

A MUSICAL ANTIQUE

BY ELLSWORTH BRAUN

THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS are much in the public eye at present for political and commercial reasons. There are, however, other things of interest there—things to appeal to both the music lover and the antiquarian. Being an amateur of the two arts several ancient, but serviceable, pipe organs in Manila churches had aroused my interest. Inquiries as to their age, builders, and the location of others brought out startling information—information that set me on the road to Los Piñas in a hurry.

Some ten miles south of the old Walled City that is the center of Manila, is the small town of Los Piñas. Its people are interested only in the little effort required to live, love and die; none of them have the faintest idea that their village contains one of the world's greatest antiques.

I found the old stone church, like so many others in the Islands, in bad state, roof sagging and yard cluttered with weeds. The Filipino Padre received me kindly, but seemed unable to understand why I should care to see an organ so old as to be out of use, and built in such poverty that its pipes were made of bamboo. He concluded, however, that my form of lunacy was harmless, and with two *muchachos* escorted me to the gallery of the church. Were the rumors I had heard true?

I must admit that I had been skeptical up to that moment. It could hardly be that so delicate and complicated an instrument as a pipe organ could be built of bamboo, but seeing is believing, for there it stood with its front about twelve feet wide, all of bamboo-speaking pipes, the largest being eight feet long and nearly five inches in diameter. As I went on with my examination the wonder grew. The horizontal reeds are of soft metal, rolled very thick, but with the exception of these one hundred and twenty-two pipes, every pipe in the organ is made of bamboo. As there are seven hundred and fourteen pipes the unique character of the old instrument may be imagined.

The most surprising thing is to find an organ one hundred and

twenty-five years old with a five octave keyboard. The maker was eighty years ahead of his age. He placed a full octave of pedal notes below his one manual which has an 'F' scale. The upper keys were originally covered with bone, but have been stripped long ago. There are twenty-two stops arranged in two vertical rows, the names being written on a strip beside the knobs instead of on their faces.

One of the Filipino boys vigorously worked the handle of the old bellows, and I fingered the keys in an attempt to invoke the spirit of the eighteenth-century genius. The result was ghostly enough, I must say. The hoary old pipes began with one accord to weep and wail the dirge of their long dead master, and no howling dervish could have done better, or worse.

It has been long since the last Mass was played on the bamboo organ and the "cyphers" appear to have outvoted the rest of the box of whistles. The slides are stuck, and few of the stop knobs will draw. The action is a roller board and is in good order yet. Crude as is the workmanship, it stands, and if the chests were as good as the action and pipes it would be a good organ today.

Diego Cera was born in Spain in 1762 and early caused consternation in his little circle by showing an unholy interest in wheels and levers. A happy solution to Diego's waywardness was found, and he became a priest. Diego was also a musician and his mechanical bent led him to become an organ maker. In 1787 he became a priest and three years later a missionary to Mexico. From there he went to the Philippines where he served the church as priest and organ maker. The most interesting record of his skill is the bamboo organ at Los Piñas.

The old church is falling to pieces, but as the organ stands inside of and under one of the stone arches of the thick wall of the nave, it is thus partially protected from the weather. Many of the pipes are full of dirt and now speechless, but most of them are as good as the day they were finished in the seventeen hundreds. The old bamboo is as hard as iron and where not injured by rough handling is only the better for its long seasoning.

There is the inevitable "mixture" of five ranks on thirty notes in the treble organ, and it must have sounded queer when twenty of those squealing whistles were sounded in a (dis)chord. Like most old organs there is very little bass, and none of greater length than six foot stopped, and of course there were no string tones. The

two metal reeds afforded the only variety in the assortment of flutes of every size and pitch. The tones of single pipes, when taken out and tested separately, are excellent. It struck me that old Padre Diego Cera had, all unknowingly I am sure, discovered something that might have been worth further development. Why not make pipe organs of bamboo? The wood is strong, grows in exactly the right form for pipes—long, round, and hollow—perfectly tight and almost everlasting. Padre Diego should have been a Yankee.

The old priest made many organs and several examples of his skill are scattered over the Islands. The records of the Order of Recoletos show that Diego built two bamboo organs at the same time: one, the one at Los Piñas, and the other sent to Spain as a gift to the Queen who prized it highly, saying that there was none like it in Spain or England. In this her royal highness was certainly correct, and unless the twin in Spain is still "living" (as the Tagalogs say of a watch), this relic at Los Piñas is the only organ of its kind in all the world. For the seeker after the unique and interesting it stands among the things of first importance.

Fr. Diego Cera died at the age of seventy-two in the convent of San Sebastian in Manila, thus closing a picturesque and interesting life that is now forgotten except for the name on a musty page and the organs he built of narra and bamboo.

Men have immortalized their names in paint, ink and marble, but it was left for the good missionary Padre Diego Cera to build to himself a monument of bamboo.