Staging the Nation: Race, Religion, and History in Mexican Opera of the 1940s

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In late summer 1948, Carlos Chávez published three newspaper articles in Mexico City’s El Universal on the related topics of opera, national opera, and opera in Mexico.1 Chávez was, at this time, the first director of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), a recently created federal institution for the protection and administration of fine arts. As was customary in Chávez’s political life, these public pronouncements were meant, simultaneously, to publicize an upcoming event and to explain the rationale behind a particular decision or action that was often both artistic and political in nature. On this occasion, Chávez announced his intention to create an opera company and an opera academy within the INBA, while drawing attention to the first performance, on October 3, 1948, of three one-act operas composed under the Institute’s auspices: La Mulata de Córdoba by José Pablo Moncayo (1912–58), Elena by Eduardo Hernández Moncada (1899–1995), and Carlota by Luis Sandi (1905–95).

In a review of the performance issued in 1949, the aspiring composer Luis Herrera de la Fuente recalled the numerous obstacles that earlier Mexican opera composers had encountered in their attempts to have their operas produced and dared to hope that now “the necessary conditions for the blossoming of librettists and opera composers in Mexico have finally been established by the INBA.”2 Chávez’s decisions and the composition of the three operas by Moncayo, Hernández Moncada, and Sandi were received by many as the first real opportunity granted to Mexican composers to develop an operatic tradition in Mexico, something that, despite the well-documented passion of Mexican audiences for foreign opera, everybody understood to be nonexistent. As it turned out, these three operas would be the only ones commissioned and staged by the INBA under Chávez; indeed, together with Tata Vasco by Miguel Bernal Jiménez (1910–56), they were the only Mexican operas written and premiered in the 1940s. Nevertheless, the founding of the INBA, its opera company, and the composition of these four “national” operas provide us with an opportunity to reflect on the
meaning of the national in Mexico in the 1940s, the different representations of the Mexican advanced by these operas, and the existence or nonexistence of such a national operatic tradition.

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La Partenope, composed by the Mexican criollo Manuel de Sumaya to an Italian libretto by Silvio Stampiglia and produced at the court of Viceroy Fernando de Alencastre on May 1, 1711, is customarily assumed to be the second opera composed in the Americas (the first was La púrpura de la rosa by Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco, presented in Lima in 1701). But, despite this early and distinguished beginning and the undisputed predominance of opera in Mexico’s musical history in the nineteenth century, we have a poor understanding of the history of Mexican opera itself, of its highlights and many discontinuities. We do have a list of opera composers, starting perhaps with Luis Baca (1826–55), moving through to Cenobio Paniagua (1821–82), and then beyond his student Melesio Morales (1838–1908), perhaps the most successful of them all (relatively speaking). We know about the reception—sometimes positive, sometimes negative)—of some of the operas, and we have a handful of anecdotes regarding their production or lack thereof. This information has been preserved in a variety of sources, such as isolated nineteenth-century editions and the chronicles of a few performances, faithfully transmitted from one history of Mexican music or encyclopedia article to the next. But we still lack any series of editions that would allow us to evaluate the music or to understand it in terms of a historical continuity. We simply do not know enough about the composers, the full extent of their work, the sources of their librettos, or the social, political, and cultural work that their operas performed or failed to perform. Nor do we have any sense of the living tradition of the production of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Mexican opera.

On the other hand, the history of Mexican opera is inseparable from the history of the performance of European opera in Mexico: not only did imported operas provide models for Mexican composers and audiences, but they also performed important cultural work in affecting the way Mexican audiences constructed and understood their identity as citizens of a now sovereign and independent nation, separate from Europe but tenaciously holding on to its membership in Western culture. Here, too, the voracious consumption by Mexican audiences of European opera has yet to be accounted for critically.

Nevertheless, scholars, such as Robert Stevenson and Gloria Carmona, who have documented the Mexican nineteenth century at large, have made contributions to our understanding about opera in Mexico that are worth recapitulating. Mexican theatrical traditions were closely bound to those of Spain before Mexico’s War of Independence (1810–21). But, early in the century, the operas of Paisiello
and Cimarosa, sung in Spanish, garnered quite a following among Mexican audiences. After 1830, and especially after 1850, Italian opera—bel canto composers, followed by Verdi and eventually the composers of verismo—was extremely well loved. Italian opera was performed by short-lived companies—featuring Italian singers and organized mainly by Italian impresarios—that toured the country despite the difficult travel and the lack of adequate performance venues. Mexico had an unstable political life after independence: the many coups d’état, the internal wars, the loss of half of the country’s territory to the United States in the 1840s, the threats of invasion by Spain and England, and the imposition of an emperor, Maximilian I, by the government of Napoleon III in the 1860s made it unlikely that the Mexican state or the never-growing urban middle classes would sustain a Mexican opera company. Meanwhile, the predominance of Italian companies performing Italian works made it very difficult for Mexican composers to have their operas produced—a fact that was aggravated, if not caused, by the undervaluation of Mexican authors by Mexican audiences.

Yet, while a scholarly, detailed, comprehensive, and critical account of the history of Mexican opera is lacking, Mexican composers and singers of the first half of the twentieth century could draw upon an orally transmitted story of Mexican opera that they experienced as a grievance, as a lack of opportunity and support, as a tale of productions denied and operas badly performed. It was all this that Carlos Chávez sought to address with the founding of the INBA.

From 1928 to 1948 Chávez had managed and conducted the Orquesta Sinfónica de México, a seasonal orchestra supported by a mixture of ticket revenues, private donations (individual and corporate), and state sponsorship. As the head of this orchestra, Chávez had deliberately and steadily performed a repertoire dominated by modernist pieces (by Mexicans and foreigners) and Mexican nationalist compositions. In so doing, Chávez provided his audience with the opportunity to interact with composers in the construction of a representation of themselves as Mexicans and gave them the equally important opportunity to imagine themselves as modern audiences with an increased capacity to sustain and appreciate modern music and a modern musical life. Thus, Chávez's programming and conducting performed cultural and political work that was doubly nationalist at a time when the formation of a national identity was crucial—or so it seemed to Mexican politicians and artists—to the survival of Mexico as a sovereign country.

