Manuel M. PONCE

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

CHAPULTEPEC: SYMPHONIC SKETCHES
INSTANTÁNEAS MEXICANAS
MERLIN: SYMPHONIC SUITE
ESTAMPAS NOCTURNAS

Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí
José Miramontes Zapata

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS
MANUEL MARÍA PONCE, FATHER OF MEXICAN MUSIC
by José Miramontes Zapata and Rodolfo Ritter Arenas

Manuel María Ponce\(^1\) developed an extraordinary array of talents, flourishing as composer, pianist, conductor, lecturer, researcher, teacher, writer and founder of diverse institutions and publications. Ponce is the most performed Mexican composer worldwide, particularly because of his music for guitar, and yet the bulk of his output – and thus his true standing as a composer – is generally unknown. His works were performed by some of the major musicians of the twentieth century, among them Ernest Ansermet, Enrico Caruso, Pau Casals, Gaspar Cassadó, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Jascha Heifetz, Erich Kleiber, Ruggiero Ricci, Andrés Segovia, Leopold Stokowski, Henryk Szeryng and John Williams. Ponce also enjoyed the friendship of many of the important cultural figures of the day – not only those involved in music, but also other leading personalities in the arts: Claudio Arrau, Marco Enrico Bossi, Julián Carrillo, Alejo Carpentier, Alejandro García Catribura, Carlos Chávez, Paul Dukas, Manuel de Falla, Edwin Fischer, Julian Krein, Nikolai Medtner, Arthur Rubinstein, György Sándor, Lyubomir Pipkov, Marc Pincherle, Silvestre Revueltas, Joaquín Rodrigo, Albert Roussel, Florent Schmitt, Edgard Varèse, José Vasconcelos, Heitor Villa-Lobos and countless others. The current association of Ponce with the guitar has resulted in an underestimation of the scope of his legacy, in both its quality and its sheer size. The complete \textit{œuvre} of the man known as the ‘father of Mexican musical nationalism’ covers almost every genre of classical music – solo piano, guitar, chamber music, vocal, incidental, \textit{concertante} and orchestral scores – and the most recent, and most complete, catalogue of his output\(^2\) lists some 500 works.

\(^1\) There is another major cultural figure in recent Mexican history by the name of Manuel Ponce: the priest-poet Manuel Ponce Zavala (1913–94), who was one of the leading lights in the revival of religious lyrical poetry in twentieth-century Mexico. But Manuel M. Ponce was signing his scores with that form of his name well before the other Manuel Ponce was born.

Born on 8 December 1882, in Fresnillo, Zacatecas, in north-central Mexico, Manuel M. Ponce is seen in Mexico as part of the constellation of major Zacatecan artists emerging at the end of the nineteenth century whose art attained universal importance. The poet Ramón López Velarde, composer Candelario Huízar and painter Francisco Goitia are some of those whose works were inspired by indigenous culture without ignoring the disruptive tendencies of avant-garde artistic movements in Europe. Ponce, however, saw himself as a native of the neighbouring state of Aguascalientes: both his parents were born there; his family moved there right after his birth; and he lived in Aguascalientes for the first eighteen years of his life.

Ponce showed an extraordinary musical talent from a very early age. His first piano teachers were his sister Josefinaphone and a local professor, Cipriano Ávila. Both of them fostered Ponce's talent until he moved to Mexico City in 1900. There he began taking classes with the pianist Vicente Mañas and harmony lessons with Eduardo Gabrielli, who encouraged Ponce to pursue his studies in Europe. In 1904, accordingly, he travelled to Italy to study composition and music theory with Cesare Dall’Olio, Puccini’s tutor, and Luigi Torchi, an important musicologist and music theorist. During this period the publisher Bongiovanni brought out some of his works for piano. In 1906 he continued his piano studies at the Stern Conservatorium in Berlin as a pupil of Martin Krause. During his stay he became acquainted with Ferruccio Busoni and Eugen d’Albert, and befriended the pianist Edwin Fischer. He also gave a triumphant performance at the Beethovenhalle in Bonn, and had some of his works published by Breitkopf & Härtel. As soon as Ponce returned to Mexico in 1907, he was offered a position as piano teacher at the National Conservatoire of Music and established himself as one of the country’s major musical personalities, composing chamber works, piano pieces and songs, all well received among the artistic and intellectual circles of his country.

