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by Brian Q. Silver

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[Washington Songlines: Lo ultimo de Mexico \(The Ultimate Mexico\)](#)

Last night the Washington-based [Post-Classical Ensemble](#) presented a far-ranging survey of the rich musical traditions of Mexico. This extraordinarily diverse program, set in the Shakespeare Theatre's striking Sidney Harman Hall, was moderated by [Joseph Horowitz](#), the Artistic Director of the Ensemble, and [Gregorio Luke](#), a prominent commentator on Mexican culture; the two last appeared together at the Library of Congress' comprehensive ["Two Faces of Mexican Music"](#) from March 11-16 earlier in the year. The evening's offerings were together a worthy embodiment of Luke's characterization of Mexico as the world's most polyglot country.

The program opened with [Carlos Chavez'](#) "Imagined Aztec Music," entitled "Xochipilli", (for [the Aztec god of music and dance](#), among other things), with replicas of traditional Aztec percussion instruments accompanying a western percussion and wind ensemble (including a conch shell.) Throughout the performance of the piece, a slide of a statue of the deity was projected on a screen above the stage, with this and subsequent slides--apparently selected by Luke--providing throughout the evening a beautifully colorful and evocative sequence of visual images of Mexico in contrast to the near total-black of the stage and the performer's garb. The fluid conducting style--almost dance in itself--of [Angel Gil-Ordonez](#) charged the ensemble with both precision and an electric energy that prevailed through all the pieces under his inspired--and inspiring--direction.

The next three items revealed the richness of the Mexican Baroque choral style, performed ably by the Chamber Singers of Georgetown University, again led by Gil-Ordonez. Luke remarked that within a few years of the [Conquest of Mexico](#), the churches there established a liturgical tradition that in many ways rivaled that of Europe. A sprightly Christmas villancico (an Iberian Renaissance genre) by [Juan Gutierrez de Padilla](#) (1590-1664), concluded the musical tryptych to the riveting accompaniment of cello and percussion.

Horowitz and Luke then introduced the Mexican Romantic era--noting that due to the fierce fighting that engulfed Mexico in the years following the 1910 [Mexican Revolution](#), countless masterpieces of both the Baroque and Romantic traditions

were irretrievably lost. "Vals Capricho", a spectacularly virtuosic 1901 set piece by [Ricardo Castro](#) (1864-1907), introduced the Mexican Romantic style, followed by two compositions in that style by [Manual Ponce](#) (1882-1948): Balada Mexicana (1914), and Intermezzo III: Andantino malinconico (1921.) Illustrating the Protean role played by Ponce, as Mexico's first great modern composer in straddling the Romantic and modernist traditions, Pedro Carbone (whose rendition of Castro's piece brought music literally exploding from the piano as his fingers cascaded across the keyboard) moved effortlessly into the more abstract progressions and often lambent colors of Ponce's 1932 "Sonatina"--in one section crossing his left hand effortlessly over his right in passage after passage.

In the second half of the program, Roberto Limon introduced the much gentler presence of the classic guitar, opening with portions of the canonic "Variations and Fugue on 'La Folia'"--said in its entirety to be the Bible of the guitar--composed by Ponce for the late [Andres Segovia](#), who brought the modern classical guitar to the world's concert stage. Interestingly, though he published all 20 variations, Segovia never recorded them all. While I recognized a few of these (I was familiar with the repertoire of the classic guitar, having been with my colleague, the late Vaughan Aandahl, one of the co-founders of the Guitar Society of Colorado in the late 1950s), I was not as moved by Limon's performance here as by his sensitive interpretations of the more textured and nuanced "Three Pieces for solo guitar", written by Carlos Chavez in 1923, and which move expressively beyond the more didactic character of Ponce's variations. Again, interestingly, though composed by Chavez for the undisputed master of the classic guitar, Segovia never performed these three fine pieces.

Moving to the contemporary era, the Post-Classical Ensemble presented "Three Secular Dances" for cello and piano (1994), by [Mario Lavista](#) (born 1943), whom Luke introduced as "Mexico's greatest living composer"; the performance excelled in fulfilling Lavista's goal of "bringing new sounds from old instruments." Next was the exquisite "Serenata" by [Ana Lara](#) (born 1954). Sitting in dramatic symmetry in a semicircle with two halves--an array of winds on the right--piccolo and flute progressing inward to oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and French Horn--and strings on the left--violins to viola, cello, and bass, the ten members of the ensemble presented a breathtaking range of shimmering timbres and tonal colors in six "sonic vignettes" (to use Horowitz' words) emerging, each after the other, from a backdrop of silence.

The program concluded with the often raucous masterpiece "Homenaje a [Federico Garcia Lorca](#)" (1936), by [Silvestre Revueltas](#) (1899-1940), in an eloquent performance by the Post-Classical Ensemble, including a haunting off-stage

trumpet solo in the second movement--an expression of pure pathos, and as Luke observed, the piece played at the funeral of Revueltas after his tragic death at the age of 40. Revueltas has been the composer most performed by the Ensemble since its debut in 2003, having been founded by Horowitz and Gil-Ordóñez. The group has been a tireless champion of this much neglected figure, and last night's rendition, evoking (again in Horowitz' words) "the screeching clarinets and booming tubas" of the village bands in Revueltas' childhood, captured perfectly the tensions between the surging, exhilarating hopes and dark, ultimate tragedies of the [Spanish Civil War](#), one of whose greatest martyrs was the poet to whom Revueltas dedicated this unique and important work.

The evening's memorable performance demonstrated with incontrovertible eloquence that there is much of great value and richness to be discovered in the centuries of the musics of Mexico. For me, personally, it was a splendid extension of the revelations begun in Washington with the aforementioned Chavez-Revueltas week last March, and an inspiration to take full advantage of next year's meeting in Mexico City of the Society for Ethnomusicology. I would hope that in its deliberations, its panels and papers and concerts, the Society affords adequate recognition to the myriad musical achievements of our magnificent Southern neighbor.

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