# CLARE FISCHER: The Pan-American Way

MAMBO ALLEGRO MOLTO was the name given by Rolf Liebermann to the movement that terminated his failed hybrid of the middle Fifties, *Concerto for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra* (Victor LM-1888). It was not, of course, mambo. It was a manipulation. Liebermann exploited certain brassy elements of Mexico City mambo without coming to grips with their multi-metric context, their characteristic pauses, or the special nuances of their informal esthetic. He culled bits and pieces and pasted them together to create scissors-and-paste folk-concert music, local color in the most touristic sense of the phrase.

Liebermann's *Concerto* nevertheless marked one of the first serious attempts to fuse the special elegances of the concert hall with the special energies of the Spanish-speaking dance hall. Liebermann augured the coming of a musican, academically trained, who would lead the way toward a more substantial alliance.

Clare Fischer, a bespectacled young pianist-composer of vigorously intelligent mien, gives promise of filling this specified need. For one thing, his academic credentials are superior: he is still remembered fondly, even nostalgically, at Michigan State University Department of Music, where he studied under Professor H. Owen Reed. Reed was quite evidently a decisive influence in his career, for he opened the eyes of his pupil to the infinite compositional possibilities of Latin-American folk music. Professor Reed, who is Chairman of Theory and Composition at Michigan State, lived in Mexico for five months in 1949 on a Guggenheim fellowship and at that time wrote a Mexican folk symphony for concert band, *La Fiesta Mexicana* (Mercury MG 40011), which is as palatable as it is respectful of its folk inspirations. Reed's gift is clear and rare: he awakens within an academic context an incomparable popular substance. (Reed has recently been commissioned to score this folksong symphony for a fiftieth-anniversary concert of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in April 1965.)

In order to find a pure expression, freed of academic interferences, Reed probed the rhythmic essences of Mexican folk music. The last movement of his *Fiesta*, in his own words, "combines a 3/4 measure with a 6/8 measure with a bass part which is basically a 6/8 measure moved to the right 1/8 note with an extremely syncopated melodic line." One does not have to read music to recognize within this description African implications. Metric trickery informs the *son* music of the Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City, a wondrously musical square haunted by *los que tienen tono y los que no lo tienen*— those "in tune and out of tune," and of the mariachis of points west, notably Guadalajara. Perhaps the phenomenon is explained in part by the influx of African slaves through the port of Veracruz; these Negroes were later largely absorbed in the Mexican melting pot but not apparently without leaving an indelible multi-metric tinge to the *huapango*, the *son*, and other folk delicacies.

**Clare Fischer—"opened the door on a new phase of tri-hybrid blending."**

All that was needed, in terms of the enrichment of the music of the Latin barrios of the United States, was a man with the vision to see the way pointed by Reed. This was toward a witty polarization of music with African implications and intense Mexican flavor, with music almost explicitly Negroidal in rhythmic phrasing and dominance of percussion yet lightened with touches of modern jazz (New York Puerto Rican mambo).

Taking nothing for granted, Fischer has combined the lessons of his mentor with the blessings of a dual apprenticeship. For while he ironed out his own academic patterns of musical speech, he simultaneously worked in the Los Angeles area. Night after night he collaborated with Mexican-American musicians in lively eyries where measures were invented with careful folk craftsmanship for virtuosi dancers whose every gesture was at once esthetic criticism and encouragement.

It was a sensible intellectual investment; and we are only now beginning to estimate its dividends. There are passages in a recent album (in which Fischer collaborates with vibraphonist Cal Tjader) that mark some of the deepest, most profound marshaling of jazz, African, and Latin-American elements yet heard. (Verve V6-8531). "El Muchacho," for example, is the first step forward since the failure of Liebermann to cross-fertilize mambo and concert music validly.

Professor Reed wrote "El Muchacho" and enlivened its structure with rhythmic complications inspired by the Mexican *son;* the melody and harmony of this charmingly naïve and simple piano piece are deliberately rudimentary while the rhythm of the right hand redresses the balance, as it were, by its inventive independence from the rhythm of the left (except at the cadences). At the time that Reed wrote "El Muchacho" he was not aware that he had written a composition that was a natural for further, deeper blending with the mambo. But Clare Fischer was aware of this fact, and on this album triumphantly demonstrates that mambo is a still unfinished solution to a still stimulating problem by means of punning on the ostinato patterns of the Mexican *son* with the ostinato patterns of Afro-Cuban. For those sensitive enough to comprehend his special flair, he has opened the door on a new phase of tri-hybrid blending. And none too soon. For the Castro revolution has cut the traditional ties between Cuba's Tin Pan Alley and our own popular music, and the next Latin dance may well have to be internally generated.

I do not wish to imply that Clare Fischer, granted his debt to Reed, does not have his own voice. He does indeed. Witness his bright splashes of warm pianistic color that adorn mambo "Azul," surely one of the sunniest pieces of Latin dance music ever to be recorded in California. In addition, his work with Cal Tjader on mambo "Alonzo" is a demonstration piece of the virtues of a sober revolution. Alonzo opens with a suitably propulsive riff but so celestial are the high-pitched inventions that flow easily and comfortably in the course of this composition that the introduction is retroactively shown almost to be in bad

taste. Never has a sharpened academic skill more convincingly enriched a piece of dance-hall music. So expressive is Fischer's personality that one can even detect his hand in normally anonymous ostinato patterns. Surely "Alonzo" will inspire Afro-Cuban musicians in the United States to rebel, at least occasionally, against the strictly chiseled conventions of their octave style of accompaniment.

