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Cuarteto Latinoamericano

ÁLVARO BITRÁN, violin

ARÓN BITRÁN, violin

SAÚL BITRÁN, viola

JAVIER MONTIEL, cello

2:30 pm, Sunday, October 23, 2022

Faye Spanos Concert Hall
University of the Pacific

HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS **STRING QUARTET NO. 17, W537** (1957)
(1887–1959) Allegro non troppo
Molto lento
Scherzo: Allegro vivace
Allegro vivace con fuoco

CARLOS GARDEL **Volver** (1934)
(1890–1935)

GARDEL **Por una cabeza** (1935)

GABRIELA ORTIZ **LA CALACA** (1997)
(b. 1964)

— *INTERMISSION* —

FRANCISCO MIGNONE **ENSAIO NO. 1, IN B♭ MINOR** (1958)
(1897–1986) Andantino

ALBERTO GINASTERA **STRING QUARTET NO. 1, OP. 20** (1948)
(1916–1983) Allegro violente ed agitato
Vivacissimo
Calmo e poetico
Allegramente rustico

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ARTIST PROFILE



The Cuarteto Latinoamericano, founded in Mexico in 1982, winner of the Latin Grammy twice, in 2012 for their album "Brasileiro, works of Francisco Mignone" and in 2016 for "El Hilo Invisible", today represents a unique voice in the international arena, disseminating the musical creation of Latin America.

The Cuarteto is known worldwide as a leading proponent of Latin American music for string Quartet. The Cuarteto has recorded most of the Latin American repertoire for string quartet, and the sixth volume of their Villa-Lobos 17 quartet cycle was nominated for a Grammy award in the field of the best chamber music recording as well as foreign Latin Grammy.

The Cuarteto has performed as soloist with many orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Seattle Symphony, the national Art Center Orchestra in Ottawa, the Orquesta Filarmónica de la Ciudad de México, the Dallas Symphony and the Simón Bolívar Orchestra of Venezuela. They have toured extensively around the world including performances in Europe and the Americas, Japan, China, New Zealand, and Israel and have appeared in a wide range of venues and festivals like the Concertgebouw, La Scala, the Kennedy Center, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Dartmouth College, Cornell University, Dartington International Summer School and the Ojai Festival.

The Cuarteto was in residence at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh from 1988 until 2008. Under the auspices of the Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles of Venezuela, the Cuarteto has created the Latin American Academy for String Quartets, based in Caracas, which serves as a training ground for 12 select young string quartets from the Sistema.

The Cuarteto has been awarded the México en Escena grant given by the Mexican government through FONCA (National Fund for Culture and the Arts) three consecutive times. The project revolves around the bicentennial celebrations of Mexican independence and features Mexican music for a string quartet from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Villa-Lobos: *String Quartet No. 17*

Villa-Lobos's father was a librarian and an amateur musician. Under this influence he developed an interest in music and learned cello at age six. He was inspired by classical music from Bach's *A Well-Tempered Clavier* that was given to him by an aunt. While traveling with his family throughout the vast country, he developed an interest in native Brazilian folk music, a combination of styles that persisted throughout his career.

Villa-Lobos learned to play the guitar and associated and performed with Rio de Janeiro's popular musicians. He left home at 18 because his widowed mother opposed his "delinquent" friends. He became a musical vagabond, playing cello and guitar to support himself while traveling, absorbing folk music, and composing his own pieces.

As a result, Heitor Villa-Lobos became one of the foremost 20th Century Latin American composers. In creativity, concept, and implementation, his String Quartets are comparable to those of Shostakovich and Bartok: genuinely excelling works of their genre. While not as dark and gloomy as Bartok's Quartets, Villa-Lobos responds with a tempered neo-classicism, never discarding tonality, but also never encouraging foolish sentimentality.

His music is a successful combination of an array of native Brazilian melodic and rhythmic elements with Western classical music. Unlike folk music, Villa-Lobos' quartets are classically designed four-movement works employing polyphony, polyrhythm, bitonality, and heavy chromaticism. And unlike European classical music, Villa-Lobos' quartets are marvelously unconfined from developmental and unifying formal and thematic rules. In their place, his quartets appear as a multicolor construction: they enhance self-sustained eruptions of ingenuity and slowly spin or suddenly merge into entirely new ones.

