

Preface

Carlos Chávez was the most powerful Mexican artist of the twentieth century. Not necessarily the best (who could determine that?) or even the best known, but undoubtedly the most powerful. Chávez's cultural agitation—for indigenous music, for modernism, for a place for Mexican music in the world, and for a Mexican culture widely supported by the state—started early, in the years of the Revolution (1910–1921). But it acquired full visibility when, in 1928, he founded the Orquesta Sinfónica de México (OSM), setting the organizational and musical standards for orchestral activity in Mexico. Drawing from both private and state funds as well as a substantial ticket income, Chávez managed to keep his orchestra afloat for twenty-one years until 1949, when he dissolved it and regrouped its members as the state-funded Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional. Chávez, Silvestre Revueltas (his assistant conductor in the early years), and the OSM offered a platform for Mexican composers of three generations, including those that came immediately before and after their own, to create new music and to try it out before an increasingly musically educated albeit bellicose and demanding audience. In the 1930s and '40s the newspapers gave ample coverage, including photographs, to the fashionable Friday concerts, frequented by the famous and the wealthy. On Sundays, though, the audience was made up of blue-collar workers and students with tickets at discounted prices. One of Chávez's goals was to form an audience for art music—old and new—and he pursued it further by offering free concerts to children and workers in collaboration with trade unions, and touring the country extensively with his orchestra.

Chávez's innovative programming of twentieth-century music polarized audiences and critics. Although politics and music were enmeshed with one another and all kinds of topics, both petty and lofty, were debated, for over two decades music was at the center of public opinion and social life in an unprecedented fashion. Subject to debate were questions such as how modern or modernist Mexican music should be, and how it was to represent Mexico, a particularly compelling issue in the 1920s and '30s. Chávez's answers were unequivocal: Mexican music should be very modern, finding its rightful place within the evolution

(my choice of word here is deliberate) of Western art music, and it should represent Mexico in whichever way it might—or even not at all.

In his own music, Chávez sought to imagine, invent, and propose as adequate to his audiences and fellow musicians specific musical representations—iconic and indexical topoi—of pre-Columbian and contemporary indigenous musics, which in the early twentieth century were commonly but mistakenly considered to be one and the same. In pieces such as *Los cuatro soles*, *Xochipilli*, and *Sinfonía india*, Chávez constructed the indigenous as simple but not simple-minded, innocent but not gullible, pure, sober, laconic, reserved, and powerful. In works such as the *Sinfonía de Antígona* and *Daughter of Colchis* (which Martha Graham titled *Dark Meadow*), he used similar musical means to construct a different antiquity: the Greek. In the 1920s and '30s, his style allowed him to be national while being modernist, objective, and anti-Romantic: he could write primitivist music alongside machine-music. But from his early works to his late ones, whether representational or abstract, we find in Chávez's stylistic preferences a remarkable consistency that stems from what Yolanda Moreno Rivas called an "ethical willfulness." His instrumental colors are bright and well defined, his textures polyphonic, his melodies diatonic and modal or pentatonic, his dissonances piercing, his forms innovative but solid, and his rhythm surprisingly complex yet based on simple rhythmic figures. Chávez's music is powerful and stubborn. It doesn't always enchant, but it most often persuades; it can be harsh and emotionally restrained, and yet when Chávez chose to indulge in lyricism, he showed he could write a beautiful melody. As the composer's beloved friend, Aaron Copland, used to say: his music takes more than one listening.

Although Chávez spoke often in favor of modernism, he did not advocate nationalism as a style (but rather as a political position), and his agenda was clear: to play as much Mexican music, and as many times, as possible. The best, the truest Mexican music, he believed, would eventually emerge from this process. For the same reasons, he taught little aesthetics and did not care much for style in his teaching of composition, focusing instead on encouraging experimentation and on developing the students' technique along the same lines he had earlier taught himself to compose: with attention to scales and collections of pitches, motivic work, instrumental color, texture and counterpoint, and the resultant vertical structures. Two separate generations of composers passed through his studio, one in the 1930s and another in the 1960s (when Chávez taught with Julián Orbón). Among these can be counted some of the best composers of the mid- and late twentieth century,

including José Pablo Moncayo in the first group, and Eduardo Mata and Mario Lavista in the second. At the same time, Chávez opened numerous spaces for the performance of new Mexican music: the aforementioned OSM, beginning in the late 1920s, the music series at the Conservatorio Nacional de Música and at the Departamento de Bellas Artes in the early 1930s, the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) from its founding in 1947, and finally at the Colegio Nacional in the 1950s and '60s, where as an inaugural member he again worked on audience formation and consciously left behind the model of the composer-intellectual as the mover and shaker of Mexican music.

Chávez did not only create spaces for music. As director of the Departamento de Bellas Artes in 1933–34, he was behind the promotion of dance, photography, filmmaking, and theater created within “an ethics of social justice,” as he stated in an administrative document of the time. The political winds soon shifted away from him, however, and he stayed away from governmental positions for over a decade. But after having been invited to serve as the cultural advisor in Miguel Alemán’s presidential campaign in 1946, Chávez designed and founded the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), Mexico’s most important cultural institution within the fine arts until the recent advent of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA) in 1988. INBA began operations on 1 January 1947, eventually grouping all state-sponsored art schools, music performing organizations, dance companies, theatres, and museums within a ministry of culture of sorts. Indeed, with INBA’s by-laws Chávez institutionalized the protection of Mexican art as one of the duties of the state. Yet INBA was not to be an organ merely for the preservation and presentation of art, but also for its steady creation. The propulsive nature of INBA at its inception was clearly captured in Chávez’s own words: “If experimentation is not to be carried out, then nothing should be carried out.”

