

MÉXICO: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

- MANUEL M. PONCE13:21
- 1 I. Intermezzo (1903)2:09
 - 2 II. Gavota (1901)3:09
 - 3 III. Romanza de amor (1914)3:19
 - 4 IV. Scherzino mexicano (1909)1:24
 - 5 V. Estrellita, Metamorfosis de Concierto (1940)3:19
- SILVESTRE REVUELTAS01:43
- 6 I. Adagio (1939)0:35
 - 7 II. Allegro (1939)1:05
- 8 MARÍA TERESA PRIETO
12 Variaciones Tonales (1963)11:40
Ediciones Mexicanas de Música (SACM)
- CARLOS CHÁVEZ
Tercera Sonata (1928)11:56
Carlanita Music Company (ASCAP)
- 9 I. Moderato1:35
 - 10 II. Un poco mosso3:50
 - 11 III. Lentamente2:57
 - 12 III. Claro y conciso3:26
- 13 DANIEL CATÁN
Variaciones para piano (1977)3:56
Publicaciones CENIDIM (SACM)
- 14 MANUEL ENRÍQUEZ
Hoy de ayer (1981)3:27
Publicaciones CENIDIM (SACM)
- MAX LIFCHITZ
Cinco Preludios (1964)6:53
North/South Editions (BMI)
- 15 I. Prólogo1:48
 - 16 II. Nostalgia0:51
 - 17 III. Remembranza1:24
 - 18 IV. Nocturno1:39
 - 19 V. Trágico0:59
- 20 MAX LIFCHITZ
Tema con variaciones (1965)4:38
North/South Editions (BMI)
- 21 RICARDO CASTRO
Vals de concierto Op. 25 (1885)6:14

MAX LIFCHITZ, *piano*

Total Time: 64:05

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Max Lifchitz, *piano*

México masterfully combines its rich traditions with modern innovations, creating an inspiring and dynamic narrative. Its vibrant music and captivating art reflect a resilient society that proudly honors its heritage while enthusiastically embracing contemporary influences.

This album takes listeners on an exhilarating journey through a century of exceptional piano music created by talented Mexican composers. You will discover enchanting romantic pieces from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, vibrant compositions influenced by ethnic nationalism that emerged during the post-revolutionary excitement of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as innovative works that embody the adventurous spirit of the 1960s and 1970s.

Manuel María Ponce (1882-1948) is widely recognized as the father of Mexican musical nationalism. His student, Carlos Chávez, noted that “Ponce created a true awareness of the richness of Mexican folk music and guided the process of integrating that music into higher forms of composition.” Educated in Italy, Germany, and France, Ponce was an active pianist, educator, and arts administrator. He also edited the influential journal *Cultura Musical*, which played a crucial role in shaping the musical landscape of Mexico City during the 1930s and 1940s.

Ponce’s music is characterized by warmth and passion. This collection features five of his enchanting early works that reflect his romantic roots. Crafted in the early 20th century, pieces

like *Intermezzo*, *Gavota*, and the heartfelt *Romanza de amor* (Romance of Love), with its subtly syncopated rhythms, create a romantic atmosphere infused with Mexican influences. Written on the eve of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the lively *Mexican Scherzino* brings a joyful blend of folk rhythms and harmonies that are truly captivating.

Estrellita (*Little Star*) is a charming concert adaptation, or metamorphosis, as Ponce referred to it, of the melody from his most beloved art song. Inspired by a starry night in his cherished hometown of Aguascalientes, Estrellita gained such popularity that it is often mistaken for an anonymous folk song. In this Liszt-like concert paraphrase, Ponce enhances the lyrical melody with intricate harmonies and arpeggios, culminating in a prolonged trill. This trill resolves into a melodic fragment derived from the original melody, which is accompanied by rapid sixty-fourth-note septuplets and thirty-second-note quadruplets.

Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) started his career as a violinist and conductor before dedicating himself to composition in the last ten years of his vibrant, albeit brief, life. He received his initial musical training in Durango, his hometown, and later studied at St. Edward's College in Texas and the Chicago Musical College. In 1929, he returned to Mexico City, where he began performing with his colleague, pianist Carlos Chávez. In 1935, Revueltas was

appointed conductor of the newly established orchestra at the National Conservatory of Music, where he also taught violin and composition. However, in 1937, he left this position to travel to Spain and fight on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. After Francisco Franco's victory, Revueltas returned to Mexico, where he struggled with alcoholism and ultimately passed away at the age of 40.

