


Misreading Revueltas: Polysemy and the Second String Quartet

Malinterpretando a Revueltas: Polisemia y el Cuarteto de cuerda n° 2

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Abstract

Silvestre Revueltas's Second String Quartet premiered in Mexico City 1931, and was played a year later at Aaron Copland's Yaddo Festival in Saratoga Springs. When Copland heard the work, he described it as "very amusing... a little Mexican drama, and I could easily imagine it being danced." Copland's description treats the quartet as a unified whole that all functions seamlessly under a US gaze. But he missed many elements of the music—most glaringly, the *canción* that forms the primary theme (and also subtitle) of the first movement, "Los Magueyes." Copland's essentializing take was common for Revueltas reception: critics highlighted his supposed naturalness and naiveté, thereby minimizing Revueltas's labor and skill and denying the full range of musical features, which are by no means limited to sounds associated with "Mexicanness." This article explores several alternative analytical interpretations, focusing especially on strategic alterity and composerly ambivalence. These frames, strategic alterity and ambivalence, both embody multiplicity: ambivalence is structured by multiple feelings or ideas in tension, an experience of contradiction. And strategic alterity involves a composer undermining some aspect of themselves to meet others' expectations. Both implicate multiple interpretive possibilities. Polysemic readings require acknowledgement of analysis as incomplete, in progress or shifting. These multiple understandings defy some of music analysis's deepest impulses: clarity, truth, and a unified explanatory power. This article leans into this incomplete status, with an aim of re-examining assumptions and attending to a different set of musical meanings.

Keywords: musical modernism, strategic alterity, ambivalence, Mexico, Aaron Copland, United States, Carlos Chávez

Resumen

El Cuarteto de cuerda nº 2 de Silvestre Revueltas se estrenó en Ciudad de México en 1931 y se interpretó un año más tarde en el Yaddo Festival de Aaron Copland en Saratoga Springs. Al escuchar la obra, Copland la describió como "muy entretenida... un pequeño drama mexicano, me lo puedo imaginar fácilmente bailado". La descripción de Copland trata el cuarteto como un todo unificado que funciona perfectamente bajo la mirada estadounidense. Pero no detectó muchos elementos musicales –sobre todo la canción que da lugar al tema principal del primer movimiento, "Los Magueyes"–. La interpretación culturalmente estereotipada de Copland es típica en la recepción de Revueltas: los críticos resaltaban la supuesta naturalidad e inocencia, minimizando el esfuerzo y la habilidad de Revueltas e ignorando el abanico completo de características musicales, que van mucho más allá de sonidos asociados a la "mexicanidad". Este artículo investiga varias interpretaciones analíticas alternativas, centrándose en la alteridad estratégica y la ambivalencia compositiva. Estos marcos de referencia incorporan la multiplicidad: la ambivalencia deriva de tensiones entre múltiples sentimientos o ideas, de una experiencia contradictoria. Y la alteridad estratégica resulta de la supresión por parte del compositor de algún aspecto de sí mismo para adaptarse a las expectativas de los otros. Ambos marcos implican múltiples posibilidades de interpretación. Las lecturas polisémicas exigen aceptar el análisis como incompleto, en proceso y cambiante. Este tipo de conocimiento múltiple desafía a algunos impulsos profundos del análisis: claridad, verdad y poder interpretativo unificado. Este artículo se apoya en este estado incompleto con el objetivo de re-examinar supuestos y prestar atención a otro conjunto de significados musicales.

Palabras clave: *modernismo musical, alteridad estratégica, ambivalencia, México, Aaron Copland, Estados Unidos, Carlos Chávez*



As a quick personal note, I am excited to be writing for this inaugural issue of the journal *Súmula: Revista de teoría y análisis musical*. Working in the United States, the dominant mode of communication for music theory is in English: publication venues use English, with articles written largely by scholars whose primary language is English; many articles have only English-language scholarly citations. Limited perspectives like these create huge blind spots for interpreting musical compositions, especially when those works were written and/or performed in spaces where audiences and composers spoke other languages. To illustrate the perils of this shortfall, I have written this article focused on polysemic understandings of a work, Silvestre Revueltas's Second String Quartet (1931), starting with missed cues in a US-based response to it. In so doing, I hope to illustrate the stakes for precisely the kind of different work and participation that *Súmula* facilitates.

Revueltas's Second String Quartet has musical features commonly described as Mexican when connected to a Mexican composer: a melody that feels vaguely folkloric, parallel thirds, cheeky references to vernacularity. These are all features that Otto Mayer-Serra (1941) described as central to Revueltas's compositional sound and as quintessentially nationalist. When Aaron Copland (1932) encountered the work, he heard much the same thing, describing it as "very amusing... a little Mexican drama, and I could easily imagine it being danced." Copland's description treats the quartet as a unified whole that all functions seamlessly under a US gaze. But he missed many elements of the music. Most glaringly, the work is built on the *canción mexicana* "Los Magueyes." Lacking any sense of the quartet's underlying history and influences, Copland is unable to draw a connection between

Revueltas's work and the *canción*. And while the *canción mexicana* was embraced decades earlier as a national genre, this particular song also speaks to a broader human experience of alcoholism and drunkenness—an experience with which Revueltas was personally familiar.¹ In the absence of historical context that can enrich and multiply the possibilities for interpretation, Copland essentializes Revueltas and his music on the basis of stereotypes.

This essentializing position has long been the default option for US-Americans. Critics highlight the supposed naturalness of Revueltas's work and its composer's attendant naiveté. This framing minimizes Revueltas's labor and skill, and it discourages listeners from attending to the full range of musical features in the composition, which are by no means limited to sounds associated with "Mexicanness." Revueltas's experience of being reduced to a set of national character markers of course is not unique.

Perhaps Revueltas sought precisely the reaction from US-Americans that he received. As far as I have been able to find, he gave Copland no details on the context of the work and its primary theme. Might Revueltas therefore have intended for Copland to read the quartet in an essentialist manner, a reading that would fit international expectations and perhaps garner opportunities for additional performances and revenue? I consider whether such an interpretation is in keeping with the music and its history. It is my contention that we could understand Revueltas's music not as straightforwardly nationalist but as participating in what musicologist Leonora Saavedra and others have called "strategic alterity" whereby an "othered" person embraces otherness in order to meet the expectations of the unmarked group and so benefit from the rewards it can bestow.² In this case, Revueltas could be seen as tacitly allowing—perhaps even encouraging—Copland to read his own assumptions into the quartet.

There are further interpretive possibilities as well. Perhaps surprisingly, Revueltas described the quartet as containing "nothing folkloric or serious."³ This despite the composition's grounding in a song, which Revueltas otherwise acknowledged by titling the piece "Magueyes." What does it mean for the composer to distance his work from its own obvious sources? How might we hear the work differently as a result? In Revueltas's case, the act of distancing may be politically motivated, an expression of his ambivalence about the elite cultural status of concert music and the class implications of his work as a composer. A committed communist, Revueltas was caught between his admiration for the proletariat and his role as an artist in service to the moneyed quarters of society. In a hearing that attends to Revueltas's ambivalence, one might hear the Second String Quartet recapitulating this feeling of being between worlds.

It is not unique or revelatory to suggest that there might be multiple hearings for a work.⁴ But acknowledgement of multiplicity has been rare in analyses of works considered nationalist. Indeed,

¹ For more on the *canción mexicana* and its relationship to nationalism, see Saavedra 2010. This is especially tied to Manuel M. Ponce, who advocated strongly for the *canción mexicana* as a national genre. And while Revueltas references this celebrated genre in the work, his use is clearly not what Ponce had in mind—a conflict that I will discuss further later in this article.

² Saavedra's construction is related to Gayatri Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism ([1987] 2006). For more on strategic alterity, see Saavedra's contribution to Bitrán and Miranda 2002.

