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Lifting Revueltas Out of Obscurity

By Daniel Ginsberg

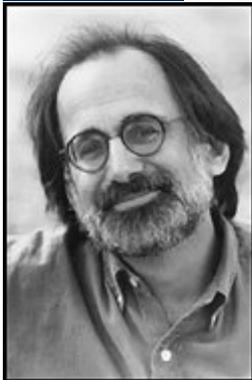
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For its inaugural concert, the Post-Classical Ensemble could not leave well enough alone. When it came to performing the music of the obscure, early-20th-century Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas at Lisner Auditorium on Thursday evening, a sparkling reading by the chamber orchestra of this subtly crafted music just would not do. No, this group had to go after its audience with a relentless zeal, hurling a dazzling array of information about the music and its composer.

This included not just traditional program notes but also lectures, poetry, movies and popular song -- all in a burst of three hours. Even the date -- May Day -- was selected to add meaning to the music of a composer fired by the idea of socialist revolution. The evening was clearly the brainchild of the ensemble's artistic adviser, Joseph Horowitz, a prolific writer and former director of the forward-leaning Brooklyn Philharmonic, who has made a career of these intense, multimedia festivals. If this evening was any indication, Horowitz's group is a welcome, edgy addition to the musical life of Washington.

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Joseph Horowitz and the Post-Classical Ensemble set out to dazzle the Lisner audience. (Post-classical Ensemble)

The centerpiece of the performance was a screening of the film "Redes," which coincided with Filmfest DC. Under the skillful Spanish conductor Angel Gil-Ordoñez, the Post-Classical Ensemble performed Revueltas's score in live accompaniment to this hour-long 1936 film about village fishermen struggling against the power of a monopoly. The

orchestra gave a wonderfully lucid account of the score. The phrasing, dynamics and general sound were alive to the evolving sense of desperation, anger and empowerment expressed in the film.

Revueltas's dirge-like music for the scene in which the hero must bury his son who died after the local overlord refused to pay for medical treatment was heart-rending yet strong. Passages for woodwind, low strings and brass were carefully crafted but not overwrought. Gil-Ordoñez kept everything moving apace and always synced with the images on-screen.

To build up to the tempestuous mood of the film, the concert began with a subtle weaving of popular folk songs from the Mexican Revolution and the composer's pieces for smaller ensembles. Any skepticism of this merger of popular and art music vanished with the soulful singing of Lila Downs, who appeared in and sang on the soundtrack of "Frida," the recent film about Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

Whether conveying the zeal of a revolutionary in "Soy Zapatista del Estado Morelos" or the story of an uncommonly brave and beautiful fighter in "La Adelita," Downs immersed herself in the music, applying a flexible sound and sensitivity to the text. Saxophonist Paul Cohen, harpist Celso Duarte and *chekere* player Yunior Terry Cabrera skillfully supported Downs.

Unfortunately, Lisner's cavernous acoustics sometimes swallowed the ensemble's account of Revueltas's "8 x radio," which suffered from awkward balances and problems of ensemble. Sparks flew, however, in a sizzling account of "Sensemaya," where short melodic figures were treated to coruscating orchestration and rhythmic invention to create a sonic chant against an evil snake. Downs read the original folk poem with a manic verve.

The locally based Sunrise Quartet gave a fine prelude concert of Revueltas's String Quartet No. 4. Violinists Teri Lazar and Claudia Chudacoff brought a sweetness of tone that matched the precision of violist Osman Kivrak and cellist Marion Baker.

The Washington Post

Bringing Revueltas Back to Life

Post-Classical Ensemble Gives Colorful Composer A Long-Overdue Salute

By Tim Page

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Composer Silvestre Revueltas -- born on the last day of the 1800s, dead from alcoholism at 40 -- was obviously the sort of person around whom legends will grow. During his scantily documented existence, Revueltas distinguished himself as a child prodigy in his

native Mexico; studied violin and composition in gangster-era Chicago; served as concertmaster for something called the Aztec Theater Orchestra in San Antonio; fought alongside the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War; returned to Mexico, where he drifted in and out of mental hospitals; lived poor; died young.

It is the sort of life that seems glamorous to those youthful, privileged romantics who will never have to experience anything like it. In fact, the world must have been sheer hell for Revueltas. Still, as was once said of Malcolm Lowry -- who was living in Mexico during the same time Revueltas was writing his last works and whose novel "Under the Volcano" has the same manic, mercurial, quasi-hallucinatory qualities we associate with the composer's best music -- Revueltas did not return from Hell with empty hands. Such works as "La Noche de los Mayas" (which was presented by Leonard Slatkin and the National Symphony Orchestra two years ago), "Sensemaya" and "Homenaje a Garcia Lorca" are great music by anybody's standards -- colorful, convulsive and unfailingly original.

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Silvestre Revueltas, who died of alcoholism at the age of 40, imbued his music with quasi-hallucinatory qualities. (Peermusic Classical)

Thursday night, a new group called the Post-Classical Ensemble will present an evening devoted to Revueltas and his world at Lisner Auditorium.

The program includes a chamber version of "Sensemaya," an octet written specifically for radio play (titled, appropriately, "Ocho por Radio") and a sampling of Mexican revolutionary songs, in performances by Lila Downs. A highlight will be a rare screening of the first of 10 films scored by Revueltas -- "Redes" (1936), co-directed by Emilio Gomez Muriel and a young Austrian emigre named Fred Zinnemann, who would go on to make such esteemed works as "High Noon" and "A Man for All Seasons."