The beginning of the revolutionary armed movement in Mexico in 1910, and the socio-political restructuring of its institutions that resulted, provoked a profound introspection that redefined national culture. For Ponce, in 1911, it involved a heightened interest in traditional and vernacular Mexican music. He then organised his findings by compiling and harmonising the popular material he had collected,
interlacing the melodies into his own compositions. That was the basis of a celebrated lecture he delivered in 1912: ‘La música y la canción mexicana’ (‘Mexican Music and Song’), with the support of the Ateneo de la Juventud (‘Atheneum of Youth’), an illustrious circle of Mexican intellectuals. This lecture provided the foundation of a brand-new Mexican musical art: it was the beginning of the so-called Nacionalismo Musical Mexicano that supported the development of a new basis for composition in Mexico. Ponce continued to harmonise songs – hundreds of them. In 1912, too, he premiered his Concierto Romántico for piano and orchestra in the Teatro Arbeu in the Centro Histórico of Mexico City, as part of a programme consisting entirely of his own compositions, the nationalistic disposition of which dazzled audience and critics alike; his music continued to command attention from then on.

Like many other important artists and intellectuals, Ponce faced material difficulties because of the insecurity reigning during the decade-long Revolution. In 1915 he therefore went into voluntary exile in Havana where – as a universal artist with Latin-American roots, convinced of the creative possibilities inherent in popular music – he absorbed the different cultural manifestations of his new environment and enriched his musical language. In the two years that Ponce spent in Cuba, he took on various activities: as pianist, composer and intellectual collaborator, and cultural ambassador of Mexico; he also premiered and published several compositions employing Cuban melodies and rhythms. Besides numerous concerts, Ponce was also involved in establishing a number of cultural associations and so maintained an important public profile.

Upon his return to Mexico in 1917, a sequence of personal and professional events in Ponce’s life established him decisively within Mexican culture. He married Clementina (‘Clema’) Maurel, who would become a fundamental figure in her husband’s life and work; he was appointed conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra; and his book Escritos y composiciones musicales (‘Musical Writings and Compositions’), which included several essays on aesthetics, Mexican music and scores, was published.³ He frequently contributed articles to the music section of the magazine México Moderno.

³ In Cultura (Mexico City), Vol. 4, No. 4, 1917.
and, very importantly, he created and directed the *Revista Musical de México*. All the while he continued to teach at the National Conservatoire of Music.

In spite of the widespread recognition he now enjoyed and the relative tranquillity of the times, Ponce nonetheless decided to leave his country once again and embarked on another journey that would transform his life and music: in 1925 he moved to Paris, remaining until 1933. His teacher there, Paul Dukas, brought him into contact with the major movements of the European avant-garde. Even though some of Ponce’s compositions were already world-famous – his ‘Estrellita’, the second of the *Dos canciones mexicanas* of 1912, was an international hit – Ponce humbly took the advice of his teacher from the very beginning of his studies in the École Normale de Musique, an attitude which gained him Dukas’ admiration. He also attended classes with Nadia Boulanger and befriended many musicologists, composers, musicians and writers. He founded the periodical *Gaceta Musical*, which presented writers and influential music critics from Europe and the Americas. Even though his friendship with Andrés Segovia pre-dated his sojourn in Paris, it was in those years that Ponce composed his first pieces for guitar – works which soon increased his international renown. His studies with Dukas led him to write music that was modern and yet also exquisitely lyrical, and of impeccable formal design. Having completed the course of Dukas’ composition class, he returned to Mexico after six fruitful years in Paris, much to the regret of Dukas, who crowned his course at the École Normale with a forthright encomium:

> Ponce’s compositions carry the mark of the most distinguished talent and have been for some time unsuitable for grading. I have scruples about giving him any grade, even the highest, that can show my satisfaction in having such a distinguished student.⁴

In spite of the schisms of the musical world back home, he managed to establish himself as a composition teacher at the Escuela Universitaria de Música and was appointed temporary director of the Conservatoire of Music, as well as a member of the Comisión Mexicana de Cooperación Intelectual de la Secretaría de Educación.

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His concert music was now beginning to become known further afield. In France in 1934 the Russian composer Julian Krein and cellist André Huvelin organised a concert in homage to Ponce at the École Normale de Musique in Paris, with a programme entirely of his works; also in 1934 the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Leopold Stokowski, performed his symphonic triptych *Chapultepec* at Carnegie Hall in New York. Back home, Ponce was consolidating his stature, writing the incidental music for the play *La verdad sospechosa* (‘Suspect Truth’) by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, performed at the inaugural concert of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Ponce continued to study Mexican music and taught a course on musical folklore at the University School of Music. On this subject he published articles, chaired lectures and collected folk material. Aside from his lectures on folklore, in 1938 he began a research programme on *Purépecha* music in Michoacán. In 1936 he founded and managed another periodical, *Cultura Musical*, his last, with the support of the National Conservatoire of Music and with the collaboration of such prominent musicians as Aaron Copland and José Rolón. In 1937, he led the establishment of the Sociedad de Conciertos de Música de Cámara. During the 1940s he was decorated with the Medalla al Mérito Cívico by the Consejo Consultivo de la Ciudad de México, as well as the Melchor Covarrubias Medal by the Universidad de Puebla. Ponce was nominated president of the Asociación Nacional Técnico Pedagógica de Profesores de Música, and director of the Escuela Universitaria de Música. All the while he kept composing tirelessly, with his new works often enjoying prominent premières. In 1943 Henryk Szeryng was the soloist in the first performance of Ponce’s Violin Concerto, with the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico directed by Carlos Chávez; Szeryng considered the work to be one of the most important violin concertos.

