Carlos Chávez's United States Press Coverage

At his death in Mexico City August 2, 1978, aged 79, Carlos Chávez left no single work that begins to compare in wide United States popularity with Manuel M. Ponce's *Estrellita*, or with any other of the Mexican pieces listed in James J. Fuld's *The Book of World-Famous Music*.[1] Nonetheless, his United States press coverage far exceeds that of any other classical or popular Mexican musician of any epoch whatsoever. Not only does his coverage vie with European luminaries of his generation but also his United States press notices span five decades.

Silvestre Revueltas, the only other Mexican in David Ewen's *Composers Since 1900*,[2] garnered 13 articles listed in *The Music Index* during the 1950's. Chávez during the same decade won 58 articles listed in the same index.[3] To extend comparisons: Georges Auric, the first European composer alphabetized in Ewen with the same birth year as Chávez, enters *The Music Index*, 1950-1959, with 14 articles—six of which were published in Europe.

Chávez's success in the kind of prestigious music periodical picked up by *The Music Index* and *RILM* began before he was thirty. The lead article in *Musical America*, XLVIII/22 (September 15, 1928), pages 5 and 21, already hailed him as Mexico's musical messiah. Barthold Fles starts "Chávez lights new music with old fires" with a Chávez quotation dismissing other Latin Americans as epigones "who imitate European composers badly." Rejecting Europe in favor of Indians, a pose that was to endear him for the next dozen years to sophisticated New York (where he lived from 1926 to 1929), he insisted in his *Musical America* interview that Aztecs had inspired not only Carlos Lazo's décor but also the music for *El fuego nuevo* (composed 1921). At length, he explained the Aztec derivation of his second ballet *Los cuatro soles* (composed 1925). When Fles, who was interviewing him, told Chávez that his music "in its racial and purely national tendencies and its nearly savage primitiveness" reminded him of Stravinsky, Chávez at once countered: "The greatest compliment to be paid Stravinsky is to call him a composer of music both creative and imitative. He has put together perfectly what others have done."

Throughout the interview Fles allies Chávez with the painters Diego Rivera and Carlos Lazo. "Lazo, a member of the artistic *avant-garde* movement among Mexicans, has designed costumes and sets for Chávez's Aztec ballet, *The New Fire*," declares Fles's caption for a reproduction of a "sketch for a warrior that shows the

[1] *The Book of World-Famous Music, Classical Popular and Folk* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971), pp. 172, 253, 509 (*Cielito lindo* credited to Quirino Mendoza y Cortés, *La Golondrina* to Narciso Serradell, *Sobre las Olas* to Juventino Rosas). Chávez did publish a piano solo arrangement of *La Cucaracha* in his *Cantos Mexicanos*, op. 16 (Mexico City: A. Wagner y Levien Sucs., 1921).

[2] *Composers Since 1900* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1969), 461-464.

[3] *The Music Index*, ed. Florence Kretzschmar (Detroit: Information Service, 1950-1959), pp. 83, 93, 90, 80, 100, 96, 98, 124, 107, 122.

influence of plastic Aztec sculpture." However, the first Chávez ballet to be mounted in the United States was to be neither *El Fuego nuevo* nor *Los cuatro soles* (The Four Suns) "which the League of Composers is considering for the coming season" (according to Fles), but rather *Caballos de Vapor = H. P.*, premiered at Philadelphia with décor and costumes by Diego Rivera March 31, 1932.

Then still in the flower of his handsome youth was the 33-year-old Chávez—whose elegant portrait adorns Oscar Thompson's article, "Philadelphia gives Chávez ballet, 'H. P.' in world premiere," *Musical America*, April 10, 1932, pages 3 and 7. Because Leopold Stokowski, who conducted, and the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company corps de ballet that pantomimed *H. P.* gave it the cachet of an "important event," a barrage of publicity preceded the premiere. Not only did the *New York Times* of March 27, 1932, bill *H. P.* as "startlingly modern" but also urged New Yorkers to attend. "More than a Pullman car of pilgrims from New York and less formal delegations from other cities" did indeed make the trip, according to John Martin in the *New York Times* of April 19, 1932. "The morning after the event revealed that there was such a high valuation put upon the affair as news that photographs of the dancers appeared in several New York papers—a proceeding without precedent in the five years of the dance revival's greatest intensity," continued Martin in his three-column review.

