be exensively allowed in Latin America, evangelism has grown enormously. Approximately eighty-five broadcasts per week are now carried over some one thousand radio stations throughout Latin America, and the process has generated some significant dimensions for the Spanish speaking in the United States. The broadcasts to Latin America began essentially as an airwave arm to on-location evangelism. Consequently, most broadcasts were translations of North American programs, with hymns and songs likewise being translations of "Anglo" favorites. As the churches grew in Latin America, a national pastorate began to develop which essentially nationalized, regionalized, and even localized church activity, including the music. Venezuelans, Ecuadorians, Hondurans, and others began composing their own religious songs for their own services. The exchange of these, north and south, has greatly broadened the musical perspective in the same way that Latin American and North American ministers, moving among pulpits in the two areas, have aided the hemispheric growth of Protestantism. One important musical result is that Spanish-speaking Protestant congregations are now singing South American, Caribbean, Central American, and especially Mexican hymns and songs.

Numerous denominations have reached this international exchange stage and have developed program organizational structure accordingly. "Cristo Para Todas Las Naciones" is a good example here: There is a separated structure from the "Lutheran Hour," and while the overall programs are coordinated, the specifics are culturally prepared to suit both the "Anglo" and "Latino" audience. Some denominations have taken yet another step. Considering that the Spanish-speaking Protestant in the United States is more than merely a Latin American in

foreign residence, such groups have tried to develop programs aimed specifically at Mexican Americans, and others. Rev. Adam Morales points to this in his *American Baptists with a Spanish Accent* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1964) and in correspondence to me (31 July 1974). Here one finds a definite threefold approach — one for the “Anglo,” a second for Latin Americans in Latin America, and a third for Spanish speakers in the United States. A tailoring of message, language and idioms, and music appears to be specified to each somewhat different group. Moreover, the May 1974 Progress Report, entitled “A National Strategy for American Baptist Hispanic Ministry,” indicates awareness of regional cultural and situational variety among Spanish speakers and even within the Mexican American population.

The Spanish Department of the Nazarene Church has developed a similar approach and has published extensive materials on culture, religion, and music in Spanish and has produced at least ten records. Some of this is aimed directly at Spanish-speaking congregations in the United States, and the Nazarenes seem to be firmly pioneering bilingual-bicultural religious instruction from pre-school through primary, secondary, and post-secondary, to adult education. Separate publications and musical texts are aimed at different age levels.

A few fundamentalist groups disagree with this polycultural approach, suggesting that it materially distorts the true universal faith and weakens morality by promoting cultural relativism. Hence, the Witnesses’ Spanish hymnal *Cantando* (1969) is a translation and universal adaptation of the 1964 Watchtower Society’s *Singing and Accompanying Yourselves with Music in Your Hearts*.

Growth in apparent trends and some new directions will undoubtedly appear as time goes on. Comments, suggestions, leads, exchange of materials, and new research will further this important musico-cultural exploration.