

## CARIBBEAN CHRISTMAS

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A HANDFUL of people breaks the stillness of the morning with their muted sounds of gaiety. As they advance towards the town plaza, doors open and the small procession adds a few more *mantillas* and perhaps a few more youthful laughs. Their festive mood is still restrained so as not to awaken those who need their sleep until the bells later begin their frenzied tolling. But the soft, tentative tuning of a guitar and the accidental rattle of the seeds inside a pair of *maraca* gourds gradually become more distinct. Laughter and conversation become less subdued.

Then . . . the bells begin to ring, loudly, happily. It is the sixteenth of December—the Caribbean Christmas season is under way!

In two-thirds of the Western Hemisphere, the joy of Christmas is expressed and sung in the Spanish tongue. Spain has given its language and culture to nineteen nations. Puerto Rico is one of them. Now, after 59 years of American rule, the Christmas scene in this corner of the Caribbean Sea is beginning to show traces of Anglo-Saxon influence. Christmas trees, artificial wreaths and holly leaves are now quite a common sight in the market during this season. Any school child can sing the English words for that beautiful melody "Noche de Paz"—"*Silent Night*." People to whom the significance of "jingle bells" and sleighs and snow is completely lost are now singing "Jingle bells, Jingle bells. . . ." A similar discrepancy is felt upon hearing the familiar "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" in a land close to the tropics, where this dream is realized only by those who migrate to the United States. With these exceptions, the Christmas Spirit remains Spanish in language, Puerto Rican in detail, Catholic in feeling.

On the 16th of December a Novena of Masses begins. It is the height of Advent and although, liturgically, Christmas yet a full week ahead, a festive air appears everywhere. The *season* is come.

This early morning Masses are called "*Misas de Aguinaldo.*" The proper meaning of the word *aguinaldo* is GIFT. In Puerto Rico, however, this word also stands for a style of Christmas folk-music which the people are allowed to sing within the Church.

It might seem that there is nothing unusual about singing carols within the Church precincts. There are, nonetheless, two striking features of the *Aguinaldo* carolling. The first, as we have pointed out, is that this is done during the last nine days of Advent. The second lies in the general character of the music and the instruments used to express it.

Generally speaking, any fast, rhythmic piece of music, full of castanets, guitars and sporadic shoutings of "Ole!" is quickly recognized by most Americans as Spanish. Anything, indeed, identifiable with the warm, joyful, quick temper of the Spanish or Latin people may pass for Spanish. Yet, this is not always the case. There are a wealth of melodies which hide their Spanish characteristics to all but the trained musicologist. Moreover, since Spain severed its political ties with its daughter nations, it has become a common thing in music that peninsular songs and dances acquire new modalities in compliance with local, or more or less national, characteristics. Thus, we find the *Danza* in Puerto Rico, the *Danzon* in Cuba, the *Merengue* in the Dominican Republic, the *Jarabe* in Mexico. Some other popular forms through Latin America still retain the Spanish title while incorporating in them new musical elements. Such is the case of the *Aguinaldo* in Puerto Rico, the *Malaguena* in Mexico and the *Bolero* in Cuba.

*Aguinaldo* is the Puerto Rican name for *Villancico* or carol. Its origin goes back to 16th century Spain and Portugal as a form of motet. It consisted then of a choral introduction and finale, while the middle section was assigned to a solo voice. When composers used an oft-repeated poetic idea contained in a current ballad or poem, they put aside the rules of polyphony and, fired by the spirit of the phrases, composed a vigorous and almost independent melody, emphasizing popular and aristocratic elements.

After the 18th century, the term *Villancico* kept its religious association only and was applied in general to those songs celebrating the Nativity. This linguistic phenomenon probably arose from its general use in the religious plays, as well as from the adaptation of many devotional poems from the famous "Cantigas de Santa Maria" to this form of music.

The Puerto Rican name, in turn, came probably from the practice of asking for "gift of hospitality" in the last verses of the song.

The custom still exists for a group of townfolk with musical and poetic talents to go from house to house singing the *Aguinaldos* and including in the closing stanzas a request for money, or at least a refreshing drink, or both. These groups of carollers are called *parrandas* or *trullas*.

