

## Williams Symphonic Winds

### Dance Mix III: Echoes of Latin America

12 May 2006

*A few introductory thoughts...*

When this program was planned in late 2005, *Dance Mix III: Echoes of Latin America* was conceived originally and singularly as a concert of enjoyable-to-listen-to music. Tangos, mambos, mariachis—a simple carnival of toe-tapping music! However, just beneath the brilliantly stylized surface of this music, this program has assumed an added socio-political dimension due to the tremendous amount of political discussion and activity in the U.S. recently on the subject of immigration, specifically undocumented workers and illegal aliens from Latin America, and what it means to be “American.” In conjunction with these debates and the wide-spread protests/boycotts around the country on Monday, May 1, this issue found musical resonance through the recent release by numerous Latin American pop artists of a new interpretation of the U.S. national anthem sung in Spanish and entitled *Nuestro Himno*. As was surely expected, the creation of *Nuestro Himno* has been controversial; in particular, President Bush condemned the song (as he said in not uncertain words that people who want to be American citizens should sing the song in English) and many news reporters and other politicians were quick to follow.

In musical terms and relative to the Latin American-inspired music on this concert, why is *Nuestro Himno* so controversial—and possibly even offensive? This debate raises many interesting and important philosophic issues such as: what does it mean exactly for anyone, or anything, to be “American,” or by extension, “Latin American?” In what ways can music be thought, then, to be exclusively “American” (or “Latin American”)? Can music even “mean” anything, and if so, how and why? Can music rightfully mean something different to different people or if it is performed differently? Can the identity and use of a piece of music be “owned” or “controlled” by one group of people? Under what circumstances can artistic creations be deemed offensive (to whom? by whom?)? While *Dance Mix III* cannot answer these questions, it may provide an impetus for re-examining these concerns.

The Dutch composer Louis Andriessen has said, “Even if music can't express anything anyway, or means nothing (and this last is incorrect), music is in any case a reflection of society.” *Dance Mix III*, then, provides an interesting analogue to the debate over the “rightness” of *Nuestro Himno* and to ways in which our culture interacts, accepts, and absorbs Latin American elements by helping to show how Latin American music is reflected in our art music society, and perhaps by extension to our society as a whole. If *Nuestro Himno* can be characterized as the adoption of a traditional American song into a pop Latin American idiom, in contrast, *Dance Mix III* shows how significantly, successfully, and non-controversially features of Latin American music have been assimilated into the world of American art music. In fact, only one piece on the program—the “Tango-Oblivion” of Astor Piazzolla—was written by a Latin American composer; every other piece exhibits some level of cross-fertilization between American and Latin American musical ideas. For example, in the 1950s, Leonard Bernstein skillfully depicted Latin American culture through his adoption of the forms and sounds of the mambo and tango. (Written in the wake of McCarthyism, the political commentary of *Candide*'s “I am easily assimilated” cannot be missed—and its corollary with today's political climate should not be overlooked.) Following in the footsteps of Aaron Copland, whose *El Salon Mexico* paved the way for the “art-ification” of Mexican folks songs, H. Owen Reed collected Mexican folk songs in the 1940s and then arranged and assembled them into his symphony *La Fiesta Mexicana*, one of the most significant pieces written for wind band.

Contemporary American composers Michael Gandolfi and Nancy Galbraith have looked in different ways to Latin American culture for inspiration, Gandolfi to the pioneering achievements and spirit of Piazzolla, Galbraith to the mythological folklore. Composer Roberto Sierra, a Puerto Rican native now teaching at Cornell University and living in Ithaca, NY, articulates this symbiotic musical relationship eloquently in "Batata-Coco," the third movement from his suite *Cuentos*; Sierra comments on the perceived views of the "exotic" by writing "a mambo which isn't a mambo"—just as the phrase "batata-coco" (which literally means "sweet potatoes and coconuts") is often used to denote *all* exotic, Latin American foods, so Sierra is commenting on the realization that his music, too, is an exotic hybrid.

These pieces demonstrate, each in its own unique way, that at least musically-speaking, the lines between "Latin American" and "American" seem to have already been dulled. Each of these American composers—Bernstein, Reed, Gandolfi, Galbraith, and Sierra, as well as countless others—has absorbed "something" from Latin American culture (be it a "feeling" or actual melodies) and then crafted his/her own musical work. Are we correct to identify these musical works as "American" or "Latin American"—or perhaps both, or neither? (Again, what does it even mean to label a piece as "American" or "Latin American"?) In comparison, what the Latin American pop artists have done in *Nuestro Himno* can be interpreted as the exact same process of artistic/cultural assimilation, but from the complementary perspective: taking something American (the national anthem) and crafting from it a new artwork. The text of *Nuestro Himno* is different from that of the national anthem (of course, it should also be remembered that the U.S. national anthem was actually a British drinking song, to which Francis Scott Key added a patriotic text), many of the harmonies are different, certainly the feel and rhythms are different, but this is clearly a Latin American re-interpretation of an American musical object. Why is this more offensive than what the American composers have done: creating American re-interpretations of Latin American musical objects? How or why is this different from what any of the composers on our concert—or any composer that has ever utilized existent material, from the Medieval motet composers through Beethoven and Brahms to the composers of today—have done?

