

Chapter Title: The Pan/American Modernisms of Carlos Chávez and Henry Cowell

Chapter Author(s): STEPHANIE N. STALLINGS

Book Title: Carlos Chavez and His World

Book Editor(s): LEONORA SAAVEDRA

Published by: Princeton University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt1cg4n5s.7>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Princeton University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Carlos Chavez and His World*

JSTOR

# The Pan/American Modernisms of Carlos Chávez and Henry Cowell

STEPHANIE N. STALLINGS

The fifty-year friendship and professional relationship between Carlos Chávez and Aaron Copland has been well documented.<sup>1</sup> Often overlooked, however, is Chávez's relationship with Henry Cowell, another American modernist active in New York in the 1920s. Though they were not close friends, their working relationship between 1928 and 1940 provides privileged insights into several issues of significance to the historicization of Chávez's early career. This essay builds on recent work by Leonora Saavedra and Alejandro Madrid, who have rewritten Chávez's participation in certain avant-garde movements in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup>

As Chávez's music gained performances and positive critical attention in New York, Edgard Varèse, Cowell, and others recognized a fellow ultramodernist in dissonant works such as the *Sonatina for Violin and Piano* (1924) and *Otros tres exágonos* (1924). In late 1927, Varèse founded the Pan-American Association of Composers (PAAC), fully expecting Chávez's participation and help in defining Pan-American music as experimental and ultramodern.<sup>3</sup> In truth, Chávez would have been a valuable collaborator, but the launch of his career in Mexico in 1928 curtailed his involvement.

Although the theme of inter-American musical activity runs through Chávez's and Cowell's correspondence and mutual activities, they had different ideas about how to promote the best new American music and, indeed, what values were to be included in the concept of musical Americanism. The two composers also shared interests: the future of modernist music and its growing affinity with scientism, and the exploration and development of non-Western musical concepts and instruments in their own compositions and in their respective classrooms. They shared the distinction of introducing to the Americas some of the first seminars in non-Western musics, Chávez in his post at the Conservatorio Nacional in Mexico City and Cowell at the New School for Social Research in New York. Both composers were also prolific writers, publishing not only

scores of articles for general audiences but also theoretical monographs proposing strikingly compatible forward-looking visions on the future of modern music.

### Near Misses: Two American Moderns in 1920s New York

Chávez visited Europe in the winter of 1922 and the United States from December 1923 to March 1924, and again from September 1926 to June 1928. Several of his compositions from these years, including “Polígonos” for piano (1923), *Otros tres exágonos*, and the Sonatina for Violin and Piano reflected an awareness of modernist composition from Europe and the United States. During his visit to New York, Chávez’s fellow Mexican José Juan Tablada introduced him to Varèse, the founder of New York’s premiere modern music performance society, the International Composers’ Guild. Chávez returned to Mexico and began to organize concerts of contemporary music at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. He programmed works never before heard in Mexico, including compositions by Satie, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Varèse, Honegger, Milhaud, and Poulenc.

From May to December 1923, Cowell embarked on his first European tour as a pianist-composer, giving performances in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and London. Upon his return he gave a concert at Carnegie Hall’s main auditorium on 4 February 1924, where he proudly introduced New York to his notorious pianistic novelty, the tone cluster.<sup>4</sup> Chávez was in New York at that time, but no extant account suggests he attended Cowell’s concert or met him personally. In early 1925 Cowell began a working relationship with Varèse, and in March headed home to California, where he started a new venture that had been seeded by Varèse’s request that he organize a branch of the Guild in San Francisco.<sup>5</sup> On 22 October 1925, the New Music Society of California held its inaugural concert in Los Angeles, with Varèse’s *Octandre* on the program.<sup>6</sup> Chávez also programmed *Octandre* on one of his new music concerts in Mexico City in December that same year. Chávez’s friendship with Cowell began during his second sojourn in New York, from 1926 to 1928.