There is, it seems to me, one possible misdirection in the interesting turns of Fischer's recent career. I refer to his use of the Hammond organ as mambo and bossa nova infrastructure. Negative associations crowd whatever sensible statements a musician might try to make on organ within a "Latin" context (for example, Pérez Prado's ghastly organ mambos one of which, appropriately, washed up as mood music in *La Dolce Vita*, music to decay morally by). It is a testament of the skills of Clare Fischer that he sometimes manages to make of the organ, despite the jarring associative values of the instrument, a friend of Spanish-African dance music. One cannot fault such a determinedly amiable experiment. Nevertheless, when one listens to Fischer's Latinizing organ in "Sally's Tomato" (V6-8531), strange mental images arm themselves. Whilst Cal Tjader pleasantly rethinks, on vibes, measures that were originally intended for a motion picture, Fischer furnishes a warm ostinato. Suddenly the mind conjures an impish monk, secreted into a forgotten chapel of an impossible Andean monastery, surprising a sacred instrument with the secular flamboyance of the mambo riff. My facetiousness ought to suggest this: Fischer's attempt to play mambo or bossa nova on organ is bold, but the connotations of the instrument are strong. The musical implications of the organ are in many ways harmonic and vertical while the Afro-Cuban context is forever percussive and horizontal.

—Robert Farris Thompson.

# The Uses of Diversity

THE DIFFERENCE between a principle and a gimmick is that a principle may be applied in many areas. Such a principle is "diversity," an electronic analogue of the principle that two heads are better than one.

Diversity reception is an old short-wave trick. Ionospheric shifts that make a signal fade out at one antenna often fade it in at another, nearby location. Commercial communications operators often use two or three receivers, with differently oriented antennas, feeding a single speaker; hams, with lower budgets, have been known to couple several antennas to their receiver, via a switch.

Connecting the output of two receivers in parallel results in a noise level three decibels less than that of either, if noise levels are identical, or six decibels below that of the noisier tuner, if levels differ. However, a noise level six decibels better than that of the noisier tuner may still be several decibels worse than that of the quieter; some sort of switching system is preferable.

The common "ham" approach—manual antenna switching—is too slow and unsure for commercial work. Through the years, several approaches to automatic switching have made their appearance.

One such approach is "Combiner Diversity," in which each tuner feeds an amplifier whose gain varies inversely with the noise level. As the noise increases in either signal, that signal automatically fades out. Combiner Diversity presents the best possible signal-to-noise ratio, but it creates catastrophic low-frequency transients. Thus, while acceptable in communications work (where bass response is cut off at about 300 cycles), it is unsuitable for use with wide-range music systems.

Tuners incorporating "squelch" circuits can be linked by a "switched diversity" system that shuts off a tuner's output when the signal strength falls below a predetermined value. But this system, too, introduces bass transients.

Yet fading and "flutter" are problems in FM reception, too, and H. H. Scott several years ago introduced in its 310-D tuner a transient-free diversity switching system. Few are the homes which Scott expects to equip for diversity, since two tuners are required, and two antennas at least thirty-five feet apart. But for the broadcast relay operator, fading and noise are not merely painful but paralyzing, and it is for him that this feature is intended. The perfectionist may still desire such a system; if so, Scott will happily oblige him.

The diversity principle is not restricted to radio reception. In 3M's new Professional Mastering System—a studio master tape recorder—diversity recording makes its first commercial appearance.

The 3M system uses diversity to increase dynamic range and alleviate a dilemma facing all recordists: how to select a recording level that will be consistently louder than the system's residual noise, while never so high as to drive the tape into distortion. "Dynamic Range" is a measure of the ratio between the loudest and softest sounds that may be comfortably heard between the low (noise) limit and the upper limit caused by distortion. The peak dynamic range of a symphony orchestra, for example, is on the order of seventy decibels or more, while most studio master recorders have been restricted to only fifty-five decibels or so. Thus, an orchestral performance must undergo "compression" of the dynamic range, a distortion of the esthetic intentions of composer and conductor. And this fifty-five decibel range is reduced still further by the inevitable noise build-up during the multiple generations of copying and recopying that a master tape goes through before reaching the public ear.

Here is where diversity recording comes to the rescue. Signals fed into each channel of 3M's new machine are recorded on two tracks simultaneously. One track (the lower track in the accompanying illustration) is recorded at normal level and with normal NAB equalization. The second is recorded through a weighting network with a rising response such that recording level is fifteen decibels higher on this track for the frequencies at the peak of the weighted response curve. The higher frequencies are emphasized because of their greater sensitivity to noise and tape overload distortion.

The level differences between the tracks are constant at any recording level. Hence, a signal level high enough to drive the weighted track into distortion will be recorded cleanly on the normal one, while signals that must fight with the noise of the normal track will be fifteen decibels above the noise of the weighted one.

In playback, each track's reproduce amplifier feeds an electronic switch, the

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