



California Music 1806-1824: Russian Reportage

IN THE MOSCOW MAGAZINE *Ruskii vestnik* 60 (1865), 322-368, Dmitrii Irinarkhovich Zavalishin (1804-1892),¹ who reached San Francisco aboard the Russian frigate *Kreiser* December 13, 1823, published an account of local customs titled "Kaliforniia v 1824 godu" ("California in 1824"). His report² contains valuable remarks on mission music, including conditions at San Francisco Solano, "the last of the twenty-one missions, and the only one established under Mexican auspices."³

In early 1824 several sailors, mostly musicians, deserted the frigate *Kreiser* in San Francisco Bay. There were some grounds for suspecting that the desertions had not occurred without the connivance of the Franciscan friars who were in charge of the missions and who had long been in sore need of musicians. Capture of the deserters was very difficult because with the assistance of the Spaniards, especially the heads of the missions, the deserters were easily concealed somewhere nearby until an opportunity arose to spirit them farther away.

Dispatched by the frigate captain to search far and wide for the deserting musicians, Zavalishin made notes not heretofore used in any history of California music.

There were neither enough musicians nor musical instruments that substituted for organs.⁴ At the new San Francisco Solano Mission I found it very strange to see serving as both altar and organ an old, rattly square piano, virtually abandoned long since [1806] by [Nikolai Petrovich] Rezanov [1764-1807],⁵ our ambassador to Japan. Set up at the back of a barn that substituted

Born June 13 (25), 1804 in Astrakhan, D. I. Zavalishin died February 5 (17), 1892 at Moscow. After taking part in the around-the-world voyage of the *Kreiser* commanded by the noted navigator, Mikhail Petrovich Lazarev (1788-1851), he associated with members of the Northern Society of Decembrists. Although absent from St. Petersburg on December 14 (26), 1825, when the Northern Society staged an unsuccessful uprising against incoming Tsar Nicholas I, he was with 84 others sentenced to Siberia where he remained until 1863. Beginning in the 1850's, he contributed extensively to such periodicals as *Moskovskie vedomosti*, *Ruskii vestnik*, and *Russkaia starina*. See *Bol'shaia sovetskaia enitsiklopediia*, ix (1972), col. 785, and *Great Soviet Encyclopedia, A Translation of the third edition*, ix (1975), 597; also Anatole G. Mazour, "Dimitry Zavalishin: Dreamer of a Russian-American Empire," *Pacific Historical Review*, v/1 (March 1936), 25-37.

James Ronald Gibson, a native of British Columbia who took his Ph.D. at Wisconsin in 1967, who was in 1973 associate professor and in 1980 professor of geography and chairman of the department at York University, Downsview, Ontario, Canada, published the first translation into English. See "California in 1824 by Dmitry Zavalishin Translated and Annotated by James R. Gibson," *Southern California Quarterly*, ix/4 (Winter 1973), 369-412. In 1976 he published *Imperial Russia in Frontier America, The Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America 1784-1867* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Maynard Geiger, *Franciscan Missionaries in Hispanic California 1769-1848, A Biographical Dictionary* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1969), p. 10.

¹In a letter from Mission San Jose to the procurator of San Fernando College at Mexico City dated October 26, 1819, Fray Narciso Durán asked that a three-rank organ with pedalboard be sent. He wanted it pitched low to accompany the singing of mission Indians.

²See the translated article concerning him in *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, xxi (1978), 622. For Rezanov's report of his 1806 California visit see *The Rezanov Voyage to Nueva California in 1806*, translated from *Istoricheskoye obozreniye obrazovaniya Rossiisko-Amerikanskoi Kompanii i deistviya eia do nastoiashchego*



КАЛИФОРНІЯ

ВЪ 1824 ГОДУ.

I.