As if Eastern metropolitan dailies did not suffice, even newspapers as distant as the *Los Angeles Times* on April 3 (1932) carried a large picture of Alexis Dolinoff, the lead dancer. The accompanying article began by calling *H. P.* "one of the most interesting of the new ballets," and continued with further puffery.

> The theme of the production has been carried out even to the proscenium curtain which hangs throughout the entire ballet. This curtain shows a horse at the left, with a tropical background representing the natural resources of the South. A dynamo at the right symbolizes the machine power of the North. The dancers are divided in like manner, their right side typifying the mechanical prowess of the man of the North, their left, the man of the tropical countries.
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> The products of the South which are consumed by the men of the North are also represented, dancers being costumed as fish, pineapples, etc. One of the ballet scenes depicts an American ship which has docked at a tropical port to carry the raw materials back to its country. The unloading of the ship in America is another scene equally colorful.

Seeking the reason for so unprecedented a bow to Mexico, Mary F. Watkins reviewed the premiere in the *New York Herald-Tribune* of April 2 with an 840-word article headlined "Mexican Composer Typifies Interrelation of North and South in Symphony/Stokowski Wields Baton/Conductor Pays Tribute to Latin-American Neighbor." According to her, "all musical and social Philadelphia" swarmed to the event "as well as the many pilgrims from New York" mentioned in Martin's *New York Times* review.

> The occasion was something of a dramatic gesture on the part of Leopold Stokowski, who, according to a printed note on the program, had "contributed his services as an expression of his admiration for Mexican culture." This, in fact, may be recognized as the first fruit of a recent journey into Latin America by the leader of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and, as a curtain raiser to a new field of symphonic possibilities, it has points of interest beyond its own actual content.
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> Chávez the composer, and his collaborator Diego Rivera, the artist, whose clear, flat and colorful primitives captured the admiring attention of New Yorkers in his recent exhibition, have fashioned a work which attempts to symbolize the interrelation between North and South, between producer and consumer, between nature and manufacture.

With such a head start Chávez next, at a mere 34, became the sole Mexican profiled in the Stanford University Press book, *American Composers on American Music* (1933)—his profiler being no less a moulder of opinions than Aaron Copland. That same year, 1933, *New Music* published his Sonata in four movements. *The Musical Quarterly*, having already published an article by him in the April 1929 issue entitled "The Two Persons" (pp. 153-159), included an adulatory article about him in the October 1936 issue. Herbert Weinstock, who wrote it, added further to Chávez's prestige by translating for publication into English his first book, *Toward a New Music, music and electricity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937).

The *annus mirabilis*—which had opened auspiciously with the premiere of his CBS-commissioned *Sinfonía India*[4] over Columbia Broadcasting System January 23, 1936—continued with its Boston Symphony first performance April 10. *Modern Music*'s March-April issue (XIII/3) carried not only Colin McPhee's favorable review of the radio premiere, but also included at pages 35-40 Chávez's own article, "Revolt in Mexico," in which he portrayed himself as cleaner of the Augean stables in Mexico. Helen L. Kaufmann published her panegyric entitled "Carlos Chávez; Decidedly No Mañana Mexican" in *Musical America*, September 1936, pages 11 and 26. Immediately capturing reader attention with Diego Rivera's purported answer to her question, "Tell me about Mexican music," she recorded his reply as being: "In Mexican music there are only Carlos Chávez and the Indians."

This decree—repeated henceforth in all general histories of music taught in United States colleges and universities[5]—became the theme song of her diffuse article. According to her, Chávez was a "Beau Brummel by contrast" with the scruffy Mexican musicians whom he conducted. Strewn thickly about her article are such pronouncements as these: "he is clear-eyed, clear-headed, filled with an almost mystical power which he communicates to the men when he faces them at rehearsal" and "in many cases he has practically taught them their instruments." With no bows to Silvestre Revueltas, Chávez instead confided to her that Revueltas had been "his assistant" but had traitorously "left him to direct a rival group, the National Orchestra, which succeeded in temporarily dividing public interest, and what was more vital, public financial support. The government, which impartially gave a stipend to both organizations, did not wholly support either. Chávez had to allow his men to take other jobs in order to make a living wage, since he could not afford to pay them what they should have had for rehearsals and performances."

His own orchestra, the Orquesta Sinfónica de México, had been "formed spontaneously by men of the musicians union who invited him to conduct it. He saw great possibilities in the raw—very raw material at hand." At an early morning rehearsal followed by breakfast with him at Sanborn's, she heard him try over the orchestral part of Aaron Copland's piano concerto. Copland was present.

