

Carlos Chávez's Polysemic Style: Constructing the National, Seeking the Cosmopolitan

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The critical discourse on Carlos Chávez's music is full of contradictions regarding the presence within it of Mexican, pre-Columbian, or indigenous signifiers.¹ His music has generally been read as though infused with the identity of twentieth-century Mexicans, conscious and proud of their indigenous heritage as a result of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) and the subsequent renaissance of Mexican art.² More often than not, this reading takes for granted a Mexican essence in the music, with an inevitability that precludes any conscious choices on the composer's part. By discussing Chávez's early compositions and stylistic choices within both national and cosmopolitan contexts, I shall argue that he was able to direct his musical preferences at will—and not as an automatic manifestation of a personal or national identity—toward the representation of the modern, the abstract, the primitive, the indigenous, the *mestizo*, or the machine-like, developing a polysemic style capable of evoking a number of diverse associations.³

1. The representation of Chávez's music as essentially Mexican is given ample treatment in Robert Stevenson's and Gerard Béhague's surveys of music in Mexico and Latin America, although their skepticism may be read between the lines: Stevenson, *Music in Mexico*, 1–7, 241–43, 250; Béhague, *Music in Latin America*, 129–43, but also 232–33, 246–52. This image informs, in almost obligatory fashion, most commentary on his music. See, for example, Antokoletz, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 221–27, and Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 275. All translations in this article, whether of a few words or full passages, are mine.

2. The Mexican Revolution was a pro-democratic civil war that set in motion a transformation of Mexican culture and the formation of modern Mexico. The literature on the Revolution and its consequences is vast. For a comprehensive study, see Knight, *Mexican Revolution*.

3. In Mexico, slavery and legal segregation were abolished with Independence, and race is currently not a category in census gathering. The current indigenous population is defined in terms of kinship and linguistic practices. With political nationalism, Mexican culture as a whole was defined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as "mestizo," a product of the *mestizaje*, or mixture, of those ethnicities and cultures that came together in the country in the sixteenth century. The *mestizo* ethnicity is considered more than the sum of its parts. In Chávez's time, it was assumed that the ethnicities mixed in *mestizaje* were the European and the indigenous (the African heritage was recognized only recently). Chávez and his family were *mestizo*; in 1924 he referred to himself as "semi-European": see Chávez, "El Cruti hindú," 27.

Composer Aaron Copland and critic Paul Rosenfeld were the first commentators on Chávez's music to construct it as essentially Mexican.⁴ Chávez subsequently appropriated their discourse for the construction of his musical persona, setting into circulation the images they had painted to describe his music.⁵ These images have been used—often without acknowledgment or even awareness of their source—in subsequent popular and scholarly literature on the composer. In order to initiate a deconstruction of this discourse, I here examine its point of origin in New York in the 1920s. Going beyond the stylistic into larger cultural processes, I reframe the emergence of modern music in New York as that of a cultural field, a social formation that includes cultural brokers and adjudicators of artistic prestige.⁶ Within this context, I discuss Copland's and Rosenfeld's construction of Chávez's music. By juxtaposing their reception with my discussion of Chávez's early works, and by sorting out the different components of his style, I strive to separate reality—insofar as there is one—from myth.

A Theoretical Framework

Nationalism as a historical and stylistic category has come under considerable scrutiny in the music scholarship of recent decades. In 1993 Richard Taruskin first exposed the power differential at the root of the false binary opposition of nationalism and universalism—in fact two nationalisms of different political and discursive strength—and the double bind in which composers from the periphery find themselves.⁷ The opposition of nationalism and universalism is not only a matter of critical reception and scholarly debate; it confronts the so-called nationalist composers themselves, prompting them to negotiate multiple, rather chameleonic identities. In his pioneering work on musical Czechness, for example, Michael Beckerman has shown how in dealing with “‘foreign’ materials”—whether

4. See, among others, Copland, “Carlos Chavez,” and Rosenfeld, “Americanism of Carlos Chavez.” See also Saavedra, “Of Selves and Others,” 158–72. I first presented my research on this topic in “Carlos Chávez and the USA: The Construction of a Strategic Otherness,” a paper given at the American Musicological Society conference, Boston, 1998.

5. Chávez used fragments of Copland's and Rosenfeld's essays as program notes and press releases in the early years of his Orquesta Sinfónica de México; see Saavedra, “Of Selves and Others,” 288, 296, and Barajas, “Crónicas musicales,” as quoted in Saavedra, “Of Selves and Others,” 293.

6. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu first developed the notion of a field of cultural production as an autonomous social structure, i.e., as a field capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products. See Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, and Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, esp. 214–77. This includes the production of symbolic capital—the accumulation of prestige and the acquisition of a reputation for competence; see Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 291.

7. Taruskin, “‘Nationalism’: Colonialism in Disguise?,” 19.

Moravian or Native American—Dvořák was continually forced to reexamine his own aesthetic. Beckerman used the metaphor of a mask to understand these changes, questioning in the process Dvořák's own assumptions about the importance of nationality for a composer.⁸

Mexico offers a different periphery in several respects. By virtue of its post-colonial condition, independent Mexico, like the rest of America, positions itself with regard not only to Europe's hegemonic cultural centers, but also to Europe as a whole.⁹ In the early twentieth century Mexican art-music composers were already riding on a second or even third wave of musical nationalism, and the idea that nations must (or naturally do) turn to their own folk music was for them received wisdom. Moreover, the double bind that haunted them was compounded by established discourses on nationalism and universalism, validated in their eyes by European scholarship. For decades, the musicological literature on nationalist music in Mexico took the binary nationalism/universalism as paradigmatic.

Looking at the period 1924–28, Alejandro Madrid recently explored modernism and avant-gardism as scenes that helped Mexican composers to negotiate their positions within an increasingly predominant discourse implemented by a nation-building post-revolutionary government. Chávez's musical personality, which Madrid rightly describes as simultaneously embracing a variety of apparently contradictory tendencies, was reduced in this discourse, he suggests, to that of a nationalist composer in apparent compliance with revolutionary mythology.¹⁰ Taking a different perspective, I have posited as a fundamental premise that the creation of a nation, rather than being exclusively an internal process, takes place within a system of nations and their cultures, in which asymmetrical relations of power affect the cultural constructions of self and other.¹¹ Rather than understanding the multicenteredness of the peripheral subject, at once and intermittently national and universal, as the result of wearing different masks, I have proposed seeing it as the continuous process of constructing a strategic otherness. In this process, once difference has acquired value within a dominant culture—even exchange value, which commodifies it—it is used for the leveraging, no matter how temporary, of

8. Beckerman, "Master's Little Joke," 142, 147–48.

9. I use the noun "America" to refer to the continent and the adjective "American" to refer to things continental. I use "US-American" when referring to matters pertaining solely to the United States. The use of the noun "America" to denote only the United States is resented by Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Americans, and is avoided by scholars of their countries and cultures.

10. Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation*, 13, 49–81.

11. Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others," 4–10. My main theoretical framework for understanding nationalism comes from Ernest Gellner, who famously wrote, "It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round": *Nations and Nationalism*, 55. His model (also developed in *Thought and Change* and *Nationalism*) has great explanatory power for Mexico. Other models I have found useful are those of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, and Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions*.

power relations.¹² I have also demonstrated how the exotic appeal of pre-Columbian cultures (primarily the Aztec) played a role in the Mexican construction of difference not only in Chávez's case but also in those of fellow Mexican composers Manuel M. Ponce and José Rolón during the years in which they resided in Paris.¹³

What makes Chávez's an especially interesting case is that, unlike Ponce, Rolón, or for that matter Dvořák, he had more than one referent:¹⁴ not only metropolitan Europe but also the United States, a country that had stood in a relation of asymmetrical political power with Mexico for decades.¹⁵ More precisely, Chávez's relation to Europe was mediated by the peripheral cultural position of the United States in the 1920s. Chávez's difference acquired value both in itself and as supplemental to the difference with respect to Europe that young composers in the United States were constructing in the 1920s.¹⁶ It was then that Chávez's interest in "primitive" cultures acquired increased and substantive value in his own eyes as well.

Numerous scholars have addressed Chávez's presence in the United States in studies of US-American composers or of modern music in New York.¹⁷ Christina Taylor Gibson investigated Chávez's activities in the 1920s and 1930s in detail in her dissertation, for the first time situating Chávez's presence in New York within what historian Helen Delpar has called "the enormous vogue of things Mexican," a shift in the cultural relations between Mexico and the United States that entailed a reevaluation of Mexican culture.¹⁸ Taylor Gibson's dissertation was followed by her study of Chávez's ballet *H.P.* (Horsepower), in its 1932 version.¹⁹ The ballet presents contrasting visions of America's industrialized North and tropical South. Taylor Gibson claims that *H.P.* demonstrates the multivalent impulses under which cocreators Chávez

12. See Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others," 167–72, and Saavedra, "Carlos Chávez y la construcción."

13. Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others," 195–217.

14. Multiple referents in the construction of difference are not, of course, exclusive to Mexico. Taruskin discusses the musical construction of Russia in relation both to the East and to two Wests, Germany and Italy, in *Defining Russia Musically*.

15. For a brief discussion of the difficult political relationship between Mexico and the United States in the twentieth century, see Delpar, *Enormous Vogue*, 1–3. A seminal study is Vázquez and Meyer, *United States and Mexico*. I discuss the anxiety caused by European and US-American colonialism and neocolonialism among Mexico's political elites in "Spanish Moors," 259–61, and "Of Selves and Others," 57–61.

16. Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others," 172–74. This essay expands upon that idea.

17. See, among others, Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 216–28 and passim; Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 275–79 and passim; Oja, *Colin McPhee*, 99–119 and passim; and Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 45–48 and passim.

18. Taylor Gibson, "Music of Manuel M. Ponce," 129–212. See also Delpar, *Enormous Vogue*.

19. Taylor Gibson, "Reception of Carlos Chávez's *Horsepower*." *H.P.* was first staged in Philadelphia in March 1932, conducted by Leopold Stokowski, with sets and costumes by Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and choreography by Catherine Littlefield.

and Diego Rivera worked as they strove to present the complexities of North-South interaction. She suggests that the ballet seems to embrace pan-Americanism in conformity with US-American expectations, while simultaneously presenting a contested North-South relationship, one based on Chávez and Rivera's shared historical experience. Stokowski and Littlefield were unaware of this multivalence, suggests Taylor Gibson,²⁰ and *H.P.*'s Philadelphia premiere was not successful.²¹

More recently, Carol Hess has situated the reception of Chávez's music of the 1920s and 1930s within the context of pan-Americanism, which she views from the perspective of the United States.²² Hess proposes that pan-Americanism should be understood as a move toward embracing sameness. And she posits this idealized pan-Americanism, in turn, as a new paradigm by which to understand American music that de-emphasizes the construction of difference within Latin American nations and in North-South relations.²³ Accordingly, she discusses Rosenfeld's and Copland's enthusiasm for Chávez's music and their emphasis on Chávez's classicism as a universalizing discourse.²⁴

Hess places *H.P.* within this paradigm, too, suggesting that the ballet "seeks to embrace sameness."²⁵ In her analysis, dialectical indigenism and musical *mestizaje* are core concepts in approaching Chávez's contradictory stylistic choices. Dialectical indigenism "affirms the coexistence of indigenous culture and machine technology in the modern age,"²⁶ as in the musical representation of the character H.P., a mechanical man of the North.²⁷ In turn, she applies musical *mestizaje* when referring to the cultural mixtures—even those involving Afro-Caribbean elements—that, she proposes, Chávez realizes in the score's Southern parts.²⁸

Chávez used similar signifiers for the mechanical and the primitive, to be sure. But, as I shall argue, their semantics vary according to context. Indeed, all evidence indicates that Chávez considered the mechanical/modern and

20. *Ibid.*, 159.

21. Because the chronological scope of this article encompasses Chávez's activities only in the years between 1917 and 1928, it addresses only the initial version (1926) of what was originally a third tableau of *H.P.* (see below).

22. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor*. In her introduction Hess states that her perspective is one of a "*gringa del norte*" (6) and invites Latin American scholars to a dialogue.

23. Hess, introduction to *ibid.*, esp. 3–9. As she indicates there, pan-Americanism was not always benign.

24. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor*, 10, 38–46.

25. *Ibid.*, 11.

26. *Ibid.*, 51.

27. *Ibid.*, 65.

28. *Ibid.*, 67–69. She thus raises the possibility that Chávez might be "indigenizing" an Argentine tango, by introducing Afro-Cuban percussion (68). Although she dismisses the possibility because of an oddly prominent snare drum, she attributes those anomalies in Chávez's scoring to *mestizaje*.

the primitive as culturally distinct; thus he represented either one or the other (or else wrote nonrepresentational music). The same important distinction applies to the indigenous and the *mestizo*, the latter a concept that until very recently in Mexican history would not have implied the presence of elements derived from the African diaspora, but only of those from indigenous and Spanish cultures. Mexican composers assumed the existence of already identifiable *mestizo* musical elements, which they then incorporated into their compositions in order to praise this aspect of Mexican culture. The process of *mestizaje* thus existed prior to nationalist art music rather than being a product of mixtures within it. By contrast, Chávez sought to construct practically from nothing a musical representation of the indigenous, having—unlike Rivera, who drew on pre-Columbian ruins—no recourse to audible and recognizable pre-Columbian music. And he sought to construct it locally and specifically, bringing it to public attention against the predominantly *mestizo* definition of Mexico. Indigenizing other musics, assuming it were possible, or veiling the distinct presence of the *mestizo* and the indigenous by subjecting it to mixture with foreign musics would have been contrary to his intentions and those of his colleagues.