Въ началѣ 1824 года, съ фрегата *Крейсеръ*, стоявшаго въ заливѣ Святаго Франциска, въ Калифорніи, бѣжало нѣсколько матросовъ, преимущественно музыкантовъ. Были нѣкоторыя основанія подозрѣвать, что побѣгъ состоялся не безъ соучастія францисканскихъ монаховъ, управлявшихъ миссіями, и издавна уже крайне нуждавшихся въ музыкантахъ. Поимка бѣжавшихъ была весьма затруднительна, такъ какъ при содѣйствіи Испанцевъ, и особенно начальниковъ миссій, бѣглецамъ очень легко было укрыться гдѣ-нибудь по близости, до тѣхъ поръ пока представится случай отправить ихъ далѣе. Переписка съ мѣстными властями, очевидно, не могла ни къ чему привести, кромѣ потери времени, и только дала бы бѣжавшимъ еще болѣе удобства укрыться. Потому, командиръ фрегата, извѣстный Михайла Петровичъ Лазаревъ (въ послѣдствіи адмиралъ и главный начальникъ черноморскаго флота), рѣшился дѣйствовать самъ и принять немедленно рѣшительныя мѣры для скорѣйшей поимки бѣжавшихъ. Это порученіе онъ возложилъ на меня. По соображеніи разныхъ обстоятельствъ, принять былъ предложенный мною планъ, который состоялъ въ томъ, чтобы отправиться немедленно ночью же съ вооруженнымъ отрядомъ къ миссіи Св. Франциска, направляясь притомъ такою дорогою, на которой никто не могъ бы насъ встрѣтить и предупредить въ миссіи о нашемъ движеніи.

for a church," this piano was played by Padre José Altamira, who simultaneously discharged the duties of celebrant, organist, reciter, and chorister.

After commending the Californios for their good manners exhibited even amidst great poverty, Zavalishin thus describes their favorite dance, the fandango.

Everyone entered the dance hall without differences or rank and without special invitation. Even though not all got fed, they nevertheless all took part in the festivities: either joining in the singing (for the dances were always accompanied by songs) or playing a guitar or mandolin, which many of them had brought. Their dances included many dramatics. The combination of the dramatics, the music, the singing, and the improvisations, made them more like excerpts from a theatrical production than proper dances. The dancers' favorite—the fandango⁸—which expresses changes of emotion, demands the continual improvisation of verses (*seguidillas*) on the part of everyone. It begins with fast music and movement, which gradually tires everyone into a more gentle, languid, and quiet state. Then suddenly everyone stops completely. A lady and her partner gradually approach each other and finally stand opposite each other. Next begins, now singly, now all together, the singing of the verses, which must be improvised and appropriate to the situation of the dancers.

Zavalishin offers two examples of such situation parleys: first, a ship's captain searching for lost treasure; second, a prisoner being saved from death by two ladies who vie for his affections. The two ladies struggle with each other

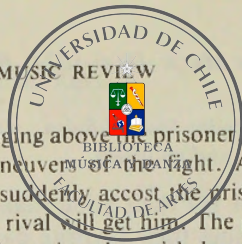
vremeni sostavil P. Tikhmenev Chast II (St. Petersburg: Edward Weimar, 1863), with notes by Thomas C. Russell (San Francisco: Thomas C. Russell, 1926).

⁸San Francisco Solano mission church at Sonoma "measuring 105 by 24 feet and constructed of boards was completed and dedicated April 4, 1824." See Geiger, *Franciscan Missionaries in Hispanic America*, p. 8.

Born at Barcelona in 1787, Altamira sailed from Cádiz "shortly after June 14, 1819, being then thirty-two years old." He arrived at Monterey, California, in August 1820. He baptized at Mission San Francisco from October 3, 1820 to July 25, 1823. Zavalishin visited San Francisco Solano sometime during the first six months of Altamira's efforts at missionizing Sonoma. Altamira remained there until August 3, 1826, after which date he served at San Carlos and San Buenaventura until departure from California January 23, 1828. In 1860 he was reported living at Tenerife, Canary Islands (*Franciscan Missionaries*, p. 9).