### Pan-Americanism and the PAAC

Ascribing a utopian quality to the Americas, Varèse cultivated relationships with a number of Latin American artists and composers, many of

whom were members of the Guild.<sup>7</sup> After the Guild's dissolution in 1927, the idea to link composers in the Americas in a new society must have seemed like a logical one, with U.S. newspapers touting the need for Pan-American cultural cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Varèse then founded the PAAC, which included both Chávez and Cowell. The performance of a movement from Chávez's ballet *H.P. (Horsepower or Caballos de vapor)* on a Guild concert in 1926 may have contributed to the momentum. It is easy to imagine *H.P.*, with its blending of modernist and Mexican elements and its theme of interaction between the industrial North and the fertile South, as the closest anyone had yet come to the creation of a Pan-American style.<sup>9</sup>

Varèse began organizing the PAAC as early as July 1927. He wrote to Chávez of a trip he was planning: "You know that my presence in Mexico and the pleasure I would experience on knowing your magical country, would be a powerful aid to our cause. . . . On my return I will talk about several projects I think will have good success and in which you would be involved."<sup>10</sup> Chávez communicated Varèse's new plans to his colleague Silvestre Revueltas, who responded, "My sincere thanks to Varèse. . . . I am enchanted by the idea of the Concert Society, and of course I accept."<sup>11</sup>

Listing Chávez and Revueltas as incorporating members, the Pan-American Association was announced in both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* on 18 March 1928. In June Chávez returned to Mexico to accept a position as director of the newly formed Orquesta Sinfónica de México (OSM). In December he was also appointed director of the Conservatorio Nacional. His new positions may have limited his involvement in PAAC activities, but other factors may have contributed as well. The initial lack of organization, funding, and critical attention to the PAAC between 1928 and 1930 may have diminished Chávez's interest. The very term "Pan-Americanism," originating in a U.S.-based frame of reference, held the assumption that there existed Americas distinct from each other, an idea Chávez resisted if not outright rejected in favor of the more inclusive concept of "Americanism," referring to the entire continent. Finally, his virtual non-participation in the PAAC while maintaining individual relationships with many U.S. composers, including Cowell, provides evidence of his skill in negotiating multiple factions of the U.S. modern music scene.

Chávez's relationship with Cowell intensified in early 1928. Some insight into their early common activities in New York can be gained through Cowell's frequent letters to his father and stepmother. Though these reports often read as more aspirational than strictly factual, they suggest there was initial excitement surrounding the Pan-American

project. In February, Cowell wrote that Chávez “wants me to come to Mexico City . . . to play my concert with orchestra. . . . Varèse is organizing all the best known moderns here into a ‘Pan-American’ composer’s society. C. C. Birchard . . . will publish a new magazine to be its mouthpiece in English and Spanish.”<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later, Cowell wrote to his stepmother that “[Miguel] Covarrubias, the cartoonist, drew me yesterday for an article which Chávez is writing about me for a leading Mexican magazine.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1928, Cowell published Chávez’s *Sonatina for Violin and Piano* in *New Music Quarterly*, the publishing arm of his New Music Society. New Music was Cowell’s preferred method of supporting composers he thought had great potential.<sup>14</sup> In March, Cowell wrote again to his father: “Anything we do for Chávez [in New Music] will come back to us in Mexican connections; he is to play my *Symphonietta* [*sic*] with his orchestra in Mexico City, and my *Concerto* later [and] promises to arrange for solo recitals there for me.”<sup>15</sup> Cowell hoped that promotion of his Mexican colleague’s music would pay dividends in terms of promoting his own works—just the type of reciprocal relationships the PAAC had said it hoped to establish.<sup>16</sup> In July he dutifully reported to Chávez about the *Sonatina*’s publication in *New Music Quarterly* and his article in *Aesthete* magazine.<sup>17</sup> In June Cowell had published a four-page article in *Pro-Musica Quarterly* describing Chávez’s music as “particularly clean-cut, crystalline, straightforward, and with an impelling rhythm.”<sup>18</sup> Probably sensing Chávez’s new preoccupation with establishing the OSM, Cowell wrote on August 7: “Please do not disappear [*sic*] entirely from the face of the earth,”<sup>19</sup> the first of many entreaties for cooperation. He requested the scores for Chávez’s “Fox” for pianist Richard Buhlig to play on a New Music concert in San Francisco<sup>20</sup> and *Energía* to build a PAAC chamber concert around it. In exchange, Cowell sent “the little trio I promised you for performance in New York next year.”<sup>21</sup>

