



Rediscovering the sound of Mexico

By **Mark Swed**

Times Staff Writer

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"**D**iscover Mexico" was the touristy title of the first concert in the Pacific Symphony's festival of Mexican music, "Los Sonidos de Mexico," Sunday afternoon at the Irvine Barclay Theatre. "Notice Mexico" might be more like it.

In fact, Mexican music is not an unknown quantity in the U.S., and particularly not in Southern California. We build walls and require passports. But sounds are anarchists and obey no governments. Nothing on Sunday, and my guess little if anything presented over the next two weeks in this season's edition of the orchestra's American Composers Festival, will sound unfamiliar, even if it's new.

Indeed, we in the U.S. are who we are musically in certain crucial ways thanks to Mexico. In the late 1930s, Aaron Copland was visiting Mexican composer Carlos Chavez when he stumbled into a cantina called El Salon Mexico and was inspired to write a piece by that name that proclaimed a new populist American style. Around the same time, John Cage was motivated, in part, by the percussion music of Chavez to found an American experimental tradition.

The Pacific Symphony festival is meant to be polyglot. Mexican music is made up of many threads. Paris was the source of Manuel Ponce's color palette in his 1941 "Concierto del Sur" for guitar and orchestra, for which Roberto Limon was the soloist Sunday. Ana Lara, who is one of the festival's featured composers and who was recently featured at a Monday Evening Concert devoted to emerging composers, turned to Gregorian chant in her "Canticum Sacrum" for strings. Mozart's wind music was the reference point for her lively Serenata for winds and strings.

Chavez's "Xochipilli," a work from 1940 that opened the program, is subtitled "An Imagined Aztec Music for Four Wind Instruments and Percussion." Arturo Marquez, who studied at CalArts, has followed Copland's example, moving from Modernism to mainstream. His Danzon No. 3 for guitar and string orchestra has the infectious spirit of Cuban dance.

"What is Mexican?" is a question the concert could not answer. The country comprises 31 states. Many of its artists who have caught our imagination were revolutionaries, such as Silvestre Revueltas. When the Kronos Quartet made its exciting CD "Nuevo," in 2002, it embraced Mexican pop, discovered really obscure composers and came across a guy who plays a leaf.

"Los Sonidos" plays it safer. But the pieces Sunday were all appealing, and all had on some level a sense of dance or at least physicality. Enrique Arturo Diemecke, music director of the Long Beach Symphony and himself a Mexican composer, conducted with enthusiasm. "Xochipilli" (which was preceded by Aztec dance by high school students) has the oddly international character of most percussion music and was exciting.

Ponce's guitar concerto was written for Segovia and is in the repertory of most guitarists. Limon does not possess Segovia's suaveness or display John Williams' effortless danciness. He was slightly overamplified and not always in sync with the orchestra, but he played with care and seriousness.

Limon was stiff in Marquez's Danzon as well, but the score's orchestral writing

contains most of the fun. Diemecke swayed his hips. Many in the audience wiggled theirs in their seats. A less inhibited crowd, I think, might have gotten to its feet. At more than a dozen minutes, the Danzon wears out its tune, but no one seemed to mind.

Lara will have more substantial and typical pieces played later in the festival. The "Canticum Sacrum," an arrangement for strings of a choral Requiem, has the solemn yet sweet spirituality found in Arvo Part and John Tavener. Her playful Serenata brightens Mozart with colors and complexity he didn't know existed. It too dances, or at least bops along.

Diemecke, who was music director of Mexico's National Symphony for 17 years, was in his element. The Pacific Symphony got the accents right. We may not be able to say what Mexican music is, and we don't hear enough of it. But when we do, it usually sounds like family. The remainder of "Los Sonidos" will surely have much to teach us, and some of that will be about ourselves.

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'Los Sonidos de Mexico'

Where: Samueli Theater, Orange County Performing Arts Center, 615 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Price: \$20 and \$25 (\$10 for students)

Where: Renee and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, Orange County Performing Arts Center

When: 8 p.m. April 26 to 28

Price: \$22 to \$85

Where: Segerstrom Concert Hall

When: 3 p.m. April 29

Price: \$22 to \$77

Contact: (714) 755-5799 or www.pacificsymphony.org

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