The *Aguinaldo* is accompanied by guitars, "cuatros" (mandolin-shaped instruments), *maracas* and "*guicharos*" which are made of ordinary pear-shaped gourds, grated at one end. They emit a rasping sound produced by striking them with a fork or a three-pronged wire handle. This peculiar instrument which can be classified among the percussion instruments, being very suitable for marking rhythm or cadence, is a heritage from the Indians. For centuries, the Church has tolerated the use of these instruments within the Church for the *Misas de Aguinaldo* in Puerto Rico, because of the religious character of the lyrics which they accompany. In some churches, especially in the big cities, the organ has superseded these popular instruments without lessening the warmth and the beauty of the *Aguinaldos*.

During the season of Advent, the singers' repertoire is already filled with the enthusiasm of the "Three Kings' Devotion." They logically suppose that their trip to adore the Child Jesus must have taken some time:

"De tierras lejanas  
Venimos a verte.  
Nos sirve de guía  
La Estrella de Oriente.

"From lands afar  
We are come to see Thee.  
A Star from the East  
Is our guide.

"Oh, brillante estrella  
Que anuncias la aurora,  
No nos falte nunca  
Tu luz bienhechora."

"O brilliant star  
That ushers the Sun,  
Would that your light  
Never fail us."

Thus runs the dialogue between the Three Kings and their guiding star, a beautiful figure of the hope and expectation of Christ Who is our Sun.

"Hacia Belen se encaminan  
Maria con su amante esposo,  
LLevando en su compania  
A todo un Dios poderoso.

"Towards Bethlehem there go  
Mary and her loving spouse,  
Carrying close to them  
An all powerful God.

Alegria, alegria, alegria  
Alegria y placer,  
Que la Virgen  
Va de paso con su esposo,  
Hasta Belen."

"Joy, Joy, Joy  
Joy and pleasure,  
That the Virgin  
Is approaching with her spouse  
The town of Bethlehem."

Some stanzas are humorous, like the one telling how the ox ate the hat of a man from Galicia who had come to adore the Child. In still others, the singing ends with the singers shouting "Que Viva!" at which point, it is not uncommon to hear some applause.

The last *Aguinaldo* is sung immediately after the Offertory of the Christmas Midnight Mass, or as it is called in Spanish-speaking countries, *Misa del Gallo*—"Mass of the Rooster's Crow." From this day on, for the entire season, the common greeting is "Felicidades!"—"Happiness!"

Unlike America, the exchanging of gifts on Christmas Day does not take place. Except for a few families in the larger towns, "Santa" does not come. Instead, this is deferred until the Sixth of January, the Feast of the Epiphany and the bearers of gifts will be "*Los Tres Santos Reyes*"—the three saintly kings. Melchior, who is always represented as a negro, Gaspar and Balthasar soon begin to appear around town on foot or on horseback. Three persons in costume accompany one of the *trullas* or *parrandas* which continue their music-making tours or, sometimes, they alone make up the *trulla*. As with our "Santa Claus," children cluster around them, gleefully repeating their wishes for the Sixth of January. A few children would philosophically deny any reality to Santa Claus, but will have no part with the detractors of the Three Kings.

On the Eve of the Epiphany, it is heart-warming to see many children cutting grass which they later will place under their beds. Gifts will be found there the next morning instead of in a stocking. The grass, or a good portion of it, will have disappeared as food for the camels of the Three Kings. The day awakens to a formidable array of toots and rattles in the homes of those who can afford gifts of toys and games. In the homes of the very poor, presents will be few, if any, but the boundless and priceless gift of Christmas joy will be theirs.

Christian Joy, born at Christmas, knows many languages and brightens many climates. Its Catholicity is in itself a cause of joy: that warmth of a shared emotion, the singleness of hearts in the fruition of a good acquired. This is especially true of Christmas. There is joy in the cold Alaskan chapel, as well as in the Caribbean Church . . . or the Chinese. From the Arctic snows to the Caribbean sun, Christmas Joy traverses many lands and encompasses many cultures, but everywhere one central fact is celebrated, one emotion is shared: ". . . for behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be to all the people; for today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord."