Charles Seeger and *Americanismo Musical*

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CHARLES SEEGER'S DEATH AT Bridgewater, Connecticut, February 7, closed an unprecedented career. His transcendent influence on United States musical life was exerted not only by his profound speculations but also by his surprisingly varied musicological publications—all without exception distinguished by their high quality.

C. Gerald Fraser wrote the *New York Times* obituary (February 8, B11:4) headlined "Charles Seeger, Musicologist, 92/Father of Folk Singer [Pete Seeger, born May 3, 1919] Was First to Teach Course in U.S." However, I here wish to recall an equivocal epoch in his life ignored in that obituary, the years from 1941 to 1953 when he was music chief at the Pan American Union (after 1948, Organization of American States). To judge from his obituary I am not alone in rating his years spent heading the PAU = OAS Music Division as rather barren, so far as productivity along the main lines of his interests are concerned. I am indeed convinced that these dozen years would have yielded him greater satisfaction had he spent them in a top flight United States university where the environment would have stimulated him intellectually. Instead he passed them doing administrative chores and publicity tasks not wholly congenial to his nature.

At the outset I stress my sincere admiration for all that he accomplished during those years, even when our value systems clashed. Frankness and objectivity are the motives that spur me to an appreciation of those years tinctured with some unavoidable reservations. What was the history of our personal contacts during those years?

In 1939, thanks to funding by the newly created (July, 1938) Division of Cultural Relations of the United States Department of State I attended both the first International Congress of the American Musicological Society at New York City ending Saturday September 16 and the first Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music held in Whittall Pavilion, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., October 18–19. If memory serves after this great lapse of time, the New York City meetings were held at the Beethoven Association. Cuba sent as its representatives Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes and Gonzalo Roig. Alfredo de Saint-Malo (representing Panama) played 3 *Piezas* by Domingo Santa Cruz and a *Danza* by Guillermo Uribe Holguín, accompanied by Nicolas Slonimsky. However, travel exigencies limited South Americans actually present to Walter Burle Marx, music director of the Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, Juan Vicente Lecuna of Venezuela, and me—whose task it became September 16 to expose the reality of the Latin American music situation (see *New York Times*, September 17, 1939, 50:1, "Music Aid Urged for Latin America") to an enthusiastic but mostly nescient auditory.

As for planners of the Washington Conference: the 37-year-old Professor William Berrien of the Department of Romance Languages, Northwestern University, spearheaded the Findings Committee "composed of the main speakers listed on the program" (including me) and edited the *Digest of Proceedings* published in January

1940 by the Division of Cultural Relations, [U.S.] Department of State. The thirteen-member Organizing Committee that grew out of the October 18-19 Conference included (in alphabetical order) Howard Hanson; Earl Vincent Moore, Director, Federal Music Project, Works Progress Administration, Washington, D.C.; Charles Seeger, from 1938 to 1940 Assistant Director of the same project; Dr. Carleton Sprague Smith, Chief, Music Division, New York Public Library since 1931, and president of the American Musicological Society 1939-1940; Dr. Harold Spivacke, Chief, Music Division, Library of Congress since 1937; and eight others in broadcasting and the like.

In New York, but much more at Washington, an official frequently under fire was Dr. Leo Rowe (1871-1946), director general of the Pan American Union since 1920. As if he were the culprit, delegates at Washington charged him with breaches so diverse as the poor sampling of Latin American music offered by the United States Marine Band and the inertness of PAU in concert programming. I declined to join the outcry against Dr. Rowe, a pioneer in cementing Inter-American ties who at 68 deserved better of us than a public flogging. Not surprisingly, Dr. Rowe himself disliked being made a whipping boy and stopped coming after the first session in Whittall Pavilion. But he did take to heart the criticisms sufficiently to begin thinking of a separate music section or division within the Pan American Union, headed by a musician not only respected as a professional but also versed in Inter-American affairs (see *New York Times*, March 17, 1941, 21:3).

