



## Revolution: Mexican Composers on the Rise

When the Chicago Symphony Orchestra programmed Carlos Chávez's *Sinfonía India* in 2010 as part of the citywide celebrations for the bicentennial of Mexico's Independence, many saw it as a gesture of appreciation for Chicago's nearly 600,000 residents of Mexican descent that year. The brief 1936 symphony, which employs themes from Mexico's Huichol and Yaqui peoples and requires indigenous percussion instruments, has become an icon of the country's orchestral music. In more recent years, there has been a significant surge in performances of music by contemporary Mexican and Mexican-American composers, who are making inroads into American classical music and entering the repertoire in greater numbers.

It is a trend that traces back, in part, to Arturo Márquez's *Danzón No. 2*, an orchestral piece premiered in Mexico City in 1994 and widely performed in the United States and abroad in the early 2000s, when it was expanded for full orchestra and promoted by conductor Gustavo Dudamel. According to data collected by Bachtrack, the piece—inspired by dance music from Veracruz—was the third most performed contemporary concert work in the world in 2024, alongside works by Estonia's Arvo Pärt. It is the only piece by a living Mexican composer to reach an international stature comparable to *Sinfonía India*, Silvestre Revueltas's *Sensemaya* (1938), and José Pablo Moncayo's *Huapango* (1941). Works by several Mexican composers are increasingly performed in mainstream concerts alongside repertoire classics.

Recently, these programs have emerged beyond the Cinco de Mayo and Día de los Muertos concerts of many U.S. orchestras; the San Francisco and San Diego symphonies have for years presented Day of the Dead programs in early November, though they can be perceived as one-off special events. Several orchestras, especially in the Southwest, also present concerts highlighting the mariachi tradition with ensembles or soloists. Youth orchestras from the U.S. and Mexico have also performed together; last November, musicians from the San Diego Youth Symphony and the Tijuana Youth Symphony performed at the University of California, San Diego, bridging both cultures.

### The Ortiz Factor

The trend reached a tipping point earlier this year with **Gabriela Ortiz's** triple Grammy win for the album *Revolución Diamantina*, including the award for Best Classical Contemporary Composition for the ballet of the same title, performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Dudamel. The album also includes the brief theme *Kauyumari*, frequently programmed as a concert opener, which uses a Huichol melody that Ortiz

originally borrowed and harmonized for the final movement of her 1997 string quartet *Altar de Muertos*.

In the 2024–25 season alone, there were more than 90 performances of Ortiz’s music in the United States, including *Kaayumari*, which has been performed over 90 times by more than 50 orchestras worldwide since its premiere in 2021. Ortiz modestly attributes the piece’s popularity to its brevity and the catchy borrowed melody. But that is only one aspect of Ortiz, a composer who grew up in Mexico City, studied with Mario Lavista—an influential pupil of Chávez—and absorbed a wide variety of local and European music.

“When I was in London, I went to Darmstadt and European contemporary music festivals, but I never really felt part of it. Never,” she says. Today, she identifies with postmodern integration and eclecticism. “I remember going on a trip to Chiapas, in southern Mexico, and I went into a church. It was interesting because I saw an altar with a neon light, and a Coca-Cola, and candles. A collage of elements. Why do these Chamula people have a Coca-Cola on an altar, a Mickey Mouse, a neon light, and also something Spanish and a scent coming from Hispanic traditions, all mixed together? That’s how I am. I don’t come from a single pure thing; I come from a mix of many things, from modernity, but also from my country’s pre-Hispanic cultures, and from the European. This is a result of my culture.”

That visit to Chiapas inspired the creation of the *Altar* series, a title the composer uses not in an ecclesiastical sense, but to denote “something grand and important, something to be respected,” she states. The first was *Altar de Neón* (1995), for percussion ensemble and orchestra. Seven more *Altar* pieces have followed, including *Altar de Cuerdas*, a violin concerto for María Dueñas that is also part of the recent Grammy-winning album.

