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| **Chávez (y Ramírez), Carlos (Antonio de Padua) (1899-1978)** |
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| Composer and conductor Carlos Chávez was a dominant force in Mexican musical life during the middle third of the 20th century. His most influential post was as director of the Symphony Orchestra of Mexico (*Orquesta Sinfónica Mexicana,* OSM), which he led from 1928 to 1948. While leading the OSM, Chávez successfully broadened concepts of classical music to include symphonic, contemporary works by Mexican composers. At the same time, he began an international guest-conducting career that continued into the final years of his life. Although best known for a handful of nationalist works composed in the 1920s and 1930s, Chávez’s compositions demonstrate a diversity of aesthetic interests, from avant-garde abstraction to popular genres; regardless of the approach used in a given work, the Chávez’s intellectualism and care is evident. |
| Early Life and Career  Carlos Antonio de Padua Chávez y Ramírez was the youngest of six children raised by Juvencia and Augustín Chávez in Popotla, a suburb of Mexico City. When he was five, his father, an inventor, passed away; his mother, the director of a local girls’ school, supported and raised her family. Nonetheless, Chávez enjoyed the benefits of a firmly middle-class upbringing, including piano lessons with Manuel M. Ponce and Pedro Luís Ogazón, and harmony lessons with Juan B. Fuentes. He did not have formal composition lessons, but began studying scores and composition treatises as a teenager, integrating the ideas he found there into his early compositions.  In September 1922, Chávez married Otilia Ortiz, a fellow pianist in Ogazón’s studio. Their honeymoon to Europe became an opportunity for Chávez to present his work abroad. After a brief return to Mexico, he began the first of two early trips to New York, where he observed the young modernist community in that city. These visits proved influential: they provided the young composer with a model for modernist musical performance and promotion, and they began a pattern of U.S.-Mexican travel and career development that continued for the rest of his life.  Chávez took a position as director of theOSM in September 1928. At that time the organisation was little more than a semi-professional theatre orchestra. Chávez rigorously re-shaped it into a premiere performance ensemble. His behaviour earned him a lasting reputation as a tyrant, but the orchestra began to attract a devoted and diverse audience. The OSM rewarded listeners with one of the most adventurous orchestral repertoires available in the Western Hemisphere. Throughout his twenty years at the helm of the OSM, he consistently programmed more contemporary American music than his peers elsewhere.  Chávez’s prominence with the OSM led to other official posts in Mexico, including chief of the Department of Fine Arts (1933-1934) and director of the National Institute of Fine Arts (1947-1952). Perhaps most significantly, though, his position at the OSM allowed him to develop a career as a composer-conductor, eventually leading performances of his own works throughout the world. Modernism and Nationalism Like others of his generation, Chávez was profoundly shaped by the events and politics of the Mexican Revolution (c. 1910-1920). In addition to disrupting his education and early career, the ripple that it sent through the artistic community contributed to his affinity for new sounds, particularly those that seemed to represent Mexican national identity. Chávez wrote several scores that are undeniably nationalist, beginning with folk song arrangements completed in his youth. The most famous of these works, *Sinfonía India, Chapultepec, Horsepower (Los Caballos de Vapor),* and *Xochipilli: an Imagined Aztec Music,* are strongly identified with the composer and his aesthetic.  Until recently, Chávez has been most closely identified with nationalism, not only in performance circles, but in scholarly publications as well. The trouble with this characterisation is that it belies the relative importance of other aesthetic interests in his work, most significantly his affinity for modernist music. Whereas his nationalist period occupies a discrete timeframe (approx. 