Seeger's paper on "The Importance of Cultural Understanding of Folk and Popular Music" read before the Washington October 18-19, 1940, Conference contained numerous animadversions against whatever "fine art music of the donor groups" was brought to the New World during "the first several centuries" (see the published version at the close of the Berrien-edited *Digest of Proceedings*). Nonetheless, after asking me if I were a candidate for the post which Dr. Rowe was being importuned to create (I told him I was not a candidate), he asked me to support his candidacy. My reasons for not seeking the post were several. At that moment I was eager to return to Montevideo—there to develop the Inter-American Institute of Musicology projected at the VIII Inter-American Congress held in December of 1938 at Lima. Moreover, what Dr. Rowe wanted was more a public relations expert heading a bureau of information than the research scholar that I felt myself meant to be. Having already spent an enormously stressful decade trying to foment Americanismo Musical, traveling hither and yon over all Latin America in pursuit of my ideal, I sensed that the moment had arrived for me to dig deeper roots in a Latin American capital, there focusing my energies in historical and ethnomusicological investigations. Only prolonged, serious fundamental research could lift the fog hitherto clouding all accounts of Southern Hemisphere music, I then believed. Hence the overwhelming need in 1939 for the nascent Institute of Inter-American Musicology and the continuing need for it in 1979 after four decades of uninterrupted service to the Inter-American cause.

Resisting further temptation from the Rockefeller Foundation, I therefore joined gladly with William Berrien, Concha Romero James, and Carleton Sprague Smith—all of whom fervently bespoke Charles Seeger's exceptional qualifications for the post. True, his prior activities were little known in Latin America, he could speak neither Spanish nor Portuguese, and he had a severe hearing problem. Also, he was

no longer in the flower of youth, as was for instance Gilbert Chase—whose appointment as "special assistant in the field of Latin American music" was announced in the *New York Times* of October 16, 1940 (25:2). Indeed he was 54 by the time his PAU appointment was confirmed (*New York Times*, March 17, 1941, 21:3).

What changes in the Inter-American musical scene the 1938–1948 decade witnessed! As contributions from our side, I intervened in the Latin American tours of figures so eminent as Arturo Toscanini and Leopold Stokowski, promoted the tours of choral groups so welcome as the Yale Glee Club and of a composer so esteemed as Aaron Copland. Also, I prevailed on so alert a conductor as Hugh Ross to lead the Schola Cantorum in the New York premiere of Juan José Castro's *Sinfonía Bíblica*. Meanwhile Dr. Rowe's selectee, Charles Seeger, whose annual salary on becoming PAU Music Chief was to be $15,000—no insignificant sum in those pre-inflation days, and a tidy resource indeed for the father of seven children (Charles Louis, John, Peter by his first wife; Michael, Margaret, Barbara Mona, Penelope by his second wife, the composer Ruth Crawford, whom he married November 14, 1931)—was receiving frequent news releases from the Inter-American Institute of Musicology, officially founded June 26, 1940, as an annex of the Uruguayan Ministry of Foreign Relations. Our exchange of letters, begun in 1940, grew into a torrent when I proposed dedicating the fifth volume of the *Boletín Latino-Americano de Música* to the United States. Realizing as I did the extent of Latin American impercipience, so far as United States musical life was concerned, I proposed not only a volume of articles but also a supplement of hitherto unpublished works by United States composers.

How to finance not one, but in effect, two tomes? How to gather a sufficient number of penetrating and authoritative articles covering such diverse topics as the history of United States art music, Amerindian, folk, and popular music, and organization of orchestral, choral, and chamber musical life, music education, music instrument making, and psychology of music? These were among the diverse tasks that Charles Seeger, Associate Editor of the volume, graciously and efficiently took under wing. Thanks to him, 46 articles and 34 compositions (including his own *Danza lenta* for violin and piano and a Suite for solo flute by his splendidly gifted second wife, alas, too early dead!) were obtained. Only his zeal produced the necessary publication subsidy (from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the National Commission of Intellectual Cooperation of the United States of America). Our Uruguayan share in the financing shamefully reduced itself to the pittance of a mere 300 pesos donated by the Banco de la República, the Consejo del Autor, and a private individual, Dr. Alejandro Gallinal. In total, the pages projected for the United States articles alone ran to 434, folio size. At my insistence, the letter press was to be reinforced with a profuse iconography that would prove the integralism of the arts in the United States. Added to the 434 were to come another 204 pages of hitherto unpublished Latin American studies and my preface. The musical supplement was projected to include 169 pages of piano, vocal, and chamber works.

