

Don Pedro Dimas: Rescuing Purépecha Music and Dance in Michoacán

By Zaidee Stavely

The Casa de Artesanías in Morelia, Michoacán, is made up of many small rooms, each one replete with crafts from a different town or region of the state. In Paracho, they make instruments, in Uruapan, wooden masks, in Santa Clara del Cobre, copper knickknacks. In the shop with crafts from Ichupio, where the people make animals, baskets, and ornaments out of dried reeds from Lake Pátzcuaro, sits a fiddler, playing away in the shadows just inside the door.

Don Pedro Dimas, the owner of this shop, is something of a legend around these parts. Not only does he play here in his shop, but also all around Lake Pátzcuaro for parties and events, as well as composing Purépecha tunes in the traditional style. Many times, young people can be found here in Artesanías, trying to play along with Don Pedro. Indeed, Don Pedro has his share of followers in the United States as well, after visiting several music camps and sharing Purépecha music with the other side of the border.

The music Don Pedro plays with his family string band, “Mirando el Lago” (Gazing at the Lake), is traditional indigenous music from the Purépecha communities of Michoacán. Purépecha tunes combine sweet singing notes that go up and down in harmony on two fiddles, played by Don Pedro and his friend Don Rafa, with long-bowed high notes and sometimes plucking of the fiddle strings. On occasion, the bow moves slowly and then sounds as if it slides down on an offbeat.

A fast-paced rhythm is added by Don Pedro’s sons Miguel and Hermenegildo on *vihuela* and guitar and his son-in-law Fidel Estanislado on *tololoche*, or Mexican bass. Don Pedro and his family are all from Ichupio, a small village community made up of houses sprinkled along the hillside above Lake Pátzcuaro here in Michoacán. Less than ten minutes away is Tzintzuntzan, a larger town famous for its pre-Hispanic ruins. Don Pedro is so well-known here that when he walks down the street, passersby call to him or extend their hands.

Although Don Pedro only attended two years of elementary school, he not only knows how to read and write in Spanish, but also in Purépecha. After he quit school to help herd his family’s cows, a man who had studied in Mexico City came to Ichupio to finish his



Don Pedro and his sons Miguel and Hermenegildo practice with neighbors in Ichupio for a mass in Purepecha.

thesis. He would go alone up into the hills and write notes in a notebook, recalls the fiddler, and he had a camera with which to take black and white pictures.

One day he told Pedro, “I’m going to leave on Saturday and come back on Sunday, and I’m going to bring you a book so you can study.” The book was in Purépecha, and with it, Don Pedro taught himself to read in his native language. As with most indigenous languages in Mexico, almost all people in Don Pedro’s village of Ichupio except for some small children speak the language, but few people know how to write or read it. The alphabet first used for Purépecha, says Don Pedro, which used letters such as an N with a long curving leg and an S with a V on top to make a “Sh” sound, no longer exists.

Growing up in his small village, Don Pedro saw his people’s music begin to fade. He says people had begun to listen to songs instead of traditional Purépecha tunes. He sees his composition of music and dance as “a form of rescue.”

The first time Don Pedro saw a violin was around 1948 when string bands would play for the festivals of Corpus Christi. “I thought the violin was really pretty, and I got an itch to learn, but I didn’t have any instruments,” he recounts. Between 1949 and 1950, when Don Pedro was around fifteen or sixteen years old, he helped organized a danza azteca, or stylized indigenous dance where the dancers wear headdresses and buckles around their ankles. He got a group of dancers together, but there wasn’t anybody to play. Pedro’s father, who knew how to play cello, bought two mandolins, and the young Pedro learned by watching others. When he finally got a violin, he learned to tune and play relatively quickly because of his experience on the mandolin.

Over the years, Don Pedro played with several different bands, all of which added something to his talent and style. Around 1952, he began to play with a group from Santa Fe de la Laguna, including a man named Rafael Medina, who later became Don Pedro’s second violinist. At that time, Don Pedro remembers, people only liked to listen to Purépecha music to dance. At a typical wedding, birth-

day party or baptism, the group would play polkas and paso dobles, saving the traditional Purépecha tunes until after the people were finished eating. Then they would break out the fast-paced traditional *abajеños* so they could dance.