Clearly, this concert seeks not to answer any of these questions, but rather to help frame them in new manner. Each listener and performer will no doubt have his/her own unique response both to the music heard and the issues raised. What *Dance Mix III: Echoes of Latin America* does is celebrate the contributions to American music made by Latin American culture, demonstrating ways in which Latin American culture has already begun to be assimilated and absorbed. Hopefully you will find this concert philosophically interesting and politically provocative—and musically entertaining!

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"For it is in the arts of our, or indeed of any, culture, that we see not only a metaphor for, but also a way of transcending, its otherwise unspoken and unexamined assumptions. Art can reveal to us new modes of perception and feeling which jolt us out of our habitual ways; it can make us aware of possibilities of alternative societies whose existence is not yet.... Of all the arts, music, probably because of its almost complete lack of explicit verbal or representational content, most clearly reveals the basic assumptions of culture." (Christopher Small, *Music, Society, Education*)

### ***Nancy Galbraith: Danza de los Duendes (1992/1996)***

Named by the *La Gazetta* (Argentina) as “one of the most outstanding composers of her generation, along with Philip Glass and John Adams,” Nancy Galbraith (b. 27 January 1951, Pittsburgh) has emerged as one of the present era's most original and dynamic composers of contemporary classical music. She studied at Ohio University, West Virginia University, and Carnegie Mellon University, where she presently serves as Professor of Composition and Theory. Her distinctive American style—once described as “a post-minimal reductive romanticism, i.e. extremely simple diatonic gestures with clear dramatic direction but without the overwrought exaggerations perpetuated by most hardcore neo-Romantics”—employs and juxtaposes an exotic array of postmodern and post-minimalist elements including lyricism, polyrhythmic ostinati and diatonic (though not always absolutely functional) harmony. Galbraith, in fact, believes that the primary characteristic of her musical style is the extreme contrast between serenity and driving rhythm.

Galbraith has stated that “the greatest satisfaction is crafting the music,” revealing an affinity for the musical aesthetic of Stravinsky—she refers to *Le sacre du printemps* as “a kind of bible” and *Symphony of Psalms* as a reference point for her work. (Other composers whom she most admires include Benjamin Britten, John Corigliano, Krzysztof Penderecki, and John Adams.) Galbraith believes that composing is like sculpting in sound: as she works, parts of the piece are cut away, others developed, some expanded into the many dimensions of counterpoint while other parts dissolve into an impressionistic haze; she views composition as a complex process in which the ego of the creator takes second place to the making of a pristinely crafted, perfectly constructed work of art—she “makes objects in sound which are a beautiful, expressive affirmation of life.”

Fascinated with the creation of large masses of sound, Galbraith has been particularly praised for her skill as an orchestrator. Stephen Baum has praised her “impressionist's mastery of texture.... Her pulsating, shimmering textures often feel as though they're a living part of the ecosystem.” She is currently recognized as a leader in the field of wind ensemble writing; many of her compositions—including *Danza de los Duendes*, *Elfin Thunderbolt, with brightness round about it*, and a piano concerto and symphony—have become standard repertoire for ensembles throughout North America, Japan, and Europe, and have appeared on many recordings.

Described as a “minimalism-charged work full of imagination and energy” and as “spirited and restless, deploying lots of Bartokian snap, crackle, and pop to create a carnival of cheerfully manic energy,” *Danza de los Duendes* (“Dance of the Goblins”) is Galbraith's most performed work. The work's title—an afterthought suggested by the composer's student—refers to the malicious and mischievous goblin-like creatures (*los duendes*) of Latin American folklore that are thought to be the spirits of dead children now dwelling in a state of “ghostly purgatory.” Hiding in trees and bushes, these elfin beings are often blamed for minor and sometimes major recreational accidents, victimizing children at play during *siesta* when their parents are asleep or inattentive. The work was composed for Argentina's Orquesta Sinfónica de Tucumán, whose music director, Eduardo Alonso-Crespo, led the world premiere in 1992; after the North American premiere by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra with conductor Kirk Muspratt a month, the Pittsburgh Press wrote, “Galbraith has penned a score of bright allure, its minimalistic touches deftly applied and its energetic personality balanced by lyrical finesse.” In 1996, Galbraith revised the work, and re-scored it for wind orchestra.