Chávez was guided by a keen sense of the sociology of musical life that he made increasingly explicit in his writings. He understood composition, performance, and reception in terms of a marketplace in which composition (in this case, modern music by Mexican composers) could only take place if a demand for it had been created; this demand would subsequently be satisfied by a steady production of music that would in turn create its own stable conditions of production and an inevitable increase in quality. But by the early 1940s the situation
had changed. Political stability, urban growth, and the spread of the middle classes diminished the imperative of nationalism; at the same time, the new situation indeed created a demand for music, but one that was easily met by other orchestras and conductors with a more accessible repertoire, based on the proven success of nineteenth-century European music. Fearing a narrowing of the market for Mexican composers and music, Chávez created the INBA in 1947, with the support of President Miguel Alemán. Thus, the Mexican state simultaneously recognized the value of national art and assumed the duty to protect it.

By 1948, Chávez’s politically nationalist agenda had not yet reached the realm of opera and he saw in the Institute the opportunity to carry this work out. (It must be said that Chávez himself did not appear to be interested in composing an opera at this point. Like many other modernist composers, in writing for the stage Chávez favored ballets and incidental music, but not opera, which he considered an old-fashioned, stagnant genre). In the newspaper articles of 1948, Chávez claimed that despite recent experiments by Debussy and other composers, opera had evolved little since the nineteenth century. And he took the opportunity to blame this state of affairs on opera companies, which he believed privileged the well trodden and lucrative at the expense of the new, thereby limiting compositional progress. Unlike private opera companies, therefore, a state-sponsored institution such as the INBA, freed from a dependence on ticket sales and patrons with conservative tastes, had the moral duty, he claimed, to support and promote experimentation as its main purpose. “If there is not enough money to support experimentation,” he wrote, “then nothing ought to be supported.”

Chávez’s ideas did not exist in a political vacuum. His main target was the private opera company that had been operating since 1943 under the name Opera Nacional A. C. Managed by Ernesto Quezada, owner of important managerial offices in other parts of Latin America, this company had been successfully presenting pieces from the conventional operatic repertoire to avid Mexican audiences. Chávez held several grievances against Opera Nacional. To begin with, it had appropriated the name Opera Nacional even though the abbreviation A. C. made it clear that it was a private, not state-sponsored, organization. In spite of this, Opera Nacional received substantial subsidies from the Mexican government, which facilitated its success and guaranteed that it would be lucrative. Opera Nacional had no permanent orchestra or chorus, but produced its seasons with “pickup” orchestras that competed with Chávez’s own Orquesta Sinfónica de México for the best musicians. As a result, Chávez claimed, these “mercenary” opera companies gave performances that were often substandard. Because Mexican singers were called to perform only minor roles next to the imported international stars, Opera Nacional contributed little to the development of Mexican opera singers. Finally, Opera Nacional, like almost every other private opera company in the history of Mexican music, had presented exclusively
foreign operas and therefore did nothing to foster the development of nationally composed opera.

Chávez did not propose a specific style for Mexican opera, but he had explicit views about how to make Mexican opera happen. His model was France, a country that had produced operas sung in its own language, with music shaped by the nation’s characteristic speech, with musical and dramatic elements derived from richly familiar traditional sources and forms and media adopted and favored by national audiences. With this prescription for national opera, Chávez’s strategy above all was to allow Mexican singers, composers, and dramatists ample opportunity to present their work in the best possible conditions. A process of natural selection would then eventually determine the course of Mexican opera. Thus, Chávez applied to opera the broader conception of nationalism that he had espoused as a guiding principle earlier in the decade, one that was much more concerned with the protection of Mexican labor within the musical market than with particular stylistic traits of the music—whether or not they were derived from folksong or popular lore.

It is in this broader context that we can better understand the operas of the 1940s. All three operas premiered by the INBA turned to the Mexican past for their subject matter. Hernández Moncada’s *Elena* (libretto by Francisco Zendejas) is a rather conventional romantic tragedy set in the time of the French occupation of Mexico—in the mid-1860s, during the reign of Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian, brother of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. Sandi’s *Carlota* (libretto again by Zendejas) addresses more directly the French occupation, having as its main character Maximilian’s ill-fated wife, Charlotte, a daughter of King Leopold of Belgium, who, it is said, went insane after the French withdrew their support for Maximilian, precipitating his demise and execution in 1867. Moncayo’s *La Mulata de Córdoba* (libretto by Xavier Villaurrutia and Agustín Lazo) reaches further back in time for its subject, to the seventeenth century, when Mexico was still a Spanish colony and the Inquisition persecuted those suspected of heresy or heterodoxy.

Of course, the “Mexicanness” of these operas is not limited to their subject matter. All three are nationally and historically conscious in a musical sense as well. *Elena*’s argument is based on the storyline of a popular *corrido*, a strophic narrative genre possibly derived from the Spanish *romance* and acculturated in Mexico by the mid-nineteenth century. The *corrido* is tightly bound to Mexico’s conflicted political history. Scholars such as Américo Paredes have placed its origin and growth in the 1830s and 1840s, at the new border between Mexico and the new state of Texas, at a time when Mexicans were rapidly becoming second-rate citizens in a land they had previously owned. Other scholars, such as Vicente T. Mendoza, place its origin in the last third of the nineteenth century, during the political dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, a time of brutal oppression of
the peasantry and the indigenous communities by the government and the landed aristocracy (1876–1910). In any case, the corrido narrates stories pertaining to the common people—love stories, of course, but more particularly the glorious accomplishments of local and national heroes, who are very often represented as social outcasts forced by social injustice and oppression to live outside the law. By the early twentieth century, the corrido was regarded as a national musical genre and enshrined as such in the period of intense nationalism concurrent to and following the Mexican Revolution, the civil war lasting from 1910 to 1920 that was sparked by democratic claims against Porfirio Díaz.

