

## **A SERIES OF LINKED DISCONTINUITIES** – Reflections on the History of Mexican Music

by Leonora Saavedra

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Mexican culture is a fusion of the native and imported. The dense intermingling of these elements is perhaps its strongest characteristic. And Mexico's musical history would indeed appear to be fractured: a series of discontinuities. But Mexican culture has at the same time managed to retain bits and pieces of each disrupted identity, reworking, adapting, and transforming vital national ingredients.

Mexican music begins many centuries before the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in **1521**. This "**pre-Columbian**" musical culture was systematically destroyed by the Spaniards because of the central role ~~they~~ *it* had played in rituals of war and religion. We do not know anymore how Aztec music really sounded, but the *idea* of Aztec music remains powerful in the Mexican imagination.

Only a few years after the fall of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, the Franciscan friars discovered that music was the best means to attract and convert the native population to their European religion. Indian choirs flourished, and the natives had no trouble mastering Gregorian chant. The *ministriles* — Indian performers on wood and string instruments— got to be so numerous that strict rules had to be enforced to contain their growth within the cathedrals' musical establishments.

Keeping pace with European musical styles, Spanish and Mexican chapel masters wrote gorgeous music for Catholic services in Mexican cathedrals. These masses and motets were, of course, in Latin. But on special occasions such as Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin, or Corpus Christi, the midnight services added *villancicos* -- poems in the vernacular set to lively rhythms that often contained words in indigenous languages, or imitations of the broken Spanish that Africans were thought to speak. These semi-secular celebrations were highly popular, lasting late into the night. After Mexican Independence (**1821**) severed the ties of the cathedrals to the protective Spanish Crown, this remarkable "**Mexican Baroque**" repertoire lay dormant for a good 200 years.

But Mexicans possess a long historical memory, and would not desert such a treasure of early music from the American continent. Mexican and American researchers and performers of early music have rescued and recorded wonderful pieces in Renaissance style, or in the sober early Spanish Baroque of the seventeenth century as evoked by **Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla** (1590?-1664; in performance April 20).

The rediscovery of eighteenth century Mexican roots pops up in unexpected places. A central form of Mexican folk music is the *son jarocho*, a lively vocal and dance genre developed in the state of Veracruz, and featuring virtuoso harp solos accompanied by small guitar-like instruments (*jaranas*). The origins of this now very familiar tradition are in popular and courtly dances of the eighteenth century, such as the Spanish *fandango* as well as others, like the *cumbé* and the *zarambeque*, that were themselves stylizations of African dances brought to the New World.

Then, 100 years after Mexicans were taken with the *fandango*, new waves of immigrants and new trans-Atlantic fashions brought to Mexico the waltz, the *schottische*, and the polka. Trained musicians like **Juventino Rosas** (1868-1894; in performance April 20) and **Ricardo Castro** (1864-1907; in performance April 20) composed hundreds of delightful dances for the entertainment of their wealthy

patrons. Loud and lively wind bands also performed them in open spaces. Soon these pieces were appropriated by such traditional ensembles as the *tamboras sinaloenses*, the *bandas*, and the *conjuntos de música norteña* that are so popular today on both sides of the Mexico-US border.

Of all Mexican musicians, the most historically aware are those composing Western art music. For nineteenth century composers such as Rosas or Castro, it was self-evident that Mexico's music belonged in the Western tradition; they wrote not only salon miniatures but also songs and operas in Italian and French styles. This repertoire allowed Mexico's upper classes to retain strong ties of identity with their European counterparts; they did not feel the need to be different.

The twentieth century, on the other hand, introduced a new situation. **Manuel Ponce** (1882-1948; in performance April 15, 20, 26-28) and **Carlos Chávez (1899-1978;** in performance April 15 and 20), for example, watched musical and political developments in Europe with great excitement around the time of World War I. There was a perceived crisis in Western music. Whose musical style would predominate? Debussy's? Stravinsky's? Schoenberg's? Would tonality be left behind? While Ponce felt overwhelmed, the younger Chávez believed that this was a New World opportunity to contribute original and fresh ideas. Modernism, in its many variants, was the main concern of Mexican composers during the first half of the twentieth century.