## Leonard Bernstein: "I am easily assimilated" from *Candide* (1956/1989)

Arguably the most famous and successful native-born figure in the history of classical music in the United States, Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) was a composer, conductor, pianist and pedagogue. As David Schiff writes, "he bridged the worlds of the concert hall and musical theatre, creating a rich legacy of recordings, compositions, writings and educational institutions." In 1958, Bernstein was named the music director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (the first American-born conductor to hold the position), introducing thematic programming and creating the televised Young People's Concerts; he was named Conductor Laureate when he left the orchestra in 1969. In 1973 Bernstein gave the Norton Professor of Poetry lectures at Harvard (filmed for TV and published as *The Unanswered Question*). He won almost every award the American music world had to offer, except the Pulitzer Prize—among others, he was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor for a Lifetime of Contributions to American Culture Through the Performing Arts, election to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, eleven Emmy Awards and the Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. A student of Walter Piston (at Harvard) and Virgil Thomson (at the Curtis Institute), Bernstein created a musical style that was uniquely his. His most profound influence, though, was Aaron Copland; as Schiff continues, "Bernstein took up the Judaic and jazz elements from 1920s Copland, which Copland had mostly abandoned, bringing the jazz up to date in a manner derived from Woody Herman, and giving the prophetic, cantorial elements of early Copland a less austere, more lyrical treatment."

Bernstein's achieved international prominence through a series of events in the early 1940s. A year after being named Serge Koussevitzky's assistant at Tanglewood, Bernstein was appointed assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in 1943. When Bruno Walter, then conductor of the orchestra, was indisposed on the evening of November 14, 1943, Bernstein replaced him; this dramatic debut, in a concert broadcast nationally, brought him instant fame. He immediately followed that success with three others. His *Symphony No. 1* ("Jeremiah"), premièred by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in January 1944, won the New York Music Critics' Circle award as the best American work of the year. Also that year, the ballet *Fancy Free*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins, was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera House and *On the Town* opened on Broadway. Not even thirty years old, Bernstein had already catapulted to the center of the American music scene, as a conductor and as a composer of both concert and stage works.

Buoyed by his theatric successes, Bernstein began work concurrently on two new theater projects in the 1950s: *Candide* and *West Side Story*. Although *West Side Story* was begun first, its artistic collaborators had numerous creative difficulties, and so, somehow, *Candide* was finished first in 1956—even more remarkable since, by most accounts, *Candide* was a theatrical flop. Walter Kerr of the *Herald Tribune* called it "a really spectacular disaster," Elliot Norton found it "clumsy and plodding," while Edwin Melvin of the *Christian Science Monitor* criticized it as "pretentious and freighted with allegory and symbol;" noting that, in addition to Bernstein, such artistic luminaries as Lillian Hellman, Richard Wilbur, John Latouche, Dorothy Parker, and Tyrone Guthrie contributed to the show, Cyrus Durgin of the *Morning Globe* concluded: "It seems incredible, when you think of all the talent involved, that *Candide* should have proved so sorry an entertainment." Part of the reception controversy stemmed from the fact that critics (and perhaps some of the collaborators?) didn't seem to know what *Candide* was: was it a musical? operetta? comic opera? (Bernstein was inclined to equivocate between the latter two options.) In addition, it was generally thought that Hellman's sharp-toothed adaptation (in which she allegedly was attempting to criticize McCarthyism) of Voltaire's satire of Leibniz's philosophical optimism was too heavy-handed and serious.

However, all parties involved seem to have regarded Bernstein's score as an unqualified success. In his autobiography, Guthrie wrote: "Bernstein's facility and virtuosity are so dazzling that you are almost blinded.... If ever I have seen it, the stuff of genius is here." Recognizing the quality of the music, and despite the show closing after less than three months, Columbia Records, in an extremely rare decision for a show deemed so unsuccessful, decided to make an original-cast album—and so, between that recording and the unparalleled success of the Overture as a concert piece, *Candide* lived on, if in purely musical form. In 1989, just one year before he died, Bernstein recorded a final, definitive version of the score—winning the Grammy for Best Classical Album, and helping to cement the lasting merit of this music.

"I am easily assimilated" comes from the end of Act I. As disasters continue to beset Candide and his beloved Cunegonde (who has already been killed once!), they witness their teacher Pangloss (Leibniz)—despite professing that all is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds—executed by hanging. They meet an Old Lady who leads them away from the scene, but unfortunately right into the Inquisition. In the tango "I am easily assimilated," we learn that the Old Lady is an Eastern European princess (whose father spoke a "high Middle Polish") who, forced to leave her country, has learned how to survive in whatever land she finds herself, by whatever means necessary—in this case, by coyly offering herself to the elderly Dons in the city square. (Interestingly, Bernstein has the Old Lady sing the line, "My father came from Rovno-Guberniya," the Russian village from where his father actually had emigrated—Bernstein thus seemingly offering a nod to his own assimilated history!)

### **Astor Piazzolla: "Oblivion" from the film *Enrico IV* (1984)**

Who is Piazzolla? Onstage he is God, offstage a son of a bitch.

