



## *Portrait of an Artist: Jack Délano*

By Francisco J. Cabán-Vales

The creative life of artist Jack Délano covered many fields which evolved throughout his life. He was trained as a musician in composition, violin and viola.

As an illustrator he graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; he became a world famous photographer on his own efforts, and circumstances of life turned him into a film and documentary maker. As eclectic as his artistry was, his origins were similarly varied, born in the Ukraine as Jacob Ovcharov, emigrated with his family to the United States, travels to Europe, work throughout the southern United States, and finally settling in Puerto Rico at the end of the 1940's.

Jacob Ovcharov was born in 1914 in a small town called Voroshilovka. The son of a schoolteacher and a dentist, the family immigrated to America in 1923 and eventually settled in Philadelphia. He studied music with

his father, an amateur violinist, and at the Settlement Music School in South Philadelphia. After high school graduation he decided to pursue an arts degree at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1935 he received a Cresson Traveling Scholarship that provided for a summer trip to Europe. As a result of this he was deeply influenced by the Renaissance art



of Italy, and the Spanish and Dutch masters of painting.<sup>1</sup> He also discovered contemporary art- cubism, abstract expressionism, surrealism- which inspired in him a sense of rebellion against the conservative training he received at the Academy.<sup>2</sup> It was around this time that he decided to officially change his name from Jacob Ovcharov to Jack Delano.

After graduating from the Academy, Delano started working as a freelance photographer in Philadelphia and New York. He also developed an interest in films, and together with his future wife Irene Esser started making short documentaries. Impressed by the work of famous

<sup>1</sup> *Délano, Jack, Photographic Memories* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington DC, 1997), 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

photographers like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, he applied for a job with the historical section of the FSA (Farm Security Administration) in 1940. For the next years he traveled throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. All through this time Delano's primary assignment was to document the social and working conditions of people in FSA projects. All of this was happening during the Second World War, and Delano was drafted in 1943. He made it to second lieutenant and traveled throughout the South Pacific and South America before being discharged in 1946. At this point he was living in New York and decided to apply for a grant from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Délano and his wife Irene had visited Puerto Rico in 1941 as part of his work with the FSA and they had become fascinated by the island and its people. They decided to propose to the Guggenheim Foundation a book of photographs about the social conditions in the Island. The proposal was accepted and Délano and Irene arrived in Puerto Rico in the late 1940's. They made friends with the future governor of the Island, Luis Muñoz Marín, and quickly became involved in the creation of a government office to combat illiteracy. Together with Irene and several technicians from Puerto Rico and the United States, the Division of Community Education was born. They started producing films to be showed in the open air of distant towns in the island. Altogether, Délano produced seven films for this division, also composing music for most of them.

Jack Délano's first compositions emerged then as

music for films he produced. After resigning from the education division, he embarked on several projects that combined the visual arts with music, immersing himself in the study of Spanish and Puerto Rican folklore. He started collecting Spanish folksongs from the collection of Federico García de Onís, a reputed Spanish philologist living in Puerto Rico.

In 1955, Pablo Casals, the famous cellist, moved to Puerto Rico and Délano was hired to make a documentary film about his visit (Pablo Casals in Puerto Rico). Several of his photographs were later used as posters for the Casals Festival. It was from Casals that Délano formed his artistic credo:

*I have since come to believe that what he [Casals] said about music and films is true of all works of art. There seem to be some basic rules of composition - order, balance, contrast, tension, climax, resolution - that apply equally to every work of art, whether it be a poem, a film, a painting, a photograph, a play, a piece of sculpture, a symphony, or a cathedral. (What is the Taj Mahal if not a symphony in marble?)<sup>3</sup>*

In 1957 Délano was appointed Assistant Program Director of WIPR, the radio station of the government of Puerto Rico. From this position he recorded the Casals Festival Concerts. At the end of the 1950's Délano started composing profusely: chamber music, songs, and orchestral pieces. Then, in 1960 he was offered a fellowship from the UNESCO to study the educational

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* P.134.

techniques used by TV stations in Asia and Europe, so he spent the next three months in Japan, India, Italy, France, and England. During the next nine years he worked at WIPR with great success, receiving prizes for innovative programming and producing several programs on Puerto Rican folklore. In these programs he became involved with some of Puerto Rico's most brilliant writers, like Dr. Tomás Blanco and the poet Luis Palés Matos.

