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MUSIC

Carlos Chávez, Mexican Modernist

By WILLIAM ROBIN JULY 30, 2015

“European musicians are of the worst kind,” the composer Carlos Chávez declared in a 1931 letter. “Conductors, pianists, violinists, singers and so on are ‘prima donna’ minded people — they are very important to themselves. We must change the situation, Aaron.” In a reply to his close friend, the young Aaron Copland concurred: “All you wrote about music in America awoke a responsive echo in my heart. I am through with Europe, Carlos, and I believe as you do, that our salvation must come from ourselves and that we must fight the foreign element in American music.”

The battle for American music was won on two fronts. Just as Mr. Copland’s populist style transformed music in the United States, so too did Mr. Chávez exert enormous influence in his home of Mexico as composer, conductor and bureaucrat. Beginning on Aug. 7 at Bard College, “Chávez and His World” will commemorate that legacy with concerts and panels spread across two weekends.

This summer represents the Bard Music Festival’s first examination of a Latin American composer, focusing on one who, though little known today, may have shaped American music more than any other. Along with building an impressive oeuvre couched in an acerbic modernist idiom, Mr. Chávez almost single-handedly remolded Mexican culture through his official roles in national arts institutions after the Mexican Revolution.

“It seemed to be the best framework in which to introduce an audience to the musical riches of the 20th century, primarily, in Mexico and Latin America,” Leon Botstein, the festival’s co-director and the president of Bard College, said in a recent interview. “For the concert audience in the United States, this is a thrilling opportunity, because most of the music they’re going to hear over these 12, 13

concerts is unknown to them.” Performances of chamber and orchestral music will situate the pluralist Mr. Chávez in his myriad contexts, from Mexico City to Greenwich Village.

Perhaps no other composer of the past century exerted such a strong pull on his national culture as Mr. Chávez (1899-1978), whose activities included leading the Orquesta Sinfónica de México (which maintained an astonishing dedication to the new, giving hundreds of premieres), directing the Conservatorio Nacional de Música (where he created an eclectic composition program and advanced research into Mexican music) and founding the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (which officially established state support of art). “Chávez is also organizationally the key linchpin of the infrastructure of 20th-century Mexican musical education and institutions,” Mr. Botstein said.

Mr. Chávez came of age just as a self-consciously nationalist art music first emerged in Mexico, epitomized by the leading composer Manuel Ponce. Mr. Chávez studied piano with Mr. Ponce, who later fretted that his former pupil was too quickly embracing the new sounds of the European avant-garde. “Will he renounce Romanticism to steadfastly follow the banner of the modernists?” Mr. Ponce wrote after Mr. Chávez made his debut in 1921.

A cleareyed Mr. Chávez followed that banner to the West Village, where he arrived broke in 1923 and met Edgard Varèse, dean of the New York ultra-modernists. In a later visit, Mr. Chávez befriended Mr. Copland, who recognized him as an ally in the war against the excesses of German Romanticism, describing Mr. Chávez as “one of the few American musicians about whom we can say that he is more than a reflection of Europe.”

In creating an image of Mr. Chávez as an essentially non-European composer, Mr. Copland also misconstrued him as an essentially Mexican one. According to Mr. Copland, Mr. Chávez “caught the spirit of Mexico — its sun-filled, naïve, Latin soul.” Critics similarly interpreted the arid intensity of Mr. Chávez’s music through Indian stereotypes. “If he did not scalp he tomahawked the keyboard,” Olin Downes wrote of Mr. Chávez’s performance of his own piano sonata in a 1928 review in *The New York Times*.

“The idea that he was a quintessential ‘Mexican composer’ and that in his case it was not a picturesque, postcard folklore, but some sort of really internal, almost racial essence, marked him forever,” the musicologist Leonora Saavedra said recently. An associate professor at the University of California, Riverside, Ms. Saavedra serves as the Bard festival’s scholar in residence and has edited an insightful volume of accompanying essays published by Princeton University Press.