Varèse moved to Paris in October 1928, leaving Cowell in charge of PAAC activity. Although Chávez did not have a prominent role in the PAAC, his music was celebrated on its concerts from the very beginning. On 12 March 1929, Stephanie Schehatowitsch played his *Sonatina* for Piano as well as “36” in the first PAAC concert in New York. The concert was designed to showcase new music from Latin American composers, several of whom had had their works performed in concerts of the Guild and the League of Composers.<sup>22</sup> Pieces by Heitor Villa-Lobos, Cuban composers Alejandro García Caturla and Amadeo Roldán, and Guatemalan pianist Raúl Paniagua completed the program. Later the PAAC programmed Chávez’s *Energía* for four concerts in Europe: in

Paris in June 1931; and three times in 1932—in New York in February, in Berlin in March, and in Budapest in April. They also programmed the *Sonatina for Violin* in Vienna in a chamber program conducted by Anton Webern.

However well meaning Cowell's desire to be inclusive, the undercurrent of exoticism and discovery in the programming strategy reads today as a bit tone deaf. We might wonder how Chávez felt about being represented on a program with composers whose only connection to each other was the state of being viewed as peripheral to New York's modern music scene, when several of them had long been an integral part of it. Several European reviewers of PAAC concerts in fact noted a distinction between Chávez (described by French critic Paul le Flem as "one who does not linger in shady, floral groves to pitch his tent") and other Latin American composers more "sensitive to the suggestions of folklore."<sup>23</sup>

The year 1932 marked the beginning of a period of increased recognition for Chávez in the United States. On 31 March, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Philadelphia Grand Opera mounted a production of *H.P.*, choreographed by Catherine Littlefield and featuring sets and costumes by Diego Rivera. Christina Taylor Gibson has analyzed the critical reception of the ballet and pointed out the ways in which it failed to live up to the promise of Pan-American cooperation touted by the press leading up to the event.<sup>24</sup> Following the ballet's abstract program notes and a "dogged search for 'Mexican-ness'" in Chávez's works, advance publicity ignored the complexity inherent in the work's depictions of "North" and "South" and instead presented a simple narrative of an industrious United States and a primitive Latin America. The result was a confused audience and mixed reviews.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, as Taylor Gibson also points out, the ballet's production raised Chávez's profile in the United States. That year Cowell thought more could be done to promote inter-American musical exchange. He returned to the idea of the Pan-American music journal and asked Chávez to send some ideas for it.<sup>26</sup> With mixed reviews of his Pan-American-themed ballet *H.P.* coming in, Chávez preferred "to postpone the idea of the Pan American journal for next year, so that we have time to think it over carefully."<sup>27</sup> The following year, in February, it was Chávez who picked up the conversation on the journal, writing, "I wish I could go to New York and [work] out together the idea of the Panamerican Journal."<sup>28</sup> With renewed enthusiasm, Cowell started making plans and speaking with interested parties.<sup>29</sup> Varèse, however, returned to New York in August 1933 and shortly thereafter resumed control of the PAAC, shutting Cowell out of the decision-making process.<sup>30</sup>

## Non-Western Musics

The search for knowledge about so-called primitive musics from around the globe coincided with (and was greatly informed by) modernist composers' quest for new musical materials to renew their aesthetics. Cowell is now well known for his enthusiasm for non-Western musics, but Chávez certainly shared his interest. During the six years he held the directorship of the Conservatorio Nacional (1928–34) he began several projects to collect indigenous folk musics of Mexico and the world. To that purpose, he founded three research academies at the Conservatory, including the Academia de Investigación de la Música Popular, which would carry out fieldwork to collect and transcribe Mexican folk and popular traditions; the Academia de Historia y Bibliografía to collect a bibliography on art music and on the musics of Asia and Africa; and the Academia de Investigación de Nuevas Posibilidades Musicales, which was to establish forward-looking theories by critically studying the musical scales of the world and the instruments on which they were played.<sup>31</sup>

Cowell, too, was interested in gathering information on world musics. In December 1930, he applied for a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship to study in Berlin, listing Chávez as a reference. Chávez's recommendation endorsed Cowell's proposed study, which was "indeed of high interest . . . Cowell will benefit immensely by getting directly in touch with musical culture of diverse countries and epochs, thus obtaining a wider notion of human expressions."<sup>32</sup> Thanks to recommendations from Chávez and twenty-two other composers, musicologists, and critics, Cowell won the fellowship. Just before Cowell's second trip to Berlin, Chávez requested recordings of "primitive folk music" and asked if Cowell would hand-select records during his stay in Berlin to create a collection.<sup>33</sup> Cowell agreed, having already been commissioned to form a similar collection for the New School. He delivered the promised records to Chávez in February 1933.

