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Mexico's Composing Geniuses

By Stephen Brookes
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A small but furious musical brawl is shaping up next week, where partisans of Mexico's most eminent composer, Carlos Chávez, will square off against equally zealous supporters of the long-neglected Silvestre Revueltas.

There's not much at stake, unless you care who wears the imaginary crown of "Mexico's Greatest Composer" (and really, do you?). But the five-day program of concerts, films and discussions may be a highlight of the musical season. It turns a revealing spotlight on Revueltas, one of the most wildly original - and deeply tormented -- musicians of the 20th century.

"Revueltas is a spontaneous composer with an eruptive, vibrant personality, and he's one of the most important composers ever produced in the Western Hemisphere," says Joseph Horowitz, a program organizer and artistic director of the Post-Classical Ensemble, one of the groups performing. "He's been the victim of ignorance and prejudice, but we're much more ready for his music than we were 20 years ago."

That's the proposition behind "Two Faces of Mexican Music: Carlos Chávez (1899-1978) and Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) Revisited," which starts Tuesday at the Mexican Cultural Institute.

It promises to be a fascinating study in contrasts. Chávez and Revueltas came of age at the close of the Mexican revolution. Painters such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were forging a new nationalistic cultural identity, and composers, too, began exploring what it meant to be Mexican. Foremost among them was Chávez.

Chávez was unmistakably brilliant. He carved out a preeminent role as conductor, teacher and administrator, heading the Mexican Symphony Orchestra and the National Institute of Fine Arts. In his mid-20s he was winning praise from composers including Aaron Copland for works that still define modern Mexican music: sophisticated, rooted in the music of the pre-Columbian past, but with an international outlook closer to Stravinsky and neoclassicism than to anything you'd hear in the streets of Mexico City.

Revueltas, on the other hand, was a maverick -- and something of a train wreck. Trained as a violinist, he bounced between Mexico and the United States in his early years until Chávez took him under his wing in 1929, appointing him assistant conductor of the National Symphony. But Revueltas never settled into respectability the way Chávez did. Idealistic, charismatic, hard-drinking, and in and out of mental hospitals much of his life, Revueltas lived on the edge and died at age 40 after a long night of drinking.

It was a life lived at full tilt, and his music shows it. Revueltas composed brash, explosive masterpieces in his 30s that are original, thoroughly Mexican and seething with a kind of intensity Chávez never matched. Inspired by the "mestizo" (mixed) culture of the villages and committed to the cause of the oppressed (he traveled to Spain to support the anti-Franco forces during the country's civil war), Revueltas took the rough, vital rhythms of rural Mexico and transformed them into works of extraordinary vividness and power. That, his supporters say, makes such masterpieces as "Sensemaya" and "Ventanas" far more "authentic" than the stylish international modernism of Chávez.

"Both are great composers, but Revueltas is more authentically Mexican, because he was more tied into local traditions," says associate history professor James Krippner of Pennsylvania's Haverford University, who will be making the case for Revueltas during one of next week's panel discussions.

For all its extraordinary vitality, though, Revueltas's music was widely dismissed after his death, and he fell into obscurity while Chávez (who lived and worked into his late 70s) saw his reputation steadily rise. But in the past decade, a growing number of musicians, particularly the Los Angeles Philharmonic and its conductor, Esa-Pekka Salonen, have begun to champion Revueltas. Some think he'll soon eclipse Chávez on the world stage.

For the Post-Classical Ensemble's Horowitz, at least, there's little doubt. "There are always composers who fall through the cracks," he says. "But Revueltas is a composer whose time has come."

Two Faces of Mexican Music: Carlos Chávez (1899-1978) and Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) Revisited Tuesday-Sunday See box at right for information on tickets, performances and venues, or visit <http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/concert/0708-mexicanmusic.html>. *The Download:* For a sampling of work by Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas, check out: By Chávez: "Sinfonia de Antígona" ; Symphony No. 4 ("Sinfonia Romántica") ; Cuarteto de Arcos No. 1 By Revueltas: "Sensemaya" ; "La Noche De Los Mayas" ; "Homenaje a Federico Garcia Lorca" *Two Faces of Mexican Music: Carlos Chávez (1899-1978) and Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) Revisited Tuesday-Sunday* See box at right for information on tickets, performances and venues, or visit <http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/concert/0708-mexicanmusic.html>. *The Download:* For a sampling of work by Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas, check out: By Chávez: "Sinfonia de Antígona" ; Symphony No. 4 ("Sinfonia Romántica") ; Cuarteto de Arcos No. 1 By Revueltas: "Sensemaya" ; "La Noche De Los Mayas" ; "Homenaje a Federico Garcia Lorca"