

COLORES MEXICANOS: THE MEXICAN ART SONG AND  
SETTING MEXICAN TEXTS TO MUSIC

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the Western art music tradition, we typically associate the art song genre with French, Italian, and German music traditions. However, since the rising of Miguel Ponce and his other, 20<sup>th</sup>-century contemporaries, the Mexican art song tradition has established its own, unique place and role within Western art music. In this thesis, after briefing exploring the history of the Mexican tradition, I will compose and analyze my own art song cycle, using exclusively Mexican texts, ranging from excerpts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Cantares mexicanos* to 20<sup>th</sup> century poems written in the midst of the Mexican revolution, all of which will share a common framework using a popular Mexican folk song. In creating this song cycle and thesis, I hope to give greater prominence to Mexican classical music and literature, helping to break down Eurocentric preconceptions of the Western art tradition.

## NOTE TO THE READER

I composed *Colores mexicanos* (2016), a cycle of seven art songs, as part of this thesis, and I discuss it in the following paper. For a copy of the musical score, contact Kristian S. Rodriguez Publishing ([www.kristiansrodriguez.com](http://www.kristiansrodriguez.com)), or send an email to [kristiansr@gmail.com](mailto:kristiansr@gmail.com), and a study score will be provided to you.

As a society, we tend to view Western academic music, like any Western art tradition, as a primarily European endeavor, privileging the work of European artists over African, Asian, and American artists. This idea holds especially true with art songs, which we most often associate with the German *Lied*, and to a lesser extent, the Italian *canzone*, the French *mélodie*, and the English song. However, as a Mexican-American composer myself, I sought to explore the Mexican art song tradition, and Mexican classical music as a whole, and to create my own art song cycle that would reflect Mexican folk and academic music traditions, while using exclusively Mexican texts from various perspectives throughout the country's history. In crafting this thesis, I endeavor to shatter Eurocentric ideals of art, literature, and culture, and bring light to the rich, complex tradition of Mexican music.

Before discussing my own art cycle, I shall provide a historical context on the Mexican art song and Mexican academic music that draws primarily from three sources: Grove Music Online's entry on music in Mexico<sup>1</sup>, Stela Brandão's *Guide to the Latin American Art Song*<sup>2</sup>, and Ludim Pedroza's presentation on the *canción* in urban Mexico in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. Until the Mexican Revolution (1910 – 1920) Mexican art music had largely been influenced by European classical tradition. Before Mexican independence, Mexican composers largely focused on cultivating Spanish genres, such as the *zarzuela*, *tonadilla escénica*, and the *sainete*. Between Mexican independence and the Mexican Revolution, influence from other European classical traditions began to influence

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<sup>1</sup> Béhague, Gerard et al. "Mexico." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18539>.

<sup>2</sup> Hoover, Maya. *Guide to the Latin American Art Song Repertoire : Catalog of Twentieth-Century Art Songs for Voice and Piano*. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2009. Accessed May 2, 2016. ProQuest ebrary.

<sup>3</sup> Pedroza, Ludim R. "Canción En El México Urbano." Lecture.

Mexican art music as well. During the Romantic period, Italian opera in particular played a dominant role in shaping the Mexican classical scene, and composers largely produced salon-style works (salon-style music refers to lighter music intended for domestic consumption by a middle- and upper-class audience). This period was also marked by the accomplishments of early Mexican composers such as José Mariano Elízaga (1786 – 1842), and the creation of a national conservatory.

The Mexican Revolution, however, sparked a wave of nationalism, and this pushed composers to incorporate musical styles from indigenous and *mestizo* cultures as a reflection of their patriotism. Manuel Ponce (1882 – 1948) led this newfound movement within Mexican art music, and systematically used various *mestizo* folk genres, such as the *corrido*, *huapango*, *jarabe*, and the *son*. However, his works, and those of his contemporaries, still drew heavily from the European Romantic tradition and the salon-style compositions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ponce's songs, such as the famous *Estrellita*, exemplify his blending of modern and traditional styles, and inclusion of various elements indicative of Mexican dances, such as cross-rhythms and alternating duple and triple meters.

Carlos Chávez (1899 – 1978), while not as prolific in the composition of vocal works as Ponce, is nevertheless important in the development of Mexican art song. Chávez sought to incorporate indigenous styles of music within his works, to the point where scholars have referred to his music as profoundly non-European. Chavez believed that Aztec culture served as the basic foundation of Mexican identity, and sought to incorporate distinct elements from indigenous music, as pentatonic scales, and the absence of semitones.

