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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Nicaraguan Folk Music from Masaya: *Música Folklórica de Masaya* by T. M. Scruggs

Review by: Robert Garfias

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Zárate, Dora P. de

1971 *Textos del Tamborito Panameño*. Panama: Dora de Zárate, 354.

Zárate, Manuel F.

1968 *Tambor y Socavón*. Panama: Imprenta nacional, 408.

Nicaraguan Folk Music from Masaya: Música Folklórica de Masaya. Flying Fish Records FF474. Recorded and Compiled by T. M. Scruggs.

The sleeve notes to this long playing record begin by describing the city of Masaya as one of the richest strongholds of Nicaraguan folk tradition, a fact supported by the examples included in this recording. Situated about 50 km from Managua, this old colonial city is not far from the western shore of the large Lake Nicaragua, famous for its fresh water sharks that were once isolated from their natural habitat by the formation of the lake thousands of years ago. Masaya is one of the richest cultural pockets abundant in living musical traditions in Central America.

The area is inhabited by mestizos and Spanish-speaking indians or *indios janizeros*, from the Turkish word “Janissary” which refers to the loss of their original language and culture. The Masaya area of Nicaragua is part of a larger cultural region that extends through southern and north-western Costa Rica, northern Honduras and Guatemala, and as far as the state of Oaxaca in Mexico. This large region is characterized by the use of marimba ensembles of various kinds and, in contrast, brass bands.

This recording presents examples of both types of music as well as guitar ensemble versions of marimba songs. The guitar and marimba repertoires appear to be largely interchangeable. While the brass bands seem to represent a different repertoire here in Masaya, in other areas of this larger Central American and Mexican cultural sphere there is much borrowing between marimba and brass bands.

The LP contains a good blend and cross section of the various musics of the Masaya region and documents the healthy survival of the various music traditions of the region. I was gratified to see that so much of the heritage that I saw there during my own field work in 1975 had survived the battles of the Contra War. In fact some of the heaviest fighting of the Nicaraguan campaign was fought right in the streets of Masaya.

In addition to six selections of marimba trio music, consisting of a marimba played by one man with two or three mallets with guitar and guitarillo accompaniment, there are five guitar selections and three brass band cuts. In addition there are in situ recordings of a street procession of a brass band and a mass with marimba music accompanying it outside of the church.

The major interest of the LP lies in its documentation of the traditional music forms of Nicaragua in their various instrumental guises. It is a style generically linked to the mestizo music of Costa Rica and Honduras, and in a broader sense to the mestizo marimba music played in Guatemala and Mexico. The web of interrelatedness of these musics may never be successfully sorted out, yet the relationships between them are intriguing. Perhaps one day when digital scanning of recorded material becomes a matter of course, we shall be able to sort out threads of tunes from one area to another and map out sub-sets of tune types as linguists study the relationship of languages and dialects.

For the moment there is almost too much information to permit a thorough and yet rational approach. In some of the examples included on the record, for example "*La cumbia Chinandegana*," we are given even the name of the composer and we know that the cumbia itself is a recent introduction from Colombia. Another selection, "*La danza negra*," associated with the Monimbo region of Masaya, has a recent political significance in the region. The "*Acuartillado*" harkens the nineteenth-century tradition of the quadrille, as does "*La mazurca*." In such examples recent history fits together with what we know of the music. For other pieces, their roots are now forgotten and perhaps untraceable. Some pieces sound clearly like their Mexican counterparts. While listening to "*Los dos bolillos*," I recognized distinct phrases from the Mexican *Son Jarocho* and "*El Colas*." Was there a direct exchange or did both musics spring from a common, perhaps Andalusian origin? Impossible to say, of course, but hearing the threads of long years of cultural diffusion is in itself intriguing.

The quality of these recordings is excellent and the selection offers a good sampling of the prominent styles. Given the dilemma of producing a recording that contains enough documentary material which listeners unacquainted with the music can find their way through it and yet be producible as a commercial recording is a challenge successfully dealt with in this endeavor. Basic notes on the recording appear on the back of the jacket and an additional sheet insert furnishes more details on the individual selections. The entire body of printed information is in English and Spanish. All in all, the recording is an excellent and important addition to this, as yet, little known cultural area. It is a great relief to know that so much has survived the ravages of the recent war. We are thankful that the living tradition has been so well documented there.

Robert Garfias, *University of California at Irvine*