-publisher Aldo Pagani

At its creative and emotional best, tango is more than its own clichés perpetuated in slick arrangements. As María Susana Azzi has written: "Tango is more than just notes.... The word *tango* conjures up images of Buenos Aires, of a dimly-lit floor, the smoke of a cigarette curling up into the air, a beautiful woman in the arms of a man, surrendering to a rhythm that is at once love and dream, pain and reality." In its passionate combination of freedom and severity, of ecstasy and coarseness, the tango is a dance form that can communicate a wide canvas of emotions and experiences. An admirer of Piazzolla, cellist Yo-Yo Ma has remarked:

Tango is not just about dancing. It is a music of deep undercurrents. Because of what Argentina went through as a country, tango has become the soul of Argentina. Music is always one way people can speak when they aren't allowed to express themselves otherwise. And Piazzolla's tangos have the great strength of true voice.... Piazzolla's music is endlessly passionate—full of yearning—and at the same time tremendously contemporary. There's a quote to the effect that Piazzolla is the Ellington of Argentina, and in a way it's true. He actually took the tango to another level by inhabiting his music. The music grew in him, and he adeptly incorporated the influences of his surroundings—whether from New York, Paris, or Buenos Aires. During the almost forty years he worked on his music, Astor Piazzolla tried many different variations—even tried an electronic ensemble! Because of this experimentation, and also his ingenuity, focus, and hard work, his music has many levels of expression and a tremendous depth. His is a truly successful synthesis of the tango and the contemporary.

Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992) was, without question, one of the most remarkable composers to emerge from twentieth-century South America. From early in his life—his family emigrated to New York when he was four, only to return to Argentina when he was eight—Piazzolla always felt

like a musical wanderer. As Azzi observes: “By nationality, Astor Piazzolla was Argentine. All four of his grandparents were immigrants from Italy—four among the millions of Italians who moved to Argentina in its golden age of prosperity and whose mark on Argentine culture remains so vivid today. Deep down, Piazzolla himself was always something of an uprooted, nostalgic migrant. At one time or other, he lived in Mar del Plata, New York, Buenos Aires, Rome, Paris, and Punta del Este. Yet although he drew inspiration from several different traditions, his music remained essentially Argentine. As composer, arranger, bandleader, and performer, his specialty was the music of Buenos Aires: the tango.” Piazzolla was a living embodiment of both integration and crossover. Without ever denying his Argentine roots, he was always receptive to new influences, seamlessly absorbing them into his art. Without ceasing to be a *tanguero* (one thoroughly imbued with the tango culture), he aimed to fashion something more universal. “Paint your village, and you paint the world”—Tolstoy’s phrase was one of Piazzolla’s favorites; Azzi believes Piazzolla did just that, writing: “He painted *his* big village with such consummate skill that musicians (and eventually audiences) flocked to him on four continents.”

The tango was in his blood from childhood when he was recognized as a child prodigy on the *bandoneón* (accordion) and in his teens began making tango arrangements for and performing with the tango master Carlos Gardel and Aníbal Troilo, one of the leading bandleaders. At the same time, he also studied classical music with the composer Alberto Ginastera. Increasingly interested in composing, in 1944 Piazzolla left Troilo’s band to form his own band, Orquesta del 46, as a vehicle for performing his own compositions; in 1954, after the devastating failure of the premiere of his neoclassical Symphony, Piazzolla traveled to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger, who encouraged him to continue composing tangos. The following year he resettled in Argentina and formed the Octeto Buenos Aires and, later, the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, which performed at his own club, Jamaica.

To a considerable degree, it is Astor Piazzolla who was responsible for the growth of tangos in the twentieth century. However, Piazzolla’s distinctive brand of tango, later called *nuevo tango* (“New tango”), met with fierce resistance and was condemned by the traditional “old-guard;” an absurd war between *piazzollistas* and anti-*piazzollistas* was waged for decades in Argentina. His work brought something approaching a convergence of the tango, classical music, and jazz; Piazzolla brought to his tango such diverse influences and elements as jazz, extreme chromaticism, fugues, dissonance, contemporary classicism, Italian opera, and an expanded instrumentation, all in an effort to renew the tango in his unique artistic vision. As Ken Hunt commented:

And while the tango of the cryonic chamber slept on, [Piazzolla’s] music sang a more urgent, radical song. His song did not always please. It challenged. It aroused passions. It communicated *duende*, that spirit of inspiration of which Federico García Lorca spoke so persuasively, and like *duende*, it communicated danger, in Piazzolla’s case, not just the figurative sort. His life was threatened, his music decried by people whose complacency was unsettled by such rampant innovation and studied disregard for the conventional.

By the 1980s, however, Piazzolla’s music was widely accepted even in his native country, where he was seen as the savior of tango, which during the 1950s and 60s had declined in popularity and appeal, and he was recognized as one of tango’s inspirational voices, as inspirational a figure in music as his compatriot Jorge Luis Borges was in literature. He is now regarded as one of the glories of Argentine culture.

In all he composed about 750 works, including more than thirty film scores for Argentine movies, such as *Tangos: the Exile of Gardel* (1985) and *Sur* (1987). While writing for films was not his favorite kind of work—he sometimes said that he only did it for the money—and was viewed as a

distraction from his “real work,” some of his most memorable pieces had their origins in films. One such example is the 1984 Argentinian film adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, whose main title has become well-known as the oboe solo “Oblivion.” As Azzi and Simon Collier observe in *Le Grand Tango: The Life and Music of Astor Piazzolla*: “The highlight of the score is undoubtedly ‘Oblivion’ with its almost unbearably nostalgic tune—one of Piazzolla’s true gems, though one that is perilously close to schmalz.”

