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**MUSIC REVIEW**

## **'Angels' soars above Mexican works on Pacific Symphony bill**

**Ana Lara's otherworldly 'Angels of Darkness and Dawn' soars above the other works on an all-Mexican program.**

By Mark Swed  
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When two angels finally descended upon the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Hall on Thursday, much music had been played and the evening had grown late. Up to that point, the Pacific Symphony had meant to please with suggestions of dance and a touch of sentimentality. Clichés were not excluded.

The concert was the main event of the orchestra's American Composers Festival, this year focused on Mexico. Carl St.Clair conducted with persuasive verve. A Texan, he didn't need to be taught the salsa. The orchestra played wonderfully, idiomatically. A carefree occasion, "Angels of Darkness and Dawn" were held at bay.

"Angels of Darkness and Dawn" is the first half of Ana Lara's "Angels of Flame and Ice," from 1994, and it was the evening's concluding work. Lara's other two angels, Light and Dusk, were not invited.

Lara, born in 1959, is one of Mexico's leading composers. Her chamber music — interesting, colorful — had been featured earlier in the festival and at a Monday Evening Concert this season. Lara's "Angels" are inevitably full of color. When she speaks of her music, as she has had repeated opportunity to do during the festival, she always speaks about color. She dresses stylishly, again with a sophisticated color sense.

But color isn't what struck me as the most remarkable element in Lara's "Angels" on Thursday. "Darkness" begins with the ancient Earth opening its mouth and intoning a primal, indescribable "Aaaaaaaah." The sound comes from the depths of the orchestra, like a prelude to an Inca "Das Rheingold."

There's no sound quite like it. Joseph Horowitz, the festival's host and artistic advisor, called Lara's score apocalyptic. The composer writes in her program notes that her inspiration was four cosmological poems by Francisco Serrano. To me, this is not the sound of total destruction but global birth. There followed, to be sure, colorful instrumental

effects aplenty. Lara seems to go stylistically from Wagner's Rhine to Respighi's "Pines of Rome," an Inca Rhine leading to an Inca Catacomb.

"Dawn" mists in an aura of Ravel, but the light this angel conveys is even more of another world. At the end, high-frequency overtones bounce off the hall's walls and all but short-circuit the inner ear.

After 15 minutes with two of Lara's angels, the music that went before seemed like it had happened long ago and on a planet far away. The most notable piece earlier in the program was the premiere of Daniel Catán's "Caribbean Airs," which had been commissioned for the occasion. Catán, with whom Lara studied, is now a local resident, currently writing "Il Postino" for Los Angeles Opera.

"Caribbean Airs" evokes Cuban music. The percussion section dominates. Bongos bang away, and so do congas. Cha-cha-cha rhythms charm. The strings swing with the luster of Hollywood in its heyday. Only in the last of the three movements is there a hint of darkness, and even here it is a dreamy darkness. The score offers 20 minutes of pure hedonism.

The festival has not ranged far and wide into the vastness of Mexico. Thursday's concert remained close to home. "Dánzon" No. 2 by Arturo Márquez, who studied at CalArts, opened the program. Another modernist turned populist, Marquez writes sweeping, swooning tropes on Cuban dance music. The "Dánzon" is irresistible, barely escaping the danger of over-mining the material.

Also with an L.A. connection was Enrique Arturo Diemecke's "Concerto a Celedonio," written for guitarist Pepe Romero by the Long Beach Symphony's music director. It is clever, appealing, lightweight music played with great style by a popular guitarist with a beautiful tone and wondrous lyrical sensibility.

Romero played three sentimental arrangements of Mexican songs by Manuel Ponce and an encore piece by his father, Celedonio Romero. And for a bit more history, St.Clair offered an exhilarating performance of Silvestre Revueltas' "Caminos," a nine-minute piece taken in seven.

Revueltas' music was the spirit of the Mexican Revolution, and ferocity served "Caminos" well, especially in a program with so much sugar. But Lara's two strange angels are what made it all worthwhile, and it is a great pity the other two weren't invited.

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