More importantly, and contrary to Hess's paradigm of sameness, I consider the actual artistic and discursive constructions of difference effected for identity purposes by the very people about whom I write—Chávez, his Mexican artist friends, and the young composers and critics in the United States—to be core issues in my discussion. And, as noted above, I view this construction as inflected by international relations of asymmetrical cultural and political power. The grass-roots pan-American cooperation among composers of the late 1920s was the ephemeral result, and not the premise, of a process that concerned the construction of two localities, the Mexican and the US-American, by composers on both sides of the border. In the process of constructing distinct identities, these historical agents produced a number of musical works teeming with ambivalences and contradictions that make them fascinating and compelling. Finally, I view this slice of history with Chávez as my guide. While his music cannot be understood without taking into consideration the importance he placed on its Mexican reception, his subjectivity was binational and his creative imagination existed simultaneously in both countries. Even so, it only rarely embraced the entire American continent: his was a love affair with the United States.²⁹

Readers acquainted with traditional accounts of Mexican culture after the Revolution will note that when discussing Chávez's Mexican context I do not invoke a homogeneous and unanimously celebratory revolutionary *Zeitgeist* as the inspiration for his work. I also deliberately avoid the

29. Chávez viewed himself as an integral part of the music scene in the United States, which was indeed how he was seen by fellow composers by 1928, as discussed below. See also Taylor Gibson, "Chávez, *Modern Music*."

more expeditious route of placing his music under the umbrella of José Vasconcelos's theories on *mestizaje*, which, in my view, have lost the explanatory power they once seemed to have.³⁰ Instead, using primary, unpublished sources, and focusing on the *canción mexicana* (Mexican song) as a localizing site, I present here an alternative narrative, one in which the state, popular culture, public discourse, and art-music composers are all agents in a very contested process of nation creation. As such, they represent instances of mediation between Chávez and the ideology of the Revolution.

The Local Construction of a Musical Persona: Teenage Choices

Nationalism in Mexico first emerged among the intellectual elites of the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1877–80, 1884–1910). But it acquired both focus and momentum as the socially comprehensive political ideology of the Mexican Revolution was channeled into the formation of a mass culture in which different sectors of the population participated. The first musical symbol widely discussed as emblematic of the national was the *canción mexicana*, a rural genre of probable Italian origin. Instrumental in this process was Manuel M. Ponce's advocacy of the *canción* among the urban upper classes in the early years of the revolutionary war. Ponce's intention was to lovingly dress the plebeian, naked *canción* in beautiful harmonic clothes, in order to make it palatable both to his targeted audience and to composers who, he proposed, would use the *canción's* melodies in art-music compositions.³¹ The image of the "lovingly dressed" song soon became a topos in public discourse on the genre.

Born in 1899, Chávez was too young to have a large role in this emergent musical nationalism, but he was precocious enough to theorize it quickly. In 1916 he contributed two essays to the newly founded literary magazine *Gladios*. Here he placed Ponce's ideas in a broader—and evolutionist—perspective, setting up an ambitious agenda for Mexican art music.³² Chávez viewed

30. José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education 1921–24, was one of Mexico's important theorists of *mestizaje*. A central text is his *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race, 1925). The literature on Vasconcelos is vast. A seminal monograph is Fell, *José Vasconcelos*.

31. On Ponce and the *canción mexicana*, see Saavedra, "Manuel M. Ponce's *Chapultepec*," 280–85. Ponce's seminal text on the *canción* is "La canción mexicana." Ponce both arranged *canciones* and composed many of his own. He was Chávez's piano teacher and a recognized composer in his own right. His early work was late Romantic in style, but in the 1920s he paved the way for the adoption of the impressionist and neoclassicist styles in Mexico. On the *canción*, see Mendoza, *La canción mexicana*. On Ponce, see Miranda, *Manuel M. Ponce*. Chávez was self-taught in composition, probably by choice.

32. Chávez, "Artículo prólogo" and "Importancia actual." *Gladios* was founded by precocious teenagers—Octavio Barreda, Carlos Pellicer, Luis Enrique Erro, and others—who eventually became prominent writers, editors, and scientists. On *Gladios*, see Barreda, "*Gladios*."

modernism as an inevitable period of anarchy in the progressive evolution of Western art music, and believed Mexico's rich body of traditional melodies, unknown to European music, could fulfill the modern need for novelty. The great advantage of these melodies, Chávez thought, lay in their being a product of the *mestizo* lower classes. Since these classes did not participate in the evolution of human civilization, he claimed, their creative imagination was in a "different state" from that of other nations.³³ Thus, from a Western- and bourgeois-centered subject position, Chávez first saw these subaltern cultures as a potential healing source for a crisis in Western culture. Then, repositioning himself as a member of a marginal culture with respect to European music, he proposed that by following the example of the formerly peripheral but innovative Russian Five, a Mexican school of composition could become widely successful within Western music.³⁴

Following Ponce's lead in practice as well as in theory, Chávez arranged several *canciones* between 1915 and 1921. In Ponce's archetype the *canción* has an ||:AB:||:CB:|| structure, and the arch-shaped melodies are set to late Romantic, chromatic harmony in contrapuntal textures.³⁵ While adhering to Ponce's model, Chávez included in his *canciones* elements that progressively revealed his own stylistic preferences for driving pulses, ostinati, discreet polyrhythm, noncontoured melodies, and developmental procedures. For example, he could add a moving, conjunct bass line establishing a steady, strong, rhythmic pulse throughout a piece ("La Adelita/La cucaracha," 1915), lead the C section of a *canción* into a development of its materials ("Adiós, adiós," 1919), or flatten the outline of a melody by reducing it to a handful of repeated pitches and pivotal intervals over a mildly dissonant ostinato ("Las margaritas," 1919).

These few songs aside, however, Chávez's juvenilia reflect the broad range of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century styles—Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Chopin, and Debussy—that he had learned as a piano student. Significantly, he did not follow Ponce in using Mexican melodies as thematic materials in these compositions. Rather, his works either embrace traditional Mexican salon music or are efforts in composing developmental forms, such as the Second Piano Sonata and Piano Sextet (both 1919). The First String Quartet (1921), strongly influenced by the quartets of Ravel and Debussy, reveals Chávez's interest in thematic transformation within Classical forms. Its first three movements bear a resemblance to those of a traditional quartet, but the last is a quiet sostenuto. We also find here traits that would, again, become staples of his mature compositional style. The first movement, for example, moves in a persistent quarter-note beat throughout. Its linear textures often result in layers of rhythmic ostinati and are occasionally interrupted by

33. Chávez, "Importancia actual," 8.

34. *Ibid.*, 9.

35. Saavedra, "Manuel M. Ponce y la canción mexicana," 158–59.

homorhythmic passages. The constant chromaticism of the individual voices is at times offset by sudden arrivals of strikingly luminous, diatonic passages. Finally, despite the lyricism of some passages, the quartet is emotionally very restrained.

Chávez's debut concert as a composer, on May 25, 1921, comprised more than a dozen works from the late 1910s and 1920. Significantly, it did not include any of Chávez's Mexican songs, which would have introduced him to the public as a composer of Mexicanist music, positioned in what was then an ongoing debate on the nature and uses of the *canción*. Rather, in a musical culture that considered impressionism, or high dissonance and chromaticism, the avant-garde of Western music, Chávez presented himself as an accomplished composer of art music with modern tendencies. Composer Rafael J. Tello (1872–1946) lamented that Chávez had unfortunately drifted away from the teachings of the classics and had tried instead to imitate Debussy, Strauss, and Ravel.³⁶ And Ponce observed the transitional state in which his former pupil found himself: “[Chávez] is under the simultaneous influence of Romanticism, leaning toward Schumann and Chopin, and modernism, which attracts him with the shine of novelty and exoticism. Will he renounce Romanticism to steadfastly follow the banner of the *modernists*?”³⁷

The Vasconcelos Years

By the time Chávez presented his debut concert important changes had occurred in the public discourse around the *canción*. In 1913, in the early stages of the Revolution, Ponce's advocacy of the *canción* had been considered almost subversive, and praised accordingly, because it brought the music of poor rural areas to urban, aristocratic audiences. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1920s a simplified *canción* (both arrangements and original songs) had emerged in the hands of composers of popular music and, supported by the publishing houses, had become a commercial success. As a form of home entertainment in the domestic parlor, as a staple in the popular theatrical works for which audiences had a voracious appetite, and as the centerpiece of the comprehensive, populist cultural policy of the first post-revolutionary government, it was this new, urban *canción* that became, to Ponce's dismay, the first musical symbol of the nation.

Believing in the cathartic power of music and music making, in 1921 minister José Vasconcelos launched a *canción*-based program for teaching music and dance to children and workers, who then performed together in

36. Tello, “Las composiciones.”

37. Ponce, “Carlos Chávez Ramírez,” 7: “se encuentra bajo la doble influencia de un romanticismo que lo inclina del lado de Schumann y Chopin y de un modernismo que lo atrae con el brillo de novedad y el exotismo.

“Renunciará a su romanticismo para seguir resueltamente la bandera de los *modernistas*?”

massive public festivals exploding with national fervor. The *canción* as both a representation and a binding force of the nation became a site of contention and negotiation that pitted highbrow against lowbrow, the rural against the urban, and the traditional against the new in unexpected ways. By 1922, arranging, composing, and singing *canciones* had become the main, indeed, the only form of musical nationalism. Notably, art-music composers not only were unable to assume positions of leadership in this process, but also became targets of official criticism and neglect. Vasconcelos, who commissioned the iconic murals painted by Rivera on several public buildings, went on record to say he did not believe in Mexican composers in the way he believed in painters.³⁸ And Ponce was openly attacked in a government-sponsored publication for his attempt to use the *canción* in art-music compositions—a “corruption,” in the words of painter Dr. Atl, that deviated from “the vigorous stream of popular sentiment.”³⁹

Plagued by this backlash, Ponce and other art-music composers spoke publicly against this state of affairs, decrying the ongoing corruption of both the melody and the true nature of the *canción*. Chávez did not pronounce publicly on this topic until early 1925,⁴⁰ but in 1924, having been appointed assistant supervisor of some of the choral centers for the working class, he made clear his frustration not only with the quality of the instruction but, above all, with that of the music in reports to the head of the Ministry of Education’s Dirección de Cultura Estética.⁴¹ He criticized the Spanish zarzuelas and the simplistic *canciones* the workers were learning to sing, insisting that the centers should rather teach pure indigenous songs, true *canciones*, and genuine Spanish folk music.⁴² Finally, he objected to the many inauthentic, “Latin” foxtrots performed by the workers, which, according to Chávez, “shared with the black Anglo-Saxon [foxtrot] only the name and the meter.”⁴³

38. “José Vasconcelos, por Ortega.” Vasconcelos, accordingly, did not commission any art-music compositions.

39. Dr. Atl, *Las artes populares*, 2:201: “deturpación”; “la vigorosa corriente del sentimiento popular.” This book was a companion to the first large government-sponsored exhibition of popular arts and crafts, organized by Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo, 1875–1964) in 1921.

40. Chávez, “México y la música,” 84.

41. Reports to Joaquín Beristáin dated August 6, 8, and 23 and September 6 and 27, 1924. All correspondence and written communications cited in this article are found in Fondo Carlos Chávez, Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Mexico City, unless otherwise noted.

42. Chávez provided Cultura Estética with *Peruvian* indigenous songs, probably those collected by Marguerite d’Harcourt in *Méodies populaires indiennes*, and made available his own scores of Manuel de Falla’s *Canciones populares españolas* and some of the *canciones* of Ignacio Fernández Esperón (Tata Nacho).

43. Chávez to Beristáin, August 6, 1924: “Así como al fox-trot latino que solamente tiene de común con el negro-anglosajón, el nombre y el compás.” By “black Anglo-Saxon foxtrot” Chávez meant the foxtrot in the United States. Chávez had become aware of the difference between African American music and the many Mexican or “Latin” foxtrots being published in Mexico. He had visited clubs in Harlem the previous winter, and his correspondence contains references to beloved recordings of African American music.

Chávez's entreaties fell on deaf ears, as no one at Cultura Estética seems to have shared his concern for purity in matters indigenous and African American, or his appreciation for Falla's modernist recovery of Spanish folklore. Discouraged, Chávez, like Ponce, stopped composing *canciones*. In fact, as discussed below, some of his compositions from this period can be understood to oppose Vasconcelos's populist musical policies and, more broadly, the intense public concern with constructing musical national symbols.

The Modern, the National, the Primitive

In September 1921, the government of President Álvaro Obregón celebrated the centennial of the conclusion of Mexico's War of Independence from Spain. Organized by Vasconcelos, the month-long festivities included the presentation, in an outdoor festival, of Mexican regional folk music. The *mestizo* dances performed included the *jarabe*, a genre that had already been promoted as the official national dance before the Revolution.⁴⁴ Exceptionally, the festivities included the *pascola* and other ritual dances of the Yaqui, an indigenous group of Northwestern Mexico.⁴⁵ There were no reports or descriptions in the media of the *pascola* or its music, but the presentation, and even the sheer presence in Mexico City of the Yaqui, reputed to be fierce and merciless warriors, awed the urban population and drew notice in the press. It was probably this irruption of the Yaqui into urban, *mestizo* public consciousness that prompted Chávez to write his *Pazcola* in November 1921.⁴⁶

Despite his purism regarding folk musics, the melody Chávez used in *Pazcola* is not his own transcription of an indigenous performance. Rather, it was taken from the volume on pre-Columbian history in *México a través de los siglos*, an ambitious scholarly publication of Díaz's government.⁴⁷ Although the melody of the *pascola* in question is in modal G minor and the I-V-I harmonic movement suggests a post-conquest origin, it is included in this volume as an example of pre-Columbian music. Chávez used this

44. The *jarabe* was one of the dances performed by the groups representing Mexican president Porfirio Díaz that were sent to World Fairs such as that in Saint Louis in 1904. The new status of the humble *jarabe* was sealed in the Mexican imagination when Anna Pavlova danced it *en pointe* in 1919. Chávez decried the emphasis placed on it to the exclusion of indigenous dances. See Chávez, memorandum "Reorganización de la Dirección de Cultura Estética," August 18, 1924.

45. The *pascola* is a ritual clown. Judging from photographs in the media, the Yaqui performers accompanied themselves with a rattle and probably a wind instrument.