While Ortiz is one of the most performed Mexican composers of the moment, she also advocates for other composers from Mexico, as well as Central and South America. As the Richard and Barbara Debs Composer's Chair at Carnegie Hall for the 2024–25 season, Ortiz led an Ensemble Connect program featuring current composers from Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela, and the premiere of her own work *Pigmentum*, for horn and piano. The Carnegie Hall position included the premiere of four new works performed in separate programs by cellist Alisa Weilerstein, Dueñas, the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth, and the Attacca Quartet. Ortiz was also the musical director of the 2025 Festival of Contemporary Music at Tanglewood this July, where 15 of her pieces were performed—alongside music by other composers—including *Altar de Muertos* and a revised version of *Altar de Viento*, a 2015 flute concerto she wrote for her husband, **Alejandro Escuer**.

“Gabriela has never shied away from melody, rhythm, and exuberant orchestration,” asserts Mexican conductor **Carlos Miguel Prieto**. From 2007 to 2022, Prieto was the music director of the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico and has conducted nearly 100 premieres of works by Mexican and American composers, including Ortiz, with whom he has worked for 30 years. “Her pieces are a huge hit under any circumstances,” he says. “I just performed a piece of hers to open the concert with the National Symphony Orchestra [in Washington, D.C., in January 2025], and it was an enormous success. It’s called *Téenek*. I know I can suggest it without any problem because it’s a piece that fits well with the

orchestra and the audience.” *Téenek*, commissioned by Dudamel and the LA Phil, which premiered it in 2017, was a breakthrough for Ortiz. In 2023, Dudamel performed it with the Berlin Philharmonic, marking something close to a cross-cultural milestone.

But Prieto, the music director of the North Carolina Symphony since 2023, wishes he could program more music by composers whose style does not necessarily fit preconceived ideas of how Mexican music should sound. He was one of the first conductors to perform *Danzón No. 2* in the United States. (The other eight *Danzones*, by the way, are practically unknown in this country.) “Both orchestras and audiences expect me, as a Mexican conductor, to bring some of the local vitality and style of Mexican music,” he says. “They want to see a Mexican conductor leading music with Mexican rhythm, and with that folk-influenced style and beat. And there are some composers from my country who completely reject that aesthetic as a way of asserting that they can be Mexican composers without writing ‘Mexican’ music.”

That issue, or limitation, is not unique to Mexican music, Prieto explains: the trifecta of Bernstein, Copland, and Gershwin, frequently performed worldwide as “American” music, represents only a small part of the breadth of U.S. orchestral music. But “orchestras have a finite number of pieces and really look to maximize the impact of these composers,” he states.

## A Broad Spectrum

The styles and aesthetics of current Mexican and Mexican-American composers are highly varied. Some are generally characterized by a populist sound that embraces rhythmic vitality with engaging harmonies and bold melodic passages. A more refined compositional style leans toward the European avant-garde, which requires more effort—more rehearsals, for instance—from both performers and audiences. Much of the most stimulating music lies somewhere in between, with the six symphonies of Chávez (who died in 1978)—and now the music of Ortiz, his successor—as points of reference.

In addition to Márquez, who won a Latin Grammy last year for his violin concerto *Fandango*, increasingly recognized composers include **Juan Pablo Contreras**, whose mariachi-styled *Mariachitlán* has been performed some 120 times worldwide, and whose *MeChicano* was commissioned by a consortium of U.S. orchestras led by the Las Vegas Philharmonic; the late **Eugenio Toussaint** (the *Pérez Prado Mambo Suite* is an audience favorite); **Samuel Zyman** (notably *Encuentros*); and **José Elizondo** (a recommendation is *Danzas Latinoamericanas*).

