**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 until 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 composer’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 organization was little more than a semi-professional theatre orchestra. Chávez rigorously re-shaped it into a premiere performance ensemble. His behavior 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 20 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 arrangements folk songs 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 characterization 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, organized a series of concerts for 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 favor 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, August 2, 1978.

Images:

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, as seen here: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/concert/0708-mexicanmusic.html>

References and further reading

Selected works (music):

In many cases, Chávez made multiple arrangements of a single piece of music. Unless the arrangement became more famous than the original, such instances are not noted below.

Sextet, 2 violins, viola, 2 cellos, and piano (1919)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319100>

Madrigal, cello and piano (1921)

Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/stream.asp?s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2Fq98393%5F108>

String Quartet I (1921)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble or Latin American String Quartet, Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319088>

*Seis Exágonos,* voice and chamber ensemble (1923/24)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F320531>

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F320532>

*Tres sonatinas,* solo piano, solo cello and piano, solo violin and piano (1924)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos, Piano Sonatina:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319091>

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos, Cello Sonatina:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319093>

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos, Violin Sonatina:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319092>

*Energía,* chamber ensemble (1925)

<http://youtu.be/9G2K7S__-3g>

*Los Cuatro Soles,* ballet (1925)

Sonata for solo piano (1928)

*Caballos de Vapor,* ballet, orchestral suite drawn from original (1931)

String Quartet II (1932)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble or Latin American String Quartet, Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319089>

Seven pieces for piano [*Unidad, Polígonos, 36, Solo, Blues, Fox,* and *Paisaje*] (1930)

*Cantos de México,* Mexican orchestra (1933)

Naxos:

http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F320529

*Sinfonía de Antígona,* orchestra (1933)

<http://youtu.be/mb7wyhAVW88>

*El Sol, Corrido Mexicano,* chorus and orchestra (1934)

*Llamadas, Sinfonía Proletaria,* chorus and orchestra (1934)

*Soli I,* oboe, clarinet, trumpet, bassoon (1934)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319314>

*Spirals,* violin and piano (1934)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319102>

*Chapultepec, Three Famous Mexican Pieces,* arrangements for: orchestra, band (1935)

*Sinfonía India,* orchestra (1935)

http://youtu.be/TKoq4KOHUEU

*Chaconne in E minor by Buxtehude,* orchestra (1937)

Ten Preludes, piano (1940)

Concerto for Piano with Orchestra (1938)

<http://youtu.be/zozW-UmloRI>

*Three Poems,* voice and piano (1938)

Sonata for Four Horns (1929); Concerto for Four Horns and Orchestra (1942)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: Sonata for Four Horns

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319317>

*Xochipilli, an Imagined Aztec Music,* piccolo, flute, E-flat clarinet, trombone, and six percussionists (1940)

<http://youtu.be/DXElDFYhW6A>

*La Paloma Azul,*  chamber orchestra and chorus (1940)

Sonata IV for Piano (1941)

*North Carolina Blues,* voice and piano (1942)

Toccata for Percussion Instruments (1942)

<http://youtu.be/8-WH7rCMIPQ>

Four Traditional Indian Melodies from Ecuador, voice, flute, oboe, E-flat clarinet, bassoon, violins I and II, viola, cello, double bass, and two percussionists.

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F320526>

*La Hija de Cólquide,* ballet, various arrangements: chamber ensemble, solo piano, [*Suite*] orchestra, *Cuarteto de Arcos III* (1943)

Naxos, *La Hija de Cólquide* Suite:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319420>

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble or Latin American String Quartet, Naxos, String Quartet III:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319090>

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (1948)

*Estudio IV, Homenaje a Chopin,* solo piano (1949)

Symphony No. 3 (1951)

<http://youtu.be/QY9QCU1oRFY>

<http://youtu.be/ECx9kibXenE>

<http://youtu.be/zdj-qaR4LFs>

Symphony No. 4 “Sinfonía romántica” (1953)

<http://youtu.be/lrBIhJgZ6hY>

Symphony No. 5 (1953)

<http://youtu.be/12YKPkVgceI>

<http://youtu.be/4WFcy4LYv8E>

<http://youtu.be/41ARh2-o_PI>

*The Visitors,* opera (1953)

*Prometheus Bound,* cantata for soloists, chorus, and orchestra (1956)

*Upingos,* solo oboe (1957)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/stream.asp?s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2Fqs6926%5F001>

*Invención I,* solo piano (1958)

Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319417>

Sonata V, solo piano (1959)