⁹The unsigned fandango article in the *New Grove* substantially repeats the fandango entry in *Riemann Sachteil* (1967). The earliest Spanish dictionary to include the word fandango—*Diccionario de la lengua castellana . . . compuesto por la Real Academia Española Tomo tercero* (Madrid: Viuda de Francisco del Hierro, 1732), 719b—claims that "the fandango was brought to the Spanish peninsula from the Spanish New World and that it is danced to very lively and festive music." As a secondary meaning, the same dictionary defines the fandango as "any banquet, rejoicing, or diversion attended by a large body of guests" ("Baile introducido por los que han estado en los Reinos de las Indias, que se hace al són de un tañido mui alegre y festivo. . . . Por ampliacion se toma por cualquier funcion de banquete, festéjo à holgúra à que concurren muchas personas"). Henry Neuman's *A New Dictionary of the Spanish and English Languages*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, etc., 1809) 1, [fol. 2Y3v], defines fandango as "1. A lively Spanish dance; the music of this dance. 2. Festive entertainment; dance with castanets or balls in the hands."

According to *Travels in the Interior of Africa: performed under the direction and patronage of the African Association, in the years 1795, 1796, and 1797. By Mungo Park [1771-1806]*, Surgeon (London: W. Bulmer and Co. for the Author, 1799), p. 367a, "fanda" in the Mandingo tongue means "Entertain, (a guest)." Mungo Park, who returned to England via Antigua, certified the wide use of the Mandingo language in the West Indies (*ibid.*, pp. 371-372). Fernando Ortiz, *Glosario de Afronegrismos* (Havana: Imprenta "El Siglo XX," 1924), derives fandango from "fanda" plus the disparaging Spanish suffix "ango." In both Cuba and Mexico (Francisco J. Santamaria, *Diccionario de Mejanismos*, 2d ed., 1974), fandango still means not only the triple meter fast dance accompanied by boisterous singing, guitars, violin, and percussion, but also "any noisy entertainment"; and in some regions such as Tabasco, "a fracas, an assault." Concerning the earliest notated fandango in a Mexican source dated about 1740, see *Music in Aztec & Inca Territory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 236.



to the sound of music and singing above the prisoner who kneels blindfolded. The steps of the dancers express various maneuvers of the fight. At last, neither being able to win, and prompted by jealousy, they suddenly accost the prisoner—as if obeying the same thought—and stab him so that neither rival will get him. The prisoner falls and sprawls full length. At the sound of unusually sad music other girl dancers appear, lift the prisoner, and carry him out.

There was yet another presentation with two choruses singing, one of cavaliers going to war and the other of girls restraining them. The girls weave and form a circle, which encloses the cavaliers.

The minuet was still fully preserved, although it was danced mainly by elderly people. There was always general animation, especially with dramatic dances presented as if they were excerpts from operas. Everyone, even the old men and women, joined in the singing and followed the course of the activities with greatest interest. Now they would jump up, now they would sit down—reproving, reproaching, pointing. “¡Bueno, hombre!” (“Well done, lad!”), “¡Más a derecho, muchacha!” (“More to the right, missy!”), etcetera. During the intervals between dances, they sang songs and verses. Very poetic images were evoked, such as the following: “Cuando el corazón se abrasa / Echa luego / Por las ventanas de casa / Vivo fuego, etc.” (“When the heart is aflame, fire leaps from the windows of the house”); “¡Madre! ¡la mi Madre! / Guardas me poneis / Que si yo no me guardo / No me guardareis, etc.” (“Mother, oh my mother, you put guards around me, but if I don’t guard myself, no one will guard me”); or, “Catorce años tengo / Ayer los cumplí / Que fue el primer día / Del florido Abril / Y chicos y chicas / Me suelen decir: / ¿Porqué no te casan / Mariquilla, di? di?” (“Yesterday I was fourteen on flowery April 1, and youths of both sexes are saying, tell why you aren’t married, little Mary”).