Music is more than a wife, because you can divorce a wife, but you cannot divorce music.  
When you marry her, she’s your love forever, and you’ll go to the grave with her.

-Astor Piazzolla

### **Michael Gandolfi: *Vientos y Tangos* (2003)**

From initial musical experiences as a self-taught rock and jazz guitarist (at age 8) through formal studies in composition begun in his teens, Michael Gandolfi (b.1956) has developed into one of the most active and visible composers in Boston. Presently the Interim Chair of the New England Conservatory Composition Department, Gandolfi received his musical training at NEC—from which he received B.M. and M.M. degrees in composition, studying with John Heiss and William Thomas McKinley—and through fellowships at the Yale Summer School of Music and Art, the Composers Conference, and the Tanglewood Music Center. Gandolfi is the recipient of numerous awards, including grants from the Fromm Foundation, the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. His music has been performed and commissioned by many leading ensembles such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Nieuw Sinfonietta Amsterdam, the Weilerstein Trio, and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. He has written several works for young audiences, including *Pinocchio’s Adventures in Funland* (1999) and *The Piper’s Tale* (2005). He presently holds commissions from the Michael Vyner Trust (a piano concerto for the London Sinfonietta), saxophonist Kenneth Radnofsky and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (for a concerto, 2007), Boston-based pianist Duncan Cumming, the New World Guitar Trio, and Collage New Music.

Gandolfi’s music is known for blending influences from popular and jazz music (stemming from his earliest musical performance experiences) with classical elements. In fact, as he readily admits: “It’s become such a part of my writing that I don’t consciously make such choices anymore.” However, it is only rarely that he explicitly utilizes extant musical materials as an inspiration for his music; as he continues: “Sometimes in these rare circumstances, where the commission specifically warrants it, I will go ahead and try to find external source material to generate a piece.” These two factors—the assimilation of jazz and popular music and the use of existing musical material—came together in what Gandolfi calls a “quite successful...assignment”: his *Vientos y Tangos* (2003). Commissioned through the *Frank L. Battisti 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday Commission Project* (a consortium of twenty wind ensembles, led by Fred Harris of M.I.T.) and dedicated to Battisti “in recognition of his immense contributions to the advancement of concert wind literature,” *Vientos Y Tangos* (“Winds and Tangos”) is a cubist re-interpretation of the history of the popular Latin American dance, infused with the brutish energy and macho attitude of Astor Piazzolla, the manic exhilaration and languid exhaustion of the dancers, and the palpably visceral scene of tango nightclubs. As Gandolfi writes:

It was Mr. Battisti’s specific request that I write a tango for wind ensemble. In preparation for this piece, I devoted several months to the study and transcription of tangos from the early style of Juan D’arienzo and the “Tango Nuevo” style of Astor Piazzolla to the current trend of “Disco/Techno

Tango," among others. After immersing myself in this listening experience, I simply allowed the most salient features of these various tangos to inform the direction of my work. The dynamic contour and the various instrumental combinations that I employ in the piece are all inspired by the traditional sounds of the bandoneon, violin, piano and contrabass.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Battisti for his inspirational leadership as director of the New England Conservatory Wind Ensemble for over thirty years. I first heard Mr. Battisti's work when I was a student at the New England Conservatory in the late 1970's. I was instantly moved by his high artistic standards, his ability to motivate young musicians, and the respect for composers, past and present, that he always eloquently expressed to his students.

### **Roberto Sierra: "Batata-Coco (¿Mambo?)" from *Cuentos* (1997)**

While walking inside a supermarket in Ithaca, in the state of New York, I saw a sign in the vegetable department that read "batata-coco." Careful examination of what was being offered made me realize that there was neither sweet potato nor coconut. The curious phrase was being used generally to refer to all of those products from the Caribbean that were exotic or unknown to United States culture.

-Roberto Sierra

For composer Roberto Sierra (b. 1953, Puerto Rico), walking the line between a heritage that is not central to the western art tradition and the very core of that tradition as carried on by the American symphony orchestras is not a problem. He builds his compositions like a symphonist, but the bricks he builds with—a turn of phrase, a fleeting rhythm—these are the spontaneous, deep-felt blood of the Latin American tradition, never far below the surface, in what has been called "the tropicalization of Western music." Sierra studied at the Conservatory of Music and the University of Puerto Rico, and upon graduation, he traveled to Europe to further his training, first at the Royal College of Music and the University of London, and later at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. Between 1979 and 1982, he completed advanced work in composition at the Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg under György Ligeti. It was during his years in Europe that Sierra discovered both the wider world of western music and that, as a Puerto Rican, he inhabited a special place within it; when he returned in 1982 to Puerto Rico to occupy administrative posts as a Director of the Cultural Activities Department at the University of Puerto Rico and as Chancellor of the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music, he found that the two socio-musical threads began to intertwine. His roots in Latin America and his subsequent identification with the west European tradition defined one another and his music gained strength and character from the fusion.