Cowell returned to New York with a broader understanding of the applicability of various world musics to modern musical composition. His new purpose was to "draw on those materials common to the music of all the peoples of the world to build a new music particularly related to our own century."<sup>34</sup> Cowell's transethnicism, which he viewed as a new universalism, reflected a desire to combat the spread of French neoclassicism in modern music—something he called "easy to compose, easy to understand, [and] easy to forget"—and to espouse an American-based universalism.<sup>35</sup> Cowell would not apply his new understanding of universalist principles to his own compositions, however, until at least fall

1933, when he began teaching world music at the New School, in courses such as “Music Systems of the World,” “Primitive and Folk Origins of Music,” and “Theory and Practice of Rhythm.” These classes introduced world musics and novel uses of rhythm and timbre to the young John Cage, among others, and in doing so helped inaugurate music written for ensembles of percussion instruments, which demonstrated vast potential for expressing a multiplicity of transethnic styles and aesthetics. Cowell likely began composing his first work for percussion ensemble while teaching “Music Systems of the World.” *Ostinato Pianissimo*, completed in 1934, represents Cowell’s attempt to synthesize and distill world music elements in percussion works. Non-Western percussion instruments appear in it: Afro-Cuban bongos and *güiro*, as well as Indian *jalatarang* (rice bowls) and gongs, but Cowell broadened their timbral possibilities by calling for them to be played in uncharacteristic ways.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Mexican government-sponsored archaeological research on pre-Columbian cultures and artifacts yielded Daniel Castañeda and Vicente Mendoza’s work on pre-Hispanic percussion instruments, *Instrumental precortesiano* (1933). This 280-page volume published by the Mexican National Museum of Archaeology, History, and Ethnography included hundreds of photographs, architecturally detailed drawings, and explanations of the origins of percussion instruments in Mexico, such as the varied types of *teponaztli*, *huéhuell*, and *timbal*, as well as estimates of their accompanying rhythms.<sup>37</sup> Between 1931 and 1934 Chávez held a series of composition seminars at the Conservatorio Nacional, the purpose of which was to give young Mexican composers “a living comprehension of the musical tradition of their own country.”<sup>38</sup> Seminararians included *Instrumental precortesiano* co-author Mendoza, Daniel Ayala, Blas Galindo, and Silvestre Revueltas. Chávez and Cowell were, therefore, among the very first to teach non-Western music in an academic setting in America. One goal of Chávez’s seminars was to explore ways to incorporate indigenous instruments, mostly percussion, into Mexican orchestral music. In a 1936 article in *Modern Music*, Chávez explained that the seminars resulted in a group of instruments they called the Mexican Orchestra, “a specially balanced ensemble of conventional instruments with the addition of *huéhuells*, *teponaxtles*, *chirimías*, and various kinds of water-drums [and] rasps.”<sup>39</sup> Chávez wrote *Cantos de México* for this orchestra in 1933. At that time, however, none of the seminararians composed for an all-percussion ensemble. Chávez himself would not do so until 1942, when John Cage commissioned his *Toccata for Percussion*.



## The Future of Modern Music

Chávez and Cowell shared many concerns about the state of modern American composition, which emerge in their respective writings. Chávez wrote about 225 newspaper articles focused primarily on nationalism, musical life, and institutions in Mexico, but his publications for U.S. audiences tended to focus on theoretical concerns.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Cowell produced journalistic writings for a general audience throughout his career, and he wrote a number of theoretical articles and books. Chávez and Cowell both struggled with what they perceived as the limitations of their inherited musical materials and training. They each historicized their musical present by examining the music of contemporary indigenous peoples and drew on teleological explanations for modern advances in order to advocate effectively for the incorporation of new and experimental music.

