**Lavista, Mario (1943-)**

**Lavista Camacho, Mario (Mexico City, 1943-)**

Ana R. Alonso-Minutti

Composer, pianist, intellectual, editor, and teacher Mario Lavista is regarded as a central figure in Mexico’s contemporary music scene. A prolific composer of orchestral, stage, chamber, solo, and electronic pieces, Lavista’s oeuvre is characterized by its intersections with the other arts. His music shows an integration of modernist avant-garde trends from both European and American music, while also adopting compositional techniques from diverse historical periods of Western art traditions. He has maintained an active performance career, especially through collective improvisations using prepared piano.



Mario Lavista, 2009. (Photo courtesy of composer).

Lavista’s role as intellectual has been shaped mainly through the series of lecture-recitals he regularly organizes as a member of El Colegio Nacional—a prestigious government-funded institution intended to foster the cultural and intellectual activities of an intellectual elite. Moreover, he is the founder and director of one of the most renowned music journals in Mexico, *Pauta: Cuadernos de Teoría y Crítica Musical,* which promotes multidisciplinary dialogues, especially among writers, painters and musicians, and has a strong emphasis on contemporary music. Lavista has been teaching at the Conservatorio Nacional since 1970, where his role as educator and mentor has been particularly relevant for ‘practically all Mexican composers that are younger than he is,’ according to Luis Jaime Cortez.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Overview**

Mario Lavista began his piano studies as a child. He enrolled at the Taller de Composición of the Conservatorio Nacional de Música in 1963 under the guidance of Carlos Chávez, Héctor Quintanar, and Rodolfo Halffter. He was granted a scholarship from the French government to study at the Schola Cantorum in Paris from 1967 to 1969 under Jean Etienne Marie. During that season he attended courses taught by Henri Pusseur, Nadia Boulanger, Christoph Caskel, and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Upon his return to Mexico, together with Nicolás Echevarría, Fernando Baena (who was later replaced by Juan Herrejón), and Antero Chávez, in 1970 Lavista founded Quanta, a collective improvisation group. The improvisations usually involved the use of Julián Carrillo’s microtonal instruments (especially harps), basic amplification applied to acoustic instruments, electric guitars, and a variety of percussion instruments. During two years, Quanta had a vigorous performance schedule collaborating with dance and theater companies. These experimental sessions were crucial in forming a public for avant-garde happenings in Mexico City.

Lavista’s interest in sound manipulation through electronic means led him to work on the recently created Laboratory of Electronic Music of the Conservatorio Nacional de Música, and at the electronic music studio of radio and television in Tokyo, Japan (NHK) in 1972. From 1974 to 1976 Lavista was head of the Music Department of the Dirección de Difusión Cultural of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and in 1982 he founded the journal *Pauta*, issued four times a year. He has served as its chief editor ever since.

Throughout the 1970s, Lavista’s activities as a pianist were numerous. Along with renowned performers such as Jorge Velazco, Federico Ibarra and Marielena Arizpe, he premiered works by Erik Satie, Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Manuel Enríquez, Oliver Messiaen, Gerhard Muench, Rodolfo Halffter, among others.



From left to right: Federico Ibarra and Mario Lavista, 1979. (Photo courtesy of Lavista)

In 1987 he became a member of the Academia de las Artes, and received a Guggenheim Fellowship for his first and only opera *Aura*, based on the short story by Carlos Fuentes. Moreover he received the Premio Nacional de Ciencias y Artes and the Medalla Mozart in 1991, an honorable mention from the Sistema Nacional de Creadores del Fondo para la cultura y las Artes in 1993, and membership in the prestigious El Colegio Nacional since 1998.

Lavista’s role as a teacher and lecturer has extended from his native country, where he has been a professor at the Conservatorio Nacional since 1970, to the Americas and Europe. He has been guest lecturer at Indiana University, the University of Chicago, Cornell University, the University of California (Davis, San Diego, and Santa Barbara), and the University of North Texas, among others. He has received commissions from international festivals and his works are frequently performed by some of the most distinguished chamber and orchestral groups both in Mexico and abroad.