The first movement's unabashed tangents are reminiscent of the composer's famous *Bachianas brasileiras No. 2* and soon invite a memory of his solo piano *Lenda do caboclo*. Similarly, the lento references a Villa-Lobos song, his *Samba classico*. Listen in the finale for some Pan-American

influence with shadows of George Gershwin and African American blues. Meanwhile, Villa-Lobos continues his obvious genius for transforming ostinatos from ordinary accompaniments into actual content. The effect is magical in its simplicity: the musical content is not hidden, but joyously pours forth.

Gardel: *Volver; Por una cabeza*

Though born in the south of France, Carlos Gardel insisted that he was a child of Uruguay whose heart belonged to Argentina. In any case, his unmarried French mother moved to Argentina when he was an infant, and he grew up to become the most enduring voice of the Argentine tango.

His career began as a bar singer and party entertainer, but in 1917 he rose to fame in South America and beyond with his song *Mi noche triste* (My Sad Night), which sold more than 100,000 copies. Immediately thereafter he began to record as well, and during his brief life he recorded 770 songs, of which 514 were tangos. His suave style, captured on film, shows that his personal bearing (think movie star) fully supported his dramatic, seductive musical stylings.

Volver is a tango song created by Gardel with lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera. The title means to turn or swivel, perhaps meant to be descriptive of the dance. This tango has been covered by multiple singers, including Julio Iglesias, Libertad Lamarque, Los Panchos, and Elisa Calamaro.

Por una cabeza may well be Gardel's most acclaimed composition, along with *Mi Buenos Aires querido*. Again, Le Pera wrote the lyrics. The title translates as "By a Head," and the lyrics are the sentiment of a horse-race gambler who compares his losses to his compulsion for the track to his addiction to women. It is widely respected by listeners as an iconic piece and has been used multiple times throughout popular culture. Gardel himself sang it spectacularly in his last film, *Tango Bar*, but it has also been overheard in many other films.¹ It is on the mellow side of tango suggesting a distinct rhythm that creates a suitable dance mood.

His career was halted by a plane crash in Medellín, Colombia in 1935. His composer

friend Alfredo Le Pera was seated next to him. He was mourned throughout the world; his funeral cortège traveled from Colombia to New York City and from there to Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, and finally Buenos Aires, where he was buried to the music of his tango *Silencioso*.

Ortiz: *La Calaca*

Latin Grammy nominated Gabriela Ortiz is one of the leading composers in México today, and one of the most dazzling musicians rising in the international setting. Her musical language attains an exceptional and emotional fusion of tradition and the avant-garde, blending high art, folk music, and jazz in fresh, frequently sophisticated, and always personal manners. Her compositions are both entertaining and current as well as insightful and refined. Listen for the balance between highly organized composition and improvisatory impulsiveness.

She was born in México City to parents who were musicians in the famous folk music ensemble Los Folkloristas founded in 1966 to preserve and record the traditional music of México and Latin America. She trained with the eminent composer Mario Lavista at the National Conservatory of Music and Federico Ibarra at the National University of México. In 1990 she was awarded the British Council Fellowship to study in London with Robert Saxton at The Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In 1992 she received the University of México Scholarship to complete Ph.D. studies in electroacoustic music composition with Simon Emmerson at The City University in London. She currently teaches composition at the Mexican University of México City.

Day of the Dead festivities in Mexico are the inspiration for the creation of Ortiz' work *Altar de Muertos* for string quartet. This piece reflects the internal search between the real and the magic, a duality always present in Mexican culture. It is divided into four parts, each

¹ Scent of a Woman, True Lies, Schindler's List, Frida, Bad Santa, All the King's Men, and Easy Virtue!

of which describe diverse moods, traditions, and the spiritual worlds which shape both the global and the composer's personal concepts of death in México. Written for the Kronos Quartet and dedicated to the memory of those close to them, today we hear the fourth movement, *La Calaca*.

La Calaca is permeated with the syncretism of the concept of death in modern México, chaos, and the richness of multiple symbols, where the duality of life is always present: sacred and profane, good and evil, night and day, joy and sorrow. This movement reflects a musical world full of delight, vitality, and a great expressive force. At the end of *La Calaca*, Ortiz quotes a melody of Huichol origin whose musical art is always found in ceremonial and ritual life.

Mignone: Andantino

Francisco Mignone was one of the most capable musicians to come out of Brazil. In addition to being a virtuoso composer, he was also a great teacher, a successful conductor, an exceptional pianist, a great orchestrator, and a man of extensive culture.