In general, Californian Spaniards were quite poetic.

Apart from Zavalishin, two other travelers aboard Russian vessels visited Alta California during the 1806–1816 decade—thereafter publishing valuable data on California music: Georg Friedrich von Langsdorff (Wöllstein, Germany, April 18, 1774; Freiburg, Germany, June 29, 1852) and Louis = Login = Ludwig Andrevich Choris (Ekaterinoslav = Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, March 23, 1795; vicinity of Veracruz, Mexico, March 22, 1828). Langsdorff, Göttingen University medical graduate, served as Rezanov’s personal physician aboard the *Juno* (250 tons, built at Bristol, Rhode Island). Leaving Sitka = New Archangel, Alaska, March 8, 1806, the *Juno* dropped anchor a month later in San Francisco Bay. After having exchanged the cargo for foodstuffs, the ship departed San Francisco for the return voyage May 21. Langsdorff thus described entertainment offered them by the commandante of the Presidio de San Francisco, José Dario Argüello.⁹

The popular dance here is called the barreño. It is performed by two couples, who stand opposite each other. They sing a tune in 6/8 time and stamp the beat with their feet, making the figure of a half chain, then balance opposite each other to a slow tune. Next, they recommence the dance. We were at some pains to teach the ladies English country-dances, which they liked so much that they afterwards commonly danced them. They seemed particularly pleased that all could dance at the same time. Some soldiers [among the forty] of the garrison who could play the violin and guitar were our musicians.

⁹Langsdorff’s *Narrative of the Rezanov Voyage to Nueva California in 1806 being that division of Doctor Georg H. von Langsdorff’s Bemerkungen auf einer Reise um die Welt* [Zweiter Band (Frankfurt am Main: Friedrich Wilms, 1812)], when as personal physician, he accompanied Rezanov to Nueva California from Sitka, Alaska, and back, *An English Translation* (San Francisco: Thomas C. Russell, 1927), p. 82.



Eager to view Indian customs at close range, Langsdorff visited eight-year-old Mission San Jose, where he found the "handsomest Indians in Nueva California." At the behest of the missionary in charge from 1804 to 1806, Fray Pedro de la Cueva,¹⁰ Langsdorff was rewarded for the difficult trip down the bay with dances and a mock battle.¹¹

The dancers were divided into two companies. Each distinguished itself by specific ornaments and a special kind of song. One of the companies comprised Indians inhabiting the coast, the other Indians belonging to inland tribes. The coast Indians were not so well made, not so strong, not so good-looking as those of the interior. These neighboring tribes formerly lived at great enmity with each other.

In their dances the Indians remain almost always in the same place, endeavoring partly with their bows and arrows, partly with the feathers that they hold in their hands and wear on their heads, and also by measured springs, by different movements of their bodies, and by facial contortions, to imitate scenes of the battle and of domestic life.

Their music consists of singing, and of clapping with a stick split at one end. The women have their own particular song, and their particular manner of dancing. They hop about near the men, but never in time with them. Their principal action or practice is in pressing the abdomen with the thumb and forefinger, first to one side and then to the other, in regular measure. As soon as the men begin to dance, the women also begin, and cease the moment the men cease.

Louis Choris,¹² the painter assigned to the Russian ship *Rûrik* that under the command of Otto von Kotzebue (1787-1846) visited San Francisco October 2 to November 1 of 1816, published six years later *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde avec des portraits de sauvages d'Amérique . . . Accompagné de Descriptions par M. le Baron Cuvier, et M. A. de Chamisso* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1822). This lavishly illustrated folio contains Choris's separately paginated description of "Port San-Francisco et ses habitants." Stressing the importance of music during celebration of Mass at Mission San Francisco, he counts it the chief means of "stirring up the imagination of the Indians and making men" of them. Among instruments, he mentions trumpets, large drums, and Basque tabors ("des tambours, des trompettes, des tambours de basque et d'autres du même genre").

