Aaron Gonzales

MUSI23: Music & Culture III

9 December 2009

Carlos Chávez

While the rest of the Western world was in a process of reevaluating itself in the wake of the first world war, Mexico was looking inward for different reasons. The revolution of 1910 and its overthrow of the post-colonial dictatorship freed Mexico once and for all of remnants from its colonial past and initiated a prolonged period of jubilant nationalism and reinvention of Mexican identity. Like all revolutions it sought a collective voice, and “the new government promulgated a complex ideology based on socialist rhetoric, anticlericism, hypernationalism, mestizaje, and indigenismo.” As a rejection of Europe and its long colonial legacy in the New World, the new nationalism looked inwards and backwards, hailing Indian ancestry and the mixed, or *mestizo*, strife as a common inheritance and as the source of a cultural rebirth—“a ‘new man’ and a new society” for the new age[[1]](#footnote-2).

It is in this post-revolutionary fervor that Carlos Chávez quickly carved out his name and established for himself what would be a leading role in the artistic life of the new political and social order. For half a century he would exist at the center of Mexican musical and artistic activity, as founder and director of the National Symphony Orchestra and head of the National Conservatory. He was born in 1899 outside of Mexico City, to a family of comfortable means and Criollo background (his father was white, while there is some debate about his mother’s lineage, specifically regarding her “Indianness”[[2]](#footnote-3)). He was largely self-taught in composition, learning by imitation of the classic composers and opting for private harmony lessons instead of entering a conservatory. In his formative years he studied piano under first Manuel Ponce and then Pedro Luís Ogazón, composers whose works increasingly bridged the gaps between the high nationalism of a late romantic dialect and the emerging forces of populist renewal and reinvention that had come out of the revolution.

The young Chávez was enlisted early on to be the voice of the new Mexican aesthetic, a task he shared with such artists as Silvestre Revueltas as well as the visual artists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. His nationalist works are simultaneously modern in their free diatonicism and manipulation, and at times abandonment, of classical form. His sources range from Mexican antiquity to contemporary folk influences—what his musical predecessor and piano instructor, Manuel Ponce, called “the melancholy of the indigenous, the picaresque qualities of the mestizo, and the proud sentiments of the European.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

In 1921, the Secretariat of Public Education commissioned Chávez to compose a work on Aztec themes, and he presented the ballet *El Fuego Nuevo (The New Fire)*. Originally scored for women’s chorus and a miniscule wind orchestra, its eventual incarnation reached Stravinskian proportions when it officially debuted. He composed his second ballet on a primitive theme only four years later. *Los Cuatro Soles*, or *The Four Suns*, undertook a theme of the primordial Aztec creation myth, much in the vein of the Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Chávez would continue to compose indigenist pieces, among these two of the most indicative of his varied compositional approach to each: the futurist ballet *Caballos de Vapor (Horse Power)*, and the *Sinfonía Índia*, based upon contemporary melodies of different Indian tribes, for which Chávez is certainly best known.

*Caballos de Vapor* (1926) exhibits a kind of Marinetti-esque futurism in its portrayal of the modern Mexican state. Pumping ostinatos simultaneously support and transform nationalistic melodies that emerge as stylized, or rather, more efficient versions of their folk prototypes. The insistent eighth-note rhythms in the strings lend the music an undeniable forward momentum but are also reminiscent of contemporary Indian music, as is Chávez’s specialized battery of percussion. Recalling Arthur Honegger’s *Pacific 231*,blaring horns alternate between *corrido*-style accompaniment, kinetic descending figures and, in the middle section, an interlude of industrial-strength glissandos that emphasize their own raw machinery. The scenario, designed by Diego Rivera, must have looked something like the artist’s *Detroit Industry* murals. Similarly, one can only imagine the enjambment of choreographic styles as they might have embodied the intersection of the modern with the already hybrid traditional culture of Mexico.

*Sinfonía Índia* (1935), Chávez’s second symphony and the piece for which he is undoubtedly best known, was also his conducting debut in the United States. It was commissioned CBS, to be performed by the CBS Symphony Orchestra and broadcast live in the United States. Like Copland’s *Salon México*, which he composed around the same time after visiting Mexico per Chávez’s invitation, the Indian Symphony is diatonic, episodic and sweepingly vast in its scope. Again, Chávez employed an arsenal of indigenous percussive instruments in the orchestration, including a mix of Aztec drums and shakers still in use by modern Indians with replicas of relics from Mexican antiquity. Chávez’s second symphony is built upon extant melodies of the Yaqui, Huichol, and Seri Indians and thus represents a living Mexico. The intricate rhythms and persistent “three-against-two” and hemiola figures are lifted directly from Indian folk music, for instance, as are the eighth-note melodies and pentatonicism. In a way, romantic grandeur of the piece makes the *Sinfonía Índia* an appropriately salutatory piece for Chávez’s conducting debut in the States, though it is nevertheless consistent with his modern, individualist style. The form is a kind of adapted sonata, for instance, that resembles a free-standing first movement. In lieu of traditional development, Chávez inserts a slow interlude on a new indigenous melody, a choice that indicates his rejection of Germanic ideas of transformation and instead the creation of a personal, esoteric organizational principle.

If Chávez’s music is highly nationalistic, it is only as a natural result of the varied influences that continually informed his compositional style. His first visit to Europe in 1922-23 introduced him to Stravinsky, among others. As much a student of the world as of his own country, his works are simultaneously neoclassical and romantic, abstract and structuralist, neoprimitive and futuristic in style. According to Aaron Copland, with whom he maintained a close friendship for over fifty years, Chávez “faced in his music almost all the major problems of modern music: the overthrow of Germanic ideals, the objectification of sentiment, the use of folk material in its relation to nationalism, the intricate rhythms, the linear as opposed to vertical writing, the specifically ‘modern’ sound images. It is music that belongs entirely to our own age.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Early on, Chávez began a lifelong development of a fundamentally modern compositional style based around the notion of non-repetition. Chávez’s modernism stems from rigid individualism and pragmatism. His abandonment of conventional form is not a reactionary statement, but rather a naturally arrived at modus apparatus.

Works Cited

Copland, Aaron. *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941.

Parker, Robert L. *Carlos Chávez: Mexico’s Modern-Day Orpheus*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.

Pedelty, Mark. *Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From the Aztec to NAFTA*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2004.

Ross, Alex. *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Picador, 2007.

1. Pedelty, Mark. *Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From the Aztec to NAFTA.* Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2004. 203-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Parker, Robert L. *Carlos Chávez: Mexico’s Modern-Day Orpheus*. Boston: Twayne, 1983. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In Pedelty, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Copland, Aaron. *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)