From his position at the head of INBA, Chávez devised numerous projects for which he called on some of the brightest minds in Mexican culture. Outstanding among them was the impulse he gave to Mexican dance. Drawing inspiration from the Ballets Russes, he brought together composers, artists, and choreographers, such as Mexican-American José Limón, for the production of new Mexican ballets, an initiative spearheaded by his life-long friend, painter, and anthropologist Miguel Covarrubias. Chávez and Covarrubias had been partners in art since their twenties, when they concocted fabulous and ambitious ballets and pantomimes to be produced on the stages of New York, where they both lived for a few years. Although these early projects came to nothing, they

paved the way for later joint enterprises. But Covarrubias was not the only Mexican artist to whom Chávez was close. From an early age he also participated in joint intellectual and artistic projects with writers such as Carlos Pellicer, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Salvador Novo, and painters such as Diego Rivera and Agustín Lazo. These activities included literary magazines, experimental theater, ballets (such as *Horsepower*, with Rivera, which did come to fruition in Philadelphia in 1932), recordings and performances, and, of course, the musical setting of Mexican poetry.

Chávez had a complex and fascinating relationship with political power. He occupied governmental administrative positions three times in his life. These did not always end happily. From 1929 to 1934 he served in the Ministry of Education, first as director of the Conservatorio Nacional de Música and then briefly, as noted, as director of the Departamento de Bellas Artes. Yet he resigned from the latter post after barely a year when his mentor, the socialist Minister of Education Narciso Bassols, was forced out of office. Chávez served out his entire term as the founding director of INBA during Alemán's presidency, from 1947 to 1952, but when at the request of President Luis Echeverría he returned to head that institution in 1973, thereby taking charge of music in Mexico once more, he lasted barely a few months before he was ousted by the musicians themselves and their trade unions.

For most of his life, however, Chávez managed to be close to political power even while he was not a part of it. Commanding substantial fees as a composer writing on commission from institutions abroad and as a conductor with an international career, he was able to remain personally independent from government. Although the OSM was often the focus of political contention in regard to Chávez's programming and choice of guest conductors (or lack thereof), it operated on a mixture of private, local, and federal funding, and its legal standing prevented it from being taken over by the state—despite the many public campaigns favoring exactly that. But the state saw no advantage in taking over responsibility for an orchestra that brought prestige to Mexico and worked perfectly well without its intervention: Chávez delivered.

However, Chávez's relations with other artists did not always go well. Disagreements and fights, personal and public, were often prompted by the clash of larger-than-life personalities and/or political differences. Chávez's energy and strong will were the stuff of legend. He could be authoritarian, even when very young. He did not think of art and arts administration as a democracy. He called to work with him only those people in whom he believed, and he brushed aside and left behind many others who eventually resented him: his ideas, the changes he

implemented, the preference shown to him by the state regardless of the particular administration, and the way in which he shaped Mexican culture. In Mexico a black legend developed around him which cannot be dispelled until its ingredients—true and false—are sorted out.

Chávez often took refuge from the turmoil of his Mexican life by going to New York: first as a penniless, aspiring composer in Greenwich Village, then as a conductor, established composer, and arts administrator at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel—he used the hotel’s stationary to scribble down drafts for countless projects—and finally living in his own apartment near Lincoln Center. Working with Edgard Varèse, his mentor in the fight for modernism, and the Composers’ Guild, and later with Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and the personalities associated with the League of Composers and its journal, *Modern Music*, Chávez established himself as an integral part of the burgeoning modern music scene of the 1920s. And he developed a deep appreciation for African-American music. While remaining firmly rooted in New York, he later expanded his reach to the West Coast, its institutions and its composers—Cowell, John Cage, Lou Harrison. While at the helm of OSM, and once his own social mobility allowed him to have homes in both Mexico City and on the Pacific Coast in Acapulco, he provided friends such as Copland, Colin McPhee, Virgil Thomson, and Leonard Bernstein with numerous “Mexico summers”: spaces where they could relax, create, or, in the case of Copland’s *Short Symphony* and McPhee’s *Tabu-Tabuhan*, listen to the premiere of their works with the OSM. And whereas he never wielded in the United States the power he had in Mexico, he was not without it, and he was often consulted by institutions such as the Guggenheim Foundation or asked by governmental and cultural organizations to facilitate projects in Mexico. As I wrote elsewhere, Chávez had a love affair with the United States and with everything it meant for him: modernity, power, efficiency, opportunity, warm friendships, and a home away from home.

As busy, productive, complex, and fascinating a life as I have painted here (and perhaps precisely on account of that), Chávez is still largely unknown to us. And so are his work and worlds. The composer’s international reputation rests on a few Indianist works, and even so his iconic Aztec ballets have not been performed in over half a century. The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth symphonies (commissioned, respectively, by the Louisville Orchestra, the Koussevitzky Foundation, and the New York Philharmonic) are unknown, as are his late orchestral pieces *Elatio* and *Discovery* (also U.S. commissions) and the *Soli III* for solo instruments and orchestra (commissioned by Germany’s Südwestrundfunk). And pianists remain largely ignorant of his magnificent piano music.

PREFACE

Chávez's repertoire as a conductor was impressively vast, yet his conducting career also remains unexplored. His relationship to the politically and financially powerful is little understood, although that has not stopped many in Mexico from condemning him for it. Nor do we yet have a full appreciation of his work at the helm of INBA, an institution crucial for Mexican culture. His enormous correspondence with personalities in Europe, the United States, and Latin America is unknown to non-Spanish-speaking readers. And we still need to come to grips with the changes in his political ideas over the years, from his Marxist-inspired projects and writings of the 1930s to his political allegiance to the United States during the Cold War. The list of things we do not know about Chávez could go on for pages. . . .