In his article “The Two Persons,” Chávez explored the limitations of music as an art form existing only in time, “extinguished and gone forever at the exact moment of its creation.”<sup>41</sup> He discussed the failures of Western notation to record the elements of a musical work as it is conceived in the mind of a composer, a theme he would address again in *Toward a New Music: Music and Electricity* (1937),<sup>42</sup> and one Cowell also treated in “Our Inadequate Notation” (1927). Notation as it exists, wrote Cowell, can give “bare details of the pitch and rhythm of conventional modes, but little else. Quarter steps, exact slides and involved cross-rhythms cannot accurately be notated.”<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, Cowell was elated to read in “The Two Persons” that Chávez also considered Western notation one of several critical impasses in modern music. Cowell called the article “a masterpiece. It clearly puts forth one of the most vital and least understood subjects in musical art. . . . I wish to talk to you of music as in time or space—I believe it to be in both!”<sup>44</sup> As far as we know, Chávez did not entertain the last hypothesis, which Cowell would explore years later in his experiments with music for modern dance.

Chávez and Cowell both tackled a problem felt by many composers of their generation: they saw themselves as the heirs of centuries of musical tradition, yet their music was often misunderstood by critics and audiences. Chávez begins *Toward a New Music* by claiming, “The great masters were not ahead of their time—their public was behind it.”<sup>45</sup> The social evolutionism sparked by Herbert Spencer’s ideas on natural selection, Oswald Spengler’s rise and decline of societies, Auguste Comte, and Marx and Engels (who argued that evolutionist theory mirrored their views on progress within societies) pervaded the sociological thought of the period.<sup>46</sup> Chávez attempted to validate modern music by placing it in a

historical lineage and emphasizing the scientific basis of art. Just as there are scientific advances such as central heating, electric lighting, and skyscrapers, he argued, there is progress inherent in artistic activity: "History and physics will well explain the artistic phenomena of today. Only by their study may we obtain a much-needed perspective on the present."<sup>47</sup> With this argument Chávez primed readers for his later discussion of the possibilities of electrical sound production and reproduction.

Evincing comparable social thought, Cowell's writings similarly conflate teleological scientism and artistic development. This is especially true of *New Musical Resources* (1930), the publication of which Chávez facilitated by introducing it to Alfred A. Knopf.<sup>48</sup> "With a more accurate knowledge of acoustics," Cowell wrote, "we have begun to perceive that acceptance or rejection [of intervals] has not been haphazard."<sup>49</sup> Thus began Cowell's theory of musical relativity, in which "rhythm and tone . . . are definitely related through overtone ratios."<sup>50</sup> Cowell's interest in developing an overarching theory of music grounded in acoustics "came about at first through wishing to explain . . . why certain materials I felt impelled to use in composition . . . have genuine scientific and logical foundation."<sup>51</sup> Since theosophy and philosophies of intuitiveness, not formal training, directed Cowell's early education and experiments with tone clusters at the piano, here he attempted to simultaneously legitimize and historicize those experiments by finding a theory to encompass them all, proving that "modern music is not proceeding blindly."<sup>52</sup>

Herein lies the main point of divergence between the two composers' writings on new musical resources and their uses. Cowell believed that composers were at an impasse in musical development because they lacked sufficient instrument technology to progress any further. His response to the challenge at that time was to examine which other musical elements, particularly the rhythms and timbres of non-Western musics, could be mined for future innovations. Chávez, on the other hand, seemingly unhampered in his musical expression, nevertheless found in electrical instruments a wealth of new technological developments that were capable of producing an infinite variety of new sounds and allowed the vision of the composer to be made permanent so that it was no longer subjected to the vagaries of the performer as interpreter.