Don Pedro says he learned the most about violin technique with a mariachi group in Tzintzuntzan, which he also joined in the 1950s: "I began to learn more there, because they played songs in A, in E major, in F major, or any other tuning, according to the song." But when the group went to Mexico City to try their luck in the late 1960s, Don Pedro stayed behind. He had a wife and four children to take care of, and he was still living in Ichupio, making his living as a fisherman and a farmer of corn, wheat, and beans.

Most produce and fish was used for the family's own consumption, but when there was extra, they sold fish and beans. Now, though, things are different in Ichupio. "The fish are gone and the earth no longer gives anything. It doesn't have any strength any longer," explains Don Pedro. "Nowadays, if you don't buy fertilizer, you will not have corn." Today, most people work as construction workers, building lake houses for wealthy Mexicans from Morelia who come to Ichupio to spend weekends, or for those who have gone to the U.S. and send money home for construction. Others, like Don Pedro, turned to crafts for a way to make a living.

Don Pedro says people always made crafts out of straw and reeds in Ichupio, but it was not until relatively recently that they began to sell them. Many years ago, Don Pedro won first place for two years in craft contests, but he didn't sell much. Then, the Casa de Artesanías (House of Crafts) asked him to go to Morelia to make crafts for six months to complete a special request. After the job was completed, they turned the shop over to him. The first few days, he says, not very many people came, but slowly demand grew. Some of the burros, horses, humming birds, chickens, baskets, and ornaments made out of reeds on his shelves are made by him, but he also sells crafts made by friends and family members. He is worried, however, about competition: "One thing that has really hurt us is the importation from China. It is really, really cheap. For example, if I make a figure for three pesos, in China you can buy it for one peso."

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Before moving to Morelia, Don Pedro began to form his own group, around 1970. His son-in-law Fidel recalls, "After I got married to Ofelia, I would go fishing with Don Pedro. Afterward, we would come back from the lake and he would start playing. He told me to grab an instrument and I learned." First, Don Pedro taught his oldest son Hermenegildo how to play a small *requinto*, teaching Fidel the deep *guitarrón* and later *tololoche*. At that time, Don Pedro's youngest son Miguel was a small child, excelling at dancing, and it was not until later that he began to play the *vihuela*.

Because Don Pedro is an excellent musician and composer, one would never think the violin was his second love. But there was a reason that he started to play Purépecha music, and it has to do with his very first love. "What most inspired me to play Purépecha music," he says, "was because I wanted to have a dance group to enter contests."

Traditional dances abound in Michoacán, from the the Danza de las Mariposas (Dance of the Butterflies) and the Danza de los Huacaleros (Dance of the Basket Carriers) to the Danza de los Pescadores (Dance of the Fishermen) and all different versions of the Danza de los Viejitos (Dance of the Old Men). Every town has a special dance. In some places, there are very old dances, like the Danza del Torito (Dance of the Bull) in Jarácuaro, where women on wooden horses dance to the tune of a flute and a drum.

But since there was no traditional dance from Ichupio, Don Pedro could not enter the contests. He relates, "That is how I got the idea to create the Danza de los Tumbís. After composing the melodies, I put together the choreography and the *zapateado*." He explains there are two kinds of *zapateado*, or stomping dance step, in the Danza de los Tumbís: three by four and six by eight. Dancing it, he assures, is very difficult.

Danza de los Tumbís means Dance of the Young People, as opposed to the "Dance of the Old Men" which is danced in many other communities in Michoacán. The *Viejitos*, or Old Men, dance bent over on canes with masks full of wrinkles and beards, while the Tumbís of Ichupio dance erect with masks that show youth and



Danza de los Tumbís (Dance of the Young People)



Procession of Mirando el Lago and friends on Day of the Dead

vitality. Barefoot women dressed in traditional white blouses embroidered with flowers, colored skirts, and aprons dance alongside young men in embroidered shirts and white pants with embroidery around the ankles. The woman in front carries a delicate fishnet in her hands, which she swings to the music and later spreads out with the help of the others. With great solemnity, Don Pedro explains that this net means a lot to the women in the community: "When we men would go out to work in the field, the women would go and wade into the water to stretch out that net at night. The next day when they would go get it, it was full of little fish."