Revueltas is best known for composing remarkable orchestral scores for the exceptional films his brother, the renowned writer and cinematographer José Revueltas, created during the 1930s. His compositions capture the essence and sound of Mexico's streets, indigenous communities, and working classes. The spontaneity and cheerful temperament of Revueltas are reflected in much of his work.

The brief piano pieces by Revueltas featured on this album—*Canción* and *Allegro*—are the only two solo piano works published by the Mexican composer during his lifetime. *Canción* (*Song*) showcases a melancholic melody influenced by Indian music and is built around the pentatonic scale, which consists of five notes. In contrast, *Allegro* is a lively polytonal piece where each hand plays in a different key: the right hand primarily in C Major, while the left hand plays in C minor. Additionally, the piece layers contrasting time signatures, particularly 3/4 and 6/8, creating engaging and provocative moments throughout.

María Teresa Prieto (1896 – 1982) was born in Oviedo, a town in the Spanish province of Asturias. Her first music teacher, Saturnino del Fresno, introduced her to the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and other Baroque masters. In 1936, she abandoned her studies at the Madrid Conservatory to join a group of Spanish exiles who fled to México due to the Spanish Civil War. In her adopted country, Prieto developed her compositional career, furthering her training under Manuel M. Ponce and Carlos Chávez. Between 1946 and 1947, she studied with Darius Milhaud at Mills College in Oakland, California. Although she returned to Spain briefly in 1958 to receive the Samuel Ross Prize for her only string quartet, she refused to move back there permanently.

Prieto’s *12 Variaciones Tonales* (*Twelve Tonal Variations*) is based on a complex original theme that spans 20 bars, which is presented at the beginning of the piece. Following the theme, there are eleven distinct variations, each in a different key, that develop melodic and harmonic elements derived from the theme. The work concludes with an impressive three-part fugue that brings the variations to an imposing close. Throughout the composition, Prieto employs a unique harmonic language that combines traditional harmonic patterns with influences from Renaissance modal techniques. While the work clearly embodies a neoclassical spirit, Prieto's harmonies also reflect the innovative artistic freedoms typical of 20th-century compositions.

Carlos Chávez (1899-1978) was one of Latin America's most celebrated composers and a central figure in Mexico's cultural scene during the first half of the 20th century. He founded the National Symphony Orchestra and served as the director of the National Conservatory of Mexico. In 1947, Chávez became the founding director of the National Institute of Fine Arts. He was also respected as a conductor and lecturer, having conducted multiple major symphony orchestras and delivered the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University in 1959. His extensive body of work reflects influences from Indianism, neoclassicism, primitivism, and modernism.

Among Chávez's best-known works is *Sinfonía India*, which features driving rhythms that evoke Aztec rituals and dances. In contrast, the monumental *Third Piano Sonata* stands out as a significant example of what critics described as the composer's bold, strident, abstract style. Written during the winter of 1928 while visiting New York City, Chávez himself premiered the sonata as part of the historic Copland-Sessions Concerts at the newly constructed Edyth Totten Theatre in Midtown Manhattan on April 22, 1928.

Following its premiere, the New York critic Paul Rosenfeld described the piece as "dry as a plant lost in the sands." He noted that while there is no voluptuousness in the score, it possesses perfect logic and a profound, austere beauty.

Herbert Weinstock commented on how the music evokes "the unsensuous harshness of Mexico's highland landscapes—magnificent and spacious plateaus of craggy distance, where stoic people earn a living from a forbidding nature."

The work reflects a neoclassical style that emphasizes simplicity, balance, and purity. It combines traditional European formal elements with minimalist textures, angular melodies, and a percussive approach to the piano. The piece utilizes brief motifs as unifying elements, features sudden changes in register, exhibits rhythmic irregularity, and employs a harmonic language based on sevenths and ninths, often highlighted by stark octaves. Chávez deliberately avoids overly romantic expressive elements while using fundamentally diatonic polyphony, resulting in strikingly harsh sonorities.

The Sonata consists of four contrasting movements. It begins with a fanfare-like first movement characterized by percussive elements. This is followed by a fast, scherzo-like second movement. The third movement offers a stark and meditative quality, with subtle hints of fugal writing. Finally, the work concludes with a march-like fourth movement, filled with driving rhythms that create a powerful ending.

