

Music

population at large. For the third consecutive year, a group of individuals, government agencies and business firms got together to organize a festival to take place in and around some of the most important churches and buildings of the city's past. Although there was dance, theater and exhibits, it was mainly a music festival, and some very interesting things were heard during eleven exhilarating days. Opening night was a dance

gala, but music stole the show. The National Dance Company performed two pieces, one set to French baroque music, the other to Mexican composer Mario Kuri Aldana's score especially written for a ballet based on one of Diego Rivera's famous mural paintings. These pieces were a good warm-up for the main course, a strong performance of Igor Stravinsky's great score *Les Noces* (The Wedding Feast), with original choreography by Bronislawa Nijinska. As it should be, the

music was live, and the performance was a great opportunity to come closer to one of Stravinsky's masterpieces. Four vocal soloists, mixed choir, four pianos and percussion ensemble brought the score to life with strength and precision, and Stravinsky's ritual, almost hypnotic setting of the words was a perfect match for a choreography with the authentic ring of the 1920's. The musical effort was anchored by the National University Percussion Orchestra, and

Music for a Great City

That is, of course, the title of a piece written in 1964 by the great American composer Aaron Copland, but it's also the spirit in which an arts festival took place in Mexico City during the last days of March. The festivity's main purpose was to promote awareness of the astonishing riches found in the downtown section of the nation's capital. Many buildings dating from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century have been rescued from disrepair, restored and put into service for the benefit not only of those who work and live in downtown Mexico City, but for the



Santo Domingo Plaza, nineteenth century.

Photo from Salvat archive.



September 16th Avenue at turn of the century.

the whole ensemble was demanding led by the orchestra's music director, Julio Viguera.

Mexican composers, both old and new, were very much in the forefront of the festival. The organizers commissioned three new pieces to be premiered during the festival, from three of Mexico's most respected contemporary composers: Mario Lavista, Manuel Enríquez and Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras. Originally conceived as a string quartet and later transcribed for string orchestra, Lavista's *Reflejos de la noche* (Night Reflections) is a very refined study in the use of harmonics in string instruments, and in it the composer does not eschew the natural attraction of certain tonal centers of gravity.

Manuel Enríquez offered the third piece in a series he started back in 1969. *Díptico III* (Diptych III) is a very austere, highly organized dialog between one percussion player and a string ensemble, in which the main traits of Enríquez' musical thought were clearly evident, especially his deep knowledge of the string

## odds and ends

instruments, garnered throughout a long career as a violinist-composer. For his part, Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras contributed a fine *Postludio* (Postlude) for strings, a three-section, single-movement piece, conceived mainly along the lines of clarity and lightness of texture. In the piece, the composer's knowledge of Renaissance polyphony and the ancient modes was very much in evidence, though the composition is in no way archaic or old-fashioned. On the contrary, the composer succeeded in blending that knowledge into a very contemporary soundscape, touched with a tinge of the contemplative.

The two concerts at which these pieces were premiered also featured some works of Mexican colonial music by composers such as Hernando Franco, Juan de Lienas, Joseph de Torres, Manuel de Zumaya as well as anonymous compositions. These works, originally written for organ and voice, were transcribed for string orchestra by Mexican contemporary musicians. The performances were by the Fine Arts Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Manuel de Elías and Armando Zayas.

Mexican colonial music, in its original form, was also featured in a vocal concert given by the Convivium Musicum Choir, led by Frika Kubacsek at the Regina Coelli Temple. This concert featured sacred and secular music from old manuscripts found in Mexico City and Oaxaca, recently edited in modern versions. Although many of these composers were natives of Spain or Portugal, the music was written in Mexico, most of it for use in church services. A small orchestra of violins, trumpet, trombones, bass and organ, joined the choir in some of the pieces, and the night's highlight was a spicy, mischievous *villancico* (Christmas carol) sung *a capella* and with gusto by tenors Ignacio Clapés and Flavio Becerra.

As he did for the 1986 festival, Mexican conductor Eduardo Mata put together an ensemble of top performers for a concert of old music, played and sung according to truly authentic musical practice. First, the choir led by Jorge Medina sang sacred music by Palestrina, and a *chanson* by Guillaume Costeley, in a performance that led credence to the theory that ancient music should be approached with small musical forces to achieve the best results. Eight voices were more than enough to convey the mystic mood of Palestrina's *Kyrie*, *Christe*, *Kyrie* and the playful lines of Costeley's *Mignone*.