Chávez later moved into a more neoclassical polytonal style, and this shift seems to mirror the overarching shift from nationalism to more international influences in Mexico, spearheaded by the composer Rodolfo Halffter. Halffter's own personal shift from neo-classicist nationalism to atonality and serialism strongly influenced future generations of Mexican composers, which helped lead to the decline of Mexican nationalism in the 1960s. During this period, a new group of avant-garde composers such as Manuel Enríquez and Mário Kuri-Aldana began to push Mexican art music to more modern trends. This shift in compositional thought in Mexico reflected an international trend to eschew nationalism in composition for modernism in the 1940s to the 1970s.

As explained by Pedroza<sup>4</sup>, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and continuing through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, many composers trained academically in music wrote songs that fused elements of academic and popular music, which were performed largely in the *Salón* culture. These exhibited elements from the *bel canto* style while using sentimental themes, and also incorporated music from various Latin American genres, such as the Argentinian *tango*, the Cuban *bolero*, and the Austrian waltz. Ponce is the most famous example of these composers, but other important figures such as Miguel Lerdo de Tejada (1869 – 1941), who was considered an important exponent of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century *canción romántica*, and Mario Talavera, among others, helped shape this important cultural development with the Mexican *bourgeoisie*.

For *Colores Mexicanos*<sup>5</sup>, I decided to follow the tradition set by nationalists in using elements of Mexican folk music within my art songs. This idea resonates with my own compositional philosophy of imbuing folk and popular music within my own

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<sup>4</sup> Pedroza, Ludim R. "Canción En El México Urbano." Lecture.

<sup>5</sup> Rodriguez, Kristian. *Colores mexicanos*. San Marcos, TX: Kristian S. Rodriguez Publishing, 2016.

compositions as a way of communicating more directly to audiences not as familiar with academic music. In keeping with this concept, I chose to create a more adventurous, innovative piano line, while maintaining a relatively simpler vocal line that more blatantly reflected Mexican folk singing. I combine these elements with those of my own compositional style, including minimalist, post-minimalist, avant-garde, rock, and jazz influences.

In order to create a sense of continuity between such disparate texts and songs, and between the diverse influences I incorporate in my songs, I decided to use a well-known Mexican popular song around which to orient *Colores mexicanos*. I chose the Mexican *ranchera* song “México lindo y querido,”<sup>6</sup> a folk song about love and dedication to Mexico. Each of the seven songs is based on one of the pitches from the first six notes of the vocal line in the song (G-D-B-C-D-E-D):



Figure 1: The opening vocal line of "México lindo..."

In addition, each song ends on the dominant of the pitch center of the next song; for example, the last pitch the vocalist sings in the first song is an A, which is the dominant in a D major and minor scale, the pitch center of the second song. The last song (“El homenaje”), however, begins with D as the pitch center, it returns to G, providing a circular pitch structure for the entire cycle.

<sup>6</sup> Negrete, Jorge. Mexico Lindo Y Querido. By Chucho Monge. Orfeon Videovox, 1997, CD.



For the texts in *Colores mexicanos*, I selected a variety of poems from various perspectives and time periods in Mexican history, to highlight the diversity of Mexican culture and identity. In the first two songs, I use excerpts from the *Cantares mexicanos*, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century collection of Mexica texts collected by indigenous writers after the Spanish invasion. I use fragments of this text again in the last song to highlight the permanence of indigenous culture and heritage in modern-day Mexico. I also use poetry from a female writer who lived in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Nueva España, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century *mestizo* poet, and two Modernist poets, as well as “México lindo y querido.”

As previously mentioned, the texts I used were drawn from the *Cantares mexicanos*, as translated into Spanish from Nahuatl by Miguel León-Portilla<sup>7</sup>, for the texts for the first two songs. In “Así se ha perdido el pueblo mexicana,” the poet laments the destruction of the city of Tenochtitlan, using dark, provocative language to capture the despair and terror of losing one’s homeland. “Así si ha...” is through-composed, meaning each line in the poem features a new musical idea, and at many times employs a recitative-style of singing in accordance with the lack of a constant meter in the translation of the poem. The song opens with a repeated minor pentatonic scale idea in the lower register of the piano, and features percussive features such as striking the lowest note on the piano repeatedly and as loudly as the pianist can, to evoke characteristics believed to have existed in pre-Columbian indigenous music<sup>8</sup> (Figure 2). Frequent use of ostinatos throughout the piece also help contribute to the rhythmically-

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<sup>7</sup> Portilla, Miguel León, Earl Shorris, Sylvia Shorris, and Ascensión H. De. León-Portilla. *Antigua Y Nueva Palabra: Una Antología De La Literatura Mesoamericana, Desde Los Tiempos Precolumbinos Hasta El Presente*. México: Aguilar, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Garibay K., Angel María. *Poesía Náhuatl: Paleografía, Version, Intro., Notas Y Apendices De A.M.* Garibay K. Vol. III. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma De México, 1968, XIV-XV.

driven character of the song, and I use various vocal techniques such a glissando in m. 7 to further paint the text (Figure 3).

