

AMERICAN COMPOSERS. VIII

Carlos Chavez

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CHAVEZ'S music is a dance of the male on the American soil. As music it is a marvel of contraction and astringency; bare of romantic opulence, ornamentation, expansivity. It runs, robust and decisive; but always austere, flinty, foreshortened. Form as well as idiom are strict and laconic. The fugue of the *Sonata* might stand for all of Chavez's forms: since it is extraordinarily condensed and bald and wry. Throughout his work, the beat is likely to be strict and monotonous; and the attacks, the transitions, the rhythmic sequences excessively abrupt. Chavez is very given to sudden astringent hesitations, suspensions, silences; the third bar of the early piano sonatina supplies a beautiful instance of one of these curiously brutal indeterminations, in the arrest of a bit of three-part counterpoint in quavers, on a sudden crotchet. He is equally partial to hollow octaves and single unsupported voices.

His idiom is laconic, bare, *abrupti*. Tattoo-like themes, made of dry, sere staccato volumes and brittle pizzicatti, and drum-like in their effects, abound. The melodies are savage sing-songs, of an earthy coarseness, resembling the tunes of primitive peoples, of children, of Indians. Chavez has something of the stoicism of Moussorgsky, of the early Stravinsky, of Bartok; but his idiom is brother to theirs and individually austere.

There is no machine-like thunder in this music; none at least in the pieces for the piano. Dry and staccato volumes, essentially percussive, prevail. Flinty and martellato sounds appear to strike sparks from the keyboard. And where the sonorities are most individually Chavez's, as in the scherzo-movements of his sonatas, or the second section of *H. P.*, they have an original susurrus, a buzzing, rustling, cackling quality that evokes the desert, the rattling of pods, the cackling of the redman in his dusty pueblos.



CARLOS CHAVEZ
A New Portrait By
DIEGO RIVERA

Traditional elements figure in Chavez's dynamic forms: classical, Spanish-American, Indian, jazz. His music is modal, and cast in fugal and contrapuntal forms. It contains *huapangos* and *zandoungas*. Its monodies, and certain of its instruments, *guiros* and *claves*, are Indian. Certain of his pieces are couched in foxtrot measures. One is in the scheme of a blues. One of the intermezzi of his symphonic ballet *H. P.* is remarkable for its exploitation of metallic timbres in sympathy with the spirit of the industrial scene.

Yet no order, no system of musical values quite like his own has appeared either in Latin or in Saxon America or the rest of the earth. Traditional and original elements are merged in a new synthesis in his individual pieces, the piano sonata, the Mexican pieces, *Energia*, *The Four Suns*, the best pages of *H. P.* They move by rhythms of their own; by a life, momentum and fire of their own. They constitute a new dominantly dry sonority. To hear a piece like *Energia*, with its high tensity, its daringly timed and spaced buzzing, rasping string-sonorities, and its new astringent sensuousity, raciness, earthiness, is to feel music beginning anew as in the young Stravinsky, and quite as potentially.

As for the rhythms, they are brusque, unvoluptuous, impassive.

The very productions of Chavez's probationary years, the early ballet, *The New Fire*, the three little *Sonatinas* for piano, for piano and violin, for piano and cello, the racy little improvisation called *36*, the early sections of *H. P.*, have the masculine quality of his fuller later pieces. Automotive and self-contained, in the manner of classical music; leaning on no literature or metaphysical associations for their meaning; they are rich in intimations of the astringent style of the future robust, dry, impassive pieces. The early Aztec ballet, *The New Fire*, is still Debussian; it is far more dainty and romantically sensitive than its completer descendant *The Four Suns*. But it is notably bare of pictorial pretensions. The short, compact, forceful little piano sonatina is reminiscent of Ravel; but it has a savage sing-song, amerindian in its rigidity and piercing coarseness. For a few measures, the sonatina for piano and violin recalls the pentatonic stateliness of Moussorgsky: then suddenly a Chavez-turn inter-

venes. As the song of the two contrapuntally opposed instruments swells and the full reiteration of the theme threatens a climax, the violin precipitously drops into a new key while the piano continues in the old; it utters its cry in a semitone below the expected tone, and continues flatting through the succeeding cramp-like measures. The effect is simultaneously brutal and powerful, strangely miserable and immensely gratifying, like a muscular contraction, or one of feeling. And the scherzo is a characteristic bit of wild, dry, gibbering and satiric music.

As for the sere, offhand little piano-piece 36: it is all drum-like effect, brittle pizzicati, offhand unceremonious rhythms: a bit of the debonair, burlesque, crude-colored sort of music which the Parisian Six projected in their heyday. If one associates it with the less important of Chavez's pieces, it is largely for the reason that he composed it near the beginning of his still quite brief career, and that it is less substantial than its successors, the piano sonata and *Unidad*. But it is all Chavez in a nutshell.