**Enrico Chapela**, the only contemporary Mexican composer besides Ortiz published by Boosey & Hawkes, has received dozens of commissions over the last 20 years, including those from the LA Phil. He combines elements of heavy rock and other non-classical genres with orchestral music. *Magnetar*, an electric cello concerto, includes metal-style distortion, while the cantata *Braceros* employs mariachi voices with a libretto set in the historical context of the “bracero” program—an agreement between Mexico and the U.S. during WWII that allowed over three million Mexican *braceros* (manual laborers) to enter the U.S. to work in agricultural fields while American farmers were drafted into the

military. **Federico Ibarra Groth** opts for a more traditional aesthetic, but with a style that asserts itself as completely idiomatic and persuasive; his *Symphony No. 2, Las antecelas del sueño*, is an excellent starting point. Of course, these are just a few of the eminent composers.

Prieto tries to perform music by **Lavista**, Ortiz's teacher (who died in 2021), whenever he can. "It's a superior voice that, unfortunately, is difficult to program because it's not what people imagine 'Mexican' music will be," he says. Lavista's music tends to be more cerebral and textural than melodic. *Clepsidra* and *Ficciones* are among his most outstanding orchestral works.

### What Makes "Mexican" Orchestral Music Mexican?

The "Mexican" sound that generally unites these composers, despite the variety of styles and voices, is not easy to define. For conductor **Alondra de la Parra**, who grew up in Mexico City and has performed Mexican and Latin American music since founding the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas as a young music student in New York City in 2004, it all starts with the innate relationship Mexican culture has with rhythm. "What's important is that it comes from dance; it arises from feeling the pulse in the earth, in the feet," she says.

The night before our conversation for this article, de la Parra had conducted *Danzón No. 2* with the Joven Orquesta de la Comunidad de Madrid. With her Paax GNP Festival in Cancun, de la Parra also commissioned, premiered, and recorded Márquez's first symphony, *Sinfonía Imposible*, in 2022. She will perform it next year with the Orquesta y Coro de la Comunidad de Madrid, which she has directed since late 2024. Ortiz is also on her radar: de la Parra recently commissioned the composer's first symphony, which will premiere in 2026 at Paax and be performed by a consortium of orchestras.

"As a culture, Mexico is extremely musical," de la Parra notes. "We have a historical and cultural richness that very few countries in the world can share, because we go back thousands of years—the Mayans, the Aztecs, all our pre-Hispanic cultures—and then the arrival of the Spanish and the integration with Europe. So we are a very ancient culture that has always been surrounded by music, which is a fundamental part of it."

Ortiz's most recent orchestral piece is *Si el Oxígeno Fuera Verde (If Oxygen Were Green)*, themed around climate change, which the Philharmonia Orchestra of London premiered in September at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and toured across the U.S. Ortiz has come a long way for a composer who for many years never rented her music to orchestras because she felt they were doing her a favor, she recalls: "I was so happy they were going to play my music that I gave it to them for free."

While Prieto acknowledges the challenges and limitations facing the industry in general and Mexican composers in particular, he remains optimistic about where things are heading. "U.S. orchestras provide a great service to their community," he asserts. "The fact that they are programming more Mexican works demonstrates not only their involvement but also the importance of the Mexican community."

His hope is that this trend will lead to more orchestras and audiences interested in styles of Mexican music that are still unknown, even the music of composers who are accessible in one way or another but are only represented by one or two of their works. “You can’t ignore that even a composer as popular as Arturo [Márquez] has a whole side that isn’t being performed,” he says. Another example is Chávez himself, whose *Symphony No. 4, Romántica*, and his *Piano Concerto* could undoubtedly be embraced if more orchestras gave them a chance.

De la Parra believes much of this is long overdue. In 2004, when she was a college student, works of this kind had a very limited presence in American concert halls; now, these changes have allowed her to take a new piece like *Sinfonía Imposible* all over the world—from Cancun to São Paulo, Coruña, Copenhagen, Stuttgart, and next year, Madrid. Among the selections she has programmed for this summer’s edition of the Paax Festival, standing firm alongside Gershwin, Mahler, and Beethoven, is *Danzón No. 2*. Unassailable.

**By Esteban Meneses | 11/07/2025**

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