As part of the experimental nature of his Elena, Hernández Moncada included a choir that sang the multiple stanzas of the corrido as a commentary on the actions and events of the drama. Thus, he worked in elements from a traditional popular genre alongside the art music that dominates the opera, and employed the narrative nature of the corrido to ascribe a narrative function to the choir that sings it. Even though the corrido was not used during Maximilian’s reign as a means of cultural and political resistance, the social associations of the genre with politics, liberation, and uprising create a striking political reference to the historical period in which the action is situated: the French occupation of Mexico and the imposition of foreign rule.

Luis Sandi, on the other hand, wrote a waltz and a mazurka into his opera Carlota. Here, again, even though Maximilian did not introduce these dances to Mexico, they are present in Sandi’s opera as musical signifiers of the imperial court. The waltz, in particular, was by 1948 already invested with several complex national meanings. It was a favorite dance of the nineteenth-century upper and aristocratic classes, against which Mexicans had rebelled in 1910. At the same time, however, Mexican composers had excelled at composing waltzes for aristocratic patrons; that many of them are undistinguishable from their European models was a source of pride for Mexican composers. Finally, the tradition of writing waltzes had by the early twentieth century migrated to the less affluent classes and filtered out to musical life in the rural provinces, such that the waltz remains, even in our time, a national genre. If in Carlota the waltz and the mazurka are complex but benign signifiers of the imperial court, a static choir delivers a more explicit political commentary in the form of a recitative with female voices representing the motherland and male voices representing destiny. This commentary was sung into microphones and delivered by amplification, ensuring that it was heard over the (more traditionally ambiguous) orchestral and stage music.

The use of musical genres foreign in principle to opera, but having national significance, is less obvious in the case of Moncayo’s La Mulata de Córdoba, an opera whose plot is derived from an orally transmitted legend that eventually circulated in writing as well. At the heart of the plot is a beautiful and seductive mulatto woman living alone in Córdoba, a city located on the coast of the Gulf of
Mexico in the state of Veracruz, where the Spanish brought a substantial number of African slaves during the colonial epoch. The legendary Mulata was an enchantress, perhaps even a witch, and probably a healer who took care of the poor. In addition to her possible involvement with the dark arts, the behavior of La Mulata that most alienated the residents of Córdoba, and later Mexico City, was her reluctance to accept any of her many suitors as her husband—she defied social expectations of acceptable female behavior. When she was brought to trial before the Inquisition and condemned to burn at the stake, La Mulata escaped from the Inquisition’s dungeons using her magic powers. In the version of the legend brought to the stage by Moncayo, she escapes by drawing a boat on the walls of her cell and sailing away in it.

In Moncayo’s opera, La Mulata is given the name Soledad (Solitude). While Soledad’s status as a Mexican woman is unquestioned, her origins are uncertain: nobody knows when she arrived or from whence she came. Her father, as she tells one of her suitors, was white, but she herself is of mixed race, white and African. Thus, in a country in which the population is predominantly mixed, but of indigenous and European race, Soledad’s Africanness marks her as an other. Her exoticism thus “explains” her unusual power over men: her seductiveness is a result of the natural sensuality of her race. Conversely, her “ethnic” sensuality also justifies the hopelessness of the men who willingly put themselves under her spell and exonerates them from guilt. It is the role of the women of the town, then, to coerce her out of her marginality.

Moncayo belongs to the second generation of Mexican nationalist composers; he was a student of Chávez’s experimental composition workshop in the 1930s, with its emphasis on linear textures and experimentation with many different Western and non-Western pitch collections. Moncayo’s music, like that of his fellow students in Chávez’s “Taller,” is less modernist and less deliberately experimental in its search for a representation of Mexicanness than that of his teacher (or of his teacher’s contemporary, Silvestre Revueltas). As a result, one of his orchestral pieces, Huapango, is a favorite of Mexican audiences and conductors and has been used in radio and television as background music for broadcasts with an expressly nationalist content. Huapango employs three melodies from the traditional repertoire of the Mexican genre known as son jarocho, which has as a trademark the use of hemiola and syncopation, and different combinations and oppositions of binary and ternary rhythms. Resting on this codification of the son jarocho and its rhythms as expressly Mexican, Moncayo employs these features in La Mulata de Córdoba as well, albeit less prominently. To be sure, after a slow dramatic beginning in the introduction, Moncayo changes the tempo and heralds the new musical materials with a very audible hemiola in the entire orchestra (ex. 1).

Most of the time Moncayo’s almost random alternation of rhythmic groupings of two and three within a binary meter remains in the bass line, where the
rhythmic juxtapositions drive the music forward in a dancelike movement. Indeed, these rhythms appear especially when Soledad engages in the sexually charged bodily movements that so enchant the men of the town. At the same time, the reference to the son jarocho provides local color by the association of the son not only with the state of Veracruz, but also with the warmer climate—and women—of the coastal region (ex. 2).

In many other sections of the score, Moncayo deliberately borrows from Puccini’s orchestral and vocal style. More precisely, Moncayo expresses Soledad’s exoticism by aligning her musically with the “exotic” heroines of Puccini’s operas, Butterfly and Turandot, orientalizing her music at times by bringing in pentatonic scales and, above all, modal melodies with lowered leading tones. These pitch collections appear especially when Soledad alludes to the hidden reasons for her behavior. Moncayo’s powerfully lush orchestration confirms the double reference to Puccini, the opera composer, and to his female characters (ex. 3).