But Western music had also taught Mexicans that countries outside the central cultures of Europe had a better chance to be listened to if they developed a style that could be conceived as native or folk art -- "of the people." Moreover, such Russian nationalists as Mussorgsky had already proved that folk materials could refresh outworn European materials. Finally, the Mexican Revolution -- the pro-democratic civil war of 1910-1920 -- had brought a different perspective to Mexican identity. For the first time, Mexicans of mixed ethnicity attained full political power: a new ideal emerged extolling the potential of *mestizaje* to unite the best in all ethnicities and cultures. While the European component of Mexican culture had always been clear, a vital process of reclaiming the indigenous contributions of the past animated the 1920s and '30s in all the arts.

A powerful synergy now emerged between the modern and the Mexican. Just as Mexican artists like Diego Rivera began using techniques opened up by cubism in murals telling a new history of the Mexican people, Chávez appropriated elements of musical primitivism to imaginatively recreate the "Aztec." **Silvestre Revueltas** (1899-1940; in performance April 20, 26-29) built on the revaluation of everyday street music by such French composers as Erik Satie to concoct provocative satires of Mexican life. And Revueltas employed the layered, self-propelling structures first used by Stravinsky to recreate a soundscape of Mexican urban centers, in which the indigenous and modern, rural and urban collide and coexist. Ponce, meanwhile, favored an eclecticism in which impressionist moods, Romantic impulses, and neoclassical structures sustain melodies based on Mexican vernacular song.

So regarded, Mexican composers have always embraced an exhilarating contradiction, balancing between assimilation and difference, the universal and the local. And this balancing act has not been any less evident in the music of the second half of the twentieth century and of today. The awareness of Western culture is ever present: Mexican composers have felt the need to explore aesthetic and compositional concerns shared with their European and American counterparts. Moreover, they have increasingly recognized the freedom to choose, appropriate, and develop that is awarded them by the conditions of their own diversified inheritance.

**Mario Lavista** (b. 1943; in performance April 20), the most widely respected among living Mexican composers, has explored 12-tone, conceptual, and open-structure styles; the relation of his music to European and Asian literature is a

constant, and so is his preoccupation with composers and genres of the distant Western past, such as the lament. One would be hard pressed to find anything overtly Mexican or remotely folkloric in Lavista's music: this simply does not interest him. Rather, his compositions are unmistakably Lavistian. Moreover, his commitment to Mexican performers has resulted in a series of fruitful collaborations, yielding instrumental pieces that explore the quietly expressive possibilities of extended instrumental techniques. Among younger composers, **Ana Lara** (b. 1959; in performance April 15, 20, 26-29) is one of the closest to Lavista in terms of extended techniques, non-tonal idioms, and an expressive refinement that beautifully balances exceptional emotional impulses.

A sense of instrumental color unites Revueltas, Lara, **Daniel Catán** (b. 1949, in performance April 26-28), and **Arturo Márquez**, (b. 1950; in performance April 15, 26-29)) and makes their music "Mexican" despite obvious aesthetic differences. Catán, for example, has an extraordinary grasp of the expressive possibilities of the large orchestra, which he applies to the composition of opera. He is the only Mexican composer of the twentieth century who has devoted himself to this genre, which connects with a longstanding passion among Mexican audiences. Indeed, Italian opera has impacted Mexican classical and vernacular music in unsuspected ways -- for example, in the vocal style of that staple of mariachi music, the *canción ranchera*. From this perspective, it should not surprise us that Mexican composers and audiences count Italian opera among the national traditions. In the literary and musical materials of his operas Catán also reaches into an encompassing Latin American culture.

In that he is not alone: Mexicans have given citizenship rights to a multitude of European styles, but they have been no less warm in their reception of Latin American strains. Latin American dances, especially those coming from the Caribbean, have been acculturated to such a degree that many Mexicans would be surprised if told that the *danzón* is originally from Cuba. And so Arturo Márquez has consciously bridged the gap between the classical and the popular with his *danzón* series, of which **Danzón No. 2** has become something of an unofficial national anthem.

With the opening of the Mexican economy to global markets via NAFTA, and the development of digital culture and the Internet, Mexican music has received a renewed eclectic impulse. Popular and world music now coexist in Mexican contemporary art music, which nevertheless remains grounded in Western culture at large. But eased international access and the "world music" phenomenon have reignited 100-year-old questions of Mexican identity. Young Mexican composers sharply feel the challenge of situating the national within the cosmopolitan and the global. Their richly diverse lineage superbly equips them to face this twenty-first century task.