1920-1945), Chávez’s taste for innovation spans his entire career and seems to overwhelm almost every other compositional concern in a given work, regardless of its basic aesthetic. Recent scholarship reconsiders nationalist works under a modernist lens, and turns fresh attention on more abstract compositions such as *Energía,* Concerto for Four Horns, Toccata for Percussion, and *Soli I-IV*. Late Career The strength of Chávez’s influence began to be most clearly felt in the late 1930s and early 1940s. During these years, he won a Guggenheim grant for composition, organised a series of concerts for the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Two-Thousand Years of Mexican Art,* became the director of the National Institute of Fine Arts, and resigned his post at the OSM. By the end of this period, he was receiving enough commissions, guest-conducting posts and temporary teaching appointments to forgo long-term official posts in favour of increased dedication to composition and private instruction. He took the Charles Eliot Norton Poetic Chair at Harvard in 1958, for which he gave a series of lectures published as *Musical Thought;* he founded and led a composition workshop at the National Conservatory of Mexico; he accepted several prominent orchestral commissions; and he directed the Cabrillo Music Festival in Aptos, California for four seasons.  In the 1970s, Chávez briefly returned to public service in Mexico when the President, Luis Echeverría, appointed him first as an advisor, and then, two years later, as director of the Department of Music of the National Institute of Fine Arts, and director of the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico. Despite the support of the president, the posts were controversial, and the musicians union led an effective strike in protest. Chávez resigned within a month of appointment. The composer felt betrayed by the fracas; he spent most of his remaining years in New York, only relocating to Mexico City in 1975 when exploratory surgery revealed he had cancer. He died three years later, on August 2, 1978.  Selected works:  *Sextet*, (1919) for two violins, viola, two cellos, and piano  *Madrigal*, (1921) for cello and piano  *String Quartet I* (1921)  *Seis Exágonos,* (1923/24) voice and chamber ensemble  *Tres sonatinas,* (1924) for solo piano, solo cello and piano, solo violin and piano  *Energía,* (1925) chamber ensemble  *Los Cuatro Soles,* (1925)ballet  *Sonata* (1928) for solo piano  *Caballos de Vapor,* (1931) ballet, orchestral suite drawn from original  *String Quartet II* (1932)  *Cantos de México,* (1933) Mexican orchestra  *El Sol, Corrido Mexicano,* (1934)chorus and orchestra  *Llamadas, Sinfonía Proletaria,* (1934)chorus and orchestra  *Soli I,* (1934) for oboe, clarinet, trumpet, bassoon  *Spirals,* (1934) for violin and piano  *Chapultepec, Three Famous Mexican Pieces,* (1935) arrangements for: orchestra and band  *Sinfonía India,* (1935) orchestra  *Chaconne in E minor by Buxtehude,* (1937) orchestra  *Ten Preludes*, (1940) for piano  *Concerto for Piano with Orchestra* (1938)  *Three Poems,* (1938) forvoice and piano  *Sonata for Four Horns* (1929)  *Concerto for Four Horns and Orchestra* (1942)  *Xochipilli, an Imagined Aztec Music,* (1940) for piccolo, flute, E-flat clarinet, trombone, and six percussionists  *La Paloma Azul,* (1940) chamber orchestra and chorus  *Sonata IV* (1941) for Piano  *North Carolina Blues,* (1942) voice and piano  *Toccata* (1942) for Percussion Instruments  *Concerto* (1948) for Violin and Orchestra  *Estudio IV, Homenaje a Chopin,* (1949) for solo piano  *Symphony No. 3* (1951)  *Symphony No. 4: Sinfonía romántica* (1953)  *Symphony No. 5* (1953)  *The Visitors,* (1953) opera  *Invención I,* (1958) solo piano  *Sonata V*, (1959) solo piano  *Soli II,* (1961) wind quintet  *Sonata VI*, (1961) solo piano  *Symphony No. 6* (1961)  *Invención II,* (1965) for violin, viola, and cello  *Soli III,* (1965) for bassoon, trumpet, viola, timpani, and orchestra  *Soli IV,* (1966) for trumpet, horn, trombone  *Invencíon III,* (1969) for harp  *Estudio a Rubinstein,* (1973) for solo piano  *Partita,* (1973) for solo timpani  *Zandunga Serenade* (1976)  Written works:  *Toward a New Music: Music and Electricity,* trans. H. Weinstock (New York, 1935).  *Musical Thought* (1964) |
| Further reading:  (Agea)  (Carmona)  (Carmona, Epistolario selecto de Carlos Chávez)  (García Morillo)  (Halffter)  (Moreno Rivas)  (Parker) |