



Manuel María Ponce Cuéllar

PONCE

There they are in a cafe in Havana: these three Mexicans who are barely distinguishable, in a sepia photograph with age-worn edges I discover in my hands. He who seems to encourage the talk, who seems to dream the most, is **Manuel Maria Ponce**. With his firm nose, big black eyes and coarse, abundant head of hair parted in the middle. The other two are the poet Luis Gonzaga Urbina and violinist Pedro Valdéz Fraga. It is 1915 and Mexico boils in their veins; street-level Mexico, the real Mexico. Ponce has already found his purpose in life: to create a music that sounds Mexican.

Transgression is the mark of those who leave traces, but a total breakdown of the rules is not necessary to mark a new step. It is possible to innovate from within tradition. Open doors to new landscapes perhaps just requires a fresh eye.

During the first half of the twentieth century, when Schoenberg's atonality and Stravinsky's neoclassicism already exist, Ponce composes in a musical language rooted in romanticism but applied to Mexican sound material. Later his sound would become more impressionistic. Fascinated by the natural music of his people and especially by their songs, he came to initiate a major movement of nationalist creation that helped define Mexican cultural identity. At the same time he revitalized the academic repertoire for guitar, being of the first composers of the century to create widely for that instrument. His friendship with the great Spanish guitarist Andrés Segovia would produce a professional collaboration that would place the guitar in a leading role on the world's stages.

Ponce's interest in the creation of a Mexican music at the time led to having opponents. Early in the century the social elite of Mexico - as in almost every Latin American country - maintained a mentality of cultural subjects from Europe, obediently colonized to European arts; which made them despise native cultural expressions. Folklore, music, popular manifestations, etc. lacked values in the eyes of the "cultured". European customs, music and social conception should be, in their eyes, the norm. When Ponce began to investigate natural Mexican music; to deliver conferences, preserve and compose inspired by Mexican music, they disparagingly called him "the

composer of music that smells of *huarache*", which are the humble sandals of the indigenous natives.

By then - professor of piano at the National Conservatory, of which he became director in later years - he had the audacity to give a recital of his works, among which he premiered his *romantic concert for piano and orchestra*, works in which he incorporated folkloric material for the first time. Many - including his pupil, the eminent composer Carlos Chávez - consider that recital in 1912 to be the starting point of Mexican musical nationalism. The moment that native sound material was first used as the raw material for complex musical forms.

At the same time Ponce insisted in small works for the piano where his musical art manifests itself most naturally and gracefully. In 1914 he published his *Mexican songs*, delightful arrangements of traditional songs. Brief compositions adorned with ingenious harmonies that convert those simple melodies into concert works. He later said: "*I consider it a duty of every Mexican composer to ennoble the music of his homeland, giving it artistic form, redressing it in the garb of polyphony and lovingly preserving the popular music that is an expression of the national soul.*"

He composed countless songs for voice and piano so authentically Mexican that for a long time many were considered to be anonymous traditional songs. Nowadays he is regarded as the creator of modern Mexican song. Until the end of his life he defended popular music forms at conferences, in articles, from the classrooms of the Conservatory; where he taught piano, music history, aesthetics and folkloric music between 1933 and 1946. He reflected it in his extensive body of work for piano and he inspired a whole new generation of composers that would raise that initial nationalism to magnificent levels, although conceiving it in very different ways.

The restless young man on that photo in the Havana coffee shop over time grew to become an icon of Mexican classical music, an icon of Latin American academic music, and would leave behind musical monuments such as *Concierto del Sur* for guitar and orchestra, *Chapultepec* and *Ferial* for symphony orchestra and small delights for piano such as *Intermezzo* and the world famous song *Estrellita*.