As national operas representing national history, none of the three operas I have considered thus far addresses a subject or story that might have been considered politically controversial. Both the French and the Spanish had been expelled from Mexico through wars of liberation waged by recognized historical figures. And though repudiated as an emperor and a foreigner, Maximilian had been a liberal monarch during his short reign and was deeply interested in Mexico’s nature and culture. Indeed, the image of the royal couple itself had often been cloaked in a romantic aura due to their tragic end. Finally, the Mexican state of the 1940s understood itself as entirely separate from the Church and as the guarantor of nonsectarian education and religious freedom; both the state and (presumably) civil society viewed the role of the Inquisition in imposing Roman Catholic doctrine as pernicious.

Example 1 La Mulata de Córdoba, Obertura, m 39–40 (Mexico City: Ediciones Mexicanas de Música, 1979).

Example 2 La Mulata de Córdoba, Obertura, m 44–51 (Mexico City: Ediciones Mexicanas de Música, 1979).
A different situation arose with Bernal Jiménez’s *Tata Vasco*, commissioned in 1940 by Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores to commemorate the arrival in Michoacán, four hundred years earlier, of the Spaniard Vasco de Quiroga (1470–1565). Quiroga—or Tata Vasco, as he was later called—arrived in New Spain in 1531 as an administrator and judge ([*Oidor*]) of the Real Audiencia, a Spanish tribunal that functioned as a court of appeals. In 1538 he was named bishop of Michoacán. In his capacities as both a civil and ecclesial administrator, Quiroga was a political and cultural mediator between the Spanish crown, its local and brutal proxies, the Catholic Church, and the P’urhépecha or Tarascan indigenous communities of Michoacán.

Like many clerics who traveled to the New World in the first fifty years after the conquest, Quiroga was inspired by utopian ideas—in his case, those of Thomas More. He was instrumental in the spread, coerced or not, of the Catholic faith in the region and in the building and organization of religious and charitable institutions, such as the Pátzcuaro Cathedral and a series of schools and hospitals for the natives (the Hospitales de Santa Fe). His greatest impact, perhaps, was in the reorganization of the economic life of the province after the devastation inflicted by the conquest. Among other achievements, he grouped the native population into guildlike communities, each devoted to the production and trade of one particular craft: copper, lacquer, guitars, ceramics, textiles, and so on. While crucial to the enculturation of the natives in Spanish beliefs and ways of life, this type of organization also allowed the economic growth and self-sustainment of the communities, a process that subsists to some extent even today. Notwithstanding the politics and ethics of colonization and forced evangelization, Quiroga has been inscribed into Mexican history as a protector of the native populations and as their benevolent and devoted educator in the beliefs, customs, arts, and trades of Spain.

Although *Tata Vasco* was successfully premiered in Pátzcuaro, the former seat of the Bishopric, on February 15, 1941, a scheduled performance in Mexico City in the state-owned Palacio de Bellas Artes was canceled for fear that the state might appear to be endorsing the opera’s intense religiosity, which was certain to cause a political controversy. The opera’s first performance in Mexico City thus took place instead in the privately owned Teatro Arbeu on March 25, 1941. It was only
later, in 1949, and as part of Chávez’s avowed desire to foster national opera, that a performance took place at the Palacio, which was by then being managed by the INBA.

The sensitive politics of Tata Vasco and of its imagined nation need to be understood within the context of the devastating power struggle that took place between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church in the century preceding the opera’s composition. The issues at stake were many and important: the imbalance between a state that was politically weak and impoverished and a durable religious institution that had amassed considerable wealth and political power under the protection of the Spanish crown; the perceived allegiance of the Church to foreign powers such as the Vatican and, through its foreign priests, to other nations as well; the control by the Church of the peasantry and of great expanses of land that both the state and the growing bourgeoisie regarded as being underutilized; and finally the control, as perceived in the 1920s, of “the consciousness of the Mexicans” who, as the government claimed, were kept by the Church in a state of irrational superstition through the nonscientific education provided by religious institutions.

This struggle took different ideological and legal forms that led to armed confrontations, first in the 1850s and as recently as the 1920s and 1930s. Particularly cruel was the war of 1926–29. A new constitution adopted in 1917, during the War of Revolution, included articles actively curtailing the power of the Church. The high clergy and several Catholic secular organizations refused to recognize the new constitution and, more importantly, the authority of the postrevolutionary state. While some members of the Church and some secular organizations proposed that the battle should be waged in court on legal grounds, others took more radical approaches. The confrontation reached a critical point when President Plutarco Elías Calles, himself violently anticlerical, passed the corresponding laws and amendments to the penal code. In response, the Church suspended religious services throughout the country. A protracted military, legal, and diplomatic confrontation ensued with the high clergy close to the Vatican, the political arm of the Church (the very radical Liga Nacional para la Defensa de la Libertad Religiosa), and the military movement known as Los Cristeros. These were groups of peasants engaged in guerrilla warfare against federal troops in Western Mexico (including Michoacán), whose immediate and almost only goal was to regain the possibility of attending Church, though the struggle was characterized by extreme brutality from both sides.