Likewise, the two men dealt differently with what they perceived as the limits of musical notation. Cowell asserted that modern notation was not graphically correct, and that if a composer desired a new effect and left it to the performer, "any of a hundred different ones may be produced."<sup>53</sup> Chávez agreed: "Several performances, taken from identical writings, are always different performances."<sup>54</sup> Cowell's answer was to

experiment with new graphical devices adapted to suit modern compositional choices. His piano piece *Fabric* (1917), for example, exhibited a contrapuntal texture of three simultaneous rhythms. In order to facilitate reading the multiple rhythmic relationships, Cowell devised a system of notating new subdivisions of the whole note, all indicated using differently shaped noteheads. By 1927, he realized that non-Western musics also resisted accurate transcription using Western notation, pointing out that “printed examples of Indian music . . . if sung purely as written . . . become conventional tunes.”<sup>55</sup> On this point, too, Chávez agreed: “The constant small irregularities in time and tempo in folk music cannot be captured in notation with complete fidelity.”<sup>56</sup> Cowell’s solution remained rooted in proposing new ways for notes to appear graphically in the score. Similarly, Chávez in 1929 had called for “a system of marks on paper that can exactly represent all and every one of the properties of the sound called for [and] a way of indicating the procedure of performances with which to work out these properties with absolute precision . . . independent of an interpreter.”<sup>57</sup> By 1936, however, he had given up that hope: “It would probably not be wrong to say that occidental musical writing in reality lacks the possibility of future development.”<sup>58</sup> His proposed solution lay instead in “the act of permanently recording musical conceptions” through the use of new sound reproduction technologies such as the player piano.<sup>59</sup>

Cowell was concerned with the player piano insofar as it offered one possible solution to the limitations of notation discussed above. “The only notation,” he wrote, “that must of necessity be graphically correct, since it produces the sound itself, is the holes in a player piano roll.”<sup>60</sup> Chávez, for his part, considered a broader role for the reproducing piano, that of “spreading music without the necessity of wide specialization in it as a profession, or of depending on performers not always at hand, or requiring a remuneration or compensation for their professional services.”<sup>61</sup> Chávez’s aspiration was to cultivate audiences for high-quality art music—a project that could be assisted by reproducing instruments. The real advantage offered by the perforated roll, however, was “the possibility of a music not limited by the anatomic capacity of two or four however dextrous [*sic*] hands.”<sup>62</sup> Composers desiring to use the player piano, such as, later, Conlon Nancarrow, may have found encouragement not only in Cowell’s *New Musical Resources* but also in Chávez’s more detailed outline of the possibilities of such instruments: “the only means for achieving music of fixed values unaltered during successive performances. . . . Only then will a fixed music exist, and the musical creator, like the sculptor and painter, give actual permanence to his conceptions.”<sup>63</sup>

Chávez was clearly invested in the theoretical possibilities of electronically produced music, but he did not explore those possibilities in his own works until his 1968 ballet *Pirámide* for SATB chorus, orchestra, and tape. *H.P.*, which he composed while researching *Toward a New Music*, has a mechanical theme, driving rhythms, and purposely harsh dissonances, which might have made it an opportune work in which to experiment with electronic timbres. But the early version of the theremin, which was the only electronic instrument at that time that could have been incorporated into an orchestra, had, he said, “various major inconveniences. One is the difficulty of fixing the pitch . . . another is the inevitable *portamento* between a sound and the one following it. . . . A third is that the ‘attack’ is always imperfect and awkward.”<sup>64</sup> The theremin did not provide the absolute control over sound that Chávez desired of technology.

Cowell, uncomfortable following the path that led to eliminating the performer’s will from music making, instead experimented throughout the 1930s and 1940s with methods to maintain the integrity of his intentions while allowing performers more interpretive liberty.<sup>65</sup> His earlier claim in a letter to Chávez that he believed music to exist “in space as well as time” informed his efforts in collaborations with modern dancers, who were occupied with developing choreography to pre-composed music. In developing his work *Synchrony* for Martha Graham in 1930, Cowell proposed a solution he believed would treat both art forms equally, which was to create a contrapuntal relationship in which the music climaxes while the dance movements are subdued, and vice versa—a compelling idea theoretically but one that did not work well in practice. *Synchrony* was never performed as a dance work, but Chávez programmed a concert version with the OSM in December 1932.