46. The Centennial festivities had been Chávez's only experience of Yaqui music to this point. As a child he had spent some summers in Tlaxcala, where he observed the performance practices of the Tlaxcalteca indigenous communities. There is no record of the performance practices of either the Yaqui or the Tlaxcalteca peoples in 1921.

47. Chavero, *Historia antigua*, 795. Chavero does not discuss this piece's origin or source.

melody in his *Pazcola* to produce what was an early exercise in primitivism.⁴⁸ To be sure, the theme's roots in tonic and dominant harmonies and the structural device of the ritornello created from the melody keep the piece close to traditional Western music. But the driving pulse, changes of meter, repetition, and open fifths—all musical traits widely believed in Western cultures to pertain to the primitive—together with dissonant harmonies and the relentless extension of certain procedures, move the work in the direction of primitivism.

While the unpublished *Pazcola* has remained unknown, a second primitivist piece has played a crucial role in the way Chávez and his music are regarded. Composed in late 1921, the ballet *Toxihmolpia: El fuego nuevo* represents, as Chávez imagined it, the Aztec religious ceremony that took place every fifty-two years in order to supplicate for the rebirth of fire and the continuation of human life.⁴⁹ Chávez conceived three ritual dances—a “Dance of Fear” (that the fire may not be reborn) by the Priests and the Men, a “Sacred Dance” by the Women, and a “Dance of the Warriors”—followed by the rebirth of fire in the hands of the High Priest during an orchestral interlude, and a final “Dance of Joy” by the entire cast.⁵⁰

Here again, Chávez rehearses his primitivist style. A pitch collection consisting of a C major scale with lowered sixth and seventh degrees is used initially in all dances. Other pitches, including E \flat , A \flat , and B \flat , are added as the melodic lines progress, in ascending or descending sequences, changing pitch collections. While the C major and minor scales are both present, the effect is not the blurring or alternation of the modes. Instead, Chávez uses the potential of the entire C major/minor pitch collection to create a variety of melodic and vertical dissonances: semitones, tritones, major sevenths, and ninths. Anhemitonic pentatonic scales are carved from this collection for use in some thematic materials, mostly for color.⁵¹ Other than a few striking moments of

48. Chávez's 1919 “Artículos históricos,” on Jules Combarieu's theory on the origins of music, offers the first testament to his lasting infatuation with the primitive. He did not address primitivism directly until 1954, in “Influencias, forma, etc.”

49. “Toxihmolpia” is Nahuatl for “new fire”; Chávez eventually kept only the Spanish “El fuego nuevo” as a title. Halffter, Sordo Sodi, and Muñoz Hernández, eds., *Carlos Chávez: Catálogo completo de sus obras*, states that *El fuego nuevo* was commissioned by the Ministry of Education, and commentators such as Parker, Luis Sandi, and others suggest it was a direct commission from Vasconcelos (and thus the equivalent of Rivera's murals on pre-Columbian topics). See, among others, Parker, *Carlos Chávez: A Guide*, 4, and Sandi, “Chávez y la música,” 79. I have found no evidence to support this common supposition, and Vasconcelos does not mention such a commission in his memoirs. In 1954 Chávez merely reported that Vasconcelos had “made some money available”; see “Influencias, forma, etc.” It is probably more accurate to observe, as Stevenson does, that he received the minister's “encouragement and blessing”: *Music in Mexico*, 239.

50. The location of the original score for small orchestra is unknown. The extant sources include a version for two pianos, dated 1921, and a reorchestration made in 1927 (a facsimile is available for perusal from G. Schirmer). All music manuscripts consulted for this article are housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter NYPL).

51. In 1921 Chávez's use of pentatonicism was probably guided by Debussy's gamelan-inspired pieces. Pentatonicism became a major signifier of the indigenous in his music.

homorhythm, the texture of the ballet is, as in Chávez's Western-style pieces, entirely multilayered. Literal and sequential repetition replaces traditional developmental procedures.

Chávez did not draw from recognized indigenous melodies in this piece but composed his own—a point he later made many times. Most melodic lines are conjunct and made of a restricted number of rhythmic figures combined over many measures to create slight variations. In contrast to earlier pieces, nearly all rhythmic motives are based on even subdivisions of the quarter note, and there are almost no sudden changes of meter. (This rhythmic simplicity, even monotony, would become a distinctive trait of Chávez's Indianist music). A driving pulse based on two eighth notes is present in one or another layer throughout much of the piece (see Ex. 1), and the meters used are conventional. Finally, all dances are brought to an exhilarating climax by means of a progressive buildup in dynamics, instrumentation, tempo, and textural complexity.

Example 1 Chávez, *El fuego nuevo*, “Danse sacrée,” mm. 15–21 after Rehearsal L. Unpublished MS. Perusal facsimile score, Carlanita Music Co., administered by G. Schirmer.

The musical score for Example 1 consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 15-17) includes Piccolo, Flutes, and Marimba. The Piccolo part begins in measure 15 with a melodic line starting on a dotted quarter note, marked *p*. The Flutes part begins in measure 15 with a melodic line starting on a quarter note, marked *p* and *a 2*. The Marimba part begins in measure 15 with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *pp*. The second system (measures 18-21) continues the Piccolo and Flutes parts, with the Flutes part marked *a 2*. The Marimba part continues with the same rhythmic pattern, marked *pp*. The key signature changes to B-flat major in measure 18.

El fuego nuevo was not premiered in the early 1920s, as Chávez had probably hoped.⁵² Writing it must nevertheless have been a liberating experience. As we have seen, between 1915 and early 1922, a time when the culture surrounding him was preoccupied with finding the national, Chávez had experimented with writing art music that could be both modern and nationalist, using precomposed melodies from two rural genres still in use: the *canción* and the *pascola*. It is fair to suggest that he found in neither of them the alternative, outside-the-evolutionary-path melodic material for which he had been searching. Once he decided to write a ballet, where no organic unity or long-range functional harmony was, in principle, required, and on a topic derived from Aztec culture, whose music has not survived, Chávez found himself free to write the kind of personal, modern music he had already been writing anyway.⁵³ In *El fuego nuevo* we see the personal stylistic elements of his previous compositions taking over the discourse and being put to work in the creation of a modern primitivist piece.

El fuego nuevo and for that matter *Pazcola* may thus be seen as challenges to the local culture surrounding Chávez in two respects: first, they focus on the indigenous and the pre-Columbian while most of the nationalist effort in music was centered on the *mestizo* genres of the *canción* and *jarabe*; and second, they are modernist pieces written in a milieu in which writing in the manner of Debussy was considered almost too daring. Primitivism as a way of combining the modernist and the non-European was unprecedented in

52. It is a common supposition that composer Julián Carrillo (1875–1965), conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, impeded its premiere; I have found no evidence for this. Carrillo did impede the premiere of Chávez's *Sinfonía de la Patria*, an uncatalogued work of 1923; see Carrillo, *Testimonio*, 172. Chávez conducted a concert version of *El fuego nuevo* in Mexico on November 4, 1928. It was performed again within a few years and, to my knowledge, has not been performed since. It has never been staged.

53. Ancient codices contain no notated music, and sixteenth-century chroniclers and missionaries who witnessed pre-Columbian music and dance left no transcriptions of it. They rather gave general, culturally biased descriptions of the performances as devilish and abominable (although executed with admirable precision). The very limited nineteenth- and early twentieth-century research on the music of both contemporary indigenous communities and pre-Columbian civilizations (most of the time no distinction was made between them) tended to focus on organological aspects. See, for example, Seler, "Mittelamerikanische Musikinstrumente," and Seler, "Die holzgeschnittene Pauke." Nineteenth-century Mexican scholars such as Chavero produced state-of-the-art compilations of knowledge on pre-Columbian cultures, but their attempts to describe the music are not successful. A handful of foreign scholars, among them Lumholtz (*Unknown Mexico*, 1902) and Preuss (*Die Nayarit-Expedition*, 1912), undertook ethnographic research on and transcribed the music of mostly nomadic, contemporary communities that are not related to the Aztecs. Chávez did not know their work in the 1920s. Later attempts to reconstruct pre-Columbian melodic systems on the basis of surviving musical instruments and contemporary indigenous melodies have not been fruitful and have often been marred by wishful thinking, national pride, or the Eurocentric belief that pre-Columbian music, being "primitive," must have been pentatonic. Critiques of these attempts have been made by Stevenson, *Music in Mexico*, 32–46; Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others," 233–38; Martínez Miura, *Música precolombina*, 12–16; and Tomlinson, *Singing of the New World*, 3–5.

Mexico, but its use placed Chávez right in the midst of the Western avant-gardes while giving his music the potential to signify the national. Writing modernist music that evoked not the *mestizo* present but the indigenous present or, even better, the pre-Hispanic past must have suggested to him a personal path that would grant him the distinctiveness to which all young composers aspire.

Although Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was the most notorious musical antecedent of *El fuego nuevo*, we cannot be certain that Chávez was already familiar with its music when he set to work on his own ballet. He must nevertheless have realized that the work had put Stravinsky squarely at the center of European art music.⁵⁴ Thus Chávez composed *El fuego nuevo* with one eye (or ear) on the local culture but the other directed abroad, and he was indeed hoping for a premiere by Adolph Bolm, the Russian dancer who had earlier been a member of the same Ballets Russes that had created Stravinsky's *Rite*. In the years around 1920 Bolm was engaged to choreograph modern ballets in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and he attended some of the Centennial performances in 1921, apparently at the invitation of the Mexican government, together with Chávez and writer Pedro Henríquez Ureña. It was then, the composer recalled, that the idea of writing the ballet emerged.⁵⁵ A few weeks after the Centennial, Chávez sent Bolm the scenario for *El fuego nuevo*, thinking perhaps of a premiere during the choreographer's possible future engagement in Mexico. Chávez evidently was also ready to go to New York, only to be discouraged by Bolm.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, hope for choreography by Bolm was to remain in the composer's mind for many years to come.

A Dissenting Nationalist

The year after the Centennial celebrations, with Vasconcelos's project at full throttle and tensions between composers of art and popular music rising, Chávez wrote his own radical—"futurist," his friend Octavio Barreda called it—*Jarabe*.⁵⁷ The piece follows tradition in that it consists of a series of short *jarabes* with their requisite square phrase structure and repetition scheme.

54. I have not been able to ascertain which compositions by twentieth-century composers other than Debussy and Ravel Chávez knew before his trip to Europe in late 1922. Nor have I been able to determine when he first became acquainted with any of Stravinsky's major works, including *The Rite of Spring*. What we do know is that he attended the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Carnegie Hall performance of *The Rite*, conducted by Pierre Monteux, on January 13, 1924 (Chávez, "Perpetual Renewal," 127), and that in 1925 he performed some of Stravinsky's songs, as discussed below. He conducted the Mexican premiere of *The Rite* in 1935.

55. Chávez, "Influencias, forma, etc."

56. Bolm to Chávez, November 25, 1921.

57. Barreda to Chávez, February 17, 1926.

Example 2 Chávez, *Jarabe*, mm. 33–36. Unpublished MS. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.

The musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a 6/8 time signature. It begins with a measure of rest, followed by a series of chords and melodic fragments. A measure number '33' is placed above the first measure. The lower staff is in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. It features a driving, triplet-based pulse with chromatic alterations in the melody and harmony.

All the melodies can be recognized as traditional ones, such as the “Jarabe Tapatío,” “El Atole,” or “El Palomo.” Despite this adherence to tradition, however, Chávez’s treatment does violence to the genre. He alters every single melody chromatically and disrupts the principle of strict repetition typical of the genre by further altering the melodies as they repeat. While more often than not he retains the harmonization of the melody in parallel thirds, typical of the *jarabe*’s performance practice, he alters the thirds chromatically with the effect of disfiguring the natural melodic contour (see Ex. 2). Finally, the intense polyphonic treatment seems to overwhelm the melodies. And yet the genre naturally lends itself to the composition of music along the lines Chávez had been exploring: it has a driving, triplet-based pulse, and its natural repetitiveness can be used, as the composer does here, to dwell insistently on a particular rhythmic and melodic design.

As a nationalist piece, *Jarabe* would not have met with the approval of Mexican audiences, for whom nationalism meant the exaltation and “ennoblement” of folk music. And Chávez must have known this: if ever confirmation were needed that art music made folk melodies “ugly,” as Tello claimed, this piece would provide it.⁵⁸ It is therefore difficult not to hear *Jarabe* as a defiant take on the national obsession with the genre and a response to what Chávez probably viewed as its cheapening by both populist cultural policy and theatrical success.

All three Centennial pieces—*Pazcola*, *El fuego nuevo*, and *Jarabe*—remained unperformed and unexposed to public and critics. But one other work from this period that can also be viewed as being in a critical dialogue with public culture did get a hearing: the *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano of 1924. Written in New York, it is “futuristic” in a way that recalls the *jarabe* in its incorporation of recognizable Mexican musics into a modernist language. The Scherzo, for example, features the 6/8 meter with cadential hemiolas typical of the folk genre called *son*. But while there is also a clear *son* outline in the melody, Chávez modifies it chromatically (see Ex. 3a), making it at once harder to recognize—and ugly.

58. Quoted by Dr. Atl, *Las artes populares*, 2:209.

Example 3a Chávez, *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano, mm. 31–34. Mills Music Co. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.

Scherzo ♩ = 138

Violin

Piano

Example 3b Chávez, *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano, mm. 84–85. Mills Music Co. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the *Journal*.