Daniel Catán (1949-2011) studied music and philosophy at Sussex and Southampton Universities in England before earning his Ph.D. at Princeton University, where he was mentored by Milton Babbitt. In 1994, the San Diego Opera

premiered his opera *Rappaccini's Daughter*, which marked the beginning of his career as an opera composer in the United States. This success was further established with the Houston premiere of *Florencia en el Amazonas*, a work that the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York staged to much critical acclaim during the 2023-24 season.

Catán's *Variaciones para piano* (*Piano Variations*) features an original theme followed by six variations, all performed without pause. Unlike the post-romantic lyricism found in Catán's operatic works, the musical language of this early piano piece aligns with the twelve-tone serial style that was popular in academic circles during the 1970s. The composition unfolds with polyphonic lines and angular melodies, creating unique harmonies and contrasting textures. A lively finale marked "presto" brings the work to a dramatic conclusion.

Manuel Enriquez (1925-1994) was a distinguished violinist, composer, and arts administrator. He attended The Juilliard School in New York, where he studied violin under the renowned pedagogue Ivan Galamian. Additionally, he studied composition with Peter Mennin and Stefan Wolpe. Enriquez served as the director of México's National Conservatory and the Music Department of the National Institute of Fine Arts. Among his many honors, the fellowships he received from the Guggenheim Foundation and Germany's DAAD

Institute are particularly notable.

"Hoy de ayer" (*Today from Yesterday*) is a composition characterized by intense energy and tension. It is an aleatoric work, meaning that the performer must improvise certain sections using musical gestures provided by the composer. The harsh dissonances and disjointed passages represent the "today" aspect of the title, while sections that evoke traditional chord structures toward the end of the piece reflect the "yesterday" aspect. This work is a notable example of Enriquez's cosmopolitan, non-nationalistic style.



Active as a composer, pianist, and conductor, **Max Lifchitz** (b. 1948) began his musical education in his native México City under the tutelage of Rodolfo Halffter. After relocating to New York City in 1966, Lifchitz studied at The Juilliard School and Harvard University, where his teachers included Luciano Berio, Leon Kirchner, Bruno Maderna, and Darius Milhaud. He was awarded first prize in the 1976 International Gaudeamus Competition for Performers of Twentieth Century Music, held in

Holland. The San Francisco Chronicle described him as "a young composer of brilliant imagination and a stunning, ultra-sensitive pianist." The New York Times praised Mr. Lifchitz for his "clean, measured and sensitive performances," and the American Record Guide remarked, "Mr. Lifchitz is one of America's finest exponents of contemporary piano music."

Lifchitz's *Cinco Preludios* (*Five Preludes*) are unabashedly eclectic. They were written in 1964, when, as an adolescent growing up in México City, he first entertained the thought of becoming a composer. Their post-romantic language explores opaque harmonies built around modal and polytonal patterns. Each prelude employs a distinct melodic gesture and is cast in a straightforward ternary formal pattern.

Written in 1965, the *Tema con variaciones* (*Theme with Variations*) belongs to a collection of works intended for the novice pianist. A lyrical theme introduced by the left hand is followed by five contrasting self-contained variations, each built around a gesture derived from the opening melody and freely elaborated. The titles of each variation are *March*, *Pastoral*, *Two-Part Invention*, *Nocturne*, and *Etude*.

Ricardo Castro (1864-1907) was the most successful Mexican piano virtuoso at the turn of the 20th century. His works, which included a Piano Concerto, a Cello Concerto, and an opera,

were published in Germany and performed successfully in major European capitals during the early 1900s. Following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Castro's success in Europe and the support he had received from the ousted political leader, Porfirio Díaz, made him an easy target for criticism by post-revolutionary revisionists. In the 1920s, his music was denounced as anti-Mexican, being regarded as a barren imitation of European models. As a result, Castro's music—and that of most of his contemporaries—was largely forgotten until the 1990s, when renewed interest in his life and work led to a re-evaluation of his status among Mexican composers.

The *Vals de Concierto, Op. 25* (*Concert Waltz, Op. 25*) is a prime example of Castro's virtuosic romantic style. This captivating piece of salon music, a style popular among his contemporaries, demonstrates a strong influence from the great Romantic European masters, Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt. The composition follows a clear A-B-A ternary structure and concludes with a brilliant coda. It is interesting to note that the Viennese waltz, introduced to Mexico by Emperor Maximilian during the French Intervention of the 1860s, became the most popular dance across all levels of Mexican society. Its lilting rhythms were seamlessly integrated into the folk music of many regions throughout the country.

CREDITS

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