The overall result of this confrontation was the loss of the privileges and political strength that the Church had held since the conquest and evangelization of the native populations in the sixteenth century. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Church and its active supporters engaged in different forms of political and cultural resistance. Bernal Jiménez, who had considered the priesthood before
choosing to devote himself to what he called an apostolate of music, can be seen as a member of this resistance. Given the context in which *Tata Vasco* was created, it is worth describing in detail the particular understanding of the nation that is advanced by Bernal Jiménez through the plot, libretto, and music of the opera. 18

*Tata Vasco* is structured in five parts, or *cuadros*, which, in some of the manuscript sources of the music, are organized into three acts, with the third act taking one *cuadro*. The opera opens with the representation of what is described in the libretto as a savage scene: the funerary rites for the last of the P’urhépecha kings, assassinated by the Spaniard Nuño de Guzmán, and the Indians’ cries for revenge. Among them is the Indian prince Ticátame, a young warrior in love with the king’s daughter, Coyuva. But Coyuva has already converted to a religion of love and forgiveness—Catholicism—and in the course of the first scene persuades Ticátame also to embrace it. As a consequence, the P’urhépechas’ main priest and sorcerer, Petámuti, places a curse upon the couple. In the next *cuadro* the opposite ethos is made clear: jolly missionaries gently teach the Catechism to a group of Indian boys, merrily rewarding them by singing a courtly song. After his arrival, Tata Vasco, as the Crown’s *Oidor*, listens to the complaints of the Indians, impoverished and oppressed by the Spanish conquistadors. Tata Vasco promises to intercede with King Charles V, but in exchange he asks the Indians to abandon idolatry, as well as their barbarian ways, such as their practice of polygamy and their nomadic life, which, he sings, reduces them to the level of beasts. Most importantly, he sets as an example the passion of Jesus Christ and exhorts the P’urhépechas to forgive their exploiters. Ticátame and Coyuva ask to be married by Tata Vasco.

Naturally, the romantic focus of the opera is the young couple, though Ticátame’s conversion occurs already in the first *cuadro* and their marriage in the third. Moreover, as Petámuti arrives at their wedding seeking to kill the bride and groom, he stumbles on the steps of the church and—in a clear attempt to avoid any representation of violence committed by the Christians—is himself killed when he falls on his own knife. Just before the moment of his death, Petámuti embraces the Catholic faith and is christened by Tata Vasco in the midst of intensely pious music. Thus, by the end of the third *cuadro*, all relevant dramatic issues have been resolved by love, death, and, above all, religious conversion.

The opera is not about any particular Indian bride or her groom, however, but about Tata Vasco’s great deeds and his contribution to the process of evangelization and civilization of the P’urhépechas. The remaining *cuadros* represent Tata Vasco in the midst of plans to build the hospitals and the cathedral (undramatic as this might seem) and provide occasions for the Indians’ proud display of their newly acquired arts and crafts. Toward the end of the opera, Tata Vasco enters a mystic state of spiritual transport and unveils the image of the *Virgen de la Salud*,
the patron saint of the converted P’urhépechas, to equally exalted music. Thus, Bernal Jiménez and his librettist, Manuel Muñoz, deliver an unambiguously positive representation of what is perhaps the most traumatic event in Mexican history, and present an idealized vision of the role played by the Catholic faith in Mexico’s history and culture that includes a rosy picture of the process of conversion of the indigenous populations. Finally, unlike the other three operas, which resonate with associations of war, liberation, and confrontation, Tata Vasco preaches forgiveness and conformity.

In the annotated libretto published at the time of the premiere, Bernal Jiménez carefully stressed that Tata Vasco was a symphonic drama rather than an opera. The libretto includes an introduction by the composer himself, excerpts of the primary thematic materials used in the work, and descriptions of how these materials were used in the composition of the music. Bernal Jiménez claims to have had four main goals in mind. In order to ensure the work’s continuity, four musical themes are used throughout, symbolizing the “race” or “stock” of the P’urhépechas [Raza], love [Amor], the Catholic faith [Fe], and Tata Vasco himself. These themes, which might be called leitmotifs (though Bernal Jiménez does not use this term), as well as others representing minor characters and issues, are used in slightly different versions to represent characters and ideas and, more importantly, are presented in contrapuntal combinations to convey the many spiritual and ideological struggles that take place in the opera. For example, Bernal Jiménez sets a theme of intuition or prerevelation of the Catholic faith in counterpoint with those of race and then love to signify Ticá’tame’s difficult spiritual journey to Christianity. Although some motifs become thematic material for the vocal ariosos that the characters sing for most of the drama, more often than not it is in the orchestral music that the struggles are symbolically waged. Petámuti’s conversion and death, for example, are conveyed entirely by orchestral music and stage action.

Bernal Jiménez described the Tema de la Raza as “rough and cruel, like the Puhrepecha [sic] people,” and used in it a series of conventions that are standard in Western art music to represent the primitive: a rhythmically strong melody with a narrow range and based on a pentatonic pitch collection, underscored by repetitive rhythms in the bass and percussion. These conventions, as I have argued elsewhere, had already been used to encode pre-Columbian cultures by other Mexican composers, such as Silvestre Revueltas and Chávez himself, who have thus internalized a European conception of these peoples as primitive others (ex. 4).

On the other hand, Bernal Jiménez used the melody of a Gregorian alleluia, Ego sum panis vivus, to symbolize faith, and a grave, solemn melody for Tata Vasco, which he described as having in it something of both the Old and New Worlds (ex. 5).
Finally, he used an archetypal Mexican melody in compound meter for the theme of love, which, in his view, “contains the tenderness and nostalgia of the mestizo” (ex. 6).²² Primitive Indians, paternalistic Spaniards, and tender mestizos inhabit the music of the opera by means of these themes and motifs, leaving no doubt as to Bernal Jiménez’s vision of the Mexican population and its hierarchies.

Sung in Spanish, with numerous P’urhépecha words scattered throughout the libretto, and based on Mexican history, Tata Vasco was meant to be an example of “Mexican art” that displayed the “most brilliant aspects of the Mexican musical soul.”²³ The composition is infused with Mexican musics that serve the double purpose of providing local color and reinforcing national
pride. Thus, while Bernal Jiménez conceded in the printed libretto that his P’urhépecha music is constructed “according to our present understanding of that music,” he nevertheless did use pre-Columbian percussion instruments when appropriate. Other passages reveal Bernal Jiménez’s own sensitivity to traditional musics with long histories of cultural and spiritual relevance. For example, groups of Indians who have already been converted and civilized sing an alabado—a traditional hymn of praise to the Lord probably brought to Mexico from Spain by Franciscan missionaries in the eighteenth century—as they march to their labors in the country at daybreak. The alabado was especially prized by early scholars of Mexican traditional music because of what they perceived to be its historical purity and genuine piety.