Molto ritenuto

IV corda

mf lâche
senza vibrato

84

glissando lentamente

The Adagio uses the melody of the traditional *canción* “L’Inasia,” altered both chromatically and through changes of meter. Although these alterations make the melody sound more languid and perhaps sadder than in the original, Chávez rejects all sentimentality by indicating that it was to be played “without vibrato” and “sempre rigorosamente in tempo.” The sonatina seems designed to provoke a specific reaction in a Mexican audience, in that “L’Inasia” was one of the pieces used by Dr. Atl to illustrate true-to-the-people Mexican *canciones*.⁵⁹ Moreover, in the Scherzo the vigorous *son* is suddenly broken off, whereupon the violin plays a segment of the melody, marked “lâche” (expanded in a footnote to “in a very indolent, lazy manner”) and with glissando (see Ex. 3b); thereafter the piano hesitantly plays another segment in smaller fragments, as if lost or confused. After a piano glissando, both instruments engage in a long and furious chordal ostinato, discarding all elements of the *son* except the meter. It is thus impossible not to see this sonatina as a challenge to traditional conceptions of beauty and the surrounding national culture.

59. *Ibid.*, 2:211.

As noted above, in the early part of the 1920s control of what public discourse referred to as “doing” nationalism in music was not in the hands of art-music composers; they had very little access to the power structures that could have allowed them to have any impact on the matter. Alienated by a precarious musical establishment in which he played no role, it was not until 1930 that Chávez once again attempted to participate in the local dialogue about musical nationalism with another Mexicanist composition. Moreover, young man that he was, he had also fully embraced not only modernism but modernity and its many symbols: speed, machines, technology, and jazz-derived popular music from the United States, such as the foxtrot, which for older composers was inimical to any expression of Mexicanness.⁶⁰ Chávez took refuge in modernism and in the idea of working abroad, and in December 1923 left for his first sojourn in New York.

“Le bon combat”: Chávez the Modernist and the Cosmopolitan Cause of Modern Music

In early 1923, the Berlin publishers Bote & Bock published Chávez’s *Las mañanitas (À l’aube: Image mexicaine)* and *Deuxième sonate pour piano*. Chávez immediately sent them to José Juan Tablada, the *modernista*/cubist poet then living in New York. In the 1920s, Tablada took it upon himself to redress the public image of Mexicans in the United States and to build bridges between the two countries by introducing to the New York art establishment every Mexican artist he regarded as worthy of attention.⁶¹ He was a close friend of Edgard Varèse, who in 1921 set Tablada’s quasi-Dadaist poem “Lune-Scaphandre” to music as “La croix du sud,” the second movement of *Offrandes*, and a year later dedicated *Hyperprism* to the poet and his wife.⁶² Tablada showed Chávez’s music to Varèse, and might have introduced the two composers when Chávez passed through New York on his return from Europe in the spring of 1923.⁶³ When Chávez returned to New York later that year he attended the premiere of Varèse’s *Octandre*, and the two composers soon became close.

Varèse was instrumental in the emergence of the cultural field of modern music in New York, programming forward-looking music in the concerts of

60. The foxtrot was opposed in public discourse to the *canción*, symbol of Mexico, as the symptom of a “Yankee invasion.” See Coignard, “Mundo, demonio y carne,” and Ponce, “S. M. el Fox,” 181.

61. Williams, *Covarrubias*, 17. On the demeaning representations of Mexicans in US-American popular culture of the 1920s, see Delpar, “Goodbye to the ‘Greaser.’” See also Covarrubias, “Our Southern Neighbor, Mexico,” which caricatures the representation and reality of Mexicans.

62. Clayton, *Edgard Varèse*, 82, 97–98. See also Tablada, *Obras—IV Diario*, passim.

63. Tablada to Chávez, April 2, 1927.

his International Composers' Guild.⁶⁴ While the critics had given scant attention to the first season of the Guild, a greater number attended the concerts as audiences became larger, the Guild more prestigious, and the venues better and located further uptown. Hidebound by a mindset that found value in what the new composers did not, most critics refused, as Henry Cowell put it, "to make a serious criticism, contenting themselves with satirical remarks."⁶⁵ Still, a few, among them Paul Rosenfeld and Lawrence Gilman, took the music seriously and contributed in fundamental ways to the ascription of alternative value to it. Thus, by the end of the decade, the Guild, the League of Composers, and other organizations to be discussed below had managed to turn things around. The cultural field of modern music emerged, together with its main institutions, cultural brokers, and systems and agents of legitimization (of recognition, consecration, and prestige), and a self-selected group of composers, performers, patrons, and concertgoers who distinguished themselves, as Pierre Bourdieu would say, by their distinctions: by the classifying action of taste, in this case for modern music.⁶⁶ This entire structure of social relations was an important determinant in the emergence and shaping of modern composition in the United States.

Chávez witnessed this process in its early stages and sought to duplicate it in Mexico. Thus, upon his return home in spring 1924, he took it upon himself to wage "le bon combat" for modernist music.⁶⁷ The task was not easy. Writing to Varèse, Chávez described the difficulties he faced and the route he intended to follow:

I persuaded *El Universal* and *Excelsior*, which are the strongest newspapers, to create a small section on music, and you will be able to get an idea of the kind of promotion I intend to undertake through the translations I have published and am sending to you. It is very little because the conditions for fighting in Mexico are terrible. I am alone and have to overcome a sea of resistance. Here people hardly know of Debussy; they do not know Moussorgsky and even less what followed after Debussy.

I have organized only three concerts . . . but there is no money. . . . The public will not pay for this, and official help is null because of the very bad financial situation of the government.

That is why it seemed to me important to start by the press campaign that I have initiated. . . .

64. On the emergence of modern music in New York, see Oja, *Making Music Modern*. On the scandal-provoking Guild, see Metzger, "New York Reception of *Pierrot lunaire*."

65. Cowell, "Modernism Needs No Excuses, Says Cowell," *Musical America* 41 (1925): 9, quoted in Lott, "New Music for New Ears," 274.

66. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 6. By conceptualizing the emergence of modern music as a cultural field I aim to show how the value attributed to the music of new and young composers is rooted in the social, and not in individual taste.

67. Varèse used this term to describe the modernist cause: Varèse to Chávez, March 13, 1925.

In this way the public will be sufficiently prepared for the performance of *Octandre* and *Pierrot*. . . .

I am sending you the six *Exágonos* by Pellicer that I already performed here. I very much hope that they will interest you.⁶⁸

Indeed, in the summer of 1924, as he battled against the practices in *Cultura Estética*, Chávez also wrote a series of “editorials” for Mexican newspapers in which, in prose at times epigrammatic, he railed against beauty, the presumed loftiness of music, and the complacency of audiences. Rather, he hailed the foxtrot, Stravinsky, and Varèse, quoted Jean Cocteau, and insisted repeatedly on the need for music to change through innovation.⁶⁹ Chávez also organized and performed in recitals on July 20, August 21, and September 10 that featured pieces by Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Poulenc, and Auric, together with those he had tried unsuccessfully to have performed by the workers of *Cultura Estética*—songs by Falla and Tata Nacho, and five Inca melodies. Of his own music, Chávez programmed one Mexican and one art song, *Polígonos* for piano (1923), six *Exágonos* on poems by Carlos Pellicer, and the *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano.⁷⁰

The Guild Pieces and Machine Music

As we have seen, the Violin *Sonatina* contained elements that resonated with the surrounding local culture. The six *Exágonos* (Hexagons), which contain no references to Mexico, are a very different matter. The composer set six poems of six lines each—hence the title—by his childhood friend Pellicer, who would eventually become a recognized poet. The first *Tres exágonos* (1923) set what are essentially passionate love poems, and the music shows some affinity with Darius Milhaud’s *Catalogue de fleurs*. The second set,

68. Chávez to Varèse, November 20, 1924: “Logré que en ‘El Universal’ y en el ‘Excélsior’ que son los diarios más fuertes se creara una sección de música pequeña y podrá usted darse una idea de la difusión que procuro realizar, por las traducciones que he publicado y le mando. Es bien poco porque las condiciones de lucha en México son horribles. Yo soy el único y tengo que vencer un mar de resistencia. Aquí apenas tienen idea de que existe Debussy; no conocen a Moussorgsky ni mucho menos lo que sigue de Debussy.

“He dado solamente tres conciertos . . . pero no hay dinero. . . . El público no paga esto y la ayuda oficial es nula por las pésimas condiciones financieras del Gobierno.

“Por eso me pareció muy importante comenzar por la campaña de prensa que he iniciado. . . .

“De esta manera creo que el público queda ya suficientemente preparado para la representación de *Octandre* y el *Pierrot*. . . .

“Le envió a usted los seis *Exágonos* de Pellicer que yo toqué ya aquí. Espero y deseo que le interesen.” (Spanish spelling corrected.)

69. Editorials appeared in *El Universal*, *Excélsior*, and *El Globo*. In 1924 Varèse published one of Chávez’s editorials as “Antecedents and Consequences” in the Guild’s journal *Eolus*.

70. The concerts were apparently not reviewed.

Otros tres exágonos (1924), dedicated to Varèse, is significantly edgier in terms of both text and music.⁷¹ The poems busy themselves with surreal and humorous images of mermaids who ask for sandwiches, boats that collide with the moon making *it* shipwreck, and lovers who mortgage sunsets. For example, the first “Exágono” sets the following poem:

El buque ha chocado con la Luna.	The ship clashed against the moon.
Nuestros equipajes, de pronto, se iluminaron.	Our luggage was suddenly illuminated.
Todos hablábamos en verso y nos referíamos los hechos más ocultados.	We all spoke in verse and shared with each other the most secret facts.
Pero la Luna se fue a pique a pesar de nuestros esfuerzos románticos.	But the moon shipwrecked in spite of our romantic efforts.

Chávez's choice of poetry brings these pieces close to Tablada's “Lune-Scaphandre” and Varèse's *Offrandes*. The vocal line is syllabic and angular, and the melodic lines are made up of small motives that either settle into rhythmic ostinati or else constantly juxtapose subdivisions of the beat into 2, 3, 4, and 5. Nearly every poetic line is set to its own musical materials, creating what is, in fact, a constantly changing, very polygonal piece. The music illustrates the events narrated in the poem through direct, humorous word painting.

Although Chávez sent Varèse all six *Exágonos*, only the second set was performed by the Guild. Chávez's program notes for the concert of February 8, 1925, are indicative of the way he wanted to represent himself to his New York audience: “Carlos Chávez is the leader of an energetic modern music movement in Mexico. Both by his articles and by concerts of new music which he organizes, he is introducing the works of living composers to Mexico City.”⁷²

Otros tres exágonos went over well with the audience, as Varèse reported by telegram to Chávez on February 11, 1925. Rosenfeld's review was short and approving, albeit not free from exoticist overtones: “And the Tres Exagonos of Carlos Chavlez [*sic*], on little Pierrot Lunaire poems by Carlos Pellicer, came like a whiff of Latin-American freshness and gaiety and dry sureness of means, and sent the audience away in some of the good humour that should have been theirs in much greater quantity.” Even the conservative Olin Downes paid a compliment in an otherwise sarcastic review: “Colin O'More sang very competently the ‘Tres Exagonos,’ after satirical poems of

71. *Tres exágonos* was originally composed for voice and piano but was rescored to match the instrumentation of *Otros tres exágonos*: tenor or soprano, flute/piccolo, oboe/English horn, bassoon, viola, and piano. The rather literal translation of the poem is mine.

72. Program of the International Composers' Guild, February 8, 1925, AGN.

Carlos Pellicer, of Chavez, music which has an element of satire and what may be called a literary quality.”⁷³

Encouraged by this success, Varèse requested another piece from Chávez, who dispatched *Energía*, a portrayal of energy, noise, speed, and chaos written for piccolo, flute, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, viola, cello, and double bass.⁷⁴ With its use of sound blocks, this is the most Varèsian of his compositions, yet Chávez does not forgo his own characteristic flow of contrapuntal lines and driving, clearly marked pulse. He creates a large registral space between the piccolo and the double bass that he fills with active, strong, at times polyrhythmic layers, interrupted occasionally by dissonant rhythmic unisons in all nine instruments, not unlike Varèse’s rhythmic unisons in *Octandre*. Despite these interruptions, the pulse and the heightened activity feel relentless. The strings play occasional glissandi, and Chávez often instructs the players to “press the bow down so it scrapes the strings, producing a rough tone.”

Also from 1925 is another work related to energy, machines, speed, and chaos: *36*, a short, fast piano composition originally called *HP*, and once aptly described in Mexico as a piece “that shake[s] one up with the unleashed energy of a fast train. The rhythm bounces around like a racing car on an obstacle course.”⁷⁵ Indeed, *36* exhibits a constant flow of rushing triplets, arrested only occasionally and unpredictably by sudden changes in rhythmic figuration. Moreover, at times the music gives the impression of accelerating uncontrollably through the unexpected presence of sixteenth notes, and through the polymeter created by the melodic patterns and the placement of accents (see Ex. 4).⁷⁶

If *Otros tres exágonos* was well received in New York, in Mexico City Chávez’s initial efforts had practically no impact on local music life. By late 1925 he had gathered around him a larger group of performers, including violinist Silvestre Revueltas and singer Guadalupe Medina.⁷⁷ On December 18, 1925, they performed together in a concert that featured Chávez’s First String Quartet, Milhaud’s *Catalogue de fleurs*, Stravinsky’s *Trois chants russes*, piano pieces by Erik Satie, Poulenc’s *Rapsodie nègre*, and Varèse’s *Octandre*.

73. Rosenfeld, “Musical Chronicle,” April 1925, 352; Downes, “Music: International Composers’ Guild.”

74. Varèse to Chávez, July 14, 1925. In the end *Energía* was not programmed by the Guild.

75. José D. Frías, concert program of December 18, 1925, AGN: “que sacuden cual la desencadenada energía de un expreso. El ritmo salta como un automóvil de carrera en una pista de obstáculos.” The Mercedes 35 HP (1901) is considered to have been the first modern car. By naming his piece *36 (HP)*, Chávez might have been playfully alluding to an even more powerful car.

76. We also find this perceptual acceleration in *Polígonos*.

77. Revueltas, in particular, was a comrade-in-arms in the battle for modern music in Mexico. See Saavedra, “Of Selves and Others,” 239–74, and Kolb-Neuhaus, “Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas.”