On Sunday, when the service is ended, the Indians gather in the cemetery, which is in front of the mission house, and dance. Half of the men adorn themselves with feathers and with girdles ornamented with feathers and with bits of shell that pass for money among them, or they paint their bodies with regular lines of black, red, and white. Some have half their bodies (from the head downward) daubed with black, the other half red, and the whole crossed with white lines. Others sift the down from birds on their hair. The men commonly dance six or eight together, all making the same movements and all armed with spears. Their music consists of clapping the hands, singing, and the sound made by striking split sticks together, which charms their ears. This ends with a yell greatly like the sound of a cough mixed with a whistle. The women dance among themselves without violent movements.¹³

¹⁰Concerning Fray Pedro de la Cueva (born 1776 in Estremadura province, Spain), see Geiger, *Franciscan Missionaries*, pp. 57-61.

¹¹Langsdorff's *Narrative*, pp. 104-105.

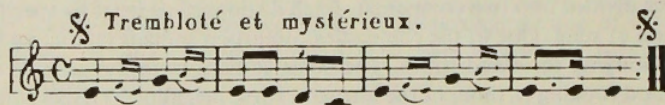
¹²Louis = Login = Ludwig Andrevich Choris, "by origin a German, had already accompanied Marshal von Bieberstein on an expedition into the Caucasus as his draftsman." See August C. Mahr, *The Visit of the "Rurik" to San Francisco in 1816* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1932), p. 12. The donor of the *Rûrik* expedition—Count Nikolai Petrovich Rumiânizov (1754-1826), chancellor of the Russian Empire 1809-1814—paid the costs of Choris's luxurious folio published at Paris in 1822.

¹³Mahr, pp. 96-97.



Choris next inserts a "Californian air," which he prefaces with the adjectives *Trembloté et mystérieux* ("tremblingly and mysteriously"). Remarking on this

AIR CALIFORNIEN.

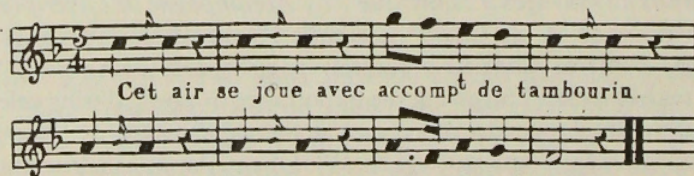


melody, Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838),¹⁴ the poet and naturalist who accompanied the expedition, questions who notated it.¹⁵

Choris even gives California music in his text. I do not know who has undertaken here and there in the course of his work, to notate the tunes sung by Choris. I will yield preference to this friend, in that he can sing better than I.

Just as Choris was the first to publish what purported to be a "Californian air," so also he was the first to publish, in his section on the Aleutians,¹⁶ an *Air des îles aléoutiennes*. Whatever their authenticity, Choris's airs document Russian ethno-

AIR DES ILES ALÉOUTIENNES.



musicological interests long before United States travelers awoke to the importance of transcribing ethnic melodies.

¹⁴Born in France, Chamisso wrote the lyrics for the cycle set by Robert Schumann, *Frauenliebe und -leben*, op. 42 (composed 1840).

¹⁵Mahr, p. 33 (German original text at p. 32). The portion of Chamisso' diary dealing with the San Francisco stopover of the *Rûrik* was first translated by George McElroy for *The Overland Monthly*, 8/3 (March 1873), 202-208.

¹⁶Concerning eleven Aleuts who were captured with their illiterate Russian commander Vasilii Petrovich Tarakanov and forced to spend some twenty months at Mission San Gabriel or San Fernando before being boarded on the *Rûrik* November 1, 1816, for return to Alaska (via Hawaiian Islands), see Thomas J. Woessner, "Foreign Visitors to California, 1786-1822," University of San Francisco Master of Arts thesis (in history), 1966, pp. 97-106.