

## ROLDAN AND CATURLA OF CUBA

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**T**WO of the most colorful and exciting composers of the Western Hemisphere, Amadeo Roldan and Alejandro Garcia Caturla, both Cubans, died unexpectedly in their prime during the year 1940. Their general outlook was similar; they were above all interested in developing the extraordinarily vivid native musical resources of their country. Although both composers wrote chiefly for symphony orchestra and smaller chamber combinations, and both had a sound European training, their work produced quite different results.

Roldan, born in 1900, was educated in Madrid as a violinist and composer. At the age of nine he won first prize as composer, and in 1916 first prize in violin-playing at the Madrid Conservatory. He returned to Havana in 1921, where he organized the Havana Chamber Music Society. In 1932 he became conductor of the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra, a post he held until his death.

He had enough Negro blood to be stirred and interested by the Afro-Cuban rhythms of the natives. It was Roldan who introduced large numbers of native percussion instruments and the African-style counter-rhythms and accented off-beats into symphonic scores. Nowhere else in America has the native African rhythm been so well preserved as in Cuba, and no other composer has made so significant a development of these ritualistic and secular rhythmic modes. Roldan's best music sounds like an almost literal enlargement of genuine native performance. It preserves that spirit through the use of characteristic rhythms and instruments. In my opinion, no composer has ever succeeded better in capturing the feeling of native music in symphonic works.

Alejandro Caturla, born in 1906, studied a short time with Nadia Boulanger in Europe. His technic of composition was less secure from a formal standpoint than that of Roldan, but the self-education which followed his work with Boulanger resulted in great originality of scoring,

form and harmonic material. In contrast to the professionally elegant Roldan, he appears a talented amateur. Whereas Roldan introduced actual Cuban rhythms and instruments, Caturla tried to use the more conventional instruments (with some additions) to imitate the sounds of Cuban music. Thus his symphonic works give an impression of Cuban music, rather than of being native in style. Caturla inevitably invented many unusual orchestral effects and developed a unique treatment of conventional instruments. His music is brilliant and dashing, with much atmosphere of dissonance, which is used to give the impression of native sounds rather than as a necessary part of the harmony. Although less close to genuine native music, Caturla's orchestral works are more telling and effective as show pieces than those of Roldan. His glittering orchestration, dashing rhythms (even though not always really faithful to those of the original tunes) and rapier-like discords create a sharp and memorable sensation. At times he has used native themes, adding discordant notes not to be found in native scales. Roldan, on the other hand, often used actual native melodies, preserved as accurately as possible, and composed original melodies in native style which are almost impossible to tell from the really indigenous ones.

Although the music of Roldan and Caturla has been occasionally performed by leading orchestras of the United States, neither has attained quite the United States reputation of other Latin-American composers. Yet the actual values in their music will stand beside those of any better-known Spanish Americans. The death of these men in their prime is a loss to both North and South America.