In the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Ms. Saavedra traces how Mr. Chávez, far from naïve, deployed national elements in his compositions. Once Mr. Copland and his cohort brought him to international attention by proclaiming him the archetypal Latin composer, the cosmopolitan Mr. Chávez played to that identity, writing a primitivist “*Sinfonía India*” that incorporates indigenous drums and echoes “*The Rite of Spring*.” For “*Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*”— a huge 1940 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that juxtaposed Diego Rivera’s murals with pre-Columbian artifacts — Mr. Chávez composed “*Xochipilli*,” a shrill and steely reimagining of Aztec music featuring replicas of antique instruments. These inventions of the “Mexican” allowed Mr. Chávez to capitalize on the vogue for Mexican culture in the United States and secured him a lasting relationship with New York, where he maintained an apartment across from Lincoln Center.

But Mr. Chávez was as invested in the technological as the national. “There are so many pieces that are not about being Mexican; they’re machine music,” Ms. Saavedra said. “Chávez was a young man in the 1920s: He loved modernity, he loved cars, going to the movies, Charlie Chaplin.” His 1925 “*Energia*,” a nonet for winds and strings, bustles with mechanical rhythms and quizzical instrumental lines.

A fascination with the contemporary culminated in Mr. Chávez’s absurdist ballet “*Horsepower*,” with sets and costumes designed by Mr. Rivera, in which the industrial North confronts the exotic South — complete with dancing fruit and a protagonist dressed as a giant machine. Despite glowing advance press and a strong champion in the conductor Leopold Stokowski, the ballet’s sold-out 1932 Philadelphia premiere was poorly received. Frida Kahlo wrote that “there was a crowd of insipid blonds pretending to be Indians from Tehuantepec and when they had to dance the zandunga they looked as if they had lead instead of blood.” But the score for “*Horsepower*” is a fascinating document of a composer panoramically

surveying the Americas, with discordant harmonies, jagged melodies and a searing tango.

When Mr. Chávez first returned to Mexico in 1924, he began a local campaign for modern music that went unheeded. “I am alone and have to overcome a sea of resistance,” he wrote to Mr. Varèse. “Here people hardly know of the existence of Debussy; they do not know Moussorgsky and even less what followed after Debussy.” Alienated from a post-Revolutionary artistic renaissance steered by the education minister, José Vasconcelos — who subsidized Mr. Rivera’s murals but ignored the high-art compositions of Mr. Chávez’s colleagues — Mr. Chávez penned distortions of folk music that mocked the government’s populist revival of Mexican song. But by the end of that decade, Mr. Chávez had positioned himself at the helm of several state-backed institutions, ones that he fervently directed toward the new.

“He knew that there could be no important composition in Mexico if there wasn’t a very solid infrastructure,” Ms. Saavedra said. “Otherwise the composers compose and put it in a drawer.”

Mr. Chávez conducted an orchestra dedicated to introducing new music and revamped the national conservatory. He appointed as his assistant conductor Silvestre Revueltas, who would develop a glittering and heated compositional voice. Though he fell in and out of favor as governments changed, Mr. Chávez remained at the center of Mexican musical life, a position that benefited colleagues including Mr. Copland, whose “El Salon Mexico” represents the best-known document of this cultural exchange.

Despite his impressive legacy, Mr. Chávez remains a controversial figure in Mexico today. A long-lasting affiliation with the country’s dominant political party and his authoritarian personality — which eventually put him at odds with Mr. Revueltas — left many musicians and scholars resentful. But the wealth of his music and the cross-border connections on display at the Bard festival are reminders of how government support for the arts helped create not only an American sound but also a framework to sustain it. And from jarabes and foxtrots to Neo-Classical preludes and heaving symphonies, Mr. Chávez’s oeuvre represents a musician as vigilantly committed to the global as to the national.

“So much the better if our tradition is richer and multiple, deriving from native as well as Western culture,” he once said in a lecture. “We are just as much the owners of our ancestral Tlacuilos as we are of our Florentine Renaissance grandfathers. To circumscribe ourselves, to fix on one thing or the other, is to impoverish ourselves.”

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