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5 Julian Krein (1913–96) was a member of a musical dynasty of Russian Jews: his father, Grigory Krein (1879–1955), and his uncle Alexander (1883–1951) were founder members of the short-lived Society for Jewish Folk Music in St Petersburg in 1908; they were both composers, and Alexander also a cellist, and his uncle David (1869–1926) was a prominent violinist. Like Ponce, Julian, a prodigy composer, arrived in Paris in 1927 to study with Dukas, and in 1934 he, too, returned home, to Moscow.

6 Its first recording will follow in the next volume of this series of Ponce’s orchestral music, in preparation from Toccata Classics.

7 The *Purépecha* are a group of indigenous peoples found in Michoacán, in north-west Mexico, who in the fourteenth centuries founded one of the major pre-Columbian states in central America. The *Purépecha* state resisted conquest by the Aztecs but fell to Spanish colonisation in 1530. The *Purépecha* language is still spoken by some 200,000 people.
of the twentieth century. In 1946 the *Concierto del Sur* for guitar and orchestra was premiered, first in Mexico and then in New York, with Andrés Segovia as soloist under the direction of Erich Kleiber. A year later, in 1947, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra performed Ponce’s *Ferial* under the baton of José Yves Limantour.\(^8\)

Ponce was the first musician to be decorated with Mexico’s most important award, the National Science and Arts Prize, which he received from the hands of President Miguel Alemán on 26 February 1948. In his acceptance speech, the composer described it as ‘an award, an aid that arrives at the very moments when the illusion dissipates in face of the heartrending reality’. Ponce had been in poor health for many years, and on 24 April 1948, only two months after the ceremony, he died, aged 65. Many of his works and projects were left unfinished, his visions unattained.

**Chapultepec: Symphonic Sketches**

Chapultepec is the name of a castle located on top of Chapultepec Hill, on the western side of Mexico City, where it has commanding views out over the city. The hill itself had been a sacred site of the Aztecs (the name is derived from the Nahuatl word *chapoltepēc*, meaning ‘at the grasshopper’s hill’). Built in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the castle has been military college, imperial and presidential residence, observatory, official guest-house and, since 1939, the location of the National Museum of History. The excursionists enjoying Chapultepec in the 1920s were able to witness, in the still extensive woods, a considerable variety of live instrumental and sung music, along with rhythms and dances from different parts of Mexico that, in time, contributed their own elements to an eclectic urban musical culture. That eclecticism is reflected in Ponce’s music.

The symphonic triptych *Chapultepec* was Ponce’s first large-scale orchestral work, apart from the First Piano Concerto (the *Romantic*); it was also the first Mexican symphonic work written for orchestra in the modernist style that could be defined as

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\(^8\) That is, the Mexican conductor José Yves Limantour (1919–76), not his father, a politician of the same name (1854–1935), who served as Secretary of Finance (1893–1911) under the regime of Porfirio Díaz – although, as it happens, Limantour père, who was half-French, lived in exile in Paris at the same time as Ponce lived in the city.
Mexican or as ‘Mexican impressionism’. The first sketches date from 1917; the piece was
developed and formally composed in 1921 and performed in its first version in 1922.
The movements were then entitled ‘La hora matinal’ (‘The Morning Hour’), ‘El Paseo
Diurno’ (‘The Daytime Walk’) and ‘Plenilunio fantástico’ (‘Fantastic Full Moon’); the
first edition bore two subtitles – Tres Bocetos Sinfónicos (‘Three Symphonic Sketches’)
on the title-page and Tríptico Sinfónico at the top of the score (possibly an apocryphal
edition by a copyist). Later, during his stay in Paris, Ponce revised some of his works,
including this one, and produced a new version that was published by Peer Music in
New York in 1934. It is this second version which is performed nowadays; it retains the
triptych structure of the first version by replacing the second movement, ‘Paseo Diurno’,
with one entitled ‘Nocturno’; the titles of the outer movements of this second version –
given its first performance on 24 August 1934 by the Orquesta Sinfónica de México
conducted by Carlos Chávez in the Teatro Hidalgo – became ‘Primavera’ (‘Spring’) and
‘Canto y Danza’ (‘Song and Dance’); and within the year Stokowski had given the
work its US premiere in New York. The performance recorded here restores the ‘Paseo
Diurno’ – itself a seven-minute symphonic poem – to its original position, in its first
recording. Both ‘Primavera’ and ‘Paseo Diurno’ are written in symphonic sonata form;
‘Nocturno’ has a simple ternary form; ‘Canto y Danza’ has a complemented ternary form
with episode–development and coda.

