

Matachines: Enduring the Centuries

Jack Loeffler



Peter of Ghent

In 1523, a stuttering Flemish friar, Peter of Ghent arrived in Mexico and established the first school of European style in the New World where, according to the research of Rev. Camillus W. Vahl, "...as many as a thousand students attended this school...of primary letters, [and] also of the industrial and liberal arts so that as a result students were produced who could speak Latin, who were singers, musicians, embroiderers, painters, sculptors, tailors, shoemakers and infirmarians."

Fray Peter soon recognized the significance of music and dance to the Aztecs and was determined to lure the Indians away from performing ceremonials to appease their home-grown deities, and rather perform music and dance rituals in practice of the Christian religion. Vahl writes, "Indian songs were translated and put into meter to which the Indians were accustomed." The students were also taught how to construct and perform on musical instruments of European provenance.

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As newly composed dance-dramas supplanted the old, and as young Indian boys grew to adulthood composing sacred music that rivaled compositions in Europe, it can truly be said that the Spanish Conquest owed at least as much to music as to the use of force of arms. For example, certain Christian feast days were celebrated in pagan form, "...but in a way that they became the re-telling of religious maxims through the medium of plays and vivid representations accompanied with religious songs and dance," (Vahl).

Fray Peter of Ghent was so successful in luring Indians of all ages to masses and ceremonies that involved music and dance-drama, that great open-air churches were constructed to accommodate up to ten thousand indigenous people at a time.

Two of the instruments whose construction was taught to the Indians during the sixteenth century were the violin and *vibuela*. Both instruments perfectly suited the Indians to provide music for dance-dramas. Dance dramas in the form of mummeries and later, masques had been performed in Europe since at least the thirteenth century. Indeed, masked dancers had been dancing to music in Europe and Meso-America for hundreds of years.

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And so we come to the Matachines whose origin remains enshrouded in mystery. However, clues and fields of inquiry are to be found within the tenure of Fray Peter of Ghent, the stuttering friar from Flanders who was closely related to and had the ear of Charles V, and who, incidentally, ceased to stutter when he spoke in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs.



I first recorded Matachines music in 1969 in the Rarámuri or Tarahumara village of Samachique, located in the Barranca del Cobre in the Sierra Madre Occidental of the present day state of Chihuahua, Mexico. I arrived after the ceremony had already begun, and was immediately surrounded by a large array of Tarahumara men who were several sheets to the wind as a result of imbibing *tesguino*, a fermented corn drink for which one must develop an appreciative palate. The Tarahumaras were neither friendly, nor as yet, hostile. I proffered packs of Faro cigarettes and they reciprocated by insisting that I drink *tesguino* from the never empty circulating bottle. After actively participating in several passes from the favored, weirdly-flavored Tarahumara substance of choice, a somewhat wasted would-be ethnomusicologist figured out how to set microphones, and turn on the enormous battery powered tape recorder that I lugged about in my backpack. And thus I recorded the final minutes of the Tarahumara Matachines *procesión* that wended up the side of a hill beside the church in Samachique.

Others have since made far better and more complete recordings of Tarahumara Matachines music, however, I am fortunate to have in my possession a wonderfully hand-crafted violin as well as a less well-crafted guitar, both of Tarahumara provenance whose practice of construction must hearken back to the days of Peter of Ghent.

Earlier in my 1969 adventure, I spent several weeks in the Huichol village of San Andrés de Coamiata located farther south in the Sierra Madre Occidental. While the Huicholes are not known to presently perform the Matachines, they do perform music on diminutive violins and guitars of their own fashion, and wear beautifully embroidered clothing, especially during the annual peyote fiestas of autumn. The Huicholes are linguistically related to the Tarahumara (Uto-Aztecan). Photographer Karl Kernberger and I documented the construction of both violin and guitar by Huichol craftsman, Martín de la Cruz Carrillo. He carved the bodies and necks of both instruments from local seasoned pine using only his

machete, and glued the parts together with a substance exuded from the bulbous root of a species of wild orchid. While the Huicholes are among the few Mexican Indians to have eluded the reach of the Spanish Conquest, the violin and guitar have long been included in their array of musical instruments.

Throughout the years, I have recorded complete Matachines musical repertoires in Arroyo Seco north of Taos, and Bernalillo, New Mexico, and in Pascua Yaqui west of Tucson, Arizona. I have recorded snippets in Alcalde, Las Cruces, and elsewhere. While I do not purport to be an authority on Matachines music, I have a deepening interest in its possible genesis, and in the similarities and differences in its melodies.

Almost every Matachines melody I have ever recorded employs the use of violin and guitar except in the case of the Pascua Yaqui, where musicians perform on violin and harp. What is also of great interest is that the Matachines ritual is performed in both Indian and Hispano communities. Indeed, as ethnohistorian Fran Levine so aptly states, “Matachines music is the music of *mestizaje*.”