So, when Sierra spotted at a grocery store a sign lumping together all foods "exotic or unknown" as "batata-coco," he realized that the same label could be used to describe him and his music: his music can be both American and exotic, it can be simultaneously comprehended and misunderstood—but at its core, his music stems from the seed of his Latin American heritage. It was just this relationship that was observed when a performance of his *Glosas* was reviewed in the Chicago Sun Times as "a fascinating new work—a shimmering composition of scales layered over and under sophisticated Caribbean rhythms.... Sierra has created a score that sounds both exotic and familiar."

The same description would be equally appropriately applied to Sierra's *Cuentos* ("Tales") (1997), a three-movement work for sixteen solo players, of which "Batata-Coco" is the last. ("Lenguas desconocidas" [Unknown Languages] and "Lo que pasó en las nubes" [What Happened in the Clouds] are the first two.) About "Batata-Coco," Sierra has written:

I've always wanted to pay homage to Pérez Prado, whom I consider a creator of great originality, and I decided to write a mambo that is not a mambo. Within my quasi-mambo, like an apparition, toward the end of the work some phrases appear that are indeed mambo.

Sierra's dance flirts with mambo rhythms, but with an irregular, quirky mambo melody—Sierra consistently shorten measure lengths so that subsequent downbeats seem to arrive “too soon”—juxtaposed with fitfully dense polyrhythmic sections that create an uneasy mosaic. Just as the piece begins to settle into a comfortable mambo pattern, the work abruptly devolves, snapping to a sudden close. As Joel Sachs writes, Sierra “transcend[s] the quotation and exotic effect in order to generate something really new, something American, which modifies that tradition by infiltrating it, subverting it and also making fun of it.”

In recent years, Roberto Sierra's colorful and rhythmic music has attracted a growing audience both in North America and Europe. Acclaimed as one of Latin America's most active contemporary composers and described by the American Record Guide as “the Aaron Copland of Puerto Rico,” Sierra came to prominence in 1987 when his first major orchestral composition, *Júbilo*, premiered at Carnegie Hall by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. Since then, his works have been performed by the orchestras of San Francisco, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Detroit, San Antonio, and Phoenix, by the American Composers Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Kronos Quartet, Continuum, England's BBC Symphony, and at Wolf Trap, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Festival Casals, France's Festival de Lille, the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, and Germany's Neue Musik Bonn. In 1989, Roberto Sierra became Composer-in-Residence of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for three years, and during the 2000-2001 season, he held the same post with the Philadelphia Orchestra. In the autumn of 1992, Sierra was named the Old Dominion Foundation Professor of Composition at Cornell University, where he teaches courses in composition, theory, orchestration, and analysis, and seminars on the music of Messiaen and Ligeti. In 2003 he was awarded the Academy Award in Music by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The award states: “Roberto Sierra writes brilliant music, mixing fresh and personal melodic lines with sparkling harmonies and striking rhythms....”

### **Leonard Bernstein: “Mambo” from *West Side Story* (1957)**

*Candide* is on again; we plunge in next month. So again *Romeo* is postponed for a year. Maybe it's all for the best; by the time it emerges it ought to be deeply seasoned, cured, hung, aged in the wood. It's such a problematical work anyway that it should benefit by as much sitting time as it can get. Chief problem: to tread the fine line between opera and Broadway, between realism and poetry, ballet and “just dancing,” abstract and representational. Avoid being “messagy.” The line is there, but it's very fine, and sometimes takes a lot of peering around to discern it.

-Leonard Bernstein, 17 March 1956  
17 months before *West Side Story* opened

By the time, *West Side Story* hit the stage, the protagonists of this Shakespeare adaptation had changed from a Catholic Romeo and a Jewish Juliet to an Italian Tony and a Puerto Rican Maria, around whom two rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, revolved. But what never changed was the idea that this production, originally conceived by choreographer Jerome Robbins, would fuse song and dance, tragedy and comedy, high and low art, that it would be a work of operatic power told with musical-comedy techniques—in short, that it would completely revolutionize American musical theater. With a team of collaborators that included Bernstein (music), Robbins (choreography), Arthur Laurents (book), and Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), *West Side Story* did just that—after an only moderately successful Broadway run, the musical (and movie) are now

considered landmarks in their respective mediums. As David Patrick Stearns has written: “[*West Side Story*] realized the ideal of total theater more fully and fluidly than anything Bernstein had written before, with a score more unified, personal, and modern than he had previously dared to compose for the Broadway stage. Bernstein the eclectic, for whom a line from his Offenbach-flavored *Candide* of the previous year, ‘I am easily assimilated,’ may have had special personal significance, is nowhere to be found in *West Side Story*, in which his so-called popular style is merged with that of his symphonic works.” (Interestingly, this “merger” found greater resonance: during the debut of *West Side Story*, Bernstein was appointed music director of the New York Philharmonic.)