> If the composer is present, he consults him freely. He turned repeatedly to Aaron Copland while reading through the orchestral part of the piano concerto, to verify his own interpretations—not in doubt, but in deference to the composer's wishes. The rhythms were extremely complicated, the jazz sections tricky, but he went over and over the difficult parts with unwearying patience.

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[4] For the genesis of *Sinfonía India* "written in New York City for an essentially European minded music public," see *Music in Aztec & Inca Territory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 144-150.

[5] If textbooks mention any Mexicans at all—as do Theodore M. Finney, *A History of Music* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947) and Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), they mention only Chávez.

At the first rehearsal of the Sibelius Fourth Symphony, the assistant conductor read it through, with Chávez seated beside the podium. Then he took the baton, conducting, as he usually does, without score. A musical Pygmalion, he at once breathed life into the dead marble of the performance, imparting to it, even in the reading, that dramatic excitement which is the essential quality of his work.

The reward of this devotion was reaped at the first concert of the season. When finally, on July 31, as announced, at nine o'clock promptly, the million-dollar Tiffany glass curtain in the theatre of the Palacio de Bellas Artes was lifted, Chávez walked upon the stage to thunderous applause. The program concluded with the first [Mexico City] performance of Chávez's own *Sinfonía India*. It is a spirited piece which like much of Chávez's music, makes liberal use of Indian tolk-tunes and dances. The exaltation of the music carried over into repeated curtain calls, to which Chávez responded, all smiles.

For another half decade Chávez continued delighting the United States press with his Indianist pose. The *New York Times* of March 3, 1940, carried his four-column essay, "Composers and their Folk-Music; Influence of a Nation's Folk Art on 'Learned Works.'" On May 16, 1940, he fulfilled critical expectation with a program conducted by himself at Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art, the high point of which was his own pseudo-Aztec *Xochipilli-Macuilxóchitl*.*

Turning away from the pseudo-Aztec vein, Chávez's piano concerto in three movements, premiered January 1, 1942, by the New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting, with Eugene List as soloist, disappointed Howard Taubman of the *New York Times*. In the *Time* magazine issue August 9, 1948, he no longer rated Mexico's messiah. Instead, the article (headlined "Director or Dictator") quoted a Mexican magazine, *Mañana*, to the effect that he had become a musical monopolist. "Then, last week, two out of Mexico's three leading critics jumped in. One called Chávez 'a cacique who dominates all musical roads.'"

Nonetheless, at the close of his six years of directing the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Chávez won Howard Taubman's accolade published in the *New York Times* of March 22, 1953 (x, 7), with the title "Six Years of Building; Chávez Completes Tenure As Mexican Arts Head." Replying to Taubman's questions, Chávez is quoted as saying:

In Mexico, the Government is and has always been the only patron of the arts. Having been and being still to a great extent a colonial country, Mexico has no great private money or capital. The Government is the only really rich person in the Republic. And yet, it has so many demands for public works, defense, irrigation, elementary and secondary education, etc., that encouragement of high culture has come last. However, thirty years ago the so-called Mexican Renaissance in painting was due to the fact that a lot of good painters were patronized by the Obregón government.

Next, Chávez summarized for Taubman's benefit what the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes had done during the six years that he had held President Miguel Alemán's appointment to be its director. Concluding, Chávez voiced his belief

that Mexico, like the United States, is an American branch of occidental culture. It has its own characteristics, such as folk music with its distinctive remnants of old Indian cultures, but essentially it is not different.

*For United States press notices, see *Music in Mexico, a historical survey* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1952), pp. 1-3.

Once freed from the administration of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Chávez began flying incessantly back and forth from both South America and the United States to conduct major orchestras. Only exceptionally did bureaucratic snarls impede his trips. The best publicized of these threatened cancellation of a Hollywood Bowl orchestral concert scheduled for August 24, 1954. On August 14 the *Los Angeles Times* carried a story headlined, "Guest Conductor at Bowl Denied Entry Into U.S." According to the story that followed, "his application to enter the United States was denied by the U.S. Immigration Service."

[Hollywood Bowl] Association officials said an application for a work permit was made here through the U.S. Immigration Service: Two days ago a reply was received that the application had been denied. Herman Landon, district director of immigration, declined to discuss the action.