Next was Bach's first orchestral suite, played by a small group of soloists instead of the huge forces used according to nineteenth century whims. Eduardo Mata approached the performance in the same spirit he applied last year to Bach's six *Brandenburg Concertos*, trying to conform as much as possible to baroque musical art. String instruments were furnished with gut strings instead of the modern ones made of contemporary materials, and the bows were

strung a bit loosely to achieve a mellow sound quality. *Vibrato* was ruled out, and the phrasing made each instrumental line stand out clearly in the ensemble. The string section was anchored by the members of the Latin American String Quartet, with Luisa Durón at the harpsichord, and a very sharp woodwind trio with bassoonist Juan Bosco Corro and oboists Roberto Kolb and Allyson Caldwell.

The program ended on a high note with a splendid performance

of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's masterful *Stabat Mater*. His setting of the text on the Virgin Mary's vigil by the Cross is by far the best ever composed, and it was played and sung with the same outlook as Bach's suite. There were many very moving moments in this performance, in which soprano Lourdes Ambríz and mezzosoprano Encarnación Vázquez gave a beautifully balanced reading of the original Latin text.

Mexico City's magnificent

Cathedral was the site for a spectacular musical evening, a multimedia premiere of a sacred opera on Saint John's Book of Revelations. The work was written for the festival by Felipe Ramírez, organist, composer and musicologist who has been responsible for a lot of research into Mexican colonial music.

The piece was conceived especially for performance at the Cathedral and called for a very special array of forces: a narrator, mixed choir, boys choir, two trumpets, two sets of tympani and the two splendid organs at the Cathedral. Light and darkness were also used for dramatic effect, and these, coupled with the

Cathedral's acoustics, made for some eerie moments during the performance led by the powerful voice of Mexican actor Claudio Obregón.

Leading into the premiere of Ramírez' sacred opera, the program started with his performance of a *Batalla* (Battle) for organ by Joseph de Torres y Vergara, an eighteenth century Mexican composer who was also dean and music master at the Cathedral, followed by a series of pieces for trumpet and organ by Domenico Gabrieli and Jean Philippe Rameau, expertly played by trumpeters Christopher Thompson and Mark Bennett.

A couple of days later, the fes-

tival premiered a trio of cantatas conceived as a single work, by Mexican composer Federico Ibarra. Called *Loa para la ciudad que espera* (Paeon for a Waiting City), the work is no secular cantata based on ancient forms. Actually, it resembles more an *auto-da-fe* straight out of Medieval lore. The text, written by Mexican poet José Ramón Enriquez, is a sober, dramatic song for a city that has been repeatedly raped by man and by nature, a city that once was great but now is only big, Mexico City.

The work is written for soprano, mezzosoprano, contralto, mixed choir, two trumpets, organ, harp and percussion, and

some of its vocal parts were conceived to be spoken by actors rather than sung. Composer Federico Ibarra has written several cantatas before and, as far as vocal music is concerned, he is at the forefront of Mexican contemporary music. His distinctive harmonic language and forceful musical expression were amply evident in the performance of the cantatas, undoubtedly the most powerful event of the festival.

Finally, we should mention a very satisfactory concert, conceived along classical lines, featuring works by three fine European composers. The Latin String Quartet opened with a limpid performance of Mendelssohn's *Andante and Scherzo*, Opus 81, a work that bears more than a passing resemblance to the composer's utterance in his music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Then the quartet was joined by violinist Jorge Risi, originally a founding member of the group, for a solid version of Mozart's rich, sometimes somber string quintet K. 516, played with authority by the five musicians.

The evening was capped by a surprisingly exciting reading of a masterpiece of chamber music, Ernest Chausson's unique concerto for violin, piano and string quartet. For this work the Latin American String Quartet and Mr. Risi were joined by pianist Edison Quintana, and there was never a more compact sextet to bring forth Chausson's harmonic mastery, present in the beautifully conceived, soaring melodies that never lapse into the commonplace sentimentality of less gifted composers. The ensemble playing of these six musicians was really first class all along.

Finally, we should note that with the exception of the opening night dance gala, none of these performances was given at a traditional theater or concert hall. Churches, museums, palaces, squares, courtyards and streets in downtown Mexico City became ideal places in which to listen to good music and learn something about the history of those sites, and of the efforts being made to preserve them for present and future generations. At the close of the Third Spring Festival of Mexico City's Historical Center, the work done so far was evident in the sites selected for the performances. Even so, much remains to be done, and hopefully, repeated editions of this Festival will help in bringing Mexico City and its inhabitants a little closer to each other.★

Juan Arturo Brennan



Metropolitan Cathedral.