*Soli II,* wind quintet (1961)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319315>

Sonata VI, solo piano (1961)

Symphony No. 6 (1961)

<http://youtu.be/SUtx0y2jFmk>

<http://youtu.be/LekhEDkirAs>

<http://youtu.be/9v8GsyukOJM>

*Lamentaciones,* voice, piccolo, oboe, marimba, and bass drum (1962)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/stream.asp?s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2Fqs7143%5F001>

*Fuga H A G, C,* violin, viola, cello, and double bass (1964)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble or Latin American String Quartet, Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/stream.asp?s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2Fqs5850%5F001>

*Resonancias,* orchestra (1964)

*Tambuco, for six percussion players* (1964)

<http://youtu.be/UijBVA6r8lM>

*Invención II,* violin, viola, and cello (1965)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319418>

*Soli III,* bassoon, trumpet, viola, timpani, and orchestra (1965)

*Soli IV,* trumpet, horn, trombone (1966)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319316>

*Elatio,* orchestra (1967)

*Pirámide,* ballet (1968)

*Invencíon III,* harp (1969)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319419>

*Clio, Symphonic Ode,* orchestra (1969)

*Discovery,* orchestra (1969)

*Variations,* violin and piano (1969)

Southwest Chamber Music Ensemble, Naxos: <http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F319103>

*Estudio a Rubinstein,* solo piano (1973)

*Partita,* solo timpani (1973)

Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/streamw.asp?ver=2.0&s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2F320533>

*Feuille D’Album,* guitar (1974)

Naxos:

<http://cua.naxosmusiclibrary.com.proxycu.wrlc.org/stream.asp?s=34053%2Fcuanmlpaid08%2Fqs5856%5F001>

*Five Caprichos,* solo piano (1975)

*Zandunga Serenade* (1976)

Concerto, trombone and orchestra (1976)

Books by Chávez:

Articles and essays may be found elsewhere; there is a complete list of writings in the García Morillo book cited below. These are merely the two books Chávez wrote and had published.

*Toward a New Music: Music and Electricity,* trans. H. Weinstock (New York, 1935).

This book was completed after a tour of Bell Laboratories in New Jersey. It describes the way technology might inform the creation and production of music.

*Musical Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1961; Sp. Trans., 1964, *El pensamiento musical,*

Mexico City and Buenos Aires, 1964).

The essays contained in this book are based on Chávez’s lectures as the Charles Eliot Norton Poetic Chair at Harvard in 1958.

Selected Books about Chávez:

Numerous articles are available in both Spanish and English; this bibliography is limited to the most important book-length histories. Where both Spanish and English translations exist, preference has been given to the English-language sources.

Francisco Agea, ed. *21 años de la Orquesta Sinfónica de México* (Mexico City, 1948).

Includes complete programs of for the OSM during Chávez’s leadership.

Roberto García Morillo, *Carlos Chávez: vida y obra* (Mexico City, 1960).

The primary Spanish-language biography of the composer. It was written in consultation with the composer, and contains a list of works and writings by the composer, as well as detailed accounts of his compositional process.

Rodolfo Halffter, et. al., ed.s *Carlos Chávez: catalogo completo de sus obras* (Mexico

City, 1971).

Gloria Carmona, *Carlos Chávez: homenaje nacional* (Mexico City, 1978).

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

An English-language biography of the composer. It includes a short biographical essay, and longer chapters describing the major genres represented in Chávez’s ouvre as well as a discography, works list, and bibliography.

Gloria Carmona, *Epistolario selecto de Carlos Chávez* (Mexico City, 1989).

Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Rostros del nacionalismo en la musica Mexicana: Un ensayo de*

*interpretacíon* (Mexico City, 1989).

Robert Parker, *Carlos Chávez: A Guide to Research* (New York, 1998).

An annotated guide to most of the relevant literature on Chávez, including primary and secondary source materials.

Leonora Saavedra, “Of Selves and Others: Historiography, Ideology, and the Politics

of Modern Mexican Music,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Pittsburgh, 2001).

Silvia L. Cuesy, *Carlos Chávez* (Mexico City, 2002).

Yael Bitrán and Ricardo Miranda, eds. *Diálogo de Resplandores: Carlos Chávez y Silvestre Revueltas* (Mexico City, 2002).

An article collection with material about the two contemporaries in the title, stemming from a conference given about the two composers in 1999.

Alejandro Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and Ideas in Post-*

*Revolutionary Mexico* (Philadelphia, 2008).