"Other people are involved in this thing," he said. "I don't know very much about it." Landon also said he doubted whether any officials in Washington would make public the reason for the action. He declined to say whether the decision was made in Washington or Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles *Daily News* of August 13 had headlined the same story, "Carlos Chávez barred by U.S."

The internationally famous symphony conductor, who has appeared in Los Angeles on several occasions in the last twenty years, was notified of the rejection in a form letter from the United States Immigration Department at Mexico City. No reason for refusing Chávez the entry permit was contained in the letter, said a spokesman for Columbia Arts Management, his booking agents here.

The ruling, it was said, was being appealed to Washington. Herman R. Landon, head of the Immigration Department in Los Angeles, announced that he knew nothing about the order. He said he assumed the entire matter was handled in Washington.

Under the blaze of publicity, whatever problems had prompted the form letter refusal were resolved in time for the *Los Angeles Times* of August 22 to headline his forthcoming Bowl appearances, "Chávez, Mexican Conductor, to Open Seventh Bowl Week." Albert Goldberg's encomiastic review in the *Los Angeles Times* of August 25 (III, 7) praised Chávez's conducting of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe Suite No. 2* and of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* to the hilt, classed Chávez's orchestral arrangement of a Buxtehude Ciaconna as a masterpiece, and heaped favor on Chavez's *H. P.* suite.

Mr. Chávez, who conducts both without score and baton, is an exceedingly sensitive director. He indulges in no unnecessary gyrations and is always en rapport with the music in a manner that makes for felicitous results. He has a supple sense of phrasing, a feeling for refined tonal effects, and the power to stir the musicians to well calculated climaxes.

The four movements [of his *H. P.* suite] are titled "Danza Ágil," "Tango," "Interlude," and "El Trópico." The music is highly spiced with persistent rhythms and glaring colors. Like most of Chávez's music the suite has a strong undercurrent of primitivism, adroit handling of complicated rhythmic patterns, and a distinctive personality, all of which give it a high entertainment value and genuine musical interest.

As Goldberg understood the immigration brouhaha, Chávez's "form letter" refusal resulted from bureaucratic bumbling by routine paper-handlers in the American Embassy at Mexico City. According to his anodyne report, Chávez's vaunted difficulties were indeed "rather fictitious." They even bettered his cause—resulting in "one of the warmest receptions of the [Bowl] season."

Time magazine on February 6, 1956 (page 46) saluted him as "Mexico's No. 1 man of music and one of the world's important composers."

> Last week [January 26, 1956] Composer Chávez led the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra in the first U.S. performance of his *Sinfonía No. 3*,[1] which proved to be bluntly modern, enormously powerful and sometimes beautiful. Chávez conducted the big orchestra with broad-backed, muscular energy. The music began with portentous thunder, answered by a piping call on the piccolo clarinet and a burbling of other woodwinds. Twice the movement plodded ponderously up harmonic mountains and, triumphantly, gave glimpses of wide vistas on the other side. The second movement went along at a dashing, rustic gallop while the third strutted with the bravado of a teen-ager unaware of being observed. Some of the loveliest music came when the high clarinet played a melting melody while the bass clarinet throbbed, followed by a slam-bang finale.
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> The work was commissioned [in February of 1950] by U.S. Ambassador to Italy Clare Boothe Luce [wife of the publisher of *Time*] in memory of her daughter Ann Brockaw, who died in an automobile accident in 1944, at 19. Composer Chávez took three years to finish the score, although he thought of all the themes in one day.

Influenced somewhat perhaps by the identity of Clare Boothe Luce, this particular *Time* review glowed with a euphoria that did not suffuse reviews of the next major Chávez premiere in the United States. The *New York Times* of May 19, 1957, carried Howard Taubman's "cold potatoes" review of *Panfilo and Lauretta*, Chávez's opera with libretto by Charles Kallman, a New Yorker. Commissioned jointly by Lincoln Kirstein and the Rockefeller Foundation, "the opera was written with the author's expectation of a City Center premiere. The commission was made with funds alloted to the City Center by the foundation, and the Center had the right of first refusal." But when it was done, "the City Center waived its right to the first performance," whereupon "Columbia University offered to undertake the production." Taubman elaborated with a narrative of the ineffectual efforts of students to mount an opera requiring professionals. "Chávez had to re-orchestrate its score, which he had originally written for fifty-six instrumentalists. As a thoughtful and scrupulous musician he refused to take the easy way of thinning out his orchestration by dropping some of the instruments. He wanted certain effects, and the only way to obtain them was to re-score from beginning to end." Continuing his account of the débacle of this opera set in "the middle of the fifteenth century in a villa near Florence," Taubman wrote as follows:

> What he heard on opening night could not have been rewarding for the long, strenuous hours he had invested in the re-orchestration. For the orchestra which Columbia had available for the production could not cope with the subtleties of Mr. Chávez's writing. With enough rehearsals, this amateur ensemble might have arranged a passable performance. But by some logic the amateur orchestra had very few rehearsals before the premiere.