This musical score shows measures 1 through 4 of the piece "Así se ha...". It is written for voice and piano. The piano part features a complex bass line with frequent quintuplets (marked with a '5') and dynamic markings of *f* and *ffz*. The vocal line begins in measure 1 with the lyrics "de tache d" and continues through measure 4 with "El llan - - - to,". The vocal melody includes a triplet in measure 1 and a glissando in measure 4. The piano accompaniment includes a 15-measure rest in measure 1 and a 15-measure rest in measure 4.

Figure 2: mm. 1 - 4 from "Así se ha..." In the right hand in m. 1, the pianist introduces the pentatonic figure, followed by the percussive effect on the third beat.

This musical score shows measures 7 through 8 of the piece "Así se ha...". It is written for voice and piano. The piano part continues with quintuplets and dynamic markings of *f* and *ffz*. The vocal line begins in measure 7 with the lyrics "tien - - - de, las" and continues through measure 8. The vocal melody includes a glissando in measure 7 and a 15-measure rest in measure 8. The piano accompaniment includes a 15-measure rest in measure 7 and a 15-measure rest in measure 8.

Figure 3: mm. 7 - 8 from "Así se ha..." In m. 7, the vocalist uses a glissando.

In “Si yo nunca desapareciera,” I use another excerpt from the *Cantares*; however, this poem uses much more abstract, introverted language to explore various themes including death, and possibly the afterlife. I included this poem as a metaphor for Mexico’s indigenous heritage, and how the history and culture of these groups continue to shape Mexico’s development as a nation.

In the first half of the song, I use the Andalusian cadence, a stepwise descending tetrachord progression which features prominently in many Latin American and Spanish genres. I set the cadence in the lower register of the piano, and in a different key than the vocalist, to create a sense of ambiguity and detachment (Figure 4). To further advance the idea of ambivalence, the vocalist strays from various keys, beginning, for example, in mm. 2-4 (Figure 4), where the vocal line implies D minor, but then transitions to C minor in mm. 5-7. As the poem shifts to discussing the afterlife, the pianist shifts to playing a modified version of the Andalusian cadence in ascending, arpeggiated sixteenth notes; these figures continue to ascend until the end of the piece, even as the vocalist repeats the opening two lines at the end of song, symbolizing their ascent to the afterlife (Figure 5).

**Pesante** ♩ = 100

*p misterioso*

Voice

Piano

*pp lontano*

Si yo nun - ca des-a-par-e - cie - ra, si yo nun-ca des-a-par-e-cie - ra

Figure 4: mm. 1 - 7 of "Si yo nunca..." The pianist plays the Andalusian cadence in the right hand while the vocalist sings in a different key in m. 2.

**A tempo**

15<sup>ma</sup>

poco

*pp misterioso*

Figure 5: mm. 25 - 26 of "Si yo nunca..." Here, we see the modified, ascending Andalusian cadence in the piano part.

The third song in the cycle, "Contiene una fantasía contenta con amor decente," features a sonnet by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651 – 1695), a Mexican Hieronymite nun. She dedicated the set of poetry from which this sonnet originates to a female

companion, with whom she had an illicit affair. This poem describes a deeply intimate relationship, with a growing sense of desperation as the poet scorns her lover for abandoning her side. To illustrate the intimate tone of the poem, I built the song largely around major and minor 7<sup>th</sup> chords in close harmonies, alluding to musical groups such as Trío Los Panchos that perform Mexico boleros replete with major and minor 7<sup>th</sup> chords while the vocalists sing close, triadic vocal harmonies<sup>9</sup>. I also incorporate an ornate, flowing melodic fragment in the piano reminiscent of Spanish folk music.