Miraculously, the subsidy raised by Charles Seeger permitted all this reaching print. How important the compositions solicited and obtained by him were can be gauged from such names as Charles Ives ("Unanswered Question"), Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, Elliott Carter, William Schuman, Wallingford Riegger, and George Perle. Only one Latin American work left over from the mastodonic fourth volume

of the *Boletín* (published at Bogotá) was added to the fifth volume musical supplement, Carlos Isamitt's Araucanian evocation for accompanied baritone, *Lonko Perun.*

All the manual labor devolved on us at Montevideo: the revision and coordination of the essays, the elimination of duplications and contradictions, the designing and styling, the proofreading, the supervision of the printing, and posting of the volumes abroad. Perfectly well I knew in advance the complications, because collaborators offering to work gratis on previous volumes had disappeared as if smoke. No matter that I too had worked gratis as head of the Instituto Interamericano de Musicología since the day of its founding. Translations into Spanish divided among various persons who offered their services came back incomplete, full of errors, botched by dictionary plodders with no real command of English. To avoid hurting their feelings, I translated many articles anew—allowing the ostensible translators' names to stand. So much for the life of an Editor. Printing costs, certainly lower at Montevideo than in many other capitals, nevertheless left me with a 2000-Uruguayan-peso deficit (then equal to about U.S.$1,850), which only the printer's tolerance allowed my slowly amortizing. As for the music supplement, Hans-Joachim Koellreutter kindly supervised its printing at São Paulo. Proofs went back and forth airmail.

At last, the twin tomes appeared. Not only did the attractive look of both the articles and music please the contributors, but also this was the first all-out attempt at combating the ignorance of United States music too long rampant among Latin American chauvinists. During the seven years following on the heels of our ambitious joint project, correspondence with Charles Seeger inevitably thinned. However, in the Spring of 1948 I occupied a visiting associate professorship at the University of Texas, Austin. That next summer he consented to my spending several weeks in Washington, ostensibly as OAS Music Division consultant. The visit turned out none too happily. For the first time we were in prolonged daily contact. I found him as a person diffident and distant. Never did he lend a willing ear to our serious professional problems. If I may say so without here injecting an unwanted dissonance, I could not avoid noting his partiality for this or that renowned expert in folklore or ethnomusicology—fields dear to his own heart. He did also favor certain contemporary composers—but only if they were Latin American "strong men" heading national movements. Not for him any mere struggler for recognition. His reserve was indeed such that he barely extended his right hand to anyone not previously filtered through the alembic of New York criticism.

In all frankness I must confess that I myself went to Washington hoping that help be given the Instituto Interamericano de Musicología at Montevideo—ignored by PAU (= OAS in 1948) from the moment the tides of war had made Latin American cultural ties mere froth, so far as the United States State Department was concerned. Nine years had gone by since the promises made at the 1939 Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music, attended by 188 prestigious delegates. What had PAU = OAS Music Division in the meantime ever done for us at Montevideo? Charles Seeger's co-editing of volume 5 of the *Boletín?* The funds for that came not from PAU. As the summer wore on, no possibility of doubt remained. Seeger intended to continue snubbing the Instituto at Montevideo. Before returning home I therefore could not refrain from telling the OAS Secretary General, Dr. Lleras Camargo, what small compassion Seeger showed us.