The exposition of ‘Primavera’ presents five motifs, two of which form the basis of
the main section and the remaining three that of the second part. The motifs are
highly varied in nature and are always embedded in a texture that sets them in contrast,
achieving an orchestral palette that is highly unusual in the Mexican music of the day.

The motifs of the first subject – voiced by the woodwind – are brief, introducing
the main section, which suggests an allegory of birdsong in the sacred woods of the
pre-Hispanic peoples; this theme overlaps almost immediately with the second subject,
which is endowed with a mysterious, ritual character by the horns and generates a
section of praise or supplication to the deities of the forest.

A third subject, also with an archaic, ritual quality, opens the second section of the
exposition: this theme is also presented by the horns and mimics the sonorous call of
the conch, intrinsic to the rituals of the Mesoamerican peoples. As soon as the third subject has been stated, a fourth and a fifth subject are presented in counterpoint. The fourth subject is played on the third and fourth horns and also evokes a ritual air, notwithstanding some dance-like features. The fifth subject, introduced by the strings, is one of elegiac modulation. The themes in this second section show expert construction, especially in their orchestral deployment, and display free counterpoint of the highest order.

A three-bar introduction leads to the first part of the development section through a variant on the fourth subject. This introduction is countered by the descending chromaticism of a sixth subject and merges with jubilant sounds from the forest, leading to the seventh subject. In this two-part development, the music uses segments of all the themes employed in the exposition.

The recapitulation, less extensive than the initial exposition, uses symphonic variation in mirror form; it opens with the fourth and sixth subjects, with no loss of structural spontaneity, thus demonstrating Ponce’s extraordinary feeling for musical continuity. The second section of this recapitulation displays the first and second subjects interlaced with the fourth until the movement comes to a brilliant close.

An unbroken melodic line extends throughout the following ‘Nocturno’ [2], which incorporates several different motifs; they not only allow it to develop some scale but also generate a sense of depth from which various musical impressions emanate: elegy, intimacy, amorous melancholy, dialogue with nocturnal nature, solitude. The impulse for the movement seems to have been the initial phrase of Ponce’s song Marchita el Alma (‘The Soul Wilting’), although it appears, almost insinuated, only at the end of the first section of the ‘Nocturno’, in the melody woven between the strings and the horns. Distant motifs can be heard immersed in this texture, suggesting the song of the mockingbird. Then, in the second section, the melodic line increases in drama with a new motif in triplets on the horns. The cellos, clarinets and other woodwinds alternate briefly, always culminating passionately with the motif from Marchita el Alma. The repetition of the triplets, now in the strings, precedes the most intense section, beginning with a new and persistent mournful phrase over the pianissimo murmuring
of the strings. Immediately, and in constant crescendo, the musical texture diversifies, with duplications that include fragments of mirrored counterpoint that seem to capture the reflection of moonlight in water. The mournful motif contrasts with the continual, elegiac plasticity of the beginning of the Nocturne and rises to a climax, before the tension is released in a diminuendo that leads to the conclusion of this atmospheric painting, with the memory of Marchita el Alma still floating on the strings of a solo cello and a rising fourth suggesting a solitary mockingbird.

The sonata-form ‘Paseo Diurno’ (‘Daytime Walk’) depicts the pleasure of walkers in the woods of Chapultepec. Its character, in an urbane and intermittent perpetuum mobile, conveys an excitement that Ponce himself may well have experienced in 1923 when a zoological garden was inaugurated in Chapultepec, immediately converting the woods into a favourite place for walks and the recreation of local people and visitors to Mexico City. The exposition begins with fanfares and sonorous, jubilant effects, starting with scherzando scales and leaps by the strings that suggest the expectation of the visitors as they approach. The first subject follows, overflowing with energy and a sense of happiness which is interrupted suddenly by two transitory themes that modify a scene charged with expectation; this passage is followed by a transition to the second section of the piece. The first subject of this section has a rustic, pleading intonation suggesting the call of a street-seller. Surprisingly, Ponce breaks with this rather tender line and carries on, via a richly scored passage, to the development section, which introduces a new theme marked by imitative counterpoint. This theme is first heard in inverted counterpoint in contrary motion, repeated, over a contrasting background that contains all the musical motifs employed since the beginning of the work; this passage constitutes the first musical climax.