The program will be conducted by Angel Gil-Ordoñez, music director of the Post-Classical Ensemble. Gil-Ordoñez, a former associate conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Spain, is the founder and director of Musica Aperta Washington and the director of orchestral studies at Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

"What attracts me to Revueltas, first of all, is that he is so Mexican, so completely local," Gil-Ordoñez said. "When you listen to Revueltas, you smell the marketplace and taste the tamales. You are in a cantina -- a piano bar -- drinking tequila. And you are in a culture saturated with music, with marimbas and mariachis.

"Music is a continuous component of Mexican life," he continued. "The young men of Mexico actually still serenade their girlfriends with trumpets, violins and guitars. In Mexico, the Plaza de Garibaldi is filled with mariachis all playing at the same time; you go there to hire a band." The sound is sometimes raucous and out of tune -- "clarinets clashing with tubas," as Gil-Ordoñez puts it. "This is the sound of Revueltas. It also suggests something common to Charles Ives -- the clash of simultaneous bands -- or to Mahler's imitations of street musicians."

Aaron Copland, one of Revueltas's early admirers, likened him to Franz Schubert for his seemingly effortless production.

"His music is a spontaneous outpouring, a strong expression of his inner emotions," Copland said. "When seized with the creative urge, he has been known to spend days on end without food or sleep until the piece was finished."

And yet it goes too far to represent Revueltas as a sporadically inspired primitive. A work such as "Sensemaya," for all of its seismic power, is constructed with extraordinary rhythmic subtlety, and "Ocho por Radio" invents and perfects a sort of modernist Mexican chamber music that is absolutely of its time and place.

Gil-Ordoñez formed the Post-Classical Ensemble in tandem with Joseph Horowitz, a Manhattan-based author, musical historian and artistic adviser to various American orchestras who has created more than two dozen interdisciplinary festivals over the past 20 years. While serving as executive director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, Horowitz produced series devoted to "The Russian Stravinsky" and "American Transcendentalists" that explored the folk roots of concert music and won national attention. He hopes to forge similar paths with the Post-Classical Ensemble.

"I think of these events as ways to break out of the classical music ghetto, which is necessary if classical music is to continue to flourish in the 21st century," Horowitz said in an interview last week. "If you can juxtapose concert works with some of the popular and vernacular music that helped produce them, you wind up with something that is both engaging and intellectually provocative."

Horowitz insists that this has nothing to do with what has come to be known as "crossover" music. "That's a marketing ploy, a calculated attempt to reach as wide an audience as possible without any respect for the integrity of the music. We're not putting Revueltas on the same program as Mexican revolutionary songs just out of the blue -- we're putting the two together because they *fit*. Our context tells you something very real about Revueltas and may help a listener hear new elements in his music."

The title "Redes" refers to fishing nets. Horowitz calls the 60-minute film "a story of poor fishermen victimized by monopoly control of their market." The cinematographer was Paul Strand, once described by Susan Sontag as "the biggest, widest, most commanding talent in the history of American photography."

"Visually, 'Redes' is a poem of stark light and shadow, of clouds and sea, palm fronds and thatched huts, with Strand's camera often tipped toward the abstract sky," Horowitz said. "Curiously, the spoken word is almost never back-scored -- the music speaks when the actors don't, and vice versa. And yet the contributions of Strand and Revueltas are indelible -- and indelibly conjoined."

Indeed, "Redes" might be considered a forerunner to composer Virgil Thomson's two documentaries with Pare Lorentz, "The Plow That Broke the Plains" (1936) and "The River" (1937) as well as his much later collaboration with Robert Flaherty, "Louisiana Story" (1948), for which Thomson won what is still the only Pulitzer Prize for Music ever awarded to a film score.

The current concert -- titled "Viva la Revolucion!" and set just in time for May Day -- was produced in association with Lisner Auditorium and the Washington, D.C., International Film Festival. Future programs will include an examination of Spanish mysticism (with the participation of the Sephardic singer Flory Jagoda), the overtly Hungarian-inspired music by Brahms and Bartok (with the Gazsa Band of Budapest) and another look at Stravinsky's Russian roots (with the Pokrovsky Folk Ensemble of Moscow).

Indeed, Horowitz said that he already has many more programs planned than he can possibly mount. "Right now, the important thing is to find a viable board of directors for the Post-Classical Ensemble," he said. "But there are a number of things working in our favor. We have a distinctive mission, Angel is a wonderful conductor, and he has been presenting concerts in Washington for five years without sinking into debt, so I have a feeling we're going to do fine."

At the very least, this initial concert will help introduce the music of Revueltas to a wider audience. To date, there is no biography of the composer and, appallingly, the 29-volume New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians accords Revueltas only about 500 words -- fewer than it gives to Madonna, for example. The best -- indeed, almost the only -- study of Revueltas in English was written by the composer Peter Garland and published by Soundings Press as "In Search of Silvestre Revueltas." In Garland's opinion, the strongest of Revueltas's work "totally obliterates the boundaries of classical and popular musics."

Which suits Horowitz fine. "He exceptionally embodies fusion with the vernacular," he said. "His musical language is a churning kaleidoscope . . . bristling with the grit and energy of Mexican streets, streaming with poetic folklore and song."

Garland concluded his pioneering essay with a plea: "Can we hope that by the centennial of the composer's birth, on the eve of the twenty-first century (Dec. 31, 1999) we will at last know the work of one of the most important composers of the first half of the twentieth?" That centennial has come and gone, but Mexico's greatest composer may be finally on the verge of winning the following he so deserves.

The concert will begin at 8 p.m. Thursday at Lisner Auditorium, 21st and H streets NW. A discussion and presentation of a Revueltas string quartet will take place at 7. Tickets are \$15 and \$25. For more information, call 301-808-6900.