Still another contretemps rubbed sparks from the flint that summer. Only the year previous a new personality, another temperament, had appeared on the Washington scene, Guillermo Espinosa from Colombia. He had succeeded in entering OAS ranks in 1947, but as a lowly functionary at a miniscule salary doing menial tasks, while his valiant and efficient wife Tatjana Gontscharowa taught at Peabody Institute in Baltimore to make ends meet. Well did I know the mighty labors of Espinosa at Bogotá where he founded the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional August 18, 1936, conducting it during the next decade with signal success. At the outset of the *Boletín Latino-Americano de Musica*, IV (Bogotá, 1938) I had published a 41-page history of his achievements up to 1938: "Guillermo Espinosa y la Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional." During my four months in Bogotá—while an official Uruguayan delegate to the Fourth Centenary of its founding—I had spent most of my time in the arduous task of seeing the fourth volume of the *Boletín* (861 pages + 134-page musical supplement) through the press (Litografía Colombia). Thanks to the generosity of Dr. Arcadio Dulcey, Director of the Publications Division of the Bogotá Fourth Centenary celebrations, the volume did appear (literary portion colophon, December 5, 1938; musical supplement, November 30) before my exit from Colombia for Venezuela. But also while at Bogotá I had had the chance to witness at close range the constant intrepid struggle of Guillermo and Tatjana Espinosa to keep the orchestra alive—the kind of struggle that every day devours the Latin American musician, and that can be known only by those North Americans who come spend time with us. It was Espinosa who invited not only me but also such other foreigners as Oscar Lorenzo Fernândez, Nicolas Slonimsky, Armando Carvajal, Alfredo de Saint-Malo, and Vicente Emilio Sojo to participate in his Festival Ibero-Americano de Música (described in the *Boletín*, IV, 55-63). Since a copy of the *Boletín*, IV, sat conspicuously on the shelves of the OAS Music Division in the summer of 1948, Seeger could not plead ignorance of what Espinosa had heretofore accomplished—both as conductor and as successful organizer of a first-class Inter-American music festival. Why therefore his glacial silence when I first dropped Espinosa's name? Did his antennae signal the size to which a cloud then no larger than a man's hand would eventually grow?

In my opinion, Seeger had neglected his duty to travel the length and breadth of Latin America. What better way to acquaint himself with not only our musical officialdom but also those sectors free of government control? His hugging Washington could not be blamed on inadequate travel funds. The real reason for his not sallying forth was his inability to speak either Spanish or Portuguese, and worse still, his inability to comprehend (with a hearing aid) conversation in those languages. Hiding his inabilities, he preferred the role of an immobile headquarters general. Not for him the needed impartial reconnoitering of Latin American music and musicology. Instead he relied on a few favorite field commanders to give him reports from the battleground.

Sitting in his easy chair at Washington, he even at times reminded me of those contemptuous Cultural Attachés who disdain treating with any musicians less than a Ginastera, Domingo Santa Cruz, or Villa-Lobos in the nations to which they are assigned. True, when Seeger became PAU = OAS Music Chief, Carlos Chávez's United States prestige was sufficiently in the ascendant for Chávez not to need OAS patronage. But, if so, Chávez was that rare field commander who could advance

without headquarters help. The rest needed Seeger. In return he needed them and used them.

How heavily Seeger relied on field commanders can be exemplified by the case of the Chilean composer and folklorist, Pablo Garrido (born March 26, 1905, at Valparaíso), who passed through Washington en route to New York during the summer of 1948. A cordial and hearty fellow, he arrived at Seeger's office without a letter of introduction or any other prior recommendation from Domingo Santa Cruz. Never more upset, Seeger at once took me aside to ask who this creature might be and how to get rid of him. I told Seeger that Garrido had published a 133-page *Biografía de la cueca* (Santiago: Ediciones Ercilla, 1943) and suggested inviting him to lunch, "since we are all equal under the sun." What a lunch! Acting as translator, I witnessed Seeger's cold, even hostile, reaction to an uncredentialed visitor. How different was Carleton Sprague Smith when he headed the Music Division of the New York Public Library! Ready to be the crying towel for any Latin American musician who hit the New York City asphalt, he invented solutions, parlayed connections, telephoned recommendations. Moreover, he continued the same hearty host (seconded by his enchanting wife Elizabeth) when in 1944-1946 he was Cultural Attaché in the United States Consulate at São Paulo. A fluent speaker of impeccable Spanish and Portuguese, he adorned any social occasion with his fine flute playing. All told, he was then, and remains today, the ideal cementer of human and artistic relationships.