³ For any quote from Revueltas's sketches for his String Quartet No. 2, see <http://datosabiertos.unam.mx/FaM:BDREV:MU16>

⁴ See, for example, Rings 2008. Moreover, as Agawu (2009) writes, musical meanings are always contingent, depending upon the context of the interpreter. I will return to this point later in the article. Specific to the topic at hand, Saavedra (2015) has written on polysemic meaning as a compositional strategy for Mexican composer

such works are rarely analyzed seriously at all, reflecting a sense that their “national” character is simply obvious, or that the “national” traits are the only features that merit comment. In particular, works labeled nationalist have often been understood to be readymade for international consumption, created by design to be accessible for audiences without detailed knowledge of the context from which the works emerge. Was the Second String Quartet, which was performed in both Mexico and the US in the early 1930s, intended to be understood differently by different audiences—to convey to US-Americans a naturalized national identity, while Mexicans could glean a different understanding? Revueltas’s writings about this work and others in his oeuvre create a complicated sense of their themes and compositional aesthetics; he implies that the music is folkloric and yet isn’t, or that its dissonances and polytonalities suggest an urban scene that isn’t there. I cannot be sure what Revueltas’s private thoughts or intentions might have been, but his communications propel analysis into polysemic spaces, with multiple viable interpretations. It is not my goal to suggest what interpretation is correct but rather to suggest that all of these interpretations are essential to understanding the Second String Quartet. Only through multiple distinct readings, readings that conflict with one another and create very different senses of the quartet, can we begin to grasp the artistry of Revueltas’s work.

This article explores several possibilities for analytical approaches and interpretations, focusing on missed cues, strategic alterity, and composerly ambivalence. This is not a proposal of a novel theoretical approach—as Kofi Agawu writes, “I do not claim to offer a new theory of meaning; rather, [I draw] on a handful of existing analytical theories and [add] some insights of my own” (2009, 3). I begin with Copland’s essentialist reading, showing how his assumptions are part of a long practice of reductive hearings, in which Revueltas is understood to be simple, natural, even savage. From there, I look at the first and most explicit cue in the work, the canción “Los Magueyes,” and explore how Revueltas uses and plays with this reference. I then turn to Revueltas’s own comments on the work and consider the complicating possibilities of his contradictory and ambivalent words. How might acknowledgment of ambivalence affect an analytical approach?

The frames I use in this case study—strategic alterity and ambivalence—both themselves embody multiplicity. As Amaryll Chanady (2008) and Homi Bhabha (1994) note, ambivalence is structured by the existence of multiple feelings or ideas in tension. To be ambivalent is to be engaged in contradiction. And to recognize strategic alterity at work requires that one see a composer’s choices as consciously undermining some aspect of themselves in order to meet the expectation of others. Strategic alterity is ever in dialogue, so where it arises there must be at least two ways of defensibly interpreting its products. The interpretations of audiences and creators are both illuminating, though neither is total by itself. In considering these frames, I consider the ethics of analysis for composers who have previously been essentialized and marginalized by scholars and critics alike.

First glances

An initial impression, the work’s opening measures. String Quartet No. 2 contains a variety of markers that are simultaneously typical of modernist aesthetics in the period, and also often commonly observed “Mexicanist” features. On first listening, this opening sets up a seemingly typical “nationalist” work. It begins with cues that could be read as playful: polytonality and multiple meters, mixed with a distinct taste of the vernacular (Figure 1). The cello opens with an overtly tonal root-fifth C-G vamp.

Figure 1. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 (“Magueyes”), I. Allegro giocoso, mm. 1–5 (Vln II/Vla *tacet*).

The image shows a musical score for Violin I and Violoncello. The Violoncello part is in the bass clef, 2/4 time, and begins with a *pizz.* (pizzicato) triplet of quarter notes (G2, B1, D2) marked *mf*. The Violin I part is in the treble clef, 2/4 time, and begins with a triplet of eighth notes (D4, E4, F#4) marked *p*. Both parts feature triplet markings over their respective notes.

The first violin then enters with the primary theme for the movement. This melody, like the opening vamp, is highly tonal and in duple meter, but the two lines are not in the same tonal or metrical space. The violin’s two beats take up the same space as three beats in the cello, and instead of C major, the violin plays a diatonic melody in D major. The combination is off-kilter and slightly chaotic, but brief; the cello drops off after a few measures of violin, leaving the first violin to play the melody solo.

While they operate in distinct tonal and metrical spaces, the two lines share in presenting references to popular music within the chamber-music genre.⁵ Over the course of the movement, vernacular features are surrounded by interjections that fit less neatly into diatonic vernacular frameworks: the movement is littered with whole-tone scale excerpts and blocky chords that incorporate minor ninths and major sevenths. But a sense of the popular—and, moreover, the tonal—pervades the work. This element is visible in a variety of features, from frequent parallel thirds—a potential reference to Mexican popular styles (Mayer-Serra 1941; Saavedra 2001; 2010)—to echoes of the primary *canción* theme throughout. And the combination of vernacular and concert-music materials is clearly one of clashing rather than easy mixing. Even in the opening, the popular gestures are at odds with each other in their two different keys, and the concert-music elements undermine the continuity and tonal possibilities of either grounding. This sound—a bitonal, off-kilter reference to vernacularity—participates in a common modernist aesthetic of the era, bringing working-class cultures into salon and concert repertoires.

Reductive reception

Aaron Copland’s understanding of the Second String Quartet comports with the introductory analysis I have just provided, focusing on basic features of folkloric sound and modernist treatment. But his response speaks to more than these features. It is a form of reduction, one that naturalizes Revueltas’s sound as a byproduct of his Mexican identity and minimizes his skill, labor, and aesthetic agency. Revueltas sent the score and parts for the quartet to Copland for use at the 1932 Yaddo Festival in Saratoga Springs. Following the festival, Copland wrote to his friend, and Revueltas’s compatriot, Carlos Chávez. Reviewing the festival in a letter dated May 8 of that year, Copland writes:

The Yaddo Festival was a great success, even better than I had hoped. [...] The Revueltas was very amusing. It seemed like a little Mexican drama and I could easily imagine it being danced. To my great surprise the Lange Quartet were very enthusiastic about it and say that they will play it again next season.

⁵ These sets of features in combination have clear implications within topic theory. While there is much to be said about the musical topic of vernacularity and Revueltas’s use of it in this work, I have chosen not to focus on a topical approach for this article, instead attending most to issues of essentialism and cultural politics.

[...] On the other hand, some of the musician-listeners were confused because the form of the first two parts seemed so broken up—but I wasn't. Congratulate him for me. (1932)⁶

Copland's commentary is emblematic of Revueltas's reception over the past several decades in the US: he is simultaneously complimentary and belittling, and he communicates criticism, although it ostensibly issues from the mouths of others. Simultaneously, he positions himself as one very much in the know. Rather than allowing himself to be challenged by Revueltas, Copland uses Revueltas's composition to establish his own authority as interpreter of Mexican works.

