
Reviewed by Ronald R. Smith

The impressive work done by John D. Robb is designed to serve an audience of wide background and tastes. This book is useful to Mexican-Americans who wish to know more of their cultural heritage, to amateur musicians and singers of folksongs, and to the serious scholar with interest in traditional musics of America. Robb has spent thirty-five years collecting and researching the music of Hispanic peoples in the southwestern part of the United States. The present volume is a "supplement to and expansion of (an) earlier book, Hispanic Folksongs of New Mexico,¹ and a number of articles and record albums."² Robb's intention was to provide a panoramic view of Hispanic folk music in the Southwest from his base in New Mexico. The materials covered are representative of the traditions found in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. The author places emphasis on the rich contribution of Mexico although the heritage of Spain is considered as basic.

Theory is not the book's major focus, although an implicit concern and well-established methodological framework has been realized and presented in the study. Robb has woven together textual details, musical manuscripts, and some contextual information to provide the reader with a view of the living tradition. The author himself transcribed the musical examples and translated the texts of folksongs in the volume. In the Preface he states that, "it seems strange, at least to a musician, that scholarly works dealing with folk music have often taken the music for granted."³ Regard for the music and its performers prompted Robb to include not only the songs with text but instrumental melodies and his own piano-vocal arrangements of "Selected Songs."⁴ For some people, these arrangements might seem inappropriate in a scholarly treatment of folk song. For many readers, they provide a means to get closer to the tradition.
The organization of Robb's work is perhaps its strongest feature. Not only is the book easy to read, but finding and comparing songs in it is simple. The supporting information presented with each item is as complete as the author could make it. He directs the reader to other sources where the same song may be found. Cross-referencing is important because it places Robb's work in a wider context of Iberian and Hispanic scholarship. In addition to the Preface, there is a short section in which the author explains the overall format of the book and an Introduction in which he discusses the nature of folk music, its origins and influences, forms, thematic foci and values, and the performers within the tradition. The consistency of informant data and the integrity with which he attempts to present each text is a reflection of the book's subtitle, "A Self-Portrait of a People."

The book's content is heavily weighted toward what Robb describes as "a musical point of view." Thus, each section is preceded by a short head-note which describes the genre or form to follow. The classification system is simple and basically divided into secular song texts and melodies and religious song texts and their melodies. The final section consists of instrumental melodies. Several types of songs are found in more than one section since they may utilize both secular and religious themes. Décimas and several religious dances such as the Matachines are examples of these genres.

Within the sections mentioned above, the reader will not only find the song type or form listed under its name (e.g., Corrido, Romance, or Himno), but also under several topical headings such as "Occupations," "Courtship and Marriage," or "Social Dances." The system seems to place the same or similar material in various places within the text, but it does indicate the manner in which songs and texts are perceived by performers within the tradition. The well-constructed and valuable indices of titles, first lines, and general topics, provide the reader with enough assistance to locate any composition he desires. The sheer volume of items, more than seven hundred, demonstrates the strength of the folksong tradition in the area surveyed and the range of forms which were in oral tradition.

The reader should note the recent publication date
of the volume. Many of the songs presented were collected over a forty year span. Thus, some of the material comprises in effect an archive of Hispanic folksong. In addition, vocal style and ornamentation are not a focus of the musical transcriptions. The reader who wishes to investigate these areas and ascertain which selections are still in the active repertoires of singers must utilize the volume as well as recordings which have been made recently. Robb gives the locations of the recordings he made in the field so that a serious scholar might avail himself of the opportunity to study both the textual representations of the songs and the actual sound.

At first glance, Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest seems to be just another collection of texts and tunes. The attention to detail, smooth organization of items presented, and comparative information make the book a valuable resource text. In conjunction with other works by the same author and recorded material, and works which emphasize the ethnography of the Southwest, I can find great use for this volume.

NOTES


3. Ibid., p. xi.

4. Ibid., pp. 737-827; 831-859.

5. Ibid., p. xii.