Other musics refer to specific performance practices; for example, some rustic melodies are given over to the chirimías, early modern double-reed instruments introduced by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century especially for church music and still used today in some communities of central and western Mexico. The melody of the alabado itself is set in parallel thirds and sixths, replicating an actual performance practice that Bernal Jiménez describes as “those polyphonic combinations to which our Indians are accustomed and that are the surviving remains of early forms of polyphony” (ex. 7).

Finally, the Indians perform for Tata Vasco four traditional dances of mixed Spanish and indigenous origins—Gauris, Moros, Viejitos, and Apaches—that continue to be performed in different versions throughout Mexico, in highly syncretic celebrations of important Catholic feasts, such as Easter. As a result, local color is conveyed by music that attempts to be historically accurate and socially meaningful.

With the employment of symbolic leitmotifs and Mexican musics, Bernal Jiménez musically achieved his devotional and nationalist objective. But his goal was to go still further. He addressed the perennial issue of the relationship of words and music and attempted to ensure the hierarchy of the latter by grounding it in preestablished European vocal and instrumental forms and genres, none of which are proper to opera in principle. Thus he wove into the orchestral music a prelude, a fantasy, a set of variations, a fugue, a chorale, a fandango, a

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Example 7 Tata Vasco, Alabado from Miguel Bernal Jiménez and Manuel Muñoz, Tata Vasco: Drama sinfónico en cinco cuadros, Pátzcuaro (no stated publisher: 1941), 37.
rondo, a minuet, and, finally, a four-movement symphony. These forms give a structure to the orchestral music that sustains the vocal parts, which may or may not make use of the same melodic materials. The choices are not always arbitrary from a dramatic perspective; for example, a weighty exchange of religious points of view between Tata Vasco and a representative of the Indians is set to a fugue with a subject and three countersubjects, as the dialectical nature of the fugue, claimed Bernal Jiménez, best suits this confrontation.

Finally, Bernal Jiménez’s fourth goal was to present “that which has the greater significance in musical knowledge” and a condensation “of the entire culture of our times,” by which he meant, of course, Western culture. Therefore, he used two Gregorian chants for his theological battles, the *Aria della Monicha* for his set of variations, a motet on the text *Uxor tua* that is Palestrinian in intent although slightly modernist in style, an instrumental chorale “in the spirit of Bach” (despite the religious inconsistency raised by J. S. Bach’s Protestantism) and, as mentioned, a classical symphony.

A symphonic drama on a Mexican historical subject, referencing specific, culturally significant Mexican and European musics of the past four centuries of both “high” and “low” cultural provenance, bursting with a mixture of forms extraneous to stage genres, based on Wagnerian dramatic principles, and with an overwhelming religious message—such is *Tata Vasco*. And yet, when it was first performed, nobody batted an eye. To be sure, many commentators discussed whether the work was truly an opera, a symphonic drama, or an oratorio. Fellow church musicians commented on Bernal Jiménez’s felicitous handling of the contrapuntal challenges of the work. Some discussed whether his use of leitmotifs had been successful. But nobody judged his ambitious attempt to synthesize the whole of Western art music, while putting Mexican vernacular musics at front and center, to be anything other than business as usual. Bernal Jiménez’s *Tata Vasco* provides an extreme example of the cultural practices that were at work in the other three Mexican operas of the 1940s, and indeed in all of the so-called nationalist music of Mexico. Deranged as his music might seem, Bernal Jiménez himself was not. And so, being extreme, *Tata Vasco* demands an acknowledgment of such practices, as well as a new examination of the conventional analytical categories of “nationalism” and “nationalist music” that we use to understand the music of countries such as Mexico.

On one level, *Tata Vasco* is an exact representation of Mexican culture, in that every single one of the musics embraced within it—whether European, homegrown, or even artificial (the pentatonic fake Indian music)—can be heard in Mexico at any given time, including in the early twenty-first century (although, it must be granted, perhaps not within the two-hour span of an opera). These musics are performed in ways that are meaningful to Mexicans, either bearers of high or low cultures (for lack of a better terminology), or both. Mexican culture is
in fact made of the juxtaposition and active interaction of centuries-old layers of coexisting and conflicting cultural histories, prompting cultural critics to emphasize hybridity as its defining characteristic, or to claim—not without humor—that Mexico has been postmodern since the sixteenth century. The same principle can be extended to the operas by Moncayo, Sandi, and Hernández Moncada: they are national precisely by their hybrid, syncretic musical nature that so faithfully represents the hybridity, the contrasts and contradictions, of Mexican culture at large.

More important, however, in making these operas intensely Mexican is the conscious way in which their composers struggle to come to terms with a tradition—Western art music—that is neither national nor foreign. The prescription for writing nationalist music inherited by composers belonging to third-generation nationalisms such as the Mexican consists in searching for so-called folk musics (preferably rural) and embedding them somehow in Western European forms and genres. That is how a nationalist style is produced, they are told. The cultural and political work expected of such music, if any is expected, is to provide the aesthetic ground for a cohesive identity for all members of a nation, at least in theory. Much less recognized is the political work that such music performs not within but outside the nation: to ensure its survival within a system of nation states, since, it is posited, only nations that are nations (that have a history, an identity, and a future) have the right to be sovereign. National art, including art in nationalist styles, is instrumental in negotiating political sovereignty because it demonstrates the existence of a cultured nation on a par with others.