Copland used a similar tone in later commentary, one that treats Revueltas's works as delightful but lacking in heft or real value, reflecting spontaneity and naturalness rather than skillful technique. In 1941, a year after Revueltas's death, Copland wrote:

Revueltas was the spontaneously inspired type of composer, whose music is colorful, picturesque, and gay. Unfortunately, he never was able to break away from a certain dilettantism that makes even his best compositions suffer sketchy workmanship. ([1941] 1968, 149)⁷

The interpretation emphasizes naiveté rather than the scholarly sensibility attributed to European concert music of the age and, as such, resonates with paternalistic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of the noble savage.⁸

Similar threads can be seen in other writings about Revueltas. Also in 1941, musicologist Oscar Mayer-Serra dismissed the intellectual value of Revueltas's music, concluding,

[c]ontemporary Mexican music—in the works of Chávez as well as those of Revueltas—has not yet passed beyond the simple exposition of melodic, rhythmic, and instrumental materials derived from sources of popular inspiration and expressed in terms of the modern musical idiom. It still lacks a constructive principle of its own, such as Manuel de Falla in his *Concerto* for harpsichord, and Béla Bartók in his latest works, have developed on the basis of their respective folklore traditions. (Mayer-Serra 1941, 143)⁹

Revueltas also was at times a target of dismissive Chávez, his long-time colleague. Decades after Revueltas's death, in a 1976 interview with José Antonio Alcaraz, Chávez recalled:

I strongly insisted that he polish his compositions, because I always found the same things: very pretty, but uninteresting. The piccolo, the tuba [...] and those ostinatos. That interminable repetition of a pedal; I felt like he could write much better without the need to always return to the same things. The ideas were good, but they gave the impression that everything was done in a big hurry. (Alcaraz 1982, 23)¹⁰

⁶ Despite his personal connections with Revueltas and his colleague Carlos Chávez, Copland's commentary also fits a common essentialist view of Mexico that was popular at the time, part of the "Mexico Vogue," a US fascination with Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s. For more on the Mexico Vogue, see Delpar 1992 and Tenorio Trillo 1999. While the contexts are somewhat different, Christina Taylor Gibson (2012) also addresses the artistic pressures and opportunities the Vogue presented for Mexican composers and artists working in the United States.

⁷ Originally published in 1941 under McGraw-Hill as *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America*. Also quoted by Luisa Vilar-Payá in Bitrán and Miranda 2002, 31.

⁸ For further discussion of the noble savage in relation to Americans, see Ellingson 2001, who also incorporates a historical contextualization from Rousseau, Hobbes, and others.

⁹ I find it striking that this description is in an article focused entirely on Revueltas. That is to say, Mayer-Serra spent time considering the shape and details of Revueltas's output, only to conclude that the music was simple and undistinguished. I should also note that Mayer-Serra was Spanish, not American. But this article was written for a journal published in the United States, in English, and to that end, I take it to be participating in US criticism.

¹⁰ Throughout this article, translations from Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted.

It's true that Revueltas composed quickly, writing many works during this period; nearly all of Revueltas's music was composed in just one decade (1930–1940) and the early 1930s were a particularly intense period. But speed is not the same thing as haste; Chávez's diagnosis of minimal creativity and care shows a refusal to attend to possible meanings and intentions embedded in the musical features he dismisses. Chávez's thinking was perhaps occluded by his personal bitterness toward Revueltas; they had a serious falling out in 1935 (Contreras Soto 2000, 73–174).

These dismissive attitudes, in which Revueltas's composition is seen as spontaneous, unintellectual, natural, and "ethnic" have persisted in many forms, including scholarly journals. In 1987, Charles Hoag wrote in *Latin American Music Review*:

The ostinatos in [Revueltas's] *Sensemaya* and *Caminos*, though related to those heard in *Rite*, seem to have naturally risen out of the folk musics of the Spanish, Indian, and African ethnic components of the Latin American population. Like the murals of his countryman Diego Rivera, Revueltas' music celebrates the folkloric essence of Mexican culture. (1987, 172)

Along the same lines, and a few years later, Peter Garland asserted,

Revueltas's relationship to Mexican traditional musics was spontaneous and deep, not studied or self-conscious as it often is in Chávez's work. He shared a sense of camaraderie with that music, heightened by his political ideals. For Revueltas, there were no class distinctions in music. (1991, 152)

This last statement is noteworthy for its mismatch with documented history: if anything is clear, it is that Revueltas had a strong sense of class distinctions in music, distinctions that troubled him deeply and that I will delve into further in the coming pages.

It is not only scholars but also critics and musicians, including recent ones, who participate in this orthodox interpretation of Revueltas. In 2003, conductor Ángel Gil-Ordoñez said that "when you listen to Revueltas, you smell the marketplace and taste the tamales. You are in a cantina—a piano bar—drinking tequila. And you are in a culture saturated with music, with marimbas and mariachis" (Page 2003, N1). Later, the *New York Times* published an article asserting, "the music of Silvestre Revueltas at its most unbuttoned confesses a kind of brilliant savagery" (Holland 2005, E6).

Writings like these demonstrate a central failing of much Revueltas reception: a failure to consider the music carefully within the personal and political context of its creation. And beyond this is a failure to hear. Such critiques seem to deliberately ignore certain elements of Revueltas's compositions. For example, the last movement of the Second String Quartet is a blocky and angular fugue, one that demonstrates precisely the kind of "learned" style these critics believe to be absent from Revueltas's music.

Dismissive—if simultaneously complimentary—readings steeped in international stereotypes of Mexican identity present a barrier to music analysis and the potentially wider range of interpretations it supports and furnishes. In 1989, Yolanda Moreno Rivas observed this phenomenon:

For too long, idealization of the Dionysian and mythical figure of Silvestre Revueltas [...] did not favor analysis and serious evaluation of his music. Thus, the brilliant and profoundly reflexive work of his short but intense production years (1930–1940) was explained as the natural emanation from a visionary genius; from an instinctive and vital musician who spouted score after inevitably Mexicanist score. (1989, 183)

Luisa Vilar-Payá agrees:

Today few specialists study the music of Revueltas from a theoretical perspective that tackles formal and harmonic aspects of his work in depth. For some musicologists, analysis brings nothing to the music of Revueltas. Others think that this type of approach kills the idea of spontaneity and diminishes the value of studied music. (Bitrán and Miranda 2002, 31–32)

As I will discuss later, Revueltas himself leaned into the idea that interpretive analysis ill-suited his work, and that it perhaps even gave people a false sense of understanding. But, as is clear from the quotes above, critics already felt that they understood the work without engaging in close readings. He may have spurned analysis, but in its place his work is left to languish in the minds of those who see only nationality, savagery, and spontaneity. What is more, his inevitably Mexican sound can do nothing but reinforce a global hierarchy, in which Mexico is simpler and more exotic, colorful, and delightful than some other places—Europe, the United States—where artists produced modernist work.

At the risk of contradicting the composer's stated wishes—to be fair, wishes expressed at a time when music analysis was hardly more than an adjunct of the same hierarchy described above—I believe that there is more to be gained from looking at the details and construction of the Second String Quartet. I do not aim to show that dismissive interpretations are wrong. Rather, I aim to show that a careful analysis, attentive to personal and political context, is compatible with a range of interpretations beyond the orthodoxies of simplicity, spontaneity, and nationalism.

Misread reading: “Los Magueyes”

If the Second String Quartet is, as Copland put it, a “little Mexican drama,” it is not because of the specific folkloric elements the work contains. Copland did not recognize the primary theme of the first two movements, the canción “Los Magueyes.” He saw the score but must have taken no notice of the subtitle, which presumably did not register to him as having any particular meaning or recognizable content.¹¹ What did Copland miss by ignoring “Los Magueyes”?

“Los Magueyes” is a song about alcohol and drunkenness. The maguey is a plant that is part of the agave family, used to make ropes and other utilitarian objects. Its sap can also be fermented in the manufacture of alcoholic beverages like pulque. Rodolfo Ramírez Rodríguez (2007) has argued that twentieth-century Mexican arts employed references to the maguey as a marker of Mexican agrarianism and rurality. But this quartet hardly depicts an idyll of rural Mexico. Instead, the focus is on pulque and the travails of alcoholism, as in this excerpt from the first verse:

<i>esos magueyes</i>	those magueys
<i>son causa de mi desgracia</i>	are the cause of my disgrace
<i>soy muy borracho</i>	I am very drunk
<i>y nada me cae en gracia</i>	and nothing satisfies me ¹²

¹¹ I do not mean to say that he thinks the title is meaningless. Rather, his work from just a few years later demonstrates his approach to specific canciones: in *El Salón México*, he never commented upon the details or lyrics of any of the melodies he used, simply having selected them from a songbook for inclusion. Given that he did talk about this work—its Mexicanness, his reception in Mexico, etc.—I consider this omission a sign that the specific details of these songs were less important to him than their status as “folkloric.”