I set the fourth song to a poem by the Romantic poet Manuel José Othón (1858 – 1906). Othón is most famous for his work *Idilio salvaje*, considered one of the most representative works of Mexico. This poem, “El perro,” is told from the perspective of a dog, who pledges loyalty and companionship to his master. The tone grows more desperate as it becomes apparent that his owner is passing away. In writing this piece, I decided to use a simpler, more accessible setting as a break from the more complex songs surrounding it. To this end, the song displays the most evident use of *sesquiáltera*, or mixed meter between 3/4 and 6/8, a compositional technique frequently used in Latin American folk music. In addition, I employ a chord progression that reflects, with modifications, the relatively simpler chord progressions used in popular music. The song begins with a more dance-like character, but slows down rhythmically as the dog realizes

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<sup>9</sup> For examples, listen to “Sabor a mí” or “Bésame mucho” as performed by Trío los Panchos.



his master will not return.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Danza" with a tempo marking of ♩ = 92. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system includes a Voice part (treble clef) and a Piano part (grand staff). The Piano part features a melody in the right hand with dotted quarter notes and a bass line with quarter notes. The second system starts at measure 5 and includes the same Voice and Piano parts. The Voice part has the lyrics "No te - mas," and the Piano part has a dynamic marking of *mp* and a performance instruction "legato sempre e lacrimoso". The score is written on a yellow background.

Figure 6: mm. 1 - 9 of "El perro" Here, one can see the sesquiáltera by comparing the dotted quarter notes in mm 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9, and the quarter notes in 2, 4, 6, and 8.

"El vampiro," the fifth song, uses a text from modernist poet Efrén Rebolledo (1877 – 1929). Rebolledo uses the vampire figure as a morbid, striking metaphor for the effect the poet's lover and their relationship has on him, as exemplified in the line "...as I agonize, you, thirsty, imitating a black and persistent vampire, sustain yourself on my ardent blood." To convey the sense of the vampire closing in, or the relationship that the vampire symbolizes, I use a chromatic wedge in the piano that closes into the vocalist's first pitch, and I use this idea frequently throughout the song. "El vampiro" also features the most ornate vocal line of the seven songs, reminiscent of the Mexican *huapango*.

For “Nocturno alterno,” I decided on a text by modernist poet José Juan Tablada (1871 – 1945), a poet most famous for introducing the Japanese *haiku* to Mexico and writing his own in Spanish. He lived in the diaspora for much of his life, and his poems naturally convey a sense of global cosmopolitanism. In “Nocturno alterno,” Tablada writes two different nocturnes, each comprising four lines that alternate between one nocturne and the other. In the second stanza, however, the two ideas come together, as exemplified in the line “...however, the moon is the same in New York and Bogotá!”

To highlight the literary devices used in “Nocturno alterno,” I contrast two different musical ideas; the right hand plays a light, asymmetric, dance-like melody, while the left hand plays a more reflective, sustained, chordal idea (Figure 7). At first, the juxtaposition between the two musical ideas is clear; however, as the first stanza develops, I begin blending them together. Finally, as the two ideas come together in the second stanza, I have the pianist play both fragments simultaneously (Figure 8), bringing a close to this penultimate piece.

**Con spirito** ♩ = 144

Voice

Piano

*f animato e delicato*

5

*mp calmo e sostenuto*

Figure 7: mm. 1 - 8. In mm. 1 - 4, we see the dance-like melody, or idea 1. in mm. 5 - 8, we see the sustained idea, or idea 2.

**A tempo**

¡Y sin em - bar - go

*f*

Figure 8: mm. 37 - 38, we see idea 1 in the right hand of the piano (middle clef), juxtaposed with idea 2 in the left hand (bottom clef)



The final piece, “El homenaje,” begins with a recapitulation from the second song “Si yo nunca...” Here, I use the same arpeggiated sixteenth figures, but descending, while repeating the opening two lines of the text, creating a sense of continuity between the two songs. Then I transition from the illusion to revealing the first musical fragments from “México lindo y querido.” I take the first six pitches that I used for the cycle’s structures and break them apart over each octave of the piano. The vocalist sings fragments from “México lindo...” but, I have distorted them by frequently changing keys. Additionally, the tune is sung without words until m. 26, when the vocalist finally declares “¡México lindo y querido, si muero lejos de tí!” (Mexico, beautiful and beloved, if I die far from you). The piano concludes the cycle with a two-measure coda, using chords that use G as the pitch center, but a low D in the left hand is the last note played, ending the cycle with a sense of ambiguity and a lack of a resolution.

I created “Colores mexicanos” to bring further attention not just to Mexican art songs or Mexican academic music, but to Mexican culture and identity as a whole. I used a variety of texts from various points in Mexican history and from various demographic groups to highlight the various perspectives and faces that comprise Mexican identity, and I utilized elements of various Mexican folk genres to underline the nuances and complexities of Mexican culture. Thus, in this project, I hope to provide a deeper, more complex portrait of the identity of Mexico.



25

Mé - xi - co lin - doy que - ri - do,

29

si muc - ro le - - - jos de

34

tí.

loco

*p*

loco

Figure 11: mm. 25 - 36 of "El homenaje" Here, the vocalist finally reveals text from "México lindo," and we see the final coda in the piano.