A second block of the development has an extended bass line in figured pedal point that would seem to evoke the roaring and howling in the zoo. Ponce sets over it one further contrapuntal variant in contrary motion and an augmentation of the initial subject of the development. Thereafter, the music proceeds to the recapitulation, which (unlike the exposition) features an extended transition towards its second section. Ponce closes the movement brilliantly with the basic subject of the development, with figured
and tremolo chords and an orchestral tutti in the background, emulating the boundless enjoyment of the day-trippers in Chapultepec.

The musical material of the concluding ‘Canto y Danza’ (‘Song and Dance’) is linked to two other works by Ponce: the fourth of the Preludios Encadenados (‘Linked Preludes’) for piano of 1927 and the Canto y Danza de los Antiguos Mexicanos (‘Song and Dance of the Ancient Mexicans’) for orchestra of 1928, both written during Ponce’s stay in Paris. A mournful indigenous chant opens the ‘Canto y Danza’ over the sound of percussion instruments that emulate pre-Hispanic sounds and rhythms; it is repeated five times. The last variant of this chant is suddenly interrupted and gives way to a second theme with variations on ostinato figures; the resulting fabric of sound creates an extraordinary mixture of indigenous features with coastal sonorities from the Gulf of Mexico, where the influence of Caribbean music could be felt. A recitative on the oboe, rising towards a point of rhythmic ecstasy, is then joined by the strings in anticipation of another dance. This recitative is brought to a head by rhythmic-melodic motifs similar in many aspects to the Mexican dance known as the huapango, and all the musical elements used throughout the dance are then immediately heard in counterpoint to create the climax. Gradually the formidable rhythmic impulse yields to a ritardando, which leads on to the closing passage, where the final bars once more take up the expressive impetus, with energetic chords conveying at one and the same time anger, nostalgia and rebellion.

Estampas Nocturnas
Ponce’s Estampas Nocturnas (‘Nocturnal Engravings’) for string orchestra were originally composed in 1908 for solo piano, as three Bocetos Nocturnos (‘Night Sketches’), and a version for string orchestra, as Tres Cuadros Nocturnos (‘Three Night Pictures’), was premiered in 1912, as the first work in the historic first season of concerts of the Orquesta Beethoven, conducted by its founder, Julián Carrillo; this occasion marked Ponce’s debut as the father of Mexican musical nationalism, and it included the first performance of his Piano Concerto No. 1, the Romántico. The version for string orchestra had three movements: ‘La Noche’ (‘Night’), ‘En tiempos del Rey Sol’ (‘In the
Times of the Sun King’) and ‘Dormi Piccolo Amore’ (‘Sleep, My Little Darling’). Ponce later (exactly when is not clear) added a final scherzo, and the work was published in 1923. The *Estampas Nocturnas* display all the virtues of effective writing for strings – balance, contrast, transparency and virtuosity – and they take their place in the tradition of string serenades from Mozart to Brahms, Dvořák, Grieg and Tchaikovsky, while also presenting Mexican elements. The work is constructed as a cycle with considerable thematic unity.

‘La Noche’ begins by evoking the mysterious atmosphere of night: a melody in gradual, stepped descents leads, within a few bars, to an elegiac and mystic nocturne. A variation on the initial material now arises as if in rejoicing, the contrasting violas in a dark sonority. Gradually the musical line reaches a deep calm in an exquisite first closure, marked *dolce*. The last bars of this first episode are an exclamation of ecstasy and exultation. A second episode opens with the introductory material, now over a background of *pizzicati*, and then once again adopts an almost exultatory character, although in a variation more concentrated in rhythm and tempo. Gradually the exultation gives way to a profound and intimate meditation upon the mystery of night.

‘En Tiempos del Rey Sol’ is a gavotte, the melodic grace of which is initially expressed in elegant triplets that break suddenly into leaps of descending intervals; in spite of a general feeling of joy, a depth of melancholy can be sensed, evoking the French court and the gallantry of the times of Louis XIV, the *Roi Soleil*. The second part of this first section uses new melodic lines that express even more nostalgia but which finally find their answer in the initial theme of the Gavotte. The second section, which is Romantic in nature, takes the form of a trio flanked by two iterations of the gavotte and with much plasticity in the melodies. This trio section leads to an exquisite climax generated by the alternation, in dialogue between the different string parts, until returning with deep nostalgia to a repetition of the opening of the movement, which now ends as it began, like a mid-eighteenth-century courtly French gavotte.

‘Arrulladora’ (‘Lullaby’) unfolds in its entirety over a delicate ostinato that begins in the lower strings. Although the music may suggest a relationship to the *berceuse* of European tradition, its affinity with Mexican song is closer. At the centre of the lullaby,
a brief but expressive phrase on the cello timidly draws the silhouette of the piece, thus creating an A, A' structure. This section may have been intended to illustrate the moment at which the child is carefully laid in its cradle: Ponce later wrote a variant of this piece for piano, with the title ‘Duerme’ (‘Go to Sleep’).