¹² This is taken from several versions of the song. There is some variation among recordings: for example, while Rafael Buendía and Eugenia León sing the words I have given here, Oscar Chávez provides a variation on the

Figure 2. Comparison of folk tune versions. Lower staff: first half of “Los Magueyes” as presented in Moncada García 1971, 52 (Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, 1904); upper staff: adapted opening, Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 (“Magueyes”), I. Allegro giocoso.

(m. 3, downbeat in original)

(m. 6)

Le pi-do al cie-lo que se se-quen los ma-gueyes, por-que e-sos ma-gue-yes son cau-sa de mi des-gra-cia;

(m. 8)

soy muy bo-rra-cho y na-da me cae en gra-cia, por-que no me a ma-la mu-jer que tan to-a-mé.

“wrong” note in the quartet
(accompaniment = G with F-sharp neighbor tones)
lines up with chromatic motion in folk tune

Francisco Moncada García (1971) describes “Los Magueyes” as part of a group of songs he labels *canciones báquicas* (bacchic songs). Indeed, “Los Magueyes” is typically treated as an amusing drinking song. While I have not heard recordings from the 1930s, more recent performers commonly take on a drunken style of performance, with the instrumentalists playing out of sync or in wavering tempo, and the singer slurring their words.¹³ Given this point of reference, the opening measures of the first movement of Revueltas’s quartet could be read as playing with the trope of drunken performance. The cello starts like the bass of a band, vamping in C major. But when the melody comes in, it’s in the wrong key and at the wrong tempo. Like singers in recent recordings, perhaps Revueltas’s violin sounds drunk, the pulque impairing the player’s skills.

In the measures that follow, more sounds of potential impairment arise. In m. 9, just as the melody turns to the subdominant, Revueltas puts a “wrong note” in the first violin. Of course, the wrong-note aesthetic is quite common in modernist works that reference vernacular practice,¹⁴ but here that sound takes on additional potential meaning, as the player misses the melodic peak of the canción—and a note that cues the move to the subdominant—perhaps a result of drunkenness.

The “band” in this quartet never quite gets it together—the cello vamp falls off, and the violinist never plays the full melody of the canción. In Figure 2, I have placed Revueltas’s first-violin melody over a version of the first half of “Los Magueyes.” I should note that the full melody of “Los Magueyes” is not a singular item; like many folkloric melodies, it has several variants. In this figure, I have taken

final line: instead of “y nada me cae en gracia,” he sings “y a naide[sic] le caigo en gracia,” with the meaning “and no one likes me.” Moncada García also marks “a nadie le caigo en gracia” as a very common version of the lyrics, which has that same switched meaning of “nobody likes me” (1971, 87).

¹³ See, for example, Rafael Buendía, *Que Se Sequen Los Magueyes*, Musart T-10917, 1983; Eugenia León, *Puño de Tierra*, IC21 7503006516078, 2008.

¹⁴ The term “wrong-note” has been used by some scholars to refer to twentieth-century composers’ use of notes that seem slightly off, providing a sense of distortion—especially composers including folk melodies or children’s songs, such as Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Ravel. Deborah Rifkin calls these “transgressive,” noting that they “displace otherwise tonally expected continuations” (2018).

Figure 3. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 ("Magueyes"), I. Allegro giocoso, mm. 1–19.

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

pizz. *mf*

p

f *arco*

mf

p *espressivo*

dissonant interjection, ending on dominant, at odds with implied subdominant of melody

Introduction of theme to be later used in Lento section, mm. 58–67

mf *f*

mf *f*

f *mf*

f *sff*

f *sff*

f *sff*

compressed opening gesture instead of closure to tonic, now in parallel thirds

rhythm derived from "Los Magueyes"

arrival at harmonically unstable chord

... breaks into rising sequence

f *sff* *ff*

f *sff* *ff*

f *sff* *ff*

pp subito

pp subito

opening gesture, now in parallel seconds, presented as a rising sequence

the melody from a collection by Francisco Moncada García (1971). He catalogued eighteen different versions of "Los Magueyes," and his collection shows regional variants and likely paths of distribution. The version I have shown here is from Lagos de Moreno in Jalisco, collected in 1904.¹⁵

It is perhaps reasonable to hear the quartet as an appropriately playful take on a song about alcoholism. To my ear, however, there is something else going on, revealed by the surprising force-

¹⁵ Moncada García's text publishes all of the versions in C major, but I have here transposed it to D major in order to facilitate comparison. Further, I have displaced the very first segment of the Revueltas, which begins on a downbeat instead of a pickup; the other segments are placed metrically as they occur in the score.

fulness of the sound, and something that might connect to Revueltas's misgivings about nationalist representation. "Los Magueyes" is part of a genre that was celebrated in the early twentieth century as a paradigm for national expression: the *canción mexicana*. While the genre is often posited as having roots in Italian music of the nineteenth century, it took on a different symbolic character in the twentieth.¹⁶ In the 1910s, composer Manuel M. Ponce engaged in a multi-pronged campaign for the genre, giving talks and creating "polished" versions for voice with piano accompaniment. He also put *canción* melodies into concert works, using these melodies as cues for Mexican identity within an elite register (Madrid 2008; Saavedra 2010).

Compared to Ponce's work with *canciones mexicanas*, Revueltas's treatment of "Los Magueyes" is violent—the opposite of Ponce's "polished" presentations. Revueltas undermines its simplicity by cutting it off, breaking it into fragments and introducing sharp dissonances into a largely diatonic vernacular melody. As demonstrated in Figure 2, Revueltas uses only partial phrases, leaving off central parts of the melody and creating a lumpy and uneven realization. Underneath this fragmented melody, the other members of the ensemble interject loudly, at odds with the first violin rather than supporting it. Figure 3 shows several of these features as they occur in the opening measures.

After the initial half-phrases, the *canción* rapidly disintegrates. Just when the melody approaches what should be the conclusion of the first half of "Los Magueyes" at mm. 10–11, which should arrive with resolution to the tonic, Revueltas breaks away from the theme and its D major tonal space, interrupting to preview a melody that will be featured later, during the *Lento* section of the movement. From here, Revueltas returns to the *canción*, but it is never quite recovered. Instead, he restates the opening half-phrase of "Los Magueyes" in a condensed way in m. 12, now in parallel thirds. Rather than continuing, the melody disappears into a rising sequence whose rhythm is derived from the initial statement of "Los Magueyes" (mm. 13–15), one that wanders far from D major and concludes with an abrupt, *fortissimo*, harmonically unstable chord in m. 16. This chord bears little tonal relationship to the preceding materials, approached from a steadily increasing registral spread over the preceding two measures, with lines that are associated with both melodic minor and octatonic pitch collections—a sharp contrast to the major-mode emphasis of the movement so far. While this movement is specifically in D major—with a suggestion of C major bitonality at the beginning—the only doubled note in the chord is D-sharp, not a part of either key. Revueltas returns to the opening thematic gesture in m. 17, this time in parallel seconds, and again moves through a rising sequence before breaking off at the end of m. 19. Over the course of this opening section, the theme goes from a recognizable melody to an abstracted reference, its features broken down into small gestures and rhythmic references.

With these abrupt breaks and interruptions, Revueltas's music suggests quick shifts and turns of attention, subverting expectations of continuity and direction. There are multiple possible interpretations for this feature of the work, the most obvious being that Revueltas is modeling the interrupted, unfocused thoughts and random motions of a drunkard. This would place Revueltas's compositional choices squarely within the space of vernacular songs. Further, it might be a rebuke of the idealized form of the genre put forward by Ponce.

¹⁶ Ricardo Miranda suggests that Manuel M. Ponce may be at the root of this narrative, having posited Italian and Spanish nineteenth-century roots for the genre in a set of lectures he gave on the topic in 1913 (2015, p. 49). This same narrative is later reiterated in Vicente T. Mendoza's monograph on the topic (1998), as well as in Leonora Saavedra's work (2010).