H. P., the ballet lately performed under Stokowski's baton in Philadelphia, really belongs among the compositions of Chavez's "first period:" even though the parts recently added to it figure among his recent and most advanced conceptions. The interlude between the third and fourth of the ballet's four symphonic movements, introductory to the dance of men and machines, is unique in Chavez's compositions: it is the page of the metallic timbres referred above to, and is at par with the best of Varese's similar music, and far more pithy and evocative than the corresponding pages of Prokofieff and Antheil. The interlude between the second and third movements is an excellent example of the calm, Latin, classical music Chavez has learned to write for simple instrumental combinations, and typified by the slow movement of the very recent sonata for four horns. The fantastic page of buzzing, rattling sonorities in the second section, with its exploitation of the Indian gourd and rattle instruments, *guiros* and *claves*, is completely unprecedented. The whole score swarms with subtleties and exquisite detail, more magically than almost any score of the composer's. Still, its character indicates its prematurity: for the mature

pieces of Chavez are distinguished from the best of the other Latin-American composers', Villa-Lobos' and Roldan's, by the absence of musical "folkloreism" and exploitations of favorite Spanish and Spanish-American tunes and rhythms; and *H. P.* contains a commonplace *huapango* and a *zandouga* cast in the style of Bach two-part inventions. Even its most brilliant sections, the first and last movements, include popular tunes: the piece thus representing a musical road abandoned by the composer. But like all Chavez's immature works, *H. P.* is filled with indications of Chavez's peculiar genius. The first and last sections are distinguished, for all their frankly popular inspiration, by a polyphony extended even to the contrapuntally treated orchestral timbres, and by the brilliance of its elevenths and thirteenths, the shrill effects of the high clarinets, the brittle percussion-like pizzicati. And the feeling of sun and abundance and young strength which the typical Chavez pieces awaken, is equally ineluctable here.

These typical pieces are *Energia*, the sonata for four horns, the ballet *The Four Suns*, the piano sonata and the Mexican pieces. The ballet, the piano sonata, and the Mexican piece called *Unidad* are perhaps the most important: Chavez's great feeling of life is couched in them in his pure aphonic style. The "four suns" are the four geological periods of the Aztec codices: worlds of water, of wind, of fire and lava, and of earth; and the dances embody them in the form of an Aztec rite. The music is iterative, Amerindian, full of shrill and piping tones, at once ferocious and reserved. Indeed, it has an almost fresco-like quality, as if it, too, were inscribed on a temple wall in Chitchen-Itza; and even when we familiarize ourselves with it, and finally are admitted to its strange childlike and primitive joy, it remains reserved, never unbuttoning feeling. While the score might not have found its present shape had not the ballet-movements of *Petrushka* and *Le Sacre* preceded it, the mixed rudeness and shyness and austerity distinguish it entirely from the Russian works. It has an aristocratic remoteness. As for the piano sonata, it is dry as a plant lost in sands. The leanness of the sound, the uncompromising harshness of the counterpoint, the strictness of its beat, at first are wellnigh intolerable. The themes are at once childlike and pre-

cise, drumlike and decisively rhythmical; the treatment of the piano is essentially percussive. The four compact, boldly contrasted little movements are predominantly staccato and martellato, moving in vigorous abrupt rhythms, and prolific of jerky accents and flinty sounds; sparks upon the anvil of the keyboard. Hollow octaves and single unsupported voices are prevalent; so too, Chavez's favorite suspensions, brutal deceptions, and interminations. The impressionistic pedal figures not at all. There is no voluptuousness in the score: at moments, when the composer himself is at the piano, we seem to listen to modal, polytonic music executed as if the music were Bach and the performer a pupil of the French Conservatory's. The fugue is bald; the scherzo a savage dusty bit, one of those flighty, glittering, rhapsodic passages in which we hear an echo of the atrocious rattling and scratchings of the Aztec instrumentalists. Yet there is perfect logic here; and a source of new delight. — And *Unidad*, staccato and earthy as it is, has an élan like that of the youthful Schumann, and high spirits like those of the youthful Schumann. And its form is more completely articulated than that of other of Chavez's pieces. Chavez is not a master of form; his forms are often made up of repetitions. But *Unidad* at least has unflagging line, and streams ahead like a pennant in a wind.

And the American man dances in it: goodhumored, robust, mocking, ultimately detached: in the plenitude of liberated energies, in joyous reserve, in derisive impenetrability. But it is not singular; all Chavez is such a rhythmic expression of masculine completeness and independence on the American soil.

H. P. begins with the dance of man in Aztec fire and splendor, in the youth and fullness of his naked powers; and piece upon piece sings and celebrates Indian adjustment to the bitter conditions of the harsh unfriendly old continent: peace, union, equilibrium with its virginal and unfriendly forces; and final light, mobile, impassive superiority to them. The man has his motor within him, and is automotive. Freely he embraces the earth he stands on. Tokens of its sympathy, of union, surround him: bare tokens of children and corn and waters single and sparse among the rocks and sands. He greets it with grave joy,

with thanks for nutriment, with confidence and wonder. But his laughing allegiance is to another star, the hard bright little star of his own virtue and indomitability. Not the soil gives him final strength. He has strength to give her. And he has it in himself, where she cannot reach.

A virile energy is attuned to American conditions and brings American conditions to sympathy with itself. What the European neoclassicists have sought to achieve for themselves and their conditions through an imitation of eighteenth century robustiousness, the young Mexican has given naively, spontaneously, and originally: and communicated through tone as through the breath of life. The robustness, astringency, flintiness of these forms in tone, bare of romantic expansivity and ornamentation, are universally masculine; and the extreme contraction of form, the laconism, the dryness, the abruptness, are masculine of the new world: the vital attitude and temper demanded by it. We greet it like the invitation to our dance. And about it, as in a dream, rocky plateaus begin to stretch, dry, harsh, inhuman; pricked and gay and encouraging with rising corn, brown white-robed children, and the promise of simple life.