### Chávez as American Modernist

Notably absent from the PAAC repertoire and mission was an acknowledgment of the African American contribution to modern music, a thread Chávez included in his concept of Americanism. Unlike Cowell, Varèse, and others in their New York circle, he appreciated jazz. He collected Art Tatum records and frequented jazz establishments in Harlem with his friends Colin McPhee and Miguel Covarrubias. Though recognizably jazzy idioms never formed a thread in Chávez’s compositional persona, he showed an early interest in incorporating jazz-themed elements in his modernist piano works *Foxtrot* (1925), “Fox” (1928), and “Blues” (1928). He programmed a performance of John Alden Carpenter’s *Skyscraper Suite* for the first season of

the OSM in 1928, followed closely by Aaron Copland's *Music for the Theatre*. The significance of white U.S. composers using black music was not lost on Mexican critics. Salomón Kahan noted that in Copland's music, "Jazz, that primitive musical form by means of which the oppressed blacks took their revenge on the North American majority, imposing on them their musical way of intuiting and feeling, has been purified, ennobled and elevated to symphonic dignity."<sup>66</sup> Nor was Chávez indifferent to the plight of African Americans in the United States. As its nascent civil rights movement gained momentum he composed "North Carolina Blues" (1942), a song incorporating elements of jazz set to a poem by Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia about the lynching of black citizens in the Jim Crow South.<sup>67</sup>

Villaurrutia (1903–1950) found initial success among Mexico City's modern literary circles in the early 1920s.<sup>68</sup> In 1928 he co-founded the Mexican literary magazine *Contemporáneos*, in which his translations of Langston Hughes's "I, Too," "Poem," and "Suicide Note" from *The Weary Blues* (1926) and his "Prayer" from *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) appeared in the fall of 1931.<sup>69</sup> "North Carolina Blues" appeared in Villaurrutia's collection *Nostalgia de la muerte* (Nostalgia of death) in 1938. Its repeated refrain, "En North Carolina," vaguely recalls the spiritual-inspired repetitions in Hughes's poems "Fire" and "Moan," though "North Carolina Blues" does not contain the AAB form of the blues poems from *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, with which Villaurrutia was familiar, nor does the poem exhibit Hughes's fine-tuned rhythmic sense.<sup>70</sup> Each occurrence of the refrain "En North Carolina" interrupts what little rhythmic flow is present in the preceding stanza; thus, though a lyrical take on the harsh realities of being a person of color in the Jim Crow South, "North Carolina Blues" is not a "jazz poem" (see Example 1).

In his setting Chávez evokes a blues style without incorporating its harmonic or melodic idioms, much as he did in the earlier piano works "Blues" and "Fox." The piano accompaniment in D minor maintains constant forward motion throughout, creating a strong feeling of restlessness. The vocal line in the A section contains interval patterns that resemble (but do not actually comprise) a blues scale in B-flat, accompanied by a lumbering piano reminiscent of a funeral march in D minor. The B section, which forms a curiously early emotional climax to the poem, gruesomely portrays the hanging of a black man:

*Meciendo el tronco vertical  
desde las plantas de los pies  
hasta las palmas de las manos  
el hombre es árbol otra vez*

Rocking his vertical torso  
from the soles of his feet  
to the palms of his hands  
the man is tree again.<sup>71</sup>

16 *(p)* **Più mosso**  $\text{♩} = 72$

a - gua. Me - cien - do el tron - co ver - ti - cal,

20 des - de las plan - tas de los pies has - ta las pal - mas de las

23 *ritard. poco* ma - nos el hom - bre es ar - bol o - tra

25 **Tempo primo**  $\text{♩} = 60$   
*p* vez. En North Ca - ro - li - na

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 16-19) is marked 'Più mosso' with a tempo of quarter note = 72. It begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) section. The second system (measures 20-22) continues the vocal line. The third system (measures 23-24) features a 'ritard. poco' marking and a piano (*p*) dynamic. The fourth system (measures 25-27) is marked 'Tempo primo' with a tempo of quarter note = 60 and a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and moving lines in both hands, with various articulations like accents and slurs.

Example 1. "North Carolina Blues," mm. 16–27.

To highlight the grotesque dance of death Chávez employed habanera (mm. 18–21) and cinquillo (mm. 22–25) patterns in the piano, building harmonic and rhythmic forward movement toward a climax in measure 25. As if in answer to the horrified listener's question, "Where could such a thing happen?" the full refrain returns immediately: "En North Carolina."