**Works**

Lavista’s early works show a predilection for serial techniques and the use of literary texts (*Monólogo, Dos canciones, Homenaje a Beckett*). During his time in Europe he explored sound resources by incorporating short wave radios (*Divertimento*, 1968), and alarm clocks (*Kronos*, 1969). In his first string quartet (*Diacronía*, 1969), he began to incorporate certain aspects of indeterminacy and to explore the intervallic possibilities of two perfect fifths linked by a tritone—a sonority that permeated much of his work for the following decades.

Upon his return to Mexico, and parallel to his involvement with Quanta, Lavista wrote a series of pieces with open forms, such as *Pieza para un(a) pianista y un piano* (1970), *Game* (1971) and *Continuo* (1971). In conjunction with artist Arnaldo Coen, in 1973 Lavista conceived the graphic score *Cluster* for piano. A few years later, Coen and Lavista collaborated in yet another graphic score, *Jaula*, a paper sculpture of 16 layers of concentric cubes, which has achieved a central place in the history of conceptual interdisciplinary Mexican art.

After reaching this level of abstraction, Lavista returned to writing atonal music using conventional notation and incorporating epigraphs in multiple scores (*Quotations, Lyhann, Canto del alba, Simurg*, among others). The epigraphs are chosen from a wide variety of sources: ancient Chinese poets from the Tang Dynasty, 17th-century Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo, 20th-century American writer Ezra Pound, and many others. The epigraphs not only reveal the composer’s literary taste but also, most importantly, allow for rich interplay between music and text. At the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Lavista explored unusual timbre possibilities through the use of extended techniques for traditional instruments, as well as completing a series of solo and chamber pieces done in close collaboration with performers such as flutist Marialena Arizpe (*Tríptico*), bassist Bertram Turetzky (*Dusk*), oboist Leonora Saavedra (*Marsias*), and the string quartet El Cuarteto Latinoamericano (*Reflejos de la noche*). Most of these pieces show clear pitch centricities and the predominant use of particular intervallic explorations.

Since the 1980s Lavista has approached religious genres in a series of compositions such as *Lamento a la muerte de Raúl Lavista* (1981) and *Responsorio in memoriam Rodolfo Halffter* (1988), in which he uses Medieval and Renaissance procedures, such as the symbolic use of certain intervals, canonic permutations, and isorhythm. This is most evident in the *Missa ad Consolationis Dominam Nostram* (1994-95), a central work in his oeuvre. Even though Lavista is not affiliated with a particular religion, he has continued to explore Christian-Catholic religious genres in works such as *Tropo para Sor Juana* (1995), *Mater dolorosa* (2000), *Stabat Mater* (2005), and *Salmo* (2006-07), among others.

Lavista has written a number of scores for television and film. He has written music for numerous documentaries and shows commissioned by Televisa. Since the 1970s, Lavista has closely collaborated with director Nicolás Echevarría to create a series of film scores, of which *Judea, Semana Santa entre los coras* (1973), is the first Mexican film using electronic music. He continued to write scores for Echevarría’s movies on subsequent occasions: *María Sabina, mujer espíritu* (1978), *Niño Fidencio* (1982), *Cabeza de vaca* (1990), and *Vivir mata* (2002).

Currently Lavista is one of the most respected intellectual and artistic figures in Mexico City. As a member of El Colegio Nacional he organizes an annual series of lecture-recitals at which he presents contemporary music from Mexico and abroad performed by the most renowned chamber groups in the country, and occasionally invites performers from abroad. He has written an extensive number of short essays, most of which have been published in the *Memorias* of El Colegio Nacional and in *Pauta*.

**Selected Bibliography**

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**Website**

Lavista’s profile in El Colegio Nacional’s website:

<http://www.colegionacional.org.mx/SACSCMS/XStatic/colegionacional/template/content.aspx?mi=126&se=vida&te=detallemiembro>

1. Luis Jaime Cortez, ed. *Mario Lavista. Textos en torno a la música* (México DF: CENIDIM, 1988), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)