Example 4 Chávez, 36, mm. 21–24. Mills Music Co. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

In his review of the concert for *Excélsior*, critic Manuel Casares began “by confessing that I have never before felt so disoriented when writing a review as I am today.” He liked the works by Poulenc, Satie, and Stravinsky, but loathed *Octandre*, and of Chávez’s quartet he admitted,

Frankly, I could not understand anything. For fleeting moments I could see some sparkles of talent, which, intent on making “new music,” [Chávez] banned and wiped out with tremendous and inconceivable dissonances. The harmony, the rhythm, the form, the development, and other elements of music have disappeared from this quartet. [Chávez] has wanted to write an advanced composition and for that he seems to have concerned himself exclusively with gathering dissonances and absurd combinations. . . . A few months ago I personally heard Mr. Chávez say, “There is no point in Ravel.” Since then I have tried to make sense of this sentence, uttered by one whom I knew to be such a decided supporter of modernist music: but now that I have experienced his string quartet I realize that, if Chávez believes his composition to be music, then “there is no point” in Ravel, Debussy, Mozart . . . or any other composer, old or new.⁷⁸

78. Casares, “Crónicas musicales”: “por confesar que nunca me he sentido más desorientado para escribir una crónica como en el presente caso. . . . Francamente declaro que nada pude entender, sólo por fugaces momentos se revelaban ciertos destellos de talento, que por el afán de hacer ‘música nueva’ eran desterrados y borroneados por tremendas e inconcebibles disonancias. La armonía, el ritmo, el desarrollo y demás características de la música han desaparecido de este cuarteto. Quiso el autor hacer una obra avanzada y para esto sólo parece haberse preocupado de reunir disonancias y combinaciones absurdas. . . . Hace unos meses de personalmente

Chávez was sufficiently encouraged by the critic's attention to seek the support of Alfonso Pruneda, president of the Universidad Nacional de México, for yet another series of concerts of modern music.⁷⁹ When nothing came of this, Chávez's group disbanded and his *bon combat* for modernist music was suspended for a few years. Mexico's high-art culture, modeled upon the European, was heavily dependent on the financial support of the state, and the state, after a ten-year war, was in no position to give it. This is not to say there was no active cultural life in Mexico at this time, or even a modernist one. But as a composer Chávez was at a disadvantage by comparison with his friends in the other arts, such as the young writers Pellicer, Xavier Villaurrutia, and José and Celestino Gorostiza, and the painters Rivera, Agustín Lazo, and Rufino Tamayo. The writers were able to self-publish or subsist on bureaucratic posts and newspaper chronicles, while Rivera was hired by Vasconcelos at a meager salary to paint his murals—some of which were violently rejected by the public, and vandalized, because of their modern style—before finally starting his international career. But composers were costlier to support, and the state saw no political advantage in sponsoring art music. In addition, there was no tradition in Mexico of private patronage. Moreover, the wealthy families of the pre-revolutionary era were all in exile, and some time would be needed before a new middle and upper class, potentially supportive of music, could emerge on the basis of a modern, urban economy. Chávez once again set his sights on New York.

A Strategic Otherness: New York and the Quest for Success

While away from New York from spring 1924 to late summer 1926, Chávez had kept abreast of the city's cultural life by reading the foreign press in Mexico City and through his correspondence with expatriate Mexican artists and diplomats. Central to his imagined, and later real, presence in New York were the writer and diplomat Octavio Barreda and the artist Miguel Covarrubias. Covarrubias was a caricaturist of great talent, whose style was well liked by New York's intellectual and social elite.⁸⁰ Unlike his friends, he soon had a career as meteoric as it was unexpected, one in which his drawings of music making and dancing in Harlem played a significant role. As Barreda later recalled, the young Mexicans partied, attended as many concerts as they could afford, went to clubs in Harlem,

decir al señor Chávez que 'Ravel no tiene objeto.' Desde entonces pugnaba yo por encontrar la razón de esta frase, que no me explicaba en labios de quien sabía que era decidido partidario de la música modernista: pero ahora que he conocido su cuarteto de cuerdas me doy cuenta de que si Chávez cree que su obra es música, 'no tiene objeto' ni Ravel ni Debussy ni Mozart . . . ni ningún compositor moderno o antiguo."

79. Chávez to Pruneda, January 19 and February 14, 1926.

80. Reaves, "Miguel Covarrubias," 63.

and enjoyed the modern “lively arts”—the movies, Chaplin, jazz, vaudeville, and Broadway.⁸¹ The Village held for them some of the mythical allure of Paris's Quartier Latin.⁸² Inevitably, they also felt the impact of the city's pace and architecture.

From Mexico and later from New York, Chávez corresponded with Barreda, Covarrubias (who went to Europe in 1926), other young writers such as José Gorostiza and Pellicer, and painters such as Rivera and Lazo.⁸³ This group of artists regularly sent each other encouraging words, extravagant praise, and ideas for joint projects that rarely came to fruition. Their correspondence makes clear their quest for success and validation in a foreign cultural capital. The first thing that strikes the reader of this animated correspondence is the determination of Chávez and his friends to write a ballet—a highly regarded modernist genre. As a collaborative work it could be used to showcase the talents of several artists, as well as the colorful and exuberant Mexican imagery that Rivera, Lazo, and Covarrubias were developing.

Also of interest is the kind of project to which each of the artists was drawn, and their differing conceptions of what a modern Mexican work of art designed to be presented to foreign audiences should be. For Barreda the kernel of Mexican culture lay in the almost surreal absurdity of Mexican beliefs and everyday life; Covarrubias's interests coincided with Barreda's. They—and Chávez to some degree—had in mind a “lively” modern art, the kind that blurred the borders between the artistic and the commercial. Barreda conceived all kinds of scenarios on Mexican topics. Thus, in *Suave Patria* “there would be . . . fireworks, a parade, patriotic speeches . . . very characteristic, and successful here for sure because it will be new and exotic.”⁸⁴ And *El milagro de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (The Miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe), a pantomime project for both Chávez and Covarrubias, was to be, as Barreda explained, “in the manner of *Petrushka* . . . and as humorous as *The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower*.”⁸⁵ Later he added,

It has possibilities because the topic is new and unexpected: a marvelous opportunity for you to score big. . . . The story in itself—although very Mexican because very illogical—is very simple. Its only virtue is to contrive certain situations requiring inclusion of . . . for example, the *jarabe* (that futurist *jarabe* of yours), the

81. In *The Seven Lively Arts*, Gilbert Seldes wrote about the once lowbrow culture that young people of the day were now appreciating as art. An enthusiastic Barreda promised to send a copy to Chávez on August 5, 1924.

82. Poniatowska, *Miguel Covarrubias*, 56.

83. Lazo had designed the costumes and sets for *El fuego nuevo* in 1921.

84. Barreda to Chávez, February 9, 1925: “habría . . . fuegos artificiales, desfile, discursos patrióticos . . . muy característico y de éxito seguro aquí por novedoso y exótico.”

85. Barreda to Chávez, January 28, [1926]: “A la manera de *Petrushka* . . . y con el humor de *El Casamiento de la Torre Eiffel*.” The ballet is also referred to as *La hija del boticario* (The Pharmacist's Daughter).

gunshots, the devils (Vanegas Arroyo broadsheets) . . . the spirit . . . is humorous, playful.⁸⁶

Barreda also sent Chávez a political scenario containing the germ of what eventually became *H.P.*: “In a factory, with great whirring of machines . . . uprising of the workers and final lynching of the owner, whom they compress and turn into something useful.”⁸⁷ Attracted to this topic, the leftist Rivera sent Chávez his own scenario for *H.P.* in 1926, most of which was retained in the version eventually premiered in 1932. Rivera extended the politics of the scenario to include a contrast between the fertile, exuberant tropics and greedy, industrial North America, and opposed Wall Street and financial speculation to manufacturing—that is, to the workers and their livelihood.

In Rivera’s scenario, “the men of North America travel toward the tropics, searching for the products of the fertile land to feed the civilization of machines.” After the sailors take “possession” of these products we find ourselves back in “the city of industry and the machine that transforms the raw materials.” The factory workers, who had at first danced to the pace of the stock ticker, reset the machine and “succeed in making [it] produce manufactured objects instead of financial securities.” There follows a general dance “of the machines, the jungle, the city, the fruit, the manufactured objects, and the men of the North, South, East and West.”⁸⁸ Chávez, who at that time was critical of bourgeois culture but less politically committed than Rivera, must have seen, at the very least, exciting possibilities latent in the representation of modern, machine-driven life, and in the juxtaposition of North and South.

A third and most surprising element in this correspondence, however, is the artists’ rather naive collective faith that such a work would prove a major success and bring swift recognition in a world capital such as Paris or New York, in the manner of Stravinsky’s Russian ballets. In the summer

86. Barreda to Chávez, February 17, 1926: “Hay probabilidades por lo nuevo e imprevisto del asunto: oportunidad maravillosa para que des un buen golpe. . . . La historia en sí—aunque muy mexicana por lo ilógica—es demasiado sencilla. Su única virtud es forzar las situaciones con objeto de meter . . . por ejemplo, el jarabe (aquel jarabe futurista tuyo), los balazos, los diablos (estampería Vanegas Arroyo) . . . este espíritu . . . es humorista, retozón.”

87. Barreda to Chávez, February 9, 1925: “En una fábrica, con grandes chirridos de maquinaria . . . sublevación de obreros y linchamiento final del dueño, a quien presnan y convierten en cualquier cosa útil.”

88. Rivera to Chávez, undated [1926]: “los hombres de América del norte van hacia el trópico en busca de los productos de la tierra ubérrima para alimentar la civilización de las máquinas”; “la ciudad de la industria y la máquina transformadora de los productos naturales”; “obtienen que la máquina produzca objetos de consumo en lugar de valores fiduciarios”; “de las máquinas, de la selva, de la ciudad, de los frutos, de los objetos manufacturados y los hombres del norte, del sur, del este y del oeste.” The scenario clearly argues for an international brotherhood of workers, perhaps led by the South. In 1926, Rivera was a member of the Mexican Communist Party, affiliated with the Third (Communist) International.

of 1925, for example, Lazo wrote to Chávez from Europe that he had met the French poet and painter Max Jacob, who had assured him that an Aztec ballet would probably be the next big thing in Paris and had given him a letter of introduction for Jean Cocteau.⁸⁹ Lazo's meeting with Cocteau, however, proved to be disappointing: while the writer had liked the scenario of *El fuego nuevo* he did not believe that any of the ballet companies had the resources for a new production.⁹⁰ Later, on February 17, 1926, Barreda reported that Covarrubias had shown the scenario of *El milagro* to Pierre Matisse (the painter's son and gallery owner), who had suggested taking it to Diaghilev.

Closer to home, on receiving a letter from Bolm Chávez once more sent him the scenario of *El fuego nuevo*, together with the piano score and Lazo's sketches. But on March 19, 1926, Bolm returned the materials, explaining, "There have been many Aztec Ballets given by various dancers and this subject has at the present moment lost somewhat [*sic*] of the genuine appeal to the public."⁹¹ Undeterred, in 1927 Chávez made yet another attempt to have *El fuego nuevo* premiered in New York.⁹² This time, Frances Flynn Paine, a promoter of Mexican arts and crafts in the United States, acted as Chávez's agent and succeeded in obtaining a written agreement to produce the work from Samuel L. Rothafel, of the newly opened Roxy Theatre. Enthusiastic, Chávez reorchestrated the ballet and ordered indigenous musical instruments from Mexico. But his production requirements and search for authenticity proved too daunting a prospect for Rothafel, who stated in a letter to Paine of November 5, 1927, that the only company in a position to produce such a ballet was the Metropolitan Opera House. By the end of the year communication between Chávez and Rothafel had ceased.⁹³

Chávez's heart was nevertheless set on pre-Columbian mythology and music—a much more serious topic than those favored by his friends, and one that corresponded to his abiding interest both in primitive cultures and in the potential for the non-Western to be a reinvigorating source for the modern West. And so in early 1927 we find Chávez and Covarrubias collaborating on yet another Aztec ballet, *Los cuatro soles* (The Four Suns). The ballet's scenario is based on the cosmogonic myth of the cyclical creation and destruction of the world—each cycle called a "sol" (sun). Chávez and Covarrubias worked hard that winter, teasing what information they could from a copy of the Codex Vaticanus at the New York Public Library

89. Lazo to Chávez, [early summer] 1925.

90. Lazo to Chávez, July 22, 1925.

91. Bolm to Chávez, August 27, 1925, and March 19, 1926. The letter from Chávez to Bolm accompanying the materials sent in 1925 is not extant.

92. Chávez was by then in New York, with the assistance of subsidies negotiated with Pruneda.

93. For a full account, see Parker, "Carlos Chávez's Aztec Ballets," 82, and Parker, "Carlos Chávez and the Ballet," 182–85.

in relation to attire, dance steps, and musical instruments, in the hope of coming as close as possible to authentic pre-Columbian performance practices. But as Chávez probably discovered, neither the Codex nor anything else facilitates reconstruction of pre-Columbian music. And while it is possible to speculate, it is impossible to conclude with certainty that, after four hundred years of the active suppression of their original cultures, any music performed by twentieth-century indigenous communities is pre-Columbian. And so it is that *Los cuatro soles*, like *El fuego nuevo* before it, is clearly a modernist composition in a primitivist style.

It is difficult to ascertain why Chávez embarked on the composition of yet another Aztec-themed ballet, given that *El fuego nuevo* had remained unperformed.⁹⁴ Even Lazo responded skeptically to the idea: “The Aztec topic in a contemporary work is necessarily artificial, and I have always loved your music because it is modern, and because, perhaps in spite of yourself, it has no local color whatsoever, and that is the highest praise one can bestow on it.”⁹⁵ In its final version, the ballet comprises a slow prelude, four dances, and three interludes. Each dance pertains to a different sun or cycle and is related to a different element—water, wind, fire, or earth. A mixed choir (earlier a soprano) sings to the goddess Centéotl in the final dance. Though retaining their original thematic materials throughout the revisions, all the dances were enlarged in accordance with Chávez’s usual developmental style—by repetition and reinstrumentation.

