



# REFLECTIONS

## *Slava in Mexico*

BY STANLEY A. ZUCKERMAN

The late Mstislav Rostropovich performed all over the world during his illustrious career, but his 1979 visit to Mexico as conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra was certainly among his most memorable.

First, an ongoing strike by the orchestra threatened to derail the concert. The U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Patrick J. Lucey, took it upon himself to try to save the performance, coming as it did at a time when relations between Mexico and the U.S. were strained.

Lucey called the head of the orchestra's union and asked if its members would play if he could arrange a contract directly between it and the Bellas Artes (Institute of Fine Arts), taking the National Symphony Orchestra Association management out of the picture. The union agreed, and Lucey contacted Bellas Artes officials; they, too, concurred.

One major obstacle remained. The orchestra needed a conductor, and they wanted their own, their beloved Slava. Lucey asked me, as his public affairs counselor, to find Rostropovich. After many phone calls I tracked him down in the VIP lounge at Kennedy Airport.

"Oh yes," the maestro said. "Zuckerman! You are wonderful violinist and I want to meet you."

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*Stanley A. Zuckerman, a retired FSO, was counselor for public affairs at Embassy Mexico City from 1973 to 1978.*

It took several minutes to convince him that I wasn't Pinchas Zuckerman, the fiddler, but Stanley Zuckerman, the harassed diplomat. Then I explained the situation. Unfortunately, presuming the orchestra's negotiations were hopelessly deadlocked, Rostropovich had made commitments in Paris and, in any case, would find it difficult to conduct the orchestra under such an unusual arrangement.

Months later, however, with a truce achieved between the orchestra association and its musicians, the concert was rescheduled. It would take place at the Bellas Artes after an initial performance at the Cervantino Festival, an annual celebration of the arts that was held in the colonial mining town of Guanajuato in central Mexico.

The Guanajuato concert garnered long applause and many bows. But the NSO's standard encore, a rousing performance of Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever," elicited a far less positive response. Reviews by the nationalistic Mexico City media complained that it was a message of gringo imperialism that did not belong in a cultural presentation of international stature.

Upon reaching Mexico City, Slava held a press conference. Sousa, he said, was to the march what Strauss was to the waltz: each produced the best of the genre. The music should be accepted as such, not interpreted as if it had political meaning.

That night, Amb. Lucey held a small dinner in Rostropovich's honor. We talked about the press reaction to the Sousa march, and I asked the con-

ductor if he intended to perform the piece as an encore at Bellas Artes.

He wouldn't, he said, because the concert would end with the Tchaikovsky Sixth Symphony, the "Pathétique," which closes with an ethereal, almost religious theme and could not be followed by any encore, particularly one of so different a mood.

"But perhaps," I said, then immediately regretted it, "the Mexican press will conclude that they've intimidated you."

"Oh," Rostropovich said, as his eyes narrowed.

As it happened, the standing-room-only audience brought the maestro back to the stage repeatedly at the end of the "Pathétique." Finally, Rostropovich relented and conducted the humorous march from Prokofiev's "The Love for Three Oranges."

The reception was thunderous. Slava was brought back to the stage for repeated bows, finally yielding again to the demands of the audience. He tapped his baton upon the music stand, and out came "Stars and Stripes Forever."

Pandemonium broke loose. Half the audience, which included many Americans and other foreigners, clapped to the rhythm of the march. The other half shouted "Viva Mexico," shaking their fists in the air.

Still, no injuries were reported. Slava was triumphant. The ambassador took it all in stride. The Mexican press again had a field day, but the relationship between our two countries somehow survived. ■

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