All artists whose cultural production is to be exported by the nation participate in a political negotiation of sovereignty within the relation of power existing already between central and peripheral nations. Composers of art music are no exception, but they find themselves in particularly difficult predicaments. The development of a nationalist style by means of using folk musics is to be done by following compositional procedures devised in Western Europe—or procedures that would appear to have equivalent merit in terms of ensuring the organicity and structural organization of the musical text, organicity and textual structure being two aspects of composition endowed with great value by European culture at the time both nationalism and scholarship on music emerged. A third value, a legacy of German Romanticism, also comes into play, and that is innovation.

Contrary to the well-maligned narratives of Western art music that would have us believe that European music consists of one and only one harmonious and progressive development, the history of European music is the result of the struggle for hegemony and sovereignty between, among others, Italian, French, and German cultures. Organicity, textual structure, and innovation were not assigned high cultural value before the early nineteenth century, when, following the Congress of Vienna, the dominance of Italian music and opera in particular
over Germany began to crumble, along with the patronage system that kept Italian musicians (and Germans who wrote Italian music) in the most important court positions. The constituting of the German-speaking peoples into a nation in search of a state, and the search by German musicians of alternative forms of patronage and raisons d’être, processes that took place at the historically global and local levels, coalesced eventually in a shift in musical paradigms in which rhetorical or performative values (such as are found in opera) were marginalized. This, and not the logical and self-determined evolution of music from the galant through the classical and on to the Romantic styles, is what promoted change. But along with this change came a critical discourse that posited organicity, textual structure, and innovation as universal and transhistorical values, which, according to the parallel notion of the single line of evolution for all musics, all cultures must share.

Accordingly, the music of peripheral nations must not appear to be derivative by any means but always innovative; in fact, the desired outcome of employing folk musics is that the music will be different. The values and criteria set as goals, however, remain those of dominant musics and discourses. Thus, the national music of any country, except for the unmarked French, Italian, and German musics, must simultaneously be like and unlike European music, and the extent to which the music is allowed to be the same or different is determined precisely by the nations whose music is hegemonic. In this sense, art music composers of peripheral nations have faced the paradox of trying to belong to Western culture by means of being different, a paradox that forever places them in the ghetto of musics marked as national(ist), vis-à-vis the universal. Their music cannot be but expressive of this contradiction.

For almost half a millennium, Mexicans have been folded into a Judeo-Christian religion brought by Europeans, a European language, and a partly European ethnicity. After the systematic destruction of pre-Columbian high cultures, Mexican high culture has been predominantly European. And all hegemonic genres, styles, and corresponding aesthetic values have been set as models for Mexican culture; conversely, Mexican society and its cultural agents have repeatedly struggled to keep abreast with a Western culture that they have inevitably regarded as their own, and whose values they have internalized. We must, however, acknowledge that, as suggested above, art music does not unfold in a uniform, progressive, and goal-oriented development, and that the capacity of European composers to innovate technically and stylistically and to become models for peripheral musics has less to do with the quality of the innovations than with the politically grounded discursive practices—scholarly and critical—that authorize them. The imbalance between national and universal musics is played out in culture and in musical styles, but its true site is political, and only there can it ever be resolved.
Of all the colonizations and invasions of Mexican culture and territory by foreign powers, the one performed by Italian opera has been the gentlest. Audiences loved Italian opera from the beginning of Mexico’s independent life, and composers followed suit. Operatic troupes were hosted in all manner of venues, the productions were enjoyed regardless of their quality, and, for those who could not attend a performance, the many wind and military bands performed overtures, marches, and instrumental medleys of well-loved operatic arias every Sunday on the kiosk of the central plaza. The Mexican national anthem sounds like a Verdian march. And Italian romanzas traveled to the countryside, were appropriated by rural culture, and returned to Mexico City as the Mexican canción, a much valued genre that stood at the center of the early stages of nationalist art music in the 1910s. Finally, unable to find work singing opera, classically trained Mexican singers of the 1930s contributed Italian vocal styles to the ranchera song, the central genre of Mexico’s best-known music—mariachi. But while the Mexican appropriation of foreign—in this case, Italian—performance practices and genres of lesser value might not raise an eyebrow, we seem less ready to accept that, after one hundred and fifty years, Mexican composers who have appropriated opera, musico-dramatic principles such as Wagner’s, and specific operatic styles such as Puccini’s are not ready to give them back. The relevant question is, of course, who owns opera, and whose decision is it anyway? The same can be said of Palestrina’s motets or Bach’s chorales. Viewed from the periphery, the appropriation of these and any other styles that serve the composers’ cultural and musical purposes, be they specific (representing a character in La Mulata) or broad (representing history in Tata Vasco), constitutes, indeed, business as usual.

It would be easy to subsume these cultural practices under the discourse of mestizaje, which, since the publication of its locus classicus, José Vasconcelos’s book La Raza Cósmica (The Cosmic Race, 1925), has posited that Mexican culture is of inseparably mixed ethnic and cultural origins, and that its strength and value resides precisely in that. And of course, the process of mestizaje—the inter-ethnic and intercultural “marriages” that have taken place since the sixteenth century, and the slow ascent of the mestizo population to political power—is definitor of Mexican culture, as is the discourse of mestizaje itself. But mestizaje would like to make of this hybridity a fortunate and smooth final synthesis of European and Indian cultures. Instead, what I propose is an understanding that highlights the difficulties, the ambivalences, and the contradictions inherent in the project of producing a hybrid culture. The operas I have discussed here have many moments of beauty and good craftsmanship, and Mexican audiences have certainly reveled in these positives whenever they have had the chance to listen to them. But what makes the works extraordinarily compelling is precisely the fascinating way in which they confront, embody, and attempt to resolve those ambivalences and contradictions.
What are we to make of these operas in the context of Chávez’s intent to foster a tradition of national opera? That they are national is undeniable. On the other hand, they do not function as works in a continuous tradition. Unable to underwrite opera, Chávez’s INBA soon abandoned it. Later directors of the INBA, equipped with larger budgets, took up opera again, but the resolute determination to steadily support only what is national and experimental was gone. Of the four operas mentioned here, only *La Mulata de Córdoba* and *Tata Vasco* remain in repertory, and they can be heard once every few years. The full orchestral scores have not yet been published, no commercially released recordings are available, and they can therefore hardly constitute an antecedent for the younger generations to address.