Every December, thirty Tumbís, or young men, and thirty Marías, or young women, dance together, going from house to house on Christmas Day and Three Kings' Day, on January 6. At almost every house, Don Pedro says, the family will invite the dancers to eat the regional *pozole*, a thick hominy and pork soup made from red corn in these parts. Don Pedro describes, "People are waiting for you. They have to give you something to eat or invite you in. I always told people, 'Look, there isn't much time for us to stay in each house. If you didn't get to see everything we are dancing here, close your door and come along with us. We would get to Tzintzuntzan and there wouldn't be very many people, but from Tzintzuntzan to Ichupio, a crowd would gather."

At first, Don Pedro's dance was often disqualified in contests. Now that the dance is more than thirty years old, however, it is accepted as traditional in the indigenous communities and has won several prizes. Every year on October 17, for example, there is a regional music and dance contest for groups from around the Lake and the Purépecha Plateau. So many groups participate, describes Don Pedro, that the contest begins at 5 p.m. and does not end until 4 a.m. Don Pedro's dance group and band have won third, second, and first place on several different occasions.

Don Pedro's music has been becoming more and more well known in his area, and people come both from his own country and from

the United States to learn how to play it. The first North American to visit Don Pedro was Lee Birch, who arrived around 1980. Birch, a fiddler himself and interested in Purépecha culture, invited him to the United States, but Don Pedro could not get a visa at that time. Over ten years passed before Don Pedro was able to travel to the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington, in 1994. Since then, he has traveled to the West Coast several times, playing with his sons at youth dance festivals, folk music camps, schools, and family parties. Now, several of his students have come to see him to learn where this music they love came from.

After composing the *Danza de los Tumbís*, Don Pedro began to compose more music, and he decided to compose a tune for each place he visited, always in Purépecha style. Recently, for example, he wrote "Recuerdo del campo dos" (Memory of Camp Two), after spending a week at Lark in the Morning music camp in Northern California. His inspiration, however, comes from all over. One song, "El niño llorón," or The Cry Baby, was composed when Don Pedro still lived in Ichupio and a neighbor boy would get up and walk around crying and crying every morning. The tune incorporates that sound with repeated scales of high notes.

Another, "Mis lágrimas" (My Tears), was written after an earthquake in 1985 that killed thousands of people in Mexico City. Don Pedro and his sons had been on a tour in the state of Guerrero, and the earthquake occurred during a three-day break. When they returned to Guerrero, the hotel they had stayed at was destroyed. "That's where 'Mis lágrimas' was born because I felt, 'What if we had been here?'" says Don Pedro.

But it is perhaps his song "Recuerdo de las trojes" (Remembering the Trojes) that best embodies Don Pedro's vision. *Troje* is the name given to traditional Purépecha houses made of wood. Many no longer exist; others are deteriorating fast. But their memory persists in a fiddle that sings over Lake Pátzcuaro.

That dream of Don Pedro's of rescuing the Purépecha music and culture has come true in some ways. Today, Purépecha music is not only heard in indigenous communities, but also among mestizo crowds. Don Pedro spends many weekends and holidays in Ichupio or Tzintzuntzan, playing for baptisms, weddings, and civic events. And the pride and love that the people of Ichupio feel for Don Pedro and his music and dance, now an integral part of their community, is clear in the steps and turns of the young people from Ichupio, dancing their very own *Danza de los Tumbís*.

Pedro Dimas and his group Mirando el Lago will be playing at the Adams Avenue Roots Festival in San Diego, California, April 30-May 1.

To order Mirando el Lago's CD in the U.S., contact: Swing Cat Records, P.O. Box 30153, Seattle, WA 98113; www.swingcatenterprises.com. (Please see Swing Cat ad on page 47.)

[Zaidee Stavely grew up listening to her mother play Southern Appalachian fiddle tunes and is now learning to play "son huasteco" (see article in Winter 2004/05 issue) on her own fiddle. She lives and works as a freelance journalist in Mexico City.]