There are further possibilities here, too: the work connects sonically to a series of features common in Revueltas's music that have been interpreted as reflecting Mexico's urban environment in the 1930s. These comments show direct connection to the opening section I have just described. Mayer-Serra wrote of Revueltas's works as expressing attention to working-class vernacular musics and the noise of modern, urban Mexico. He highlighted Revueltas's carnivalesque music, expressing chaos through "folk melody, twisted and disfigured by constant alterations," adding that,

[h]e is interested in present-day Mexico, with the festivities of its market-places, the comical, sad atmosphere of the *carpas*—the crude little playhouses of the capital—, the tumult of the crowd in the street, the shrill colors of the people and the landscapes, the songs and music of the country as it exists today. (Mayer-Serra 1941, 127)

Leonora Saavedra (2001) describes these compositional techniques as Mexicanisms, marked by frequent changes of meter, metric displacements of melody, and hemiola; by notes that suggest "popular tuning systems, slightly or plainly off according to Western standards" (247); by collage techniques to represent street markets and fairs; and by use of brass and tone colors that suggest popular bands.

More recently, Julio Estrada discusses accumulations close to noise and suggests that Revueltas's

rhythmic constructions present relatively stable patterns that take on the risk of shifting into chaotic structures; the textures of it give the impression of being out of place to become a field of detunings, equivocations, or mistakes in synchronicity; the whole allows one to perceive a spontaneous disproportion and the rude buzz of a peasant country entering the industrial era. (Estrada 2012, 29–30)

In my reading of this opening section, I see some of the features Mayer-Serra, Saavedra, and Estrada have described. As I will discuss in the coming section, I also see other interpretive possibilities. In addition to the noise of density and industrialization, I read this "twisted and disfigured" melody as commentary on the clash between vernacular songs and the rarified setting of salon music.

Central to my argument is the importance of the specific context of the work, and Revueltas's relationship to the materials, something more specific than Estrada and Mayer-Serra were aiming to address in their broader reading of Revueltas's oeuvre. As shown by Copland's commentary, without contextual cues, critics and audiences have no recourse but to hear Revueltas's work as essentialized, using the stereotyped shortcuts for identity that are readily available to them. And in the case of US audiences, that hearing reinforces a sense of US sophistication as a contrast to Mexican delight. With the knowledge of the *canción* in mind, a different reading is possible, one that does not reinforce such hierarchies.

Ambivalent Revueltas

Revueltas himself suggested that the quartet was open to multiple interpretive possibilities, and not just the obvious ones. Despite the explicit subtitle reference to "Los Magueyes," he wrote the following two statements on a manuscript for the quartet:

I could say, a Mexican sketch. (It could be, if you wish.) But it has no tendency to be folkloric, nor serious, nor transcendental.

And:

I could call this a Mexican sketch with no folkloric transcendence. Rather a fantasy. It has a fragment of a popular song as its basis. It has nothing that is folkloric nor serious nor transcendental. (Kolb Neuhaus 1998, 39; translated in Saavedra 2001, 244–245)

Within these notes, Revueltas lays out a series of tensions: If the work is not folkloric *or* serious, how might it be understood? What does it mean to name a work after a well-known canción, present that song as the primary theme for the work, and then deny the folkloric reference? Who are these notes for, left in the margins of his manuscript? Saavedra contends that these words may reflect Revueltas's unease with the then-popular use of vernacular materials in concert works and with associated nationalist politics. She writes:

The notes allow us to document Revueltas's misgivings, ambivalent attitudes, and contradictions concerning the nationalist project. Thus the notes for [the quartet] reveal a Revueltas who, at the very least, finds the conscious act of using a folk melody in his quartet to be rather too deliberate and who is fearful that the resulting Mexican or folkloric character might appear to be too contrived and as too obvious a statement. (Saavedra 2001, 245)

Saavedra's argument is framed in contrast to prior interpretations of these writings, which she notes "have typically been interpreted merely as a sign of the composer's playfulness and general irreverence towards the musical and political establishment" (245). Her claim, as I see it, is not on behalf of a particular alternative interpretation but rather of openness to the possibility of alternatives. In their very obscurity, these manuscript notes are a refusal of closure, inviting an ongoing discussion of what is at stake in the music.

Revueltas often wrote in ways that can be difficult to parse—one moment embracing the concert-music world and its practices, and the next dismissing its elitism. For instance, in notes on *Esquinas* (*Corners*), an orchestral composition from 1930, Revueltas wrote: "From the point of view of musical skill, I can't say anything, because it doesn't interest me. Some good-humored people say that I have skill; others, bad-humored, say no. They surely know better" (Kolb Neuhaus 1998, 47). Statements like these only augment the sense of ambivalence shrouding Revueltas's compositional art, practically demanding that we look beyond the constant tropes of nationalism, spontaneity, and playfulness to find in the work new meanings and even critiques of old ones.

If Revueltas felt ambivalent about the musical projects he was undertaking, there might be alternative musical readings and understandings to gain—multiple ways to consider this music, at once part of the "nationalist" canon and a critique of it. This frame of ambivalence provides an alternative mode of reading these works beyond dominant tropes of nationalism or playfulness, and into deeper questions of how composers navigate competing demands and desires.

Consider Revueltas's stated misgivings about not only his own skills but also classical music writ large. "I like all kinds of music," he wrote in 1932. "I can even stand some of the classics and some of my own works, but I prefer the music of my village, which is heard in the province" (Revueltas and Revueltas 1989, 29). This statement might be read as a fairly standard modernist gesture: idealizing the rural and unaffected, even while composing works for ensembles that perform the European art-music canon. But the bitterness of Revueltas's words lingers. There is more than a whiff of critique here. The statement also undermines ascriptions of nationalism, as Revueltas aligns himself with a specifically provincial tradition. The music he loves is neither his own (individual) nor "universal" (cosmopolitan). And nor is it a Mexican national music. In this way, one could make sense of adopting a vernacular theme like "Los Magueyes" while denying it folkloric character. Vernacularity lacks the

political freighting of folklore, for the former simply is another word for common practice, while the latter asserts that in common practice lies some essential, defining, and unifying character of a people.

This reading of Revueltas's act of denial dovetails with his concerns about class—specifically, his sympathies with working-class people and his aversion to his own elite affiliations. Despite having moved among artistic circles in New York and Mexico City, and even as he fought for space on concert stages and in newspaper reviews in these cities, Revueltas viewed himself as advocating for peasants and workers. Even more, he identified as part of that group, a repositioning of artists from the upper-class cultural status to a proletariat position. Class struggle was so central to Revueltas's being that it contributed to the dissolution of his marriage. In a 1927 letter to his then-wife Jules Klarecy, he wrote:

Since our last conversation, and the prior one, sufficient for us to get a sense of our points of view, I have arrived at the conclusion (which does not imply a reproach or that I wish you ill) that, unfortunately, although we overlap in certain ways, our means and form of realizing them are entirely different, and not just this, but also the things in which we apparently coincide are of a vain, exterior nature; at root, profoundly, they differ entirely. Your ideology is based in the social conceptions and ethics of the bourgeoisie. [...] My ideas about ethical social problems have another sense and different roots: they come from the pueblo, from the workers, the oppressed and the exploited, loves of the future. These individual differences become the differences of the world. [...] Even I, a teacher, an intellectual worker, so exploited, so oppressed like the rest of the workers in the current conditions of capitalist countries, I have considered my responsibility, my human and living responsibility, to fight at the side of my comrades for a new and better life. (Revueltas and Revueltas 1989, 46–47)

He expressed similar concerns throughout his life, with a deep investment in working-class oppression and rights, and an investment in the post-Revolution Mexican Communist Party. Nevertheless, it is clear that he saw concert music as carrying baggage that was in some ways incompatible with the working class and rural life in Mexico.¹⁷ Revueltas's conflicted words suggest ambivalence not only about the “folkloric” in concert music, but about the class politics that could potentially be read into the work.