It would be inaccurate, moreover, to assume that no operas were composed in Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century. Composers have continued, if only sporadically, to write opera and chamber opera, and clusters of new commissions appear every now and then, depending on the will of political patrons. With the exception of Daniel Catán (*La Hija de Rappacini, Florencia en el Amazonas, Salsipuedes*), working in the United States, most Mexican composers have written no more than one or two operas. Perhaps most notable are Mario Lavista’s *Aura*, Marcela Rodríguez’s *La Sunamita*, Hilda Paredes’s *The Seventh Pip*, Víctor Rasgado’s *Anacleto Morones*, Juan Trigos’s *De Cachetito Raspado*, and Julio Estrada’s *Doloritas*. Unfortunately, none have been published, few are recorded, and most have had no history of repeat performances. Chávez’s hope for a Mexican operatic tradition remains unfulfilled.

NOTES

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4. On Chávez’s sociology of music, see Leonora Saavedrá, “Los Escritos Periodísticos de Carlos Chávez: Una Fuente para la Historia de la

5. Carlos Chávez, “La Opera.”


7. Carlos Chávez, “La Opera de Bellas Artes.”

8. On the operas of 1948 and their authors, see José Antonio Alcaraz, La Obra de José Pablo Moncayo (Mexico City: UNAM/Difusión Cultural, 1975); Eduardo Contreras Soto, Eduardo Hernández Moncada: Ensayo biográfico, catálogo de obra y antología de textos (Mexico City: INBA, 1993). Only the piano vocal score of La Mulata de Córdoba has been published; other scores remain in private family archives. My comments on Sandí’s and Hernández Moncada’s operas are based on secondary sources.

9. Villaurrutia and Lazo’s libretto was an adaptation of Villaurrutia’s play La Mulata de Córdoba. On Villaurrutia and his work, see Xavier Villaurrutia, Obras: poesía, teatro, prosas varias, crítica (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966); and Adolf Sneidas, El Teatro de Xavier Villaurrutia (Mexico City: SEP, 1973).


12. Other members of the workshop were Blas Galindo, Salvador Contreras, and Daniel Ayala. Together with Moncayo, these composers are known as “El Grupo de los Cuatro.” Chávez published an account of his teaching methods and objectives in “Revolto in Mexico,” Modern Music 13, no. 3 (1936): 35–40.

13. On Miguel Bernal Jiménez, see Lorena Díaz Núñez, Como un eco lejano … la vida de Miguel Bernal Jiménez (Mexico City: INBA, 2003); on Tata Vasco in particular, see Malena Kuss, “Miguel Bernal Jiménez,” Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1986), 1:317–18; and Stevenson, Music in Mexico, 263–64.

14. A Real Audiencia was a judicial district that functioned as an appeals court. The first audiencias date from the fourteenth century in Spain. The Spanish crown imposed the system on its American colonies in an attempt to bring the Spanish settlers and conquerors under royal control. The colonial audiencias often exercised legislative and executive functions, and mediated between the Spaniards and the local populations.

15. The P’urhépecha were a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilization; they were enemies of the Aztecs but had important trade relations with them. Tánguaxóán II, last lord of the P’urhépecha, surrendered to the Spaniards after hearing of the conquest of Tenochtitlán; later, the brutality of Oidor Nuño de Guzmán prompted an insurrection in 1530. The opera refers both to the enmity between P’urhépechas and Aztecs and to the excesses of Nuño de Guzmán. The name Tarascan, used by the Spaniards to refer to the P’urhépechas, is incorrect but remains in use.

16. See, for example, Antonio Brambila, “Anomalias de ‘Tata Vasco,’” El Universal, March 24, 1941.

17. On this conflict, known in Mexican history as La Cristiada or Guerra de Cristeros, see the classic study by Jean Meyer, La cristiada: el conflicto entre la Iglesia y el Estado 1926–1929 (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1973–76). See also Enrique Semo, Sergio de la Peña, and Francisco Javier Guerrero, Los frutos de la Revolución (1921–1938), vol. 4 of México: Un pueblo en la historia (Mexico City: Alianza Editoral, 1989); and Enrique Semo and Adolfo Gilly, Oligarquía y revolución (1876–1921), vol. 3 of México: Un pueblo en la historia (Mexico: Alianza Editorial, 1988) for the Reform Wars of the 1850s.

18. Only the libretto has been published: Miguel Bernal Jiménez and Manuel Muñoz, Tata Vasco: drama simfónico en cinco cuadros (Pátzcuaro, 1941). My comments are based on the libretto and a manuscript copy of the piano vocal score.


20. Musical examples will be taken from the printed libretto, where they already appear in reduction.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 15.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 36.

26. Ibid., 15.

27. Ibid.
28. See, for example, Carlos González Peña, “Tata Vasco aureoleado por la Música,” *El Universal*, March 27, 1941.


32. Of course, the ultimate goal toward which a nation strives is to have its own state and territory, or at the very least a certain degree of administrative independence and political leverage within a political hierarchy.


34. Chávez, of course, would have been very sympathetic to the plight of German musicians at this point.

35. The articles on Mexico and Mexico City in such standard reference publications as the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera* fail to mention the operas composed after 1918, with the exception of Chávez’s *The Visitors*. 