The ballet contains a profusion of melodies, but the main themes of the dances are rhythmically simple and deliberately monotonous, and rhythmic unisons are frequent. The themes of the Prelude, the “Dance of Water,” and the “Dance of Wind” are based on anhemitonic pentatonic collections, while for the “Dance of Fire” Chávez used the first five pitches of the C major scale. These initial collections, however, are soon disturbed by sudden changes into others, or by the superposition of two different collections in different instrumental families.

Unlike the first three dances, for which Chávez composed all the melodies, the “Dance of Earth” contains a contemporary indigenous—Mazahua—melody.⁹⁶ And unlike those in the first three dances, this

94. There was no ballet company in Mexico at the time. The manuscripts for *Los cuatro soles* at NYPL are all dated 1925–26, when Chávez was in Mexico, but present several layers of revisions, in the form of inserted pages, made when he was in New York. The increasingly complex score was probably finished with a New York company in mind. A facsimile score is available for perusal from G. Schirmer.

95. Lazo to Chávez, December 19, 1926: “el tema azteca en cualquier obra actual tiene que ser algo postizo y tu música siempre me ha gustado porque es moderna y porque quizá a pesar tuyo no tiene ningún sabor local y creo que es el mejor elogio que se le pueda hacer” (Spanish spelling corrected).

96. García Morillo, *Carlos Chávez*, 45. Chávez reported to García Morillo that he never properly researched indigenous music, but instead just listened to what he liked (*ibid.*, 19). García Morillo does not indicate a source for the melody. He also observes that the text of the song to

theme uses a modal seven-pitch collection. It is also constructed in clearly defined, rhythmically consistent, and metrically traditional (in the Western sense) periodic phrases (see Ex. 5a). It is instructive to compare this contemporary indigenous melody with Chávez's own primitivist imagining of a pre-Columbian one, which has a narrow range, open form, improvisational character, and basic pentatonic pitch collection (see Ex. 5b).⁹⁷ Chávez brings each sun to a climax by means of a general crescendo and *accelerando*, diminution of the rhythmic values, poly-rhythm, and increasing instrumental density. The texture of the ballet is always layered, and *ostinati* are constant. In the final version Chávez uses a five-piece percussion section very effectively to provide textural density, emotional intensity, and sheer volume.

The general principles of musical primitivism are exemplified, of course, by *The Rite of Spring*, and certain passages in *Los cuatro soles* certainly seem to recall Stravinsky's ballet. But equally present are stylistic traits that, as we have seen, Chávez favored in all his compositions, be they sonatas, machine music, a *mestizo jarabe*, or an "indigenous" *pascola*—namely a disregard for a traditional melos, a rejection of overt personal emotion, a preference for layered textures, a linear conception of harmony, a mechanistic drive, and an emphasis on rhythm, strong instrumental colors, melodic diatonicism, and harmonic dissonance. Chávez indeed created with these elements a *polysemic*

Example 5a Chávez, *Los cuatro soles*, "Danza (Sol de tierra)," mm. 5–12 after Rehearsal 96. Unpublished MS. Perusal facsimile score, Carlanita Music Co., administered by G. Schirmer. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

Musical notation for Example 5a, showing a melody for Violins (Vlns.) and E-flat Clarinet (E-flat Cl.) in 2/4 time, measures 5-12. The notation is in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and starts with a treble clef. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests.

Example 5b Chávez, *Los cuatro soles*, "Danza (Sol de viento)," mm. 1–5 after Rehearsal 41. Unpublished MS. Perusal facsimile score, Carlanita Music Co., administered by G. Schirmer. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

Musical notation for Example 5b, showing a melody for Oboe and Flute (Ob., Fl.) in 2/4 time, measures 1-5. The notation is in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and starts with a treble clef. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests.

Centéotl is made up of syllables that produce sounds resembling the Aztec language Nahuatl, but is not in that language.

97. Chávez was probably convinced by 1925–26 that the Aztec melodic system had been pentatonic. Later, in his first recorded theorizing on pre-Columbian musical systems (a lecture of 1928 quoted by Stevenson, *Music in Mexico*, 6–7), Chávez would indeed claim that pre-Columbian music was based on five pentatonic melodic modes (lacking the semitone), sometimes occurring simultaneously. With regard to this polymodality he stated, "the aborigines . . . were thus enabled to integrate into meaningful wholes the disparate planes of sound that (in the European way of thinking) clashed in their music" (*ibid.*, 7). Chávez's sources are unknown.

musical language that could refer equally well to the primitive or the very modern, to energetic machines or indigenous dancers.

In early January 1927 Chávez sent the scenario of *Los cuatro soles* to Irene Lewisohn, director of the Playhouse Theatre, promising to send the piano score in a few weeks' time.⁹⁸ In late March, however, Lewisohn informed Chávez that she would consider *Los cuatro soles*, but not for that year's season.⁹⁹ Several weeks later, John Dos Passos apparently became interested in the ballet, and Chávez pressed Covarrubias to send him the set and costume sketches for both *El milagro* and *Los cuatro soles*.¹⁰⁰ But in late summer, after learning that Covarrubias had decided to extend his travels to North Africa, Chávez wrote,

I have already written a fair amount of the music for *El milagro*, but as you can surely understand I don't want to write it just to store it away. What are your ideas for the production? If you don't come back and we don't work jointly on this matter, time is going to fly once more. . . .

. . . I think *Los cuatro soles*, *El milagro*, and *H.P.* would make a full and varied program. . . .

. . . But what of it if you are in Paris and Diego in Mexico?¹⁰¹

Nothing came of these plans. With no stage performance in sight, Chávez eventually reorchestrated *Los cuatro soles* for large orchestra and directed the first performance in a concert version with the Orquesta Sinfónica de México on July 22, 1930. The energy invested in the composition of the ballets and fruitless production efforts left Chávez with only one other composition from the years 1926–27—the short, abstract, and intimate piano piece *Solo*.¹⁰²

Dances of Men, Dances of Machines

An early section of *H.P.*, *H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines*, was the only part of a ballet by Chávez to receive a first performance in New York in the 1920s—in a concert version—as part of a work in progress. In his

98. Chávez to Lewisohn, January 7, 1927.

99. Lewisohn to Chávez, March 29, 1927.

100. Chávez to Covarrubias, July 9, 1927, cited in Saborit, "Mexican Gaities," 143.

101. Chávez to Covarrubias, undated [after July 20, 1927], quoted in *ibid.*, 144–45: "Tengo escrita ya una gran parte de la música de *El milagro*, pero como tú comprendes no quiero escribirla para guardarla. ¿Cuáles son las ideas que tienes para la producción? Si tú no regresas y no jalamos parejo en el asunto, se va a pasar el tiempo otra vez. . . .

". . . [H]e pensado que *Los cuatro soles*, *El milagro* y *HP* harían un programa completo y variado. . . .

". . . ¿Pero *what of it* si tú estás en París y Diego en México?"

Although the secondary literature on Rufino Tamayo and Covarrubias states that *El milagro* was performed privately in New York, I have found no evidence for this. There is no known manuscript or printed score.

102. Not until 1951 was *Los cuatro soles* finally staged, in Mexico City, with sets and costumes by Covarrubias and choreography by Mexican American dancer José Limón.

program notes for the Guild concert of November 28, 1926, Chávez detailed his philosophy of machines, and by stressing his subjective, human-based approach to them, distanced himself from Honegger's *Pacific 231* and Prokofiev's *Pas d'acier*. The notes also address the issue of using fragments of Mexican melodies in the movement. This is probably the first time Chávez had been confronted with the need to define for a foreign audience his position concerning the use of national musics. Chávez theorizes their use while asserting the primacy of the individual creative mind over the "national mind":

Indian tunes (*sones mariaches*) will be found in my music, not as a constructive base, but because all the conditions of their composition—form, sonority, etc.—by nature coincide with those in my own mind, inasmuch as both are products of the same origin. I believe that in art the means of exteriorization used are distinct and proper to each manifestation of an individual mind and that, in so far as these manifestations coincide with the manifestations of the national or universal mind, their means of exteriorization will coincide or differ also.¹⁰³

"Sones mariaches" refers to a type of *son* from the state of Jalisco that by 1926 was transforming from a regional into a national genre and into the modern *mariachi*. Being a rural genre, the *son de mariachi* is characteristic of indigenous and *mestizo* peasant communities alike, but is of Spanish origin.¹⁰⁴ It is therefore impossible to judge whether Chávez used the term "Indian tunes" as a shortcut—with exoticist overtones—for a foreign audience, or if, like other Mexicans in the 1920s, he used "Indian" to denote the rural working class.¹⁰⁵ In any case, in *H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines* Chávez used fragments of melodies that present the characteristic melodic contour, compound meter, and hemiola of the *son*, setting them against his preferred relentless flow of mostly basic rhythmic figures, in ostinati that easily recreate the repetitive motion of a machine (see Ex. 6). The *son* melodies—their intervals sometimes altered as in the Violin Sonata—and the underlying ostinati clash and dance with each other rhythmically and melodically; they do it for the most part gently, and yet the opposition between men and machines, the traditional and the modern, is clear.¹⁰⁶

103. Concert program, AGN.

104. Research on the *son* as a genre was just beginning; it is unlikely that Chávez would have pondered the genre beyond the fact that it is part of the musical heritage of indigenous communities.

105. Except for a few instances of forced migration, indigenous communities remained in their pre-conquest geographical area, and to this day retain close ties with land and agriculture. After five hundred years of *mestizaje*, the line dividing indigenous from *mestizo* peasants is not always obvious. Government-sponsored, anthropological study of indigenous communities began in the 1920s.

106. The completed original ballet of 1932 is unpublished. My comments are based on the 1926 manuscript of *H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines* at NYPL.

Example 6 Chávez, *H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines*, mm. 5–8. Unpublished MS.

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system (measures 5-8) includes staves for E-flat Cl./Ob., B-flat Cl., Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The second system (measures 7-8) includes staves for E-flat Cl./Ob./B-flat Cl., Vn. I, Vn. II, Va., and Vc. The score features various musical notations, including triplets, dynamic markings, and a key signature change from G major to D major between measures 7 and 8.

Referring to Chávez as a Mexican composer of “radical bent,” Olin Downes described *H.P.* as a

confounding mixture of Mexican folk-tunes with sounds that suggest the whirring, the clicking, the roaring of machines. . . . [J]angling out of the chamber orchestra come the mangled fragments of Mexican ditties, gone mad, as it were, with the revolving age. The audience listened and laughed. Perhaps the composer laughed, too. . . . If Mr. Goossens, conducting the odd piece of Chavez, had suddenly pirouetted and turned like a whirligig on his pedestal,

it would not have been surprising. "H.P." indeed! The Stravinsky "Sacre du printemps." The Honegger "Locomotive No. 231" [*sic*].¹⁰⁷

Taking the opposite point of view, the critic for *Musical America* heard no "realistic illusion," although he agreed, "there is humor in the combination, and eerie fancy as well." For his part, Rosenfeld affirmed that "the strongly Varesian and none the less genial 'H.P.," together with Webern's *Fünf geistliche Lieder*, constituted "the positive if unhappily slender result of the two modern concerts of November 27th and 28th."¹⁰⁸

H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines represents the culmination of Chávez's interest in energy and its representation, reflected in both *Energía* and 36. Equally emblematic of modernity, and specifically of New York, are two other piano pieces, both related to the African American music that Chávez and his friends loved so much: *Fox*, a study in polyrhythm and polymeter of the kind he had previously enjoyed—now under the guise of a foxtrot—and *Blues*, a study in "blueing" the C diatonic pitch collection. With *Fox*, *Blues*, and his Third Piano Sonata, all composed near the end of the composer's sojourn in New York, in 1928, Chávez seems to have retreated from ballet and the dream of big productions in foreign cultural capitals to the more personal and austere realm of the piano, straightforward modernism, and the African American music of his early months in New York.

Ultramoderns and Neoclassicists

The season of the Guild in which *H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines* was premiered was its last: Varèse dissolved the association in 1927, leaving Chávez adrift in terms of a musical organization. Although he had probably attended the concerts of the Guild's rival, the League of Composers, he had not joined upon his arrival in 1926, perhaps on account of the perception that composers belonged to one or the other.¹⁰⁹ The Guild's programs were futurist, ultramodern, and progressive (terms used in the 1920s), and showed no pronounced collective allegiance to either of the two contending national camps of European culture and politics, the German and the French. The League of Composers, by contrast, had an eclectic orientation in terms of the so-called progressiveness of the music performed, and was

107. Downes, "Music: More of the Ultra-Modern."

108. R.C.B.B., "Modernists Evoke Laughter and Applause," 7; Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," February 1927, 177.

109. Claire Reis invited Chávez to show his compositions to the League's composers' committee in a handwritten note of February 8, 1927. On the League, see Metzger, "League of Composers"; Mundy, "League of Jewish Composers"; and Oja, who questions such a perception in *Making Music Modern*, 178–93.

the natural home for composers who, having studied in France, felt close to French culture.

Some of Chávez's compositions of the 1920s can be placed within the orbit of the neoclassicism favored by the League's composers, even though Chávez never adopted a neoclassicist aesthetic. Such is the case of the *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano, and his two other sonatinas of 1924, for solo piano and for cello and piano. All three demonstrate Chávez's lifelong interest in Classical forms and his attraction to the emotional restraint of classicism, evinced in his *Sextet* and *First String Quartet*. In each sonatina he compressed the four traditional movements into a single piece with four sections: a moderato, a scherzo or scherzo-like movement, an adagio, and a return to the moderato. But he also expanded a sonata-form movement over the course of four. The first "movement" exposes and develops certain materials, some of which are developed in the inner sections as well. But the "recapitulation" occurs only with the almost literal return of the first movement as the fourth.