The last movement, ‘Scherzo de Puck’ (‘Puck’s Scherzo’) [8], begins with five musical motifs of a fantastic character, melody and rhythm alternating to suggest the mercurial nature of the infinitely playful, satiric, ironic and slippery Shakespearean character from _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_. After the introduction Ponce employs a melodic line in the cellos – broad and plastic, almost ‘magical’ – that is then partially imitated by the violas against _pizzicati_ in the other strings, thematically evoking the opening passages of ‘La Noche’, but now used in the representation of Puck. At the centre of this section, the violins gradually take up the same line twice more but in ever higher registers. The exposition presents a mysterious texture of long chords alternating _f_ and _p_ before a brief intermezzo increases the dynamic and leads via a vigorous _accelerando_ to the brilliant close.

**Instantáneas Mexicanas**

‘Mexican Snapshots’, a cycle of miniature pieces in simple (I, II) and compound (III, IV, V and VI) binary form, reflects both aspects of pre-Columbian Mexican history and the cultural diversity of Ponce’s own time. His last work, written in 1947 for the 1948 ceremony during which, shortly before his death, Ponce received the National Prize for the Sciences and the Arts, it manages to sound _echt_-Mexican without recourse to the indigenous or folk instruments that composers like Chavez and Revueltas made popular in the first half of the twentieth century.

In ‘Canto de la Malinche’ (‘Malinche’s Song’) [9], Ponce assigns to the flute a melancholic melodic line formed of two motifs, in different but complementary registers, reflecting sonorities that can still be heard on archaic instruments in indigenous areas. His intention was probably to depict the beautiful ‘Malinche’ or Malintzin, in moments of sadness and nostalgia after she was given as a slave in tribute to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in 1519, after the battle of Centla, in the region of Tabasco in southern Mexico. Later, having become his concubine, she played a key role in the
conquest of Mexico and Central America as translator for and adviser to the Spaniards. She gave birth to one of the first mestizos resulting from the Spanish conquest of Mexico: Hernán Cortéz’s son Martín.

The indigenous music of Mexico today shows a close relationship with the musical archetypes of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica: ritualistic use of melody based on four notes, with a modal alternation (suggesting the contrasting effect of major and minor parallel modes in European music); the rhythmic support of percussion instruments such as the huéhuétl, the teponaxtle, bells or jingles made of various materials, hollowed wood scrapers and so on. Here, in Ponce’s ‘Música Indígena’ [10], they are simulated by modern percussion instruments.

‘Canción Popular’ (‘Popular Song’) [11] is an orchestral recasting of Ponce’s own song Si Algún Ser (‘If Some Being’). It possesses some characteristics of the music of the period of the Mexican revolution of 1910–17, which was still very much alive in the 1920s, when aspects of rural music from the most diverse regions became interlaced with that of the urban zones, in particular Mexico City and Guadalajara (in Jalisco).

The exuberant ‘Baile del Bajío’ [12] is inspired by the tradition of the son (literally, ‘a sound of a pleasing nature’, but designating related types of vocal and dance music familiar throughout the Caribbean region and neighbouring mainland). In Mexico the son shows diverse rhythmic features in the different regions of the country: there is the coastal type from the Gulf of Mexico (showing Caribbean influence), and the abajeña from the central region and the Bajío, which embraces Guanajuato in central Mexico. The abajeña is related to the son from Jalisco on the south-west coast, which has some characteristics of the Andalusian jarabe, such as part-singing in thirds. It was the son del Bajío that Ponce took as the inspiration for the creation of his fourth Mexican ‘snapshot’. The gaiety emanated by this music reflects the dances from the region of Guanajuato: polyrhythmic, being simultaneously in ⁶⁄₈ and ³⁄₄ time, with syncopated ostinato figures in the double bass, which imitates the sound of the Mexican ‘guitarrón’ (a kind of acoustic bass guitar favoured by mariachi bands). The guitarrón is accompanied by the sonorous zapateo (shoe-tapping) of dancers on wooden platforms that provide the percussive element during local celebrations in rural areas.
‘Danzas’ I and II are orchestral recastings of the first two of the Cuatro Danzas Mexicanas for piano composed and published in 1941, both in a binary structure and using an eclectic modern language which seems to reflect the collective nature of popular fiestas, with suggestions of laughter, guffawing, mockery and other comments, including the roguish behaviour of one or more inebriated revellers. The second section of the first dance gives the floor to a couple, thus awaking the suggestion of intimacy, and concludes with an harmonious final section. In ‘Danza’ II, a solitary drunkard wanders aimlessly around the village fair, staggering to one side and another; in the second section the festive dancing returns to the intimacy of loving couples, with the desired happy ending.

