



The deep sounds of Mexico

By **Chris Pasles**

Times Staff Writer

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WHAT happens when an expert shoots down your bright idea? That's what Pacific Symphony music director Carl St.Clair and the orchestra's artistic advisor, Joseph Horowitz, faced when Gregorio Luke, director of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, saw their plans for an American Composers Festival called "Los Sonidos de Mexico" (The Sounds of Mexico).

"He said, 'All you're doing is perpetuating a stereotype of Mexico as a surrogate of

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story of Mexican music, beginning with pre-Hispanic and going on through Baroque, Romantic 19th century music, Modernism and what happened after Modernism.'

"We immediately understood he was right," said Horowitz. "We redrew the framework of our festival completely."

Their redesign, the seventh such event the Pacific Symphony has programmed, is to open this afternoon at the Irvine Barclay Theatre and end April 29 at the Renee and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall in Costa Mesa.

Range of possibilities

SOME of the composers will be familiar -- Carlos Chavez, Silvestre Revueltas, Manuel Ponce.

Others are obscure. Juan Gutierrez de Padilla emigrated from Spain to Mexico in 1622. Ricardo Castro (1864-1907) reportedly wrote the first Mexican symphony. Juventino Rosas was a popular salon composer who, banished after the Mexican Revolution, died en route to exile in Cuba.

Local audiences may recognize some names in particular. Enrique Arturo Diemecke is music director of the Long Beach Symphony. Daniel Catan is familiar from "Florencia en el Amazonas," staged by Los Angeles Opera in 1997. The Pacific Symphony commissioned a new piece from him, "Caribbean Airs," that will receive three performances, April 26 to 28.

Ana Lara, a native of Mexico City who studied with Catan and did postgraduate work at the Warsaw Academy of Music in Poland, had works played on the Monday Evening Concert series in February and in Long Beach in 2005.

St.Clair admitted he was surprised at the range of possibilities.

"I wasn't all that knowing of all the history of Mexican music," he said. "I'm really happy to have discovered so many of the riches of that repertory, which is so close to our home and cultural environment in Southern California. The general knowledge that Mexican music has to do with mariachis and *pasodobles* is really quite a shallow look."

"It's been a learning experience for everybody," said Leonora Saavedra, a professor of music at UC Riverside who served as a festival advisor. "It's always easy for people to believe they know Mexican culture. Mexico is so close, and Mexican culture is so ubiquitous in the U.S. But it has a very rich and complex history."

For Horowitz, the greatest discovery was the music of Ponce, who lived from 1882 to 1948.

"I only knew the little guitar pieces Segovia played," he said. "I'm now convinced he was one of the major composers in the Western Hemisphere. He begins as a really important Romantic composer, then he was very influenced by Paul Dukas, with whom he began studying at a rather advanced age in France. Then he became a quasi-Modernist and later a major figure in Mexican nationalism. Later still, he adopted a highly chromatic style. All of this music was written with enormous skill. He had a remarkable capacity for renewal."

The festival features more music by Ponce than any other composer. He's on every program. But so is Ana Lara.

When he discovered Lara, St.Clair said, "I immediately felt passionately connected to her music, sound and use of the orchestra. Ana is one of the really most unique compositional voices that I've discovered in a long time."

Lara herself, 47, balks at being pigeonholed by any regional identification.

"I have always thought of myself as a composer rather than a *Mexican* composer," she said from her home in Mexico City. "For me, the music I compose is Mexican music because I live here, breathe here. I'm in contact with the musicians here and the public here. That makes my music sound the way it sounds. If I were living in the States or Europe, it would be different.

"But I also know that other people from different places who listen to my music find something 'Mexican' in it. They find something that's not from any other place that makes my music a little distinct."

A 'feeling of freedom'

FOR his part, Catan, speaking from his home in South Pasadena, said that to be Mexican, "I just have to be myself. If I limit that to a particular quality, then I become a false Mexican. The qualities or characteristics of being Mexican are inside me. I don't have to adopt anything to be Mexican. I am Mexican."

Still, he acknowledged, "When people commission something from a Latin American composer, they have in mind a piece with the kinds of bells and whistles that Latin music is well known for, the picture postcard image of Latin America. That's on the

whole not the kind of music that I write. But I have been exploring Caribbean pop music for some years. I was happy to get the Pacific Symphony commission that went right there to that image."

Even so, Catan, who was born in Mexico City in 1949 and studied in England, believes there are differences between the New World and the Old.

"When I came back from my European years, that's when I became aware of the enormous feeling of freedom on this continent," he said. "I had acquired a European mentality. When I came back, I felt the difference.

"What does that mean? If I were German and I was writing a string quartet, the quartets by Beethoven would be on my shoulders very heavily, breathing down my neck. This side, I am free to learn from Beethoven, but also from Debussy and samba. I don't feel dreadful about all these things coming together. To a European composer, this would be sacrilege."

Moreover, both composers feel the climate for new music is better in Mexico than it is in its neighbor to the north.

"Mexicans are much more open," said Catan. "In a sense, everything is newer. Curiously enough, a Mahler piece or a Beethoven piece can be as new as a *new* piece. For audiences hearing standard repertory for the first time, it doesn't go so much against the grain to hear a new piece. That's a very refreshing public to write for."

Lara believes the opportunities for composers in Mexico are increasing.

"When I was a student, there were very few contemporary pieces performed by the orchestra," she said. "Four people would be clapping for two seconds, and that was it. Now things have changed very much. There have been times that every week there's a first performance, and the people really enjoy the performance so much, which is wonderful.

"I started this radio program to promote new music in 1989 when I came back from Poland," she added. "Recently, I've heard people saying funny things like, 'You have changed a lot. At the beginning, you had all this strange music on your program, and you don't anymore.' I say, 'I think the one that has changed is you.' "

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'Los Sonidos de Mexico'

Where: Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine

When: 3 p.m. today

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

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 through 28

Price: \$22 to \$85

Where: Segerstrom Concert Hall

When: 3 p.m. April 29

Price: \$20 to \$77

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