The sonatinas show the influence of Ravel, especially the *Piano Sonatina*, at the same time synthesizing traits favored by Chávez in his earlier music. All three are slightly pan-tonal, predominantly diatonic, and textured in layers with some polyrhythmic juxtaposition of eighth notes and triplets or quintuplets. Constant pulses are established through the use of ostinati, and contrapuntal procedures such as imitation and augmentation are employed. Melodies are typical of Chávez (except for the opening paraphrase of "Deck the Halls" in the *Cello Sonatina*) in that they are essentially conjunct, have an open form, and develop through sequential repetition and tiny pitch modifications up or down a diatonic collection. Chávez uses stacked fifths and fourths, and major seventh and ninth chords proliferate. Finally, none of the sonatinas contains the stylistic traits that Chávez had developed as specific signifiers of the indigenous, such as pentatonicism, extended literal repetition, and simple, monotonous rhythms.

The four movements of the *Third Piano Sonata* of 1928 also refer unequivocally to Classical four-movement models, although Chávez clearly tampers with their internal structure (the second movement is a scherzo, the third a neo-Baroque fugue). The sonata is marked by the emotional restraint that Chávez had shown in his music since 1921, there being a conscious avoidance of anything not only Romantic but even graceful. The reformulation of a Classical genre and Baroque textures puts the sonata again within the orbit of neoclassicism.¹¹⁰ At the same time, Chávez's use of melodic and rhythmic modules, relentlessly clashing contrapuntal lines, sudden octaves and diatonic passages, and the illusion of uncontrolled speed places it in the domain of the "ultramodern."

110. See Oja's discussion of the sonata in the context of other American neoclassicist pieces in *Making Music Modern*, 264–82.

Chávez's music was thus at home in both the League and the Guild, but also in three other musical organizations that sprang up between 1925 and 1928—Cowell's California-based New Music Society, Varèse's Pan American Association of Composers (PAAC), and the concert series organized by Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions with the purpose of featuring young composers from the United States.¹¹¹ In what was surely a nice contrast to the misfortunes of the previous year, 1928 saw these new friends and organizations devote a fair amount of attention to Chávez and his music.¹¹² Copland featured Chávez's three sonatinas and Third Piano Sonata in the first of the Copland-Sessions Concerts, on April 22, 1928.¹¹³ Later that year, on October 24 and November 27, the New Music Society gave the West Coast premieres of the piano and violin sonatinas, publishing the latter in July. Chávez was named one of the PAAC's vice-presidents, although he did not take an active role in it.¹¹⁴ Cowell, who assumed its direction when Varèse left for Paris in October 1928, nevertheless programmed several of Chávez's pieces in the organization's concerts.¹¹⁵ Thus, with the way initially paved by his earlier performances with the Guild, by the late 1920s Chávez had become fully integrated into the nascent cultural field of modern US-American music.

An American Renaissance

Despite their differences, the Copland-Sessions Concerts and the PAAC made explicit their intention to encourage the emergence and development of both young composers and a non-European style of composition. Consider the opening manifesto of the Copland-Sessions Concerts: "Our only wish is to stimulate composers to more prolific activity and to develop a

111. On the New Music Society, see Mead, "Henry Cowell's New Music Society"; Mead, "Amazing Mr. Cowell"; and Mead, "Latin American Accents in *New Music*." On the PAAC, see Root, "Pan American Association," and Stallings, "Collective Difference." On the Copland-Sessions Concerts, see Oja, "Copland-Sessions Concerts."

112. On Copland and Chávez, see Pollack, "Más que buenos vecinos," and Parker, "Copland and Chávez: Brothers-in-Arms." On Chávez and Cowell, see Stallings, "Pan/American Modernisms."

113. That same year Chávez published "Technic and Inner Form" in *Modern Music*, the League's journal. In subsequent years the League commissioned and programmed some of his piano and chamber music.

114. By late 1928 Chávez was immersed in the management of the Orquesta Sinfónica de México. Moreover, the PAAC professed a "progressive" aesthetic credo that made Chávez uncomfortable; see Cowell to Chávez, Menlo Park, undated [September 1928], and Chávez to Cowell, October 25, 1928. Finally, as Stallings suggests, he was interested in pursuing individual rather than collective relations with colleagues in the United States: Stallings, "Pan/American Modernisms."

115. The PAAC programmed Chávez's music in New York, Paris, and Berlin.

stronger sense of solidarity among the creators of a growing American music.”¹¹⁶ The PAAC, for its part, hoped that its activities would “stimulate composers to make still greater effort toward creating a distinctive music of the Western Hemisphere.”¹¹⁷ And though the programs of his New Music Society were international in scope, in 1933 Cowell held that “American composition up to now has been tied to the apron-strings of European tradition. To attain musical independence, more national consciousness is a present necessity for American composers. The result of such an awakening should be the creation of works capable of being accorded international standing.”¹¹⁸

Like Chávez ten years earlier, composers in the United States saw the need to take a step away from Europe and yet, paradoxically but inevitably, expressed a desire for international—European—recognition based precisely on such an achieved difference. Within this strategy for success, several differences in fact became integral to the constitution of an American self. The Americans were young composers of a twentieth century that had begun after the First World War, and their first order of business was to separate themselves from the Romanticism and overcomplexity of the music of the long nineteenth century. Moreover, in the first decades of the twentieth century German music was viewed as being excessively “psychological,” a quality to which the composers of the French orbit opposed objectivity and clarity.¹¹⁹ The task for American composers was also to position themselves vis-à-vis this larger aesthetic and political divide.

Equally important was the need of young composers to determine the basis on which to build a distinctive, non-European sound.¹²⁰ The received wisdom concerning the formulation of a national style called for the elevation of regional folk music to the status of the national and for its use in the composition of art music. But for better or worse, and owing largely to sustained and enforced differences of race and nationality in the population of the United States, composers had not settled on the regional or minority music that was to be recognized as the national.

Lastly, there were issues both larger and harder to grapple with regarding the character and maturity of both composers and audience. Mary Herron DuPree notes,

In the United States, the 1920s was a period of intense concern with the possible nature of an identifiably “American” style, of an almost desperate search for a “great American composer,” and of a persistent preoccupation with the

116. “The Copland-Sessions Concerts of Contemporary Music,” April 22, 1928, quoted in Oja, “Copland-Sessions Concerts,” 212.

117. PAAC’s founding manifesto, quoted in Root, “Pan American Association,” 51.

118. Cowell, *American Composers*, 13. This book includes a chapter on Chávez.

119. This is very clear in the divided European reception of Schoenberg’s versus Stravinsky’s music. See Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 123–27, 139–49.

120. Oja, “Copland-Sessions Concerts,” 218.

weaknesses of institutions and, indeed, of the American character, both collective and individual, that seemed to prevent the achievement of an American music that was on a par with the quality and originality that was produced by Europe's best composers, or, closer to home, by America's best writers.¹²¹

Composers were not alone in their interest in the state of composition in the United States in the 1920s. Audiences, patrons, and critics were also active in discussing and assigning value to the music, and contributed to shaping the field through various means. Moreover, this period saw the rise of the young composer as critic and thus as agent of recognition and consecration.¹²² Within this context, Chávez emerged by the late 1920s if not as a leader then at least as someone to watch: a composer with an achieved difference of his own. This is evident in two essays by Copland and Cowell written in early 1928. The essays are also indicative of two contrasting perspectives from which the issue of Chávez's style can be viewed. Finally, they point to the difficulties presented by the polysemic nature of his chosen style and by his irregular attempts to incorporate Mexican elements into his music. Given the importance of Copland's essay, in particular, for the reception of Chávez's music for decades to come, it is worth reading both essays closely, and in light of the previous discussion of Chávez's early stylistic choices.¹²³

Copland opens his "Carlos Chavez—Mexican Composer" by praising his subject's music for being thoroughly modern and independent from the German aesthetic of emotion-laden self-expression:

Carlos Chavez is one of the best examples I know of a thoroughly contemporary composer. . . . Chavez is essentially of our own day because he uses his composer's gift for the expression of objective beauty of universal significance rather than as a mere means of self-expression. . . . [His music] exemplifies the complete overthrow of nineteenth-century German ideals which tyrannized over music for more than a hundred years. (322)

Most of the article addresses Chávez's single-handed creation of a distinctly and unique Mexican sound, reflecting a Mexico that Copland describes in terms with primitivist overtones, no doubt reinforced by the raging vogue for all things Mexican: "As Debussy and Ravel reflected the clarity, the delicacy, the wit and the formal design of the French spirit, so Chavez had learned to write music which caught the spirit of Mexico—its sun-filled, naive, Latin soul" (323). This was an especially enviable achievement in Copland's eyes. Thus he presents Chávez as an example to follow and a fellow composer in an expanded America:

He is one of the few American musicians about whom we can say that he is more than a reflection of Europe. We in the United States who have long desired

121. DuPree, "Failure of American Music," 305.

122. On the composer-critic, see Meckna, "Copland, Sessions, and Modern Music."

123. Copland, "Carlos Chavez"; Cowell, "Carlos Chávez." Page references to these essays will be given in the text.

musical autonomy can best appreciate the full measure of his achievement. We cannot, like Chavez, borrow from a rich, melodic source or lose ourselves in an ancient civilization, but we can be stimulated and instructed by his example. As for Chavez . . . it is not too soon to say that his work presents itself as one of the first authentic signs of a new world with its own new music. (323)

Like other composers, patrons, and critics, Copland was familiar with the scores of Chávez's Aztec ballets and had heard private performances with Chávez at the piano. Believing that in *El fuego nuevo* Chávez had followed the Russian example of using folk themes too literally, Copland was relieved that Chávez later rethought the material "so that only its essence remained" (323). (As noted above, Chávez had not in fact quoted any indigenous themes in *El fuego nuevo*.) A more mature and delightful work, in his opinion, was *Los cuatro soles*, which he perceived as a faithful distillation of a pre-Columbian essence: "This fresh, vital music has its roots so firmly in an ancient culture that, at times, it takes on something of the monotony of the Indian dances themselves" (323). (In *Los cuatro soles*, as we have seen, Chávez did in fact make use of one indigenous melody, together with his own Indianist style.) Copland seems to have liked *Energía*, *36, Exágonos*, and *H.P.*, and correctly does not ascribe any Indian essence to them (even though *H.P.* contains tunes described by Chávez as Indian). But he does hear "refreshing, original music with a kind of hard charm and a distinctly Mexican flavor" in the abstract, Ravel-like Piano Sonatina, adding, "No Indian melodies are actually quoted. . . . Here and there a recognizably Mexican turn of phrase can be discerned, but as a whole the folk element has been replaced by a more subtle sense of national characteristics" (323).

There is much blurring of the lines here between the pre-Columbian and the contemporary indigenous, and between the indigenous, the *mestizo*, and the Mexican. More importantly, Chávez's polysemic style proved confusing to Copland, who, starting from the wishful idea that Chávez had succeeded in reflecting the essence of the Mexican, had a hard time distinguishing the use of genuine folk music from other stylistic elements. In fact, as I have argued, stylistic preferences found throughout Chávez's music were used to construct a particular representation of the indigenous only in the pieces in which he wished to do so. As Copland shows us, however, once these stylistic preferences have been constructed as essentially Mexican, they can be made to reflect back on all Chávez's music, which is then also framed as essentially Mexican.

Copland was not the only commentator who wanted to see an overall Indianness in Chávez's music. In his review of the Copland-Sessions Concert of April 22, 1928, Downes writes, "But it was, after all, Mr. Chavez who supplied the ginger for the occasion. He used Mexican Indian themes with primitive joy, but without softness or mercy. If he did not scalp he

tomahawked the keyboard, and that, as some one remarked, was counterpoint for you.”¹²⁴ It is not clear whether Downes perceived that merciless use of Indian tunes in all four pieces—including the three sonatinas—or only in the Piano Sonata, in which Chávez himself “tomahawked” the piano. In any case, the sonata, although relentless and wild with dissonance and intricate rhythm and polyphony, is anything but the monotonous, rhythmically simple music used by Chávez to construct the Indian. And it is most certainly not sunny or naive. Copland, to whom the sonata was later dedicated, concluded that it contains “a personal quality which is impossible to describe in words, but which, after all, constitutes the composer’s chief claim to originality” (323).

By contrast, Cowell set out to explain in his essay “Carlos Chávez” precisely where he thought the composer’s originality resided. Although Cowell agrees with Copland that Chávez “abjures sentimentality and voluptuousness” (23), his opening paragraph reads like a rebuttal of Copland’s main argument:

Carlos Chávez is a composer of music. He is also a Mexican; but although his music may have been somewhat influenced by his nationality, his claim to recognition as a composer is not based on his country, but upon the actual worth of his music itself. He does not seek to put forth works which are based on Mexican folk-themes, although he is an authority on them, but writes his own music, to be judged irrespective of nationality. (19)

Since he has developed a technique of his own, Chávez’s claim to leadership, in Cowell’s opinion, consists in his having found the solution to the issue of how to write modern counterpoint—which had so far vexed modern composers—and in his fortunate, systematic application of the law of contrasts to all aspects of music. Chávez writes counterpoint, Cowell claims, with true melodic independence of the voices, but prevents the meandering typical of modern dissonant counterpoint by confining himself for certain periods to the diatonic scale and by giving himself complete freedom within the limits of certain pitch collections. All these pitches are harmonically related, he explains, “in such a way that no matter in which direction the melodies turn, their harmonic balance is assured” (21–22). He writes,

[Chávez] has the piquancy of a good use of dissonance in his music, but he also has the occasional audacity to use an unresolved concord! One of the most astonishing things in his music is the use of octaves, either single or consecutive, in the middle of a passage in two-part counterpoint. . . . The very idea of such a procedure has been unthinkable to even the most radical composers. (22)

124. Downes, “Music: Presenting American Composers.”

Finally, Cowell explains that “it is when [Chávez] applies his contrasts to more unusual fields that he creates the most characteristic and individual portions of his style” (22). Thus, in the late 1920s, when young composers on both sides of the border shared similar preoccupations, both Copland and Cowell propounded Chávez’s singular music as a model—unique and thoroughly modern—thereby adding Chávez’s difference as an asset, even a surplus, to their collective US-American difference.