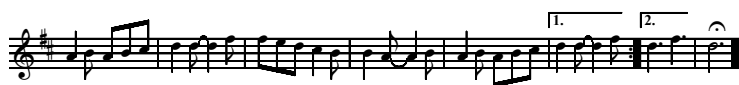
The Matachines ritual is presented as a set of dances, each with its own melody, and each dance addressing a specific element of the drama. As scholar Larry Torres of Arroyo Seco points out in a recorded interview I conducted in 1986, each community applies its own unique interpretation to the Matachines ritual. That same year, I recorded the entire musical repertoire of the Arroyo Seco Matachines that hadn't been performed there for many years. José Damian Archuleta was the *violinista*, and Ernesto Montoya was the *guitarrista*. Their Matachines ritual occurred in eleven movements: *la Marcha, la Malinche, el Monarca, la Corona Part I, la Corona Part II, la Mudada Part I, la Mudada Part II, la Tejida* (maypole dance), *el Toro, Abuelito de la Sierra*, and *la Entriaga de los Matachines*. For an interpretation and musical notation of the Arroyo Seco Matachines presentation, refer to *La Musica de los Viejitos*, Loeffler, Lamadrid, & Loeffler, UNM Press, 1999: 196–207; and Claude Stephenson's 2001 dissertation: 238–40.

In August, 2000, I recorded the entirety of the Bernalillo Matachines drama under the musical direction of Charles Aguilar. For a rendering of the transcribed musical notation, refer to Stephenson, pgs. 241–244. The Bernalillo pageant is presented in ten movements: *la Entrada, la Cruz, la Mudanza, Paseada de la Malinche, la Batalla del Monarca, Juvilo, el Toro, la Tendita, Promesas Dance*, and *la Carrera* (Procession).



Picuris violinist

Musically, both Arroyo Seco and Bernalillo musicians share a common key signature, D Major. Listening to the melodic lines for both rituals, anyone with a musical ear would readily identify the music as Matachines music. However, in comparing specific melodies, there are great differences. For example, the Arroyo Seco version of *la Marcha*, which is the equivalent of *la Entrada* in Bernalillo, one finds the time signature to be in 6/8 time with six eighth notes to the measure wherein is couched a more complex melody line. *La Entrada* of Bernalillo is in 4/4 time with a more stately melody line.

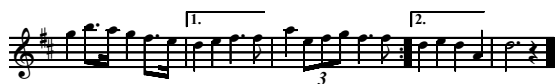


Arroyo Seco la Marcha

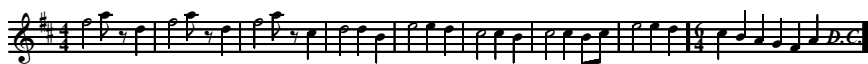


Bernalillo la Entrada

The Arroyo Seco version of *la Malinche* is in 4/4 time with a sixteen-measure melody line that repeats again and again until the end of the dance. The root melody for the Arroyo Seco Malinche is the same as the eight-measure Batalla melody played in Bernalillo. However, the Arroyo Seco version is more highly embellished.



Arroyo Seco la Malinche



Bernalillo Batalla

Another similarity between Bernalillo and Arroyo Seco occurs between the *Júvilo* movement in Bernalillo and *el Monarca* in Arroyo Seco. Both are in 3/4 time and have nearly identical melody lines.



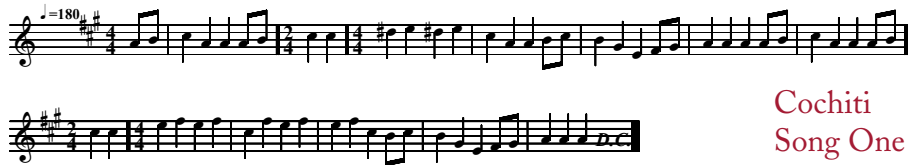
Bernalillo Júvilo



Arroyo Seco la Monarcha

And so on. In other words, the music of the Matachines has undergone transformations over the decades and centuries of specific community performance, yet the music retains its Matachines flavor wherever it is performed, at least in New Mexico.

In Cochiti Pueblo, the music of the Matchines is more markedly different than between Arroyo Seco and Bernalillo. First, the prevailing key is A Major. However, there are occasional accidentals that give Song One in particular something of a modal flavor.



Cochiti
Song One

Also, the time signatures may well change within the melody. For example, Song Four begins with three measures of 3/4 time, then goes to one measure of 4/4, then back to 3/4 for six measures, returning to 4/4 for one measure, thence to five measures of 3/4 ending in one measure of 5/4!



Cochiti
Song Four

This is in keeping with more traditional dance music of Cochiti Pueblo that is usually provided by a combination of chanting and rhythm instruments wherein the time signature may abruptly shift as the dancers move in rhythmic accord.

The Matachines melodies at Cochiti differ from those performed among other Indians including the Tarahumaras of the Barranca del Cobre. In an unnamed Tarahumara song transcribed by Stephenson, one can note a shift from the key signature of A Major as the G# goes to G natural while the violinista has a modal moment as he plays on his hand-crafted violin.



Tarahumara Sin Nombre

...music of this enduring ritual has remained relatively stable since antiquity

No matter where it is performed, the Matachines ritual provides a ceremonial continuum wherein the mythic process of each individual community is cyclically re-enacted, inevitably culturally tweaked over spans of time, wherein cultural intuitions are ever interpretively re-aligned. While a particular violin may pass through the hands of family members from generation to generation, the music is transmitted aurally through the generations, each musician providing elements of individual interpretation and style. Hence, the fiddling fingers of the great-grandson may well convey a subtle but real difference in expression from that of the forebear. Music expresses cultural change. The miracle is that the music of this enduring ritual has remained relatively stable since antiquity.



Tijeras musicians