When Délano retired in 1969 he decided to pursue several freelance projects: he designed a hands-on children museum and the Pablo Casals Museum in San Juan. He also started designing and illustrating books for children together with Irene. Random House published their version of "The Emperor's New Clothes". This type of work occupied him during most of the 1970's until 1979, when he decided to apply for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. He wanted to show the Puerto Rico of the 1980's, forty years after his work with the FSA. The grant was approved and the project: "Contrasts: 40 Years of Change and Continuity in Puerto Rico", evolved into an exhibition which ran throughout the States, Puerto Rico, and South America. After the death of his wife and collaborator Irene in 1982, he traveled extensively attending exhibits of his photographs and concerts of his compositions.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Délano's life was his ability to excel in so many fields. His work as a celebrated photographer, successful illustrator, filmmaker, and extraordinary composer show his ability to adapt to any

circumstance. He can be seen as a true artist, able to impose his personality and create beauty in a variety of artistic expressions. Jack Délano died in 1997, shortly after finishing his autobiography "Photographic Memories".

### Works and Style

As a composer Jack Délano was a late bloomer. He studied music from childhood into adolescence, but there is a twenty to twenty-five year hiatus in which he devoted himself primarily to photography and filmmaking. His eventual return to music, specifically composition, was in the context of music for films he was producing. His constant travels around the island of Puerto Rico, taking pictures for the FSA, brought him into contact with popular music from the country (*música jíbara*). This was reflected in his first composition to gain prominence, the Sonata for Viola and Piano, which earned a chamber music prize in 1953 in a competition sponsored by the Puerto Rican Radio. This work was one of the firsts to incorporate folksong into a Sonata form in Puerto Rican music. The first movement makes use of the *tónica andaluza* (Andalusia Tonic), a feature of Puerto Rican folksong. The second movement uses the *séis con décima*, a *mestizo* type of Puerto Rican genre. Finally, the last movement uses a *guaracha*, a popular Afro-Caribbean rhythm.

During the 1950's he was commissioned to write a ballet, *La Bruja de Loíza* (The Witch of Loíza). It is based on a folktale of African origin, in which a young woman "takes off her skin" at night while her lover is asleep and turns into a horrible witch, to spend the night in

a frenzy of wild dancing. At daybreak she puts back her “beautiful skin” before her lover awakes. He also wrote “*La Oración de Jimena*” (Jimena’s Prayer), a song for alto and harpsichord based on a passage from “*El Cid Campeador*”, a medieval Spanish ballad. In the 1960’s he wrote his Solo Violin Sonata, a choral piece titled “*Me Voy a Ponce*”, the Musical Offering to the Memory of Luis Palés Matos for solo horn and viola with string orchestra, and a set of duos for two violins: “*Siete Dúos a Canon*”. During the 1970’s he was involved in many projects as illustrator and thus, composed very little. But in 1984 he composed a String Quartet, and in the 1990’s wrote a Piano Quintet, a Piano Trio, a Sonata for Violin and Piano, and Burundanga for large orchestra, chorus and soloists. His

song for soprano and piano trio “*Amor América*” uses a text by the Nobel Prize Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Among his works for orchestra, the Sinfonietta for Strings, was commissioned and premiered by the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra, and has been performed widely in the Island and in the United States.

Jack Delano’s awakening as a composer happened after his move to Puerto Rico, in that sense he is truly a Puerto Rican composer. The ever-presence of Caribbean rhythms and melodic gestures, and his ability to incorporate the national folklore of the Island into his output, while retaining a universal outlook, puts him at the forefront of Puerto Rican composers in the second half of the Twentieth-Century.

1. Délano, Jack, Photographic Memories (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington DC, 1997), 19-20.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid. P.134.

4. Olivieri, Emanuel. Puertorrican Music for Viola and Piano, program notes, sound recording. (San Juan, 2000).