“A Jesus for America”

In a letter of January 22, 1929, Minna Lederman, editor of *Modern Music*, wrote to Chávez, “I have just read in Paul’s book about you; he likes you but you must not let him make a Jesus for America of you.”¹²⁵ The book that so alarmed Lederman was Paul Rosenfeld’s *By Way of Art: Criticisms of Music, Literature, Painting, Sculpture, and the Dance*, published, like the articles by Copland and Cowell, in 1928, and containing the most elaborate and far-reaching commentary on Chávez as a leader of a distinctly American music.¹²⁶ Rosenfeld opened this chapter with a paragraph that situated Chávez’s *classicism* within, or rather against, European neoclassicism:

Strictly on the external plane of things, Chavez’s recent piano sonata and ballet *The Four Suns* persuade in their precision, architecturality and green reserve. “Classical,” they do not embody a return, like the precise, architectural and “pure” composition of the Strawinskies; or lean on theories; or preach existing orders and societies in musical terms. Where the great mass of their European companions and competitors merely chill and disaffect, these most characteristic works of the sturdy young Latin from Mexico move by an eminent involuntariness and virginity. Undeluded, bony and dry as his own high deserts, and peppery as chilis, sonata and ballet constitute a veritable classic music: form and expression of commencing cultures. (273)

In rhapsodic and image-driven language, Rosenfeld goes on to comment on several aspects of Chávez’s technique and style that he finds remarkable. The sparseness, unvoluptuousness, and closeness of the textures—which allow the music to “appear wellnigh inexpressive”—are all incontrovertibly derived from eighteenth-century classicism (276). And yet the Scherzo of the Third Piano Sonata “is a savage, dusty bit” and “the fugue is bald, excessively compressed, and wry” (278–79). Finally, though *Los cuatro soles* is naturally indebted to the *Rite* and *Petrushka*, “in place of the blazonry, sensuality, and booze of the Russian music, we find an objective, aristocratic remoteness” (277). The ballet “admits us into a strange kind of joy, childlike, ferocious, unfamiliar and still emancipatory,” and the Third Piano Sonata “intensively

125. Lederman to Chávez, January 22, [1929].

126. Rosenfeld, “Americanism of Carlos Chavez.” Page references will be given in the text.

continues the experience of objective form and virginal circumstance" (277). Rosenfeld's use of adjectives such as "childlike" and "virginal," placed next to "architectural" and "bare," and then to "willful," "savage," and "unlyrical," conveys his understanding of Chávez's music not as neoclassical but as classical, and then again as classical precisely of the New World: "Orientation toward a new natural condition, a new society and soul, is part, we know, of the function of every veritable classicism" (281).

Throughout the 1920s, Rosenfeld had chronicled and participated in the emergence of modern music in New York.¹²⁷ In early 1922 he had despaired of finding US-American music that was deeply felt, original, and infused with the country's life and spirit:

We'd like much to find a composer here who furnishes us with solid matter into which we could bite with all the jaw. . . .

. . . Why should not an American composer be as able as a Frenchman or Pole or Viennese to seize upon the elements of existence and transmute them to music?¹²⁸

And in the following years, Rosenfeld watched passionately for the emergence of an independent and authentic musical voice for the United States. Toward the middle of the decade he asserted a newfound optimism in relation to the role of the young composer and the European émigré.¹²⁹ Not entirely happy with what he discerned as the French influence on Sessions and Copland, Rosenfeld saw more promise, as yet undelivered, in "the American experimenters" associated with the Guild: "There you will find the daring, the sureness of feeling the Europeans *en masse* no longer show."¹³⁰ And he praised in particular Carl Ruggles, who, while showing a true "inner necessity," nevertheless showed too much of a German preference for music "at the pitch of ecstasy."¹³¹

Central to Rosenfeld's imaginary of a music for the United States were two topoi. One was the modern lifestyle and cities: machines, engineering, skyscrapers, city noise, the symphony of New York. The other was the American soil: the architecture of mountains and plains, the aridity, the challenge presented by the harshness of its nature. His approach to them was one neither of total celebration nor of resistance. Rather, for Rosenfeld "an act of imagination is the process of perceiving an objective verity, and . . . looking long

127. On Rosenfeld, see Potter, *False Dawn*; Mellquist and Wiese, eds., *Paul Rosenfeld*; and Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 302–10.

128. Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," November 1921, 616.

129. See Rosenfeld, "A View of Modern Music," 389–90, 393–96; Rosenfeld, *Modern Tendencies in Music*, 82–92, 101–7; and Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," May 1925, on Varèse, and December 1925, on Rudhyar.

130. Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," June 1925, 530.

131. Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," February 1925, 171; Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," April 1926, 351.

into the face of the truth.”¹³² The topos of the modern city was present throughout his criticism of the 1920s. But the American soil was a revelation to him during a trip to New Mexico in 1926:

Being, not becoming, pure timeless being, the statuesque station of the classic soil, was the secret principle of this land, too. Only along its coasts did it appear like the north of Europe swimming in mists, seas, rivers, rains. The mighty rest was Mediterranean, volcanic, desert, a zone of fixed forms and immutable types, and intimations of this character permeated every inch of its earth.¹³³

After witnessing a Native American corn dance Rosenfeld reflected on a much-needed return to the soil. He acknowledged that the “agricultural thought and tempo” revealed to him in the dance could never develop again after centuries of industrialization, yet believed that “the soil would reassert itself. To function perfectly, the machines themselves would have to synchronize with its rhythm, and man could never elude its cyclic processes.”¹³⁴

Two years later, in “The Americanism of Carlos Chavez,” Rosenfeld saw in the very difficulty presented by the composer’s Third Piano Sonata the experience of accessing the rough nature of the New World:

We seem to be learning to extract serenity from sensations of hardness and iciness and angularity. . . . We have gained some new place, we know, elatedly.

It is no other than the shy, uncertain heart of the Mexican-American cosmos, the rocky, bare New World. (279)

Seeking to describe Chávez’s music, Rosenfeld coined a series of metaphors relating to the pre-Columbian, the Amerindian, and the arid landscape that New Mexico shares with northern Mexico (although not with the central and southern areas; his metaphors in fact have a certain “Tex-Mex” tinge).¹³⁵ “Reminiscent of Ravel as it was,” he writes, “the compact, forceful little piano sonatina moved in a deeply affecting primitive singsong, Amerindian in its rigidity and peculiar earthy coarseness” (274). He describes the “tattoo-like themes and precise staccato volumes” that abound in the sonatinas and “throughout the little 36” (275). And he judges the Scherzo of the Third Piano Sonata—“dry as a plant lost in sands” (278)—“one of the flighty rhapsodic movements in which Chavez lets us hear an atrocious echo of Aztec rattlings and scratchings” (278–79).

132. Rosenfeld, “Musical Chronicle,” November 1921, 619.

133. Rosenfeld, “Musical Chronicle,” December 1926, 533.

134. *Ibid.*, 534.

135. In *An Hour with American Music*, Rosenfeld also claimed that “the relics of primordial American culture [are] as much the flower of an heredity as that of [Roy] Harris, for example. What, nonetheless, advances Chavez’s work beyond the Oklahoman’s is the agency of an objective attitude and approach entirely personal to the composer” (151). On the construction of Harris’s music as quintessentially US-American, see Levy, *Frontier Figures*, 227–90.

Surprisingly, Rosenfeld makes no mention of any indigenous music in Chávez's works, and even dismisses the *sones* of *H.P. Danse des hommes et des machines* as "Spanish and Spanish-American rhythms and tunes . . . common products of the musical ferment in Spain and Latin America" (274). On the contrary, Rosenfeld claims that he would discount Chávez's "waking interests" in the primitive Amerindian were it not for the music itself. Thus Chávez's knowledge of and passion for the primitive only confirmed Rosenfeld's intuition of the music. For him they were simply "the intellectual aspect of that fusion between what is unconscious in the artist himself, and what lies beyond him in the form of objective nature" (280–81). (The process might actually have been the opposite: decades later Chávez reflected on Rosenfeld's influence on him, recalling that the critic had discovered "aspects [of my music] of which I was not fully conscious.")¹³⁶

Rosenfeld concluded with a final exaltation of a borderless, pan-American renaissance in all the arts, whose vital impulse, to his surprise, came from Mexico:

Orientations like Chavez's . . . have been common to many of our recent writers. And the soil, the unconscious, the community, have spoken through painters as well as through poets. . . . We had thought the search for style limited to the States. And here it comes, out of Latin America . . . assuring us of our direction by mute evidence that that direction is not sophistical and confined to a political state, but the work of natural forces. . . . We have assurance that a Pan-American revival is indeed in progress. (282–83)¹³⁷

The Construction of Chávez's "Essence"

Copland and Rosenfeld were not, of course, working in a cultural or political vacuum. They were writing as a shift in cultural relations between Mexico and the United States was taking place in the 1920s and 1930s, when Mexico achieved political stability, the United States gained economic ascendancy, and a burgeoning cultural nationalism existed in both countries.¹³⁸ Mexican art, artists, culture, and even post-revolutionary politics obtained increasing visibility and popularity in the United States, as Mexican art "invaded" New York. Artists and intellectuals from the United States in turn made pilgrimages to a Mexico they saw first as an

136. Chávez, "Influencias, forma, etc."

137. Earlier in the article Rosenfeld had stated that Chávez's pieces "gave New York the surprise of finding their native Mexico City not at all the provinces and 'down there'; and a perfectly contemporaneous place on the edge of the future" (274).

138. Delpar, *Enormous Vogue*. See also Britton, *Revolution and Ideology*, and Oles, *South of the Border*. On the relation between artists in Mexico and the United States, see Cullen, "Allure of Harlem," and Indyk-López, *Muralism without Walls*.

experiment in leftist politics and social justice and then as a pre-industrial, culturally rich, centuries-old utopia.¹³⁹

But Chávez's own equivocation regarding the presence of indigenous music in his compositions, together with the association of his style with the scenarios of the Aztec ballets, probably led Copland, Downes, and Rosenfeld to conclude that *all* his music was an embodiment of a Mexican/American essence, and then, on the basis of that assumption, to equate its non-lyrical and harsh stylistic features—heard as modernist in Mexico, and indeed deliberately expressive of modernity in many works—with their own preferences for certain landscapes and people. In the late 1920s and early 1930s this process led to the idea that Chávez's music was the inevitable expression of a *racially* marked essence, which of course precluded any conscious choices as to what to represent and how on Chávez's part.¹⁴⁰

As we have seen, composers and critics in the United States added Chávez's difference to their collective difference as Americans within a European art, regarding it as an asset by which to extend the margins of their own peripheral position in Western culture. And Chávez initially fostered and embraced this view of himself and his music, creating a strategic otherness that allowed him to turn his difference into an asset, valued by a host culture not only for itself but also for the additional value it bestowed on music in the United States. When Chávez subsequently used Copland's and Rosenfeld's essays to reintroduce himself to Mexican audiences through his Aztec ballets, he initiated the transmission of their images as accurate descriptors of his style.¹⁴¹ But the image of Chávez as essentially Mexican, and of the Mexican as essentially indigenous, was the result of confusion and wishful thinking in an albeit compelling period of the history of music in Mexico and the United States, and we should not continue to uphold it.

For Chávez, the process of constructing a unique style and persona was manifold, as it involved positioning himself vis-à-vis a number of different referents: in Mexico, as a young modernist; in the United States, as a Mexican with an indigenous heritage; and in Europe, as a composer of the New World. Chávez's music remained unremittingly modernist, and he rarely wrote primitivist music after 1940.¹⁴² But the construction of his

139. Easier to show, see, and buy, Mexican traditional crafts and high-culture painting and drawing made inroads more quickly than literature or music. Covarrubias and Rivera acquired wide visibility much earlier than Chávez, whose career would be more clearly impacted by the vogue in the following decade.

140. This process is clearly formulated in the opening pages of Rosenfeld's "Carlos Chavez," 144–45. Decades later, Gilbert Chase still deemed it important to write in his 1980 article for the *New Grove Dictionary*, "From his maternal grandfather he inherited Indian blood, revealed in his features": Chase, "Chávez (y Ramírez), Carlos," 185. Parker's article for the 2001 edition omits this information.

141. Their ideas were in fact met with skepticism: Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others," 293.

142. Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s primitivism allowed Chávez to be both national and modern, nationalism and modernism in America went off on divergent paths in the following decades and collided openly during the Cold War. See, for example, Payne, "The 1964 Festival of Music," 152–59, 181–85.

work as the encapsulation of Mexico's essence was to weigh on the critical reception of his music for the rest of his life and beyond.

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Abstract

The critical discourse on Carlos Chávez’s music is full of contradictions regarding the presence within it of signifiers of the Mexican, the pre-Columbian, and the indigenous. Between 1918 and 1928 Chávez in fact developed, from stylistic preferences that appeared early in his compositions, a polysemic language that he could use equally well to address the very modern or the primitive, the pre-Columbian or the contemporary *mestizo*, in and only in those works in which he chose to do so. Chávez’s referents emerged in dialogue with the cultural and political contexts in which he worked, those of post-revolutionary Mexico and modern New York. But he was attracted above all to modernism and modernity, and was impacted by cosmopolitan forces at home and abroad. By the end of the decade he had earned a position within the modern musical field’s network of social relations, and had drawn the attention of agents of recognition such as Edgard Varèse, Paul Rosenfeld, Aaron Copland, and Henry Cowell. These composers and critics added Chávez’s constructed difference to their much-sought collective

difference as Americans within a European art. Chávez's own use of explicit Mexican referents in some of his works shaped the early reception of his music as quintessentially American/Mexican, eventually influencing the way we understand it today.

Keywords: Carlos Chávez, nationalism, pre-Columbian music, Paul Rosenfeld, Diego Rivera