Read in this light, Revueltas's work has polysemic possibilities, multiple lenses for interpretation. His works and writings reveal distinct spaces of tension, and some interpretations that might seem in contradiction with one another. Here, a postcolonial frame is instructive. Fernando de Toro notes that positions like Revueltas's—in between worlds, with competing demands—don't fit easily into binary or simple narratives. Faced with this tension, postcolonial approaches allow for the creation of a “third space,” highlighting “the very fact that there are emergent voices, emergent new cultural articulations and practices that can no longer be decided or explained by [...] reductionist and binaristic simplicity” (de Toro 1999, 104). Amaryll Chanady (2008) highlights the specific quality of ambivalence in this situation.¹⁸ She argues that it is central to Latin American postcolonial identity construction, writing against discussions that would position Revueltas as either for or against nationalism, either a

¹⁷ Stephanie J. Smith (2017) has discussed the importance of communist views in the aesthetics and practice of art after the Revolution. In her reading, while the absolute numbers of party membership were small, the ideas were central to the Mexican art scene in the 1920s and 1930s. Although her discussion centers on visual arts, I find it a compelling frame for considering Revueltas's aesthetics, grappling with questions of class, representation, and identity in music. And, as Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus has discussed, Revueltas was a member of the LEAR, a Communist-affiliated organization (Bitrán and Miranda 2002).

¹⁸ See also Bhabha 1994 for discussion of ambivalence; Chanady focuses specifically on the concept with relation to Latin American identity.

cheerful art-music composer or an avowedly folkloric musician. In this “third space,” Revueltas’s music can be seen as fitting both sides of the issue, and also in between spaces. I cannot be certain how Revueltas felt about these different interpretations, but his specific choices—sending the work to Copland without program notes; choosing to have the quartet performed in both Mexico City and Saratoga Springs, for audiences that would have different knowledge bases—leave space for an intentional understanding, that perhaps Revueltas meant to be read in different ways by different audiences.

Alternative analytical possibilities

Revueltas and his music are shaped by ambivalence as well as the stereotypes and biases of international audiences. Amid these dual pressures, internal and external, analysis of Revueltas’s music has suffered. Critics and scholars, convinced that Revueltas’s compositions are natural outgrowths of spontaneous inspiration, see no reason to analyze Revueltas’s works. They therefore find nothing in it beyond these stereotypes. And Revueltas at least claimed that he was content to be ignored by scholars, ensuring he would not be taken seriously. What does it mean to engage responsibly with a work whose analysis has been so frequently refused, both by the composer and by his critics?

The perceived naturalness of Revueltas’s work—its grounding in intuition rather than skill and intellect—is not to be credited: Revueltas both trained in and taught at conservatories, and his music betrays a good deal of knowledge and care. But my aim is not to redeem Revueltas’s works as sufficiently complex or sophisticated to be worthy of analysis. To do so would be to reinvest in an indefensible intellectual hierarchy.¹⁹

Rather than defending Revueltas’s value within this hierarchy, I aim to see what analysis reveals, in light of the historical and cultural context elucidated above. And this context-sensitive analysis affirms that there are multiple possibilities for interpreting Revueltas’s musical choices, depending upon one’s perspective, assumptions, and historical understanding. These possibilities can be read against prevailing interpretations of Revueltas as playful, naïve, straightforwardly nationalist, or essentially Mexican.

Returning to Revueltas’s handling of the “Los Magueyes,” I want to suggest an analytical frame that departs from both the essentialist reading provided by Copland and others and from the sense of Revueltas as an artist who merely “plays” with vernacular resources. Recall that Revueltas often turns away from the canción melody abruptly, interrupting and fragmenting the theme. This might be play—the jolly drunkard careening without a care in the world. Or it might reflect a dissolution into chaos. Alcoholism was a personal struggle for Revueltas, and with this in mind, good cheer might take on a darker, more violent cast. Alternatively, it could serve to critique the canción as paradigmatic carrier for nationalistic sentiments, as it undermines the integrity of the song’s melody and lilting character.

But there are other compelling possibilities as well. The lens of ambivalence is still more illuminating than Revueltas’s personal history with alcoholism or his specific complaints against the

¹⁹ John McGinness (2006) spoke directly to this issue in scholarship on Ives, and proposed an alternative response. He noted that—like Revueltas—Ives was often criticized for poor construction. In response to this critique, McGinness rejects the prospect of defending Ives’s skill in favor of noting that one can engage in careful and thoughtful analysis of any work, and assess what one finds.

Figure 4a. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 (“Magueyes”), I. Allegro giocoso, mm. 80–84.

Figure 4a shows the musical score for measures 80–84 of the first movement of Silvestre Revueltas's String Quartet No. 2. The score is written for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The music features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with triplets. Dynamics range from *mf* to *ff*. A first ending bracket is shown above the measures.

Figure 4b. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 (“Magueyes”), I. Allegro giocoso, mm. 119–124.

Figure 4b shows the musical score for measures 119–124 of the first movement of Silvestre Revueltas's String Quartet No. 2. The score is written for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The music features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with triplets. Dynamics range from *mf* to *ff*, with a *p* dynamic at the end. A first ending bracket is shown above the measures.

status of the genre. What emerges most concretely from analysis is a simultaneous embrace and rejection of the theme—a constant pulling back to the gestures and contour of the opening canción melody in the first two movements, followed by utter denial in the third.

Parts of this work sound “stuck” to me. Revueltas restates entire sections verbatim between movements, and repeatedly returns to certain specific pitches. As Patrick McCreless (2009) has commented, exact repetition is unusual for string quartets in this period, making it a noteworthy choice here. Repeatedly in the first movement, Revueltas restates the opening of “Los Magueyes” theme, and each time he begins on the same pitch class, A—most often A₄ specifically. At times, he isolates the rhythm without the melodic contour, and in these cases he uses other pitch areas, but the contour of the opening theme is always set in roughly D major, beginning on A (as in mm. 3, 12, and 17 of Figure 3). Further examples show the sonorities that mark the first two section endings of the movement: at the end of the first section (Figure 4a), the chord comprises bare, open fifths, D/A; at the end of the second section (Figure 4b), Revueltas adds an E₃ in the viola, but otherwise keeps the chord exactly the same.

Some larger sections of the music are even more fixed, with a kind of wholesale repetition that is uncommon in early twentieth-century string quartets. One could note, for example, the nearly identical writing in Figures 4a and 4b. Further, this kind of repetition also crosses between movements of

Figure 5a. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 ("Magueyes"), I. Allegro giocoso, mm. 58–67.

melody previewed earlier, in m. 11
(compare with Figure 3)

second half of opening phrase, "Los Magueyes"
(compare with mm. 4–5 of Figure 2)

58 **Lento**

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

62

"Los Magueyes" divided among
Vcl/Vla/Vln II

Figure 5b. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 ("Magueyes"), II. Molto vivace, mm. 57–66.

(identical to Figure 5a, with exception
of instrumentation at end)

57 **Lento**

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

61

"Los Magueyes" in single instrument (Vcl)

the quartet. Figures 5a and 5b show Lento sections of the first and second movements of Quartet No. 2. As displayed in these figures, the two movements share a section comprising ten bars that are essentially identical to one another, aside from a change of instrumentation—and thus register—for the canción statement at the end of the excerpt.

Figure 6. Silvestre Revueltas, String Quartet No. 2 ("Magueyes"), II. Molto vivace, mm. 1–13.

adapted from opening melodic gesture of "Los Magueyes" rhythm in retrograde, with addition of an extra triplet isolation of triplet as repeated rhythmic cell

Molto vivace (generalmente *f-ff*)

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello

7

f *ff* *pizz.* *arco* *ff* *pizz.* *f* *3* *3*

3 *3* *3* *3* *3* *3* *3* *3* *f* *3* *3*

3 *piu. f* return to opening material, now down M2 ... spins out again ... isolates triplet again

Alongside direct repetition, the energetic second movement as a whole is closely tied to the first by virtue of carrying over the opening gesture of "Los Magueyes" as the primary theme and transforming it into a driving rhythmic motive for this energetic movement, a usage that is audible within the first several measures. For an example of this, compare m. 3 of Figure 3 to mm. 1–3 from the second movement in Figure 6.