But to return to the summer of 1948 in Washington. Toward its close, Dr. Juan Bautista Lavalle—the Peruvian ambassador to the OAS whose acquaintance I had made at Lima a decade earlier—invited me to meet various OAS Division chiefs, among them the Peruvian savant Dr. Jorge Basadre who then headed OAS Cultural Affairs and was therefore Charles Seeger's immediate superior. At a profusely cordial luncheon meeting, I dared suggest to Dr. Basadre the propriety of transferring Espinosa into the Music Division where his talents could be put to better use. Basadre gave me a puzzled look. Perhaps Espinosa's triumphs as orchestra conductor at Bogotá had not been told him? Or perhaps a luncheon was not the correct moment to suggest a transfer? Fortunately my host, Dr. Lavalle, envinced no slightest displeasure at my flyer. Nor do I now repent it. The OAS would have gained enormously, Seeger himself would have profited, by the presence in the Music Division immediately upon his arrival at Washington of a Latin American so dynamic and competent as Espinosa. Instead, Seeger preferred to dribble—confining his Division to platitudes, and (in my opinion) conventionalities.

The old story: within hours everything bruited at a meal convoking such powers as Drs. Lavalle and Basadre was corridor gossip. Some of the gossip undoubtedly grew spicier at each repetition. My sole motive had been the improvement of an OAS Section that was being desperately looked to for leadership in Latin American music. I never heard the version carried to Charles Seeger. But from that day, he cut me: foregoing even salutations. Only through the intervention of the Uruguayan ambassador Dr. José Antonio Mora Otero—always a mainstay at the Instituto Interamericano de Musicología—could I thereafter mount an exhibition of then recently discovered manuscript works by Minas Gerais mulatto composers and of our Institute publications accompanied by a catalogue. Seeger managed to show his irritation with even this tentative. Why should he have viewed us that summer as a threat, when instead all we wished was recognition as an ally? Whatever the reasons for his

pique, he certainly allowed possessiveness too large a sway. Never then nor later did he promote Americanismo Musical of the sort that Guillermo Espinosa was consistently to expound when he became Chief.

Back to Seeger. From its first creation, what many Latin Americans had expected of the PAU = OAS Music Division was that it be a panacea. With such large expectations, the Division needed a Solon to distribute its favors. A Solon? No, a Solomon. Charles Seeger, with favors galore to bestow, was courted from all sides. Well do I remember a decoration from one South American government that in the summer of 1948 hung framed on the wall of his office—the payback for some extremely exceptional favors. How he doted on it, turning his gaze toward it when the conversation lagged! Who can blame the fox who had praised the crow's voice, when the cheese was expensive Uncle Sam machinery and equipment sent south? But Seeger conveniently forgot that today's field commander in a Latin American culture complex is tomorrow's ousted sideliner.

Another fifteen years elapsed before I again had any contact with Seeger. In 1963 we met at Washington during the First Inter-American Conference on Musicology held in the Woodrow Wilson Room of the Library of Congress April 29 to May 2. As a result of the seating arrangements at this Conference (organized by Gilbert Chase, then director of the Inter-American Institute for Musical Research, Tulane University), I sat beside Seeger. We greeted each other as if nothing had ever divided us. But by then he was out of the OAS, and fresh winds stirred the Latin American atmosphere: thanks to Guillermo Espinosa's dynamism, unprecedented energy and vision. Who followed Espinosa? Another chief, young and vigorous when appointed, Efraín Paesky—Latin American, as indeed chiefs of the Music Division (up to now, at least) always should be. Let us henceforth blot out even the memory of 1948, when a United States trio held tight the reins of power: William Manger, Vanett Lawler, and Charles Seeger. Not Carleton Sprague Smith himself could have succeeded Charles Seeger. The location of the Music Division in Washington required then, and still demands today, Latin American chiefs.

Charles Seeger's matchless merits, as his *New York Times* obituary writer correctly sensed, shone in other realms. Along with such giants as George Herzog, Richard Waterman, Alan P. Merriam, Bruno Nettl, and Alan Lomax, he lifted ethnomusicology in the United States to heights scaled only rarely by the best Europeans—Erich von Hornbostel, Béla Bartók, Curt Sachs, Fritz Bose, and a few others. His priceless legacy included the Society for Ethnomusicology, which he fathered. What more encouraging portent for Americanismo Musical than the election to succeed William Malm as its president of Gerard Béhague, Latin American Editor of *The New Grove* and author of the eloquent 369-page survey of Latin American art music published by Prentice-Hall in early 1979?