A son of Italian immigrants, he began studying music with his father, who was an excellent flutist. In 1920, Mignone received a scholarship for European study from the São Paulo Committee of Artistic Grants and left Brazil to study composition at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory in Milan, Italy. A graduate of the São Paulo Conservatory and then of the Milan Conservatory, Mignone returned to São Paulo in 1929 to teach harmony, and in 1933 took posts in Rio de Janeiro at the Escola Nacional de Música and as Music Director of the National Institute of Music's Orchestra.

The interval from 1929 to 1959, his most prolific period of composition, unveiled a passionate interest in folk and popular traditions. His compositional style is described by Luiz Heitor Correa de Azevedo, who wrote: "His is a singular spirit, practical and shrewd, capable of perceiving and adapting itself to the more subtle variations of popular taste. The enormous musical facility he possesses gives to all his works a quality of improvisation which takes its path through many diverse positions."

Mignone's improvisational capability and keyboard skills have produced many works.

He was a versatile composer, dividing his output nearly evenly between solo songs, piano pieces, and chamber instrumental, orchestral, and choral works. He also wrote five operas and eight ballets.

There are two Ensaíos (Essays) for string quartet: *Andantino* and *Andante Cantabile*. It is not known whether Mignone intended them to be played together, and if so, in which order. The *Andantino*, which we hear today, is in the unusual key of B-flat minor. The mood of a *Modinha* (a type of Brazilian sentimental love song) occurs several times; listen especially for this in the first violin singing high above the cello arabesque. This piece is among the most inspired works of the composer.

Ginastera: String Quartet No. 1

Born in Buenos Aires to parents of Catalan and Italian descent, Ginastera showed great musical aptitude from an early age. He had written proudly nationalistic music since his teenage years, but he had grown frustrated with Argentina's politics, which wobbled between exploitation and tyranny. The composer was to accept several academic posts throughout his life, but as a well-known civil libertarian, he came under frequent scrutiny from the Perón regime. As a result, he moved to the United States for a short period between 1945 and 1947, taking the opportunity to study with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood. In 1948 he became Director of the Conservatory of Music and Scenic Arts at the National University of La Plata. Three years later he made his first trip to Frankfurt for a performance of his String Quartet No. 1. In 1971, he moved to Europe, settling in Geneva where he remained until his death.

String Quartet No. 1, Op. 20 was given its première by the Mozart Quartet in Buenos Aires on 24 October 1949. The work is representative of his second phase of compositional style which Ginastera called subjective nationalism, commenting that 'it was time to drop ethnic realism in favor of the creation of an imagined folklore'. This contrasted with his former approach of objective nationalism, where his works were all profoundly influenced by traditional Argentinian elements. Examples of his early work include *Panambí*, Op. 1 (a ballet on a

legend of the Guaraní Indians), *Danzas argentinas*, Op. 2 (for pianoforte), and *Estancia*, Op. 8 (a ballet of a day on a ranch with the gauchos at the center of the action).

The quartet comprises the usual four movements (*Allegro*, *Scherzo*, *Adagio* and *Rondo*) in which rhythms of Argentine folk music are apparent through development of an illusory folklore. There are some attributes of the composer's own artistic temperament that appear for the first time: strong and penetrating rhythms, adagios that are tormented, romantic, and introspective and moods that are enigmatic, nocturnal, and surreal.

The individual movement tempo descriptions are very revealing: it opens with an *Allegro violento ed agitato* (lively, violent, and agitated) and ends with an *Allegro rustico (merrily rustic)*. But it would be wrong and misleading to portray this music as a sporty high energy exercise. Certainly, those movements are as exciting as anything in the quartet literature, but the breadth of musical expression is amazing. Ginastera had been influenced by Bartók but it's a cenuous acquaintance and original. Curiously, for the first time in his use of a wide range of string effects from snaps to glissandi, you may hear the influence Ginastera had on his pupil Astor Piazzolla.

In his last ten years he produced many excellent compositions, a prolific output comprising four operas, orchestral works, several concertos, choral and solo vocal pieces, a wide range of chamber and instrumental compositions, eleven film scores, and incidental music for six dramas.

Alberto Ginastera, the principal Argentinian composer of his era, established his skill into a thoughtful fusion of national and contemporary components. His style progressed from the clearly patriotic works of his early years into a musical language that was modern yet always evoked the origins of his cultural identity.

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