After two movements marked by expressive continuity, Revueltas turns entirely away from the "folkloric," creating in the final movement a mechanical-sounding contrapuntal texture. Instead of a common vernacular meter like 2/4, the final movement is written in a chunky 5/4 whose flat rhythm is emphasized by the use of an accent mark on each note, as well as the tempo marking, "Allegro molto sostenuto." In this movement, Revueltas's writing excludes Mexicanisms, emphasizing instead what was then commonly called the "universal" style.²⁰

The blending of fixedness with abrupt breaks, interruptions, and ultimately a total change of direction is congruous with Revueltas's prose writings, where he often reverses course within a single statement—a kind of push/pull pairing that creates tension for anyone who would aim to provide an interpretation of his works. At times he negates assumptions about his aims, even writing antagonistically toward the reader. Regarding *Esquinas*, for example, Revueltas acknowledged that one might hear an urban Mexican scene—particularly given the work's ambiguously urban title ("corners" as "intersections")—only to immediately discard that interpretation.

²⁰ The dichotomy between "national" and "universal" music was common in writings of the period. For example, Fernando Ramírez de Aguilar (pen name Itzihuappa) referred to these in 1930 as the "two great tendencies/trends."

Esquinas. Of every street and every neighborhood [...] With a strong will, you could imagine anything: streets, alleys, squares, plazas. It would be fun to find in this music the noise of car horns, streetcars, trucks, etc. Unfortunately, there is none of this. (Kolb Neuhaus 1998, 47)²¹

Perhaps what we are hearing in this reluctance toward typical Mexicanist traits—used in manipulated and fragmented form, and explicitly disclaimed—is Revueltas’s ambivalence concerning nationalism and erudite composition, as well as expectations of progress and direction in art music.²² Some scholars tease this out as an opposition between Mexicanism and cosmopolitanism. For example, Talía Jiménez-Ramírez writes of Revueltas and Chávez:

Tradition exists from two points of view at the same time: the European and the native [Mexican]. Both composers [Chávez and Revueltas] identified, on one hand, with an idealized Europe (each in his own way), and on the other, with his experience of what is or ought to be Mexican. Although Chávez and Revueltas used a traditional European voice to give presence to their native identity in European or Europeanized forums, they also used their native voice to find a place in those circles, because this was new for [those circles]. In this way, both made an effort to belong, but also to differentiate themselves; they struggled to accept and also reject the attractive force of the European [...] What’s more, each of these forces involves an internal conflict between acceptance and rejection of their own tradition. (Bitrán and Miranda 2002, 49)

Leonora Saavedra views Revueltas’s oeuvre, but not individual works, as caught between Mexicanism and cosmopolitan modernism. She labels Quartets No. 2 and No. 4 “Mexicanist,” while she describes Quartets No. 1 and No. 3 as “modernist,” and “non-Mexicanist.” The distinction is as follows:

Several of [Revueltas’s early] works [...] are intimate, rather playful, and modernist, and contributed to Revueltas’s reputation as irreverent and a member of the avant-garde. Others constitute the composer’s first attempts both at writing music that sounded Mexican, and—because of the public and contested context in which the pieces were written and performed—at making an ideological and aesthetic statement of sorts. These attempts clearly appear from the beginning to be fraught with ambivalence. (Saavedra 2001, 242)

Saavedra shows that Revueltas addressed multiple aims through these works, though I take Revueltas’s compositions to be more fluid and multifarious than this binary division suggests. Much like String Quartet No. 2, many of Revueltas’s compositions show an intertwining of vernacular and concert modalities, even when they don’t have explicit references to existing Mexican music.

And the term “Mexicanist” versus something more local raises its own question: are we to understand Revueltas’s vernacularity as national, local, or class-based? These categories are of course not mutually exclusive, but they lay claim to different political aims and audience understandings. Revuel-

²¹ I do not take this to be joking or sarcastic. Rather, Revueltas sets up a paradigm of hearing for urban noise, and then turns away from it, drawing attention to a more internal sense of “intersections.” Following the quote above, he continues: “But definitely the noise, the silence, the internal traffic of souls that I see pass near me . [...] The traffic I spoke of is multiform and without apparent coherence. It is subject to the rhythm of life, not the distance from one side of the street to the other. [...] Corners of yesterday with today’s motion, observed from other paths of the heart with a new look, more comprehensive, more loyal.”

²² This is especially noteworthy given the distinction of “arranger” and “composer” given for musicians who wrote canciones in the 1920s. See, for example, a dispute in *El Universal* in spring and summer of 1926, in which canción writers were blocked from participating in the First National Congress of Music, on the grounds that they were “arrangers” rather than “composers.” This kind of language emphasizes the very distinctions that appear to have made Revueltas uncomfortable—the idea that composers were separate from the masses and their musics (n.a. 1926a; n.a. 1926b, n.a. 1926c).

tas seemed simultaneously wary of folkloric nationalism while keen to reference a working-class vernacularity that had taken on the sheen of nationalist politics. Instead of asserting a single viewpoint within a work, Revueltas creates what might be characterized as “disunity modernism,” prioritizing disjunction over organicism, and simultaneously pursuing seemingly incompatible musical and cultural goals.

Revueltas spent many years outside of Mexico—the better part of the period 1917–1930, including much of his musical training and formative professional experiences. After returning to Mexico from the United States, where he had spent nearly half his life, he continued to emphasize ties with the United States through concerts in New York and new-music festivals that presented works from composers in the Pan American Association of Composers (Contreras Soto 2000; Taylor Gibson 2008; Stallings 2009). And as noted in Copland’s letter following the 1932 Yaddo festival, String Quartet No. 2 was performed internationally just one year after its Mexican premiere. All this even as Revueltas maintained that his favorite music was that of his village—notably placing his own music outside of that category. For music analysts, his multiple experiences and perspectives can be refracted into distinct but overlapping interpretive possibilities.

Semiotic analysts have long argued for multiple senses of musical meaning. As Michael Klein writes, “every story is incomplete” (2013, 10). I want to clarify that the stakes here are not merely for the partial status of a single interpretation. Rather, music theory’s current understandings of contingency and individual experience have often failed to address a larger set of international and postcolonial frames, using a set of bedrock assumptions and tools that have privileged a narrow set of repertoires and participants. Like many other composers, Revueltas’s position as a working composer was precarious, caught in a set of transnational power structures that need to be understood and attended to in analysis of his works. The stakes for this critical acknowledgement are high: taking a more historically sensitive lens creates space for real consideration of these works, one that accounts for unequal opportunities and reception in international culture economies.

I want to be clear that I do not hear a transparent relationship between Revueltas’s personal struggles and the notes on the page. Any composer’s words might be motivated by a variety of issues, and as noted at the opening of this article, I cannot know Revueltas’s private thoughts. My aim here is simply to open windows for a variety of distinct ways to hear this music by taking into account a variety of contextual considerations. Moreover, I find it personally compelling to consider the stakes of analytical claims. This work was part of a larger set of politically entangled post-Revolution works (Smith 2017). To my mind, it would be irresponsible to ignore the class dynamics of the period, and the ways they intertwine with self-essentializing gestures, like folkloric reference. This is particularly compelling given Revueltas’s own words about his life and works.

The question of ambivalence in the case of Revueltas largely hinges on questions of both class and essentialism. On the one hand, Revueltas’s “Mexicanist” features reference working-class practices and identity; on the other hand, they were also exotic to international audiences, and served to reiterate Mexico’s marginalized status in Euro-US cultural circles. This question of class also connects to Revueltas’s seeming ambivalence toward the elite status of concert music, and the rarified repertory and practices to which his works contributed.