In collaboration with Robbins, Bernstein created a theatrical experience where dance is on an expressive par with sound and dialogue. Much of *West Side Story* is told through dance, and the choreography generates the essential energy of the action. As Jon Alan Conrad notes:

Groundbreaking among musicals in its tragic tone (death was hardly unknown in serious musicals of the 1940s and 50s, but choosing to end both acts with corpses on stage was probably unprecedented), *West Side Story* was even more innovatory in its integration of dance; indeed, Robbins must be considered an author of the work along with Laurents, Sondheim and Bernstein. Not only is he credited with the initial concept, but his ideas for its realization determined the casting and hence the style of vocal writing. All roles except for the few adults (and to some extent the two romantic leads) were cast primarily for dancing ability; where other dance-dominated musicals of the period employed separate singing and dancing choruses, *West Side Story* eliminated the former, and replaced the latter with a cast of named, individualized roles. Most of the dance sequences are separate, dramatically eventful numbers rather than appendages to songs, and were (like the dances in his earlier musicals) composed by Bernstein himself. Compiled as an orchestral piece, *Symphonic Dances from ‘West Side Story’*, they are almost as well known as the songs. Now among the most familiar written for any American musical, the songs themselves achieved this status only gradually, aided by the popular film version of the musical released in 1961.

The “Mambo” is a part of a sequence near the musical’s opening entitled “Dance at the Gym,” which also includes the Promenade, Blues, and Cha-Cha. Since the gymnasium was “neutral territory,” the two rival youth gangs sublimate their passions and anger in the Mambo, dancing with a violence and competitive fire similar to that of their street brawls. Underneath the tension of Riff and the Jets challenging Bernardo and the Sharks to a rumble for control of the neighborhood, the dances also provide the opportunity for Tony and Maria to meet (foreshadowed in the “Mambo” by frequent interpolations of the “Maria” melody—an ascending augmented fourth resolving up a semi-tone). In 1960, Bernstein extracted many of the most popular dance numbers into a set of *Symphonic Dances* for orchestra; like the Overture to *Candide*, this “theater music” has found a comfortable home in the concert hall.

## **H. Owen Reed: *La Fiesta Mexicana* (1949)**

Music doesn't have to be serious, does it?

-H. Owen Reed

While the name H. Owen Reed (b. 1910, Odessa, Missouri) is virtually unknown to the orchestral concert public, his *La Fiesta Mexicana* is considered one of the masterworks of twentieth-century band music. In a 1957 survey of CBDNA (College Band Directors National Association) members, *La Fiesta Mexicana* was rated as the sixth “best” original work for band. (The top ten also included, among others: 1. Gustav Holst: *First Suite in E-flat*; 2. Howard Hanson: *Chorale and Alleluia*; 5. Vincent Persichetti: *Divertimento for Band*; 8. Ralph Vaughan Williams: *Folk Song Suite*; 9. Paul Hindemith: *Symphony in B-flat*.) Interestingly, and despite the explosion of wind ensemble

repertoire over the last twenty-five years, *La Fiesta* has maintained its privileged status: in a recent (1998) survey of ten of the leading wind band conductors, *La Fiesta* was one of only six of the original “top ten” still included in a compilation of the twenty most recommended/significant pieces for band.

After 37 years of teaching at Michigan State University, Reed retired in 1976 as Professor Emeritus in music theory and composition and now, at the age of 96, lives in Arizona. Many of his students have gone on to successful careers as composers, including David Gillingham and David Maslanka, both of whom have written numerous works for wind bands. Reed composed numerous works for winds, including *Missouri Shindig*, based on the American fiddle tune “Give the Fiddler a Dram,” and *For the Unfortunate*, as well as the ballet *The Masque of the Red Death*, the opera *Peter Homan’s Dream*, and three works he refers to as “chamber dance-operas.” He earned degrees in composition and French from Louisiana State University and his Ph.D. (1939) from Eastman, where he studied with Howard Hanson and Bernard Rogers; in addition, he studied at the Berkshire Music Center (Tanglewood) in 1942 with Bohuslav Martinu, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein, and then in the summer of 1947 with Roy Harris in Colorado Springs. While his music ranges from simple diatonicism and modality to aleatoric improvisations to rigorous serialism, Reed believes that: “Throughout my music, I hope that one finds strong melodic lines, which I consider my best parameter. And in all, there will probably be found a strong feeling of jazz.”