Suite Sinfónica del ‘Merlin’ de I. Albéniz
The Symphonic Suite in four movements on themes from Isaac Albéniz’s opera Merlin was the second musical task undertaken by Ponce for Albéniz’s family. It was first performed on 15 December 1938, with the National Symphonic Orchestra conducted by Silvestre Revueltas in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. Ponce succeeds in concentrating the musical and dramatic discourse of a complete opera in under eighteen minutes, without the need for words or singers, thus demonstrating his mastery of thematic integration.

Albéniz died from kidney disease in 1909, eleven days before his 49th birthday, leaving Merlin (1897–1902), the first opera of an intended English-language Arthurian trilogy, unfinished. In December 1928, Laura Albéniz de Moya, daughter of the composer (and herself a noteworthy painter and illustrator) wrote on behalf of the Albéniz family to commission Ponce, then enjoying his sojourn in Paris, to carry out a complete revision of the score of Merlin. He had been recommended to the family in Barcelona by the Catalan pianist and composer Joan Lamote de Grignon – a recommendation confirmed by Paul Dukas, ‘whom we consulted and who put us in contact with you’. It was a challenge even for a well-prepared musician like Ponce,

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9 Letter from Laura Albéniz de Moya to Manuel M. Ponce, dated 17 December 1928 (Archivo Histórico de Estado de Zacatecas (AHEZ), 8ª. collection: Manuel M. Ponce; series: Documents; subseries: Correspondence; file 239).
since the original manuscript had been mislaid, and Ponce had at his disposition only the engraved plates of the three acts, in the form of the galley proofs supplied by the publisher, Mutuelle, which contained numerous errors. He was thus ‘naturally obliged to rely on his own ingenuity when faced with any quandary’, as Laura Albéniz warned him. Ponce’s correspondence reveals that the revision of Merlin took him several years and so it was that, on 29 August 1932, Ponce received another letter in which Laura Albéniz de Moya expressed the satisfaction of her mother, Rosina, Albéniz’s widow, at a project which he had proposed to them and on which he was then already embarked, in addition to completing and correcting the score. That was the composition of an orchestral suite, in four linked movements, based on the Prelude and Dance from Act III and the Choral and Finale of Act I. In 1937, as a token of their gratitude for his work and his devotion, the family presented him with an expensive gold watch.

For the first movement of the Merlin Suite, almost all the themes Ponce used were from the Prelude, with the exception of the three final bars, which form a link to the second movement, Andante. But from then on, the thematic elements are taken from the opera irrespective of their original order, a manifestation of Ponce’s interest in the musical coherence of Albéniz’s work, freeing it from the demands of the libretto.

The Andante corresponds to the aria in which, in the opera, King Arthur forgives Morgan le Faye, her son Mordred and their ally Sir Pellinore. Ponce uses musical references from Act III of the opera, emphasising the choral song ‘In Maytime, Maytime, merry Maytime, when freshest flowers are springing’, sung during King Arthur’s dream; and he continues with an intense violin solo encapsulating the lament of Merlin’s slave girl Nivian before the wizard’s rival, the enchantress Morgan, in which she implores Morgan’s help to free her from captivity (in Act II).

This Andante movement is followed by music taken from the opening of Act III, where Merlin, unaware of Nivian’s real intentions, innocently lends her his magic wand. This section serves as a transition to the third movement. The fatal premonition that Morgan voices against Merlin in the presence of Mordred is heard on the cor anglais; it
is the same musical motif as was used by Albéniz in Act III where Merlin makes plans to thwart the union of Arthur and Guinevere.

In the third movement [17], the musical-dramatic centre is the dance of Nivian and the Saracen dancers. Here a solo violin evokes the moment when Nivian steals the elves’ gold in transparent bowls in order to deliver it to Merlin. The music of the gnomes chasing the Saracen maidens and their magical disappearance in the forest is also used, inspiring the most intense music of the Suite. Motifs from the close of the opera are also prominent, especially that accompanying Nivian’s plea to Merlin to let her hold the magic wand.

The final movement of the Suite opens with the fanfares that announce the appearance of Nivian in the opera [18]. Ponce begins this part with the hymn sung by the crowd exalting the bravery of the knights, before the competition to free the sword from the stone, a feat reserved only for Arthur. During the development of the finale, Ponce uses music associated with Nivian and her Saracen sisters as they take flight with the summer swallows in search of their longed-for liberty. The coda corresponds to fragments from the end of the First Act, the moment of Arthur’s coronation by the Archbishop.