Revueltas’s particular brand of ambivalence could be described as a dialectic between fracturing and stasis: he twists and breaks up some materials while holding others quite fixed. This pairing is not unique to Revueltas: scholars such as Cone (1962) and Taruskin (1996) have discussed this issue in

relation to Stravinsky, and Hoag (1987) specifically addresses this relationship in style between Stravinsky and Revueltas, who of course knew of Stravinsky's work.²³ In concert with his social and musical aims, Revueltas's ambivalence may well have been strategic, an attempt to avoid being labeled in one way or another. More than simple questions of nationalism and folk markers, the lens of ambivalence provides a compelling way to grapple with a variety of aspects of Revueltas's compositional style, and highlights common threads between the composer's own comments and those of his critics. In this way, it allows for movement beyond the current musicological paradigms for Revueltas, and can further prove useful for highlighting tensions and issues for similarly essentialized composers.

Polysemy

If Revueltas's materials reflect multiple, competing priorities and allegiances, they also carry multiple, competing interpretive possibilities. For Mexican audiences, the woozy, jarring approach to "Los Magueyes" could be simultaneously humorous and modern, potentially even violent in its breaking of the theme. But if Copland's letter to Chávez is a more or less accurate interpretation of the Saratoga Springs crowd's response, the theme registered as both danceable and broken up, a "little Mexican drama." Copland effectively misses the joke, reinterpreting it as communicating something essentially and inevitably Mexican. To that end, Revueltas's composition works quite well, and yet very differently, for distinct audiences: on the one hand, it communicates an essentialist understanding of Mexico; on the other, it provides a drunken and joking commentary.

Polysemic analytical possibilities are not unique to Revueltas. In some sense, they are always present; different listeners are likely to hear different musical features, or attend to events in different ways, depending upon their background, individual experiences, and the contexts in which they hear works performed.²⁴ I argue that, in the case of modernist Latin American composers, this polysemy is often created by distinct audiences—one international, one domestic—hearing potentially contradictory meanings of a work. And, further, the music could have been designed deliberately for different understandings, a kind of doublespeak.

As a point of similarity, several scholars, including Christina Taylor Gibson (2012), Alejandro L. Madrid (2008), Leonora Saavedra (2015), and Carol Hess (2013), have registered this issue with respect to Carlos Chávez. Sometimes polysemy emerged domestically, appealing in distinct ways to different factions within the Mexican artistic and political scene, but at other times Chávez communicated distinct messages to international audiences.²⁵ A great example of this is found in his 1932 ballet

²³ In a letter from 1925, Revueltas mentioned Stravinsky to Chávez—in passing, as though both men were familiar with him and, presumably, his music (Carmona 1989).

²⁴ I refrain from delving into the rich cognition research on individual experiential differences. While that undoubtedly overlaps with the issues I have just mentioned, my interest here is more social and political.

²⁵ For example, with respect to domestic audiences, Madrid (2008, 49–81) discusses Chávez's delicate negotiation between the political allegiances of the *ateneístas* and the *estridentistas*, two artistic groups that were at odds with each other. According to Madrid, Chávez navigated between them in order to benefit from official support, particularly from Minister of Education José Vasconcelos. Madrid shows that the relatively conservative position and agenda of the *ateneístas* forced Chávez into a tricky position, in which he officially supported Vasconcelos, but was perceived by critics as *estridentista* in compositional style—the *estridentistas* were an avant-garde group that actively criticized the conservative position of the *ateneístas*. Yet Chávez didn't outwardly support the *estridentistas* until 1926, after Vasconcelos had left his official posts at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the Ministry of Education. Between these two conflicting positions, Chávez created music

Caballos de Vapor (*Horse-Power, HP*). As Gibson and Hess have shown, US critics read some of the central elements in a way that missed their plainly socialist political valence.²⁶

Conclusions

Like many works, Revueltas's Second String Quartet invites an array of different interpretations. For US audiences, it provided precisely the kind of essentialist music that they expected from a Mexican composer. For audiences more familiar with the thematic content, the work could be read in dialogue with a popular song about drunkenness. If one considers Revueltas to be expressing ambivalence, it is possible to see conflict between stereotypical Mexicanisms and rigid fugal structures—conflict that can be interpreted in several ways.

Each of these frames provides its own set of affordances. If one takes Copland's reading as both intended by Revueltas and as mistaken because it misses cues in the work, one can glimpse the differences between international and domestic perspectives. Copland's take reiterates easy tropes about Mexican identity, but Revueltas also failed to provide further context that might have helped Copland see other features. And ambivalence provides a compelling frame for seeing contradiction and friction in the techniques and thematic content of the quartet. In this way, seeing the work as polysemic is not merely a consideration of different individual perspectives; it is a claim to this work—and perhaps all works—as always multiple, never solely a difference in personal interpretation.

Revueltas expressed ambivalence about the artistic demands he faced as a liminal modernist working in the United States and Mexico. And he struggled with questions of musical representation. These questions are undoubtedly both internal and external, creating a set of recognizable and overlapping tensions. Revueltas questioned the entire composerly endeavor and its concomitant critical and analytical apparatuses, and avoided ascriptions of folklorism in his music. The different analytical foci I have provided in this article highlight the multiple possibilities for managing stresses of social and political exigencies.

Copland's reductive interpretation of the quartet shows an example of how Revueltas engaged in strategic alterity. In addition to composing, Revueltas played for silent films in US theaters, music that contained frequent portrayals of stereotyped identities, and which he described as *mamarrachos* (ridiculous/useless) (Carmona 1989, 83). And while Revueltas attempted to distance himself from labels related to the nationalist movement, such as "folklorism" or *indigenismo*, he occasionally included overt stereotypical gestures in his works.²⁷

Clearly, Revueltas was not alone in navigating ambivalent feelings about issues of nationalistic music and stereotypical representation. To that end, this article is meant to provide a case study in how contextual work can help analysts consider nuanced readings that provide interpretations that

that did not match his speech; while outwardly supporting the Vasconcelos stance, his music expressed a competing aesthetic.

²⁶ This is at least partly a result of edits and compositional choices made in response to the US funders of *HP*. See Hess 2013 and Gibson 2012 for thorough discussions of Chávez's reluctant embrace of stereotypically Mexican features, and his collaboration with Diego Rivera on the production.

²⁷ For example, Saavedra (2001) describes Revueltas's overt Indianist gestures in *Cuauhnáhuac*. As I have noted elsewhere (2021), such gestures were often used by composers who had some interest in Indigenous practice, but they largely present fantasy emphasizing difference. See also López 2010 for a discussion of *indigenismo*'s blend of living Indigenous people with an exotic imaginary.

are sensitive to the complexities of these works. Such an approach could be equally useful in a variety of analytical settings, showing multiple possibilities that are not only grounded in questions of perception or performance practice, but also the specific cultural and political anchors for a work.

The presence of polysemic readings requires acknowledgement of readings as incomplete, potentially in progress or shifting. Like Revueltas's reluctance toward singular interpretations, these multiple understandings defy some of music analysis's deepest impulses: clarity, truth, and a unified explanatory power. Judith Kuhn writes, "[t]he sense that meaning—generated through the dialogic interaction of speaker, listener, and cultural context—is always in flux must inevitably seem at odds with any attempt to conceive an overarching system" (2004, 404). Similarly, by using the frames of missed readings and ambivalence, I have resisted providing a singular interpretation for the music. These multiple readings highlight the unsettled quality of the music more than an assertion of composerly intent or clear and transparent semiotic meaning.

For me, this multiplicity is key. Music theory is a shifting field, with the possibility of becoming a space for expansive understandings of music and acceptance of different interpretations—a field that embraces ambiguity and ambivalence. And, further, one that takes a hard look at the assumptions and contingencies of our claims. This is the music theory that interests me: a radical reimagining of music analysis as always incomplete and always in progress, yielding shifting insights depending upon not only who is listening, but also how we listen.



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