Taubman concluded with such shameful details as Columbia conductor Howard Shanet's having "to stop the performance" because the players had created a shambles of the third act. However, the opera itself included basic defects, according to Taubman. "It does not hang together as a whole. It is too dense verbally and musically. There are too many passages where the vocal writing is unyielding in its harshness and heaviness."

[1] Premiered at Caracas December 22, 1954, by the Orquesta Sinfónica Venezuela, this symphony had also been performed at Baden-Baden June 17, 1955.

Chávez could not blame a poor performance for the tepid critiques of his last major work premiered in New York. "His *Symphony No. 6* performed by the New York Philharmonic and conducted by Leonard Bernstein in its world premiere disappointed nearly everyone," according to *Time*, May 15, 1964. Gone now were any of the flattering portraits of him that *Time* and *Musical America* had published in previous decades. Instead, a scowling, old man in a rumpled vest cocks an indignant eye at Bernstein. The *Time* review continues thus:

> His own early compositions, such as the brilliant, flavorful *Sinfonía India*, in which indigenous folk tunes were distilled with impressive originality, earned him a reputation for localism that Chávez now frankly deplores. To critics who affect to hear the wind through the mesquite or the flapping of serapes in everything he writes, he has often protested that "I am a Mexican, Beethoven was a German—but music is international."
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> Though he often returns to his home, Chávez has freed himself from more than two decades of dedication to its country's culture. Just back from Germany, this week he will conduct a concert in Portland, Oregon, and is slated for another in Chicago.

In the rebuttal to an otherwise unanimous chorus of disapproval of his *Symphony No. 6*, only Irving Kolodin could find a few kind words for it in *Saturday Review*, May 23, 1964, pages 36, 51.

> Chávez has managed to create a work that is both freely composed and logically imagined, in a broadly flowing pattern of idea at once unfettered and strongly disciplined. The ease and purpose with which Chávez moves his musical materials about shows the practiced hand of one who, sixty-five, builds with sonority as some may with stone. Indeed, in the forty-three variations of the final passacaglia, Chávez has reared a cathedral of sonority to his faith, which clearly is music. There are scant suggestions in it of the folkloristic elements with which he worked at a prior time, though they may merely be more completely assimilated into his idiom than before.

Chávez's two books published in the United States—the already mentioned *Toward a New Music* (1937; 180 pp.)[8] and *Musical Thought*[9] (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961; 126 pp.)—skirt any specifically Latin American, or even Mexican, issues. The *New York Times* review (May 9, 1937, p. 8) of the W.W. Norton book descried "some acoustical errors entirely unworthy of so profound a scholar and thinker." Despite Chávez's pleas that musicians and engineers should combine so as to develop most fully the potentialities of electrically produced and reproduced music," Chávez himself chose later not to indulge in electronic experiments.

His 1961 book contains his six lectures given at Harvard University while Charles Eliot Norton Poetry appointee in 1958-1959.[10] According to Jan LaRue, who reviewed *Musical Thought* in *Notes of the Music Library Association*, 18 (March 1961), 239, it "may contain fewer thoughts than some of the previous Norton lectures." Of the six essays, LaRue found that "the chapter on 'Repetition in music' advances the freshest ideas, illustrated generously with musical examples, including an analysis of part of Stravinsky's *Threni*." The rest of the book struck him as mostly "forests of truisms."

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[8] Three chapters of this monograph presented to the Mexican Secretary of Education with the title, *La Música y la electricidad*, were published in *El Universal*, Mexico City, July 22, August 4, and August 16, 1932. See Roberto García Morillo, *Carlos Chávez vida y obra* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960), p. 231.

[9] Translated as *El Pensamiento musical* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979 [95 pp.]).

[10] From January 1 to June 30 of 1966 he was faculty member of the Department of Music UCLA, grade of [Regents] lecturer. John Vincent instigated this sinecure. See below, pp. 148-149.