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The lighter side of Mexico

As part of its American Composers Festival, the Pacific Symphony focuses on pleasingly entertaining samples of the country's music.

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It was a little strange to open the main event of the latest American Composers Festival – the 7th annual put on by the Pacific Symphony and this year devoted to the music of Mexico – with the Danzón No. 2 by Arturo Márquez. The work, written in 1994, is a glamorously orchestrated dance of the type heard in Veracruz, and it comes dangerously close to cliché. With its sultry shuffle and languid lines and glossy colors, it's picture postcard music, the kind of thing the Boston Pops would program or something you'd hear in an old-fashioned Hollywood movie about Mexico.

Still, it's kind of fun, and wouldn't you know, little bits of it kept coming back to me unbidden after the concert was over, which is a sure sign of something. In fact, the whole program (Thursday in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall) proved to be on the lighter and catchier side, at least until the end, when we heard some terrific, unusual and challenging music by Ana Lara, one of the featured composers of this year's festival.

You shouldn't generalize about Mexico's classical music on the basis of this concert alone, but if you did you might say that the country's composers have a consuming need to please listeners perhaps above all else, and that they wear their popular music heritage on their sleeves. Busting stereotypes didn't seem to be on the agenda.

"If the name Manuel Ponce means anything to American music-lovers of my generation," wrote festival artistic advisor Joseph Horowitz in the program booklet, "it is that of a composer of elegant guitar trifles once associated with Andrés Segovia." And so what did guitarist Pepe Romero play of Ponce on Thursday? – some elegant guitar trifles, that's what. If elsewhere, in smaller, one-off concerts, the festival attempted to show Ponce as a major and "protean" composer, these bigger, well attended subscription concerts will reinforce the same impression that most of us have always had of Ponce.

What perhaps surprised most about Thursday's concert was how rich and satisfying this lighter fare can be. Classical music (anywhere) risks something essential when it forgets about reaching the average listener. Commissioned for the festival, Daniel Catán's "Caribbean Airs" doesn't forget about it. "I sincerely

hope you enjoy listening to 'Caribbean Airs' as much I enjoyed writing it," Catán says. "And if you find your hands and feet beginning to twitch rhythmically without your permission, please do not stop them." Hardly the manifesto of an iconoclast.

In three movements and 20 minutes long, "Caribbean Airs" uses the percussion (including bongos and congas) to get its rhythmic juices going. The work is all about rhythm, really, and its melodic material – impulses and riffs, mainly, rather than full-blown themes – reinforces the rhythms, toys and plays with them, gives them vertical substance. It has some nice grooves, but overall is more eloquent than brash. It's a classy affair.

Enrique Diemecke's "Concerto a Celedonio," for guitar and orchestra (the composer is music director of the Long Beach Symphony), proved enjoyably elegant as well. On the whole, its ideas are simple, but it knows they are simple, and gets the most out of them through minimalistic techniques, delicate scoring and tasty chord progressions – a delight. Romero (the work is written in memory of his father) joined Carl St.Clair and the orchestra for a strongly felt performance.

"Angel of Darkness" and "Angel of Dawn," two movements of a larger work, revealed Lara (born in 1959) as a major and original voice. The two pieces, completely different in mood (and recognizable as Mexican not at all), nevertheless use similar means: long sustained notes and chords, floating, slowly developing arpeggios and merging sound masses. This music moves along magically, like dangerous fog and twinkling ether. By all means, we must hear the entire work.

St.Clair and the orchestra also offered a performance of "Caminos" (1934) by Silvestre Revueltas, one of the greatest Mexican composers. It's an ebullient, knotty and humorous thing, one of his "sound murals" that makes so many quick cuts from one music to another that a listener becomes dizzy and giddy. Conductor and orchestra gave it a good ride. It's just the tip of his magnificent repertoire. Here in Southern California we've heard quite a bit of Revueltas in recent years (Salonen and the L.A. Philharmonic even made a recording), but to my knowledge this was the first time St.Clair and the Pacific Symphony have played him. May it not be the last.