Rodolfo Ritter Arenas has been a frequent solo pianist with most of the major Mexican orchestras, giving the world premieres of the Second Piano Concerto by Manuel Ponce, the Ricardo Castro Piano Concerto and the Second and Third Piano Concertos by Gonzalo Curiel, works which he has also recorded – Ponce for Sterling and Curiel for Toccata Classics. He first came to national prominence in 2003, when he won first prize, a gold medal and a number of special prizes in the Angélica Morales-Yamaha Competition and the Parnassós International Piano Competition, including the audience prize. In 2008 he became the youngest member of the Concertistas de Bellas Artes, the most prominent cultural institution in Mexico, and was recently nominated a Yamaha Artist. He also composes piano and chamber music for short films, produces recordings and arranges Mexican traditional music.
José Miramontes Zapata graduated from the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatoire in Leningrad, where he studied with Tatiana Khitrova, Mikhail Kukushkin and Victor Fedotov. He has worked as pianist, choir director and cultural manager. In 2000 he founded the Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí and as artistic director and principal conductor of the Orchestra he has promoted many choral and orchestral activities with local young musicians, developing a constant cultural growth in San Luis Potosí, with more than 80 concerts per year. Under his guidance and direction, the choir of the San Luis Potosí State School of Music became the first Mexican chorus to be invited to perform, in 2001, at the Grosser Saal of the Berlin Philharmonic, and in 2005 the Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí became the first Latin American orchestra to perform at the Grosser Musikvereinsaal in Vienna. At home José Miramontes Zapata has led the San Luis Potosí Symphony Orchestra to the forefront of Mexican orchestral life and is co-ordinating, with the pianist Rodolfo Ritter and the organisation Novo Forte Cultura, a number of first recordings of orchestral and concertante works to create an anthology of Mexican music on the Swedish label Sterling and now on Toccata Classics. José Miramontes Zapata was invited to the Associazione Mundiale Toscanini as a guest conductor in 2003 and 2005 and has also appeared at the Musicalta festival in Alsace, and in Ravella.

Since its foundation in 2000, the San Luis Potosí Symphony Orchestra has occupied an important role in the diffusion of Mexican symphonic music. Concerts in some of the major halls in Mexico, China and Europe (including the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City and the Grosser Musikvereinsaal in Vienna) have conferred a growing prestige on the Orchestra. Under its chief conductor José Miramontes Zapata, it has performed in Mexico’s most important cultural festivals, also working with other prominent Mexican and international musicians. The Orchestra makes an ongoing effort to take its music to different regions of the state of San Luis Potosí, as well as to the rest of the country where people rarely have the opportunity to hear symphonic music. Giving over 80 concerts a year, it promotes the performance and recording of the works of major symphonic and concertante compositions, among them first recordings.
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of forgotten European masters like Woldemar Bargiel, Charles Bordes, Henri Duparc and Emanuel Mööor, and important Mexican composers such as Julián Carrillo, Gonzalo Curiel, Candelario Huizar, Arnulfo Miramontes, José Pomar and Manuel M. Ponce. The Orchestra also promotes cultural development with its chamber ensembles and pedagogical programmes.
Recorded live on 26 April 2015 (Chapultepec), 15 April 2018 (Estampas Nocturnas, Instantáneas Mexicanas) and 29 April 2018 (Symphonic Suite from ‘Merlin’) in the Teatro de la Paz, San Luis Potosí, Mexico
Recording Engineer: Roberto Ríos Gálvez
Editing: José Miramontes Zapata, Rodolfo Ritter Arenas
Mastering: Fernando Espinoza Nuño
Producer: Novo Forte Cultura (Lhu Cortés, General Director; Ángel Augusto Ramírez Zarco, Executive Producer)
Logistical co-ordination: Froylán Padrón Zárate
Remastering and noise reduction: Adaq Khan
Acknowledgements:
Emilio Díaz and Dolly R. de Díaz for their support with the scores and for their invaluable information;
Instituto Zacatecano de Cultura for its valuable documentation and in particular Theo Hernández and Carla Berges for their valuable help in clarifying matters concerning Merlin and for making available the letters of Manuel Ponce;
Government of the State of San Luis Potosí, Mexico;
Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Zacatecano de Cultura;
Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí;
Teatro de la Paz

This recording is dedicated to the memory of Zaeth Ritter, Director of Orquesta y Coros Mexicana and untiring promoter of the music of Manuel M. Ponce.

Digital typesetting of the scores: Uriel Luna Herrera, Marcos A. Sauceda Martínez
Cover photograph: collection of Rodolfo Ritter Arena
Texts: José Miramontes Zapata and Rodolfo Ritter Arenas
Translation: Christopher Follett
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)
Typesetting and lay-out: Kerrypress, St Albans
Executive Producer: Martin Anderson
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