*La Fiesta Mexicana*, Reed’s second band piece, was written in 1949, shortly after the conclusion of World War II, during what is arguably one of the most volatile compositional periods in Western music history: Miles Davis was recording his *The Birth of the Cool*, John Cage redefined the limits of music when he “composed” his silent piece *4’33”* (1952), Stravinsky reached the pinnacle of neoclassicism with his opera *The Rake’s Progress* (1951), Edgard Varèse was experimenting with new sounds in his *Poème électronique* (1958), and the ivory tower of classical music was firmly erected with composers such as Pierre Boulez (whose total serialist work *Le Marteau sans Maître* was written in 1954) and Milton Babbitt (whose article “Who Cares If You Listen?” was published in *High Fidelity* in 1958) leading classical music to greater heights of intellectualization. However, at the same time, music being written for wind bands demonstrated a marked conservative streak; while much of the art music world was moving away from tonality (of course, composers such as Aaron Copland were still writing in a more tonally-based idiom), the wind band movement was embracing it fully—and so neo-Romantic and quasi-tonal composers such as William Schuman, Howard Hanson, Vincent Persichetti, and Reed began writing works for wind band which would constitute the foundation of the American band repertoire. (In a 2001 interview, Reed remarked: “The worship of ‘-isms’ is, hopefully, becoming passé. In my early years while trying to learn how to compose, ‘program music’ was a four-letter word. At one time a composer had to write in the atonal style to be with the elite. And on and on!”) Concurrently, American popular music was immersed in a Latin American music craze in the 40s-60s; artists such as Carmen Miranda, Desi Arnaz, Xavier Cugat, Vincent Lopez, and Pérez Prado were famous, and dance forms such as the samba, conga, cha-cha, rumba, mambo, and tango were popular. It is at the nexus of these movements that *La Fiesta* came to be.

Like numerous composers before him—such as Béla Bartók who researched traditional musics of Romania and Hungary, and Percy Grainger who collected British folksongs—Reed, too, collected and studied folk music. His first ethnomusicological trip was in 1948-1949 (during the golden age of mariachis) when, on a Guggenheim Fellowship, he spent six months in Mexico. (Subsequently, Reed would return to Mexico for further study in 1960; he also traveled to the Caribbean in 1976 and to Norway in 1977, and since then has devoted much of his study to Native American music in New Mexico and Arizona.) Most of his time was spent in Cuernavaca and Chapala, with a few

weeks spent in Mexico City and Acapulco. *La Fiesta Mexicana* is based on authentic folk tunes and mariachi songs found by Reed in Chapala, Jalisco, Guadalajara, and Cuernavaca, and on themes borrowed from published collections of Gregorian motifs and Aztec dances. As Reed wrote:

I found most of my folk material in Chapala and Guadalajara. The band piece ("El Toro") used in the first movement is often played at bullfights throughout Mexico. I finally found the Aztec Dance in a collection that Sn. Aceves, a native of Guadalajara, had compiled in the mountains while doing some research for the Mexican government on aboriginal music. The chant from the *Mass* came from the Gregorian *Liber Usalis* and was often sung in the Cathedral at Chapala. The folk song *La Negra* which I used in the middle of the last movement was a tune which is often played by the *mariachi* bands in the same neighborhood—particularly in the state of Jalisco.

Of course, Reed was not the first or only composer who sought inspiration in Mexican folk music. While Aaron Copland's orchestral showpiece *El Salon Mexico* (1936) may be the most famous example of Mexican-infused music, two Mexican composers—Carlos Chávez (1899-1974) and Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940)—redefined authentic (if competing and contradictory) perspectives on Mexican nationalist music. What makes *La Fiesta Mexicana* unique, though, is the medium and form: it is one of the first symphonies written for wind band (predating by a few years the band symphonies of Persichetti, Hindemith, Gould and Giannini), let alone the first "Mexican Folk Song Symphony." The work was premiered by the U.S. Marine Band under the direction of Lt. Colonel William F. Santelman on 26 February 1950 at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. Since then, over 20 commercial recordings of *La Fiesta* have been made, including two each by the Dallas Wind Symphony, the University of Illinois Concert Band, the Michigan State University Wind Symphony, as well as those by the Eastman Wind Ensemble, the Peabody Wind Ensemble, the Tokyo Kosei Wind Ensemble, and the University of Texas-Austin Wind Ensemble.

Reed has supplied the following program for *La Fiesta Mexicana*:

The Mexican "Fiesta" is a study in contrasts: it is both serious and comical, festive and solemn, devout and pagan, boisterous and tender. *La Fiesta Mexicana*, which attempts to portray musically one of these Fiestas, is divided into three movements:

#### I. Prelude and Aztec Dance

The tumbling of the church bells and the bold noise of fireworks at midnight officially announce the opening of the Fiesta. Groups of Mexicans from near and far slowly descend upon the huge court surrounding the old cathedral; some on foot, some by burro and still others on bleeding knees, suffering out of homage to a past miracle.

After a brave effort at gaiety, the celebrators settle down on their serapes to a restless night until the church bells and fireworks again intrude upon the early quiet of the Mexican morn.

At mid-day a parade is announced by the blatant blare of trumpets. A band is heard in the distance and almost immediately the musicians round the corner of the plaza. The attention is focused upon the Aztec Dancers, brilliantly plumed and masked, who dance in an ever-increasing frenzy to a dramatic climax.

#### II. Mass

The tolling of the bells is now a reminder that the Fiesta is, after all, a religious celebration. The rich and poor slowly gather within the walls of the old cathedral for contemplation and worship.

#### III. Carnival

Mexico is at its best on the days of the Fiesta – a day on which passion governs the love, hate, and joy of the Mestizo and the Indio, There is entertainment for both young and old – the itinerant circus, the market, the bull fight, the town band, and always the "cantinas" with their band of "Mariachis"—on the day of days: FIESTA.