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| Modernism and Film Music in Latin America |
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| Modernism in Latin America was, as in Europe, a movement that began as a reaction to late-nineteenth-century artistic currents, primarily in visual and plastic art, literature, and music. It broke down past conceptions of art and sought to find innovation and purpose in other areas utilizing non-traditional means. While waves of modernism flourished in Western Europe at the turn of the century – for example, Dadaism, Futurism, Expressionism – currents also hit the American continents. New advances in technology (particularly the development of telephones, cinema, and sound recordings), new modes of transportation, and industry helped push forward modernist ideologies through a re-examination and interpretation of reality that moved away from traditional forms. The burgeoning practice of cinema provided new juxtapositions of visual and musical art structures that served as a novel conduit for mass entertainment, education, and nationalist projects. Within Latin America, particularly in the larger film industries of Mexico and Argentina, cinema offered new opportunities for musical innovation that juxtaposed popular and folkloric music with practices from the Western art music tradition. |
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Within Latin America, particularly in the larger film industries of Mexico and Argentina, cinema offered new opportunities for musical innovation that juxtaposed popular and folkloric music with practices from the Western art music tradition.  The cinematic apparatus arrived in several Latin American metropolises shortly after the first exhibitions in Western Europe in 1896. As a new technology, this early cinema helped to shape a Latin American modernity that linked the national and the continental with global practices. Early filmmaking consisted of actuality footage (a precursor to documentary filmmaking), mirroring methods undertaken by the French Lumière Brothers and other foreign filmmakers, but adapted by exhibitors in Mexico and Argentina. During the armed struggle of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), film production in Mexico consisted primarily of newsreels, actualities of the fighting, and foreign films, typically from the United States and Italy. Narrative films were produced, but became much more prominent during the end of the 1910s and the 1920s (for example, *El automóvil gris* (1919)). The early Argentinean industry benefited from foreign films and also domestic short features focusing on national events, newsreels, and, later in the 1910s, feature-length narrative films starring tango and theater performers, such as *Nobleza Gaucha* (1915).  Musical accompaniment for the silent films did not follow a standardized practice. Sound synchronization began early on as exhibitors attempted to record sound with gramophones and synthesize it with the moving image. While the practice proved successful in some cases, live musical accompaniment was often preferred. In Mexico, screening spaces varied from large theaters to travelling *carpa* (tent) exhibitions. Often local musical *conjuntos* (dance bands) or volunteers from the community would accompany the screenings. In larger cities, however, such as Mexico City, it was common for students from the local music conservatory and members of the military band to offer musical accompaniment. From newspapers and accounts, the chosen music reflected popular currents that consisted of transcriptions of Italian arias, pieces from the *música de salón* tradition, *canciones mexicanas*, waltzes, foxtrots, and other examples of dance music. Many of the actors on screen crossed over from popular theater, such as the *teatro de revistas,* and offered their acting talents to the new medium. Selected music often did not fit with the moving image or the narrative, but offered familiar musical accompaniment for the screenings.  During Argentina’s early film period, tango films, or tango operas, were the rage, featuring popular artists and tango orchestras called *orquestas tipicas.* Narratives were often developed around a featured tango, associating the music and dance genre with stories taking place in the city while the use of folk songs symbolized the countryside. Because of the popularity of the tango, audiences often went to the screening venue more for the music rather than the film.  During the 1930s, the Mexican and Argentinean film industries became fully synchronized with sound-on-film technology. Mexican film music relied on the on-screen performance of popular songs and off-screen orchestral music that followed modernist techniques. Mexico’s first successful sound film, the prostitute melodrama *Santa* (1931, dir. Antonio Moreno), featured music by bolerista Agustín Lara (1897-1970) and orchestral music by Miguel Lerdo de Tejada (1869-1941). The development of cinematic genres depended on the use and placement of music. The prostitute melodrama featured popular boleros and Afrocuban dance music, such as the danzón and the rumba. The *comedia ranchera* and the *cine de campirano* (films set in the countryside) featured the *canción ranchera* and various son traditions. Film utilizing a melodramatic backdrop, such as the indigenista film and the Revolutionary melodrama, featured an orchestral score. A prominent film composer of the 1930s was modernist composer Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940), who successfully scored nine films. His collaboration with photographer Paul Strand (1890-1976) on the 1935 film *Redes* juxtaposed his diverse modernist style with film scoring techniques (rapid mood and atmosphere changes, use of thematic material to convey a specific theme, folk models). Other composers to achieve notoriety included Raúl Lavista (1913-1980) and Lorenzo Barcelata (1898-1943), musicians and composers who established their careers in radio and popular theater.  Synchronized, recorded sound in Argentinean film arrived a few years after Mexican film. The first silent film in Argentina to feature a composed score was *Adiós Argentina* (1930, dir. Mario Parpagnoli), known as the first musical to spotlight the tango. This film featured rising star Libertad Lamarque and Ada Cornao, both prominent tango performers and theater actresses. The film featured a tango reflecting the film’s name, composed by Uruguayan composer Gerardo Matos Rodríguez (1897-1948). In 1930, *Corazón sin Ley* became Argentina’s first synchronized sound film using sound-on-disc technology and featured the tango “Chinita” by Eleuterio Iribarren (d. 1932) and Enrique Carrera Sotelo (1898-1951). Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, the Argentinean film industry produced more sound films that featured the tango and also the waltz, transitioning to sound-on-film technology, as in the 1933 feature *Tango.* In this transformation, the industry began to compete with Hollywood Spanish-language features, particularly after 1935.  During the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s, both industries experienced a so-called Golden Period through national and international commercial successand production. Mexico continued to expand on the genres developed during the 1930s, incorporating more on-screen musical sequences, while Argentina branched away from tango films and explored other genres, such as the detective film and other examples of melodrama. The centrality of tango in films continued into the 1950s and 1960s particularly in film scores by composer and performer Ástor Piazzolla (1921-1992). Notable composers for orchestral film scores in Argentina during the 1940s and 1950s include Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) and Alejandro Gutiérrez del Barrio (1895-1964). |
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