The lynching of blacks was an appalling reality of African American life in the southern United States well into the twentieth century. The placement of the lynching at the beginning of "North Carolina Blues," however, suggests that what is depicted in later verses, the subjugation of blacks under Jim Crow laws, is also unconscionable (and perhaps dangerous to any darker-skinned Latin Americans who travel there). Though the song has remained a neglected work in Chávez's oeuvre, it asserted a measure of solidarity with the vibrant African American artistic communities he encountered in Harlem rather than with the official narrative of Pan-Americanism that largely promoted the interests of U.S. capital in Latin America. It suggested possibilities for a version of musical Americanism that addressed rather than ignored the challenges of race, class, and empire.

Following the anti-lynching theme of "North Carolina Blues," Chávez programmed William Grant Still's cantata *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* (1940), set to a text by U.S. poet Katherine Chapin Biddle, for an OSM concert in 1944. During the first half of the twentieth century more than two hundred anti-lynching bills were introduced in the U.S. Congress. The House of Representatives passed three of them, including one while Still was composing the piece in January 1940, but it, like the others, failed to pass the Senate. Biddle's graphic vision of the work included a "white chorus" to depict a lynch mob, a "Negro chorus" to discover and bemoan the lynching, a male narrator, and a small orchestra.<sup>72</sup> Chávez saw to the text's translation into Spanish for the OSM performance, which he sent to Still and Biddle for their revision. The narrator at the concert was poet Carlos Pellicer, a close friend and associate of both Chávez and Villaurrutia.

Eschewing a U.S.-led musical Pan-Americanism that positioned him with other Latin American composers whose works were often described as picturesque and evoking local color, Chávez focused his compositional efforts on the inherently modern. But Chávez's modernism was compatible with progressive, transnational ideals. Continued research into his participation in an Americanism that took into consideration the political role of the composer and artist, as well as a shared struggle for economic and racial justice, will further challenge readings that accept him unambiguously as a Mexican nationalist unconcerned with artistic development

outside his own country. Especially fertile soil is found in the connections between Latin American and African American artists and composers in the early twentieth century, many of whom have already been charted by visual art and literary scholars.<sup>73</sup> Several historians have addressed the members of these groups' shared adoption of socialist principles in the face of racial and economic oppression.<sup>74</sup> Chávez, like Charles Seeger in the United States, concerned himself with applying Marxist social theory to the role of the composer in the early 1930s.<sup>75</sup>

Thus Chávez and Cowell, though both steeped in progressive artistic and social thought and espousing compatible visions of the future of modernist music, represented contesting views of Americanism in an era of increasing interaction between the United States and Latin America. Both saw possibilities for solving aesthetic crises in modern music by developing a distinctly American modernism that included the methodical exploration of world music styles and an informed assimilation of selected transethnic musical materials. The solution of technical challenges, too, provided a rich source for both composers' imaginations, as they proposed compatible visions of the future of concert music that involved developing electrical sound technologies. Cowell was not concerned with composing overtly political works in the 1930s, and though he clearly desired closer cooperation between American composers of all stripes, his nonconformist, all-inclusive vision was read by some of his U.S. contemporaries as a lack of seriousness and a refusal to choose a compositional camp. Chávez, on the other hand, courted politics both when it suited his artistic vision and when it served his sophisticated recasting of U.S. Pan-American discourse. Many of the warm professional interactions between Chávez and Cowell, though not indicative of a close personal relationship, offer us privileged insights into a dimension of Chávez's early career in which he was dedicated to furthering his own vision of a modernist musical America.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Robert L. Parker, "Copland and Chávez: Brothers in Arms," *American Music* 5/4 (1987): 433–44; and Howard Pollack's essay in this volume.

2. Leonora Saavedra, "Carlos Chávez's Polysemic Style: Constructing the National, Seeking the Cosmopolitan," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68/1 (2015): 99–150; Alejandro L. Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and Ideas in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

3. See Stephanie N. Stallings, "Collective Difference: The Pan-American Association of Composers and Pan-American Ideology in Music, 1925–1945" (PhD diss., Florida State



University, 2009); and Deane Root, "The Pan-American Association of Composers, 1928–1934," *Yearbook for Inter-American Music Research* 8 (1972): 49–70.

4. Though Cowell emerged as the primary figure in promoting tone clusters and claimed to have used them in his piano works as early as 1913, Leo Ornstein treated the piano similarly and had won recognition for his startling performances in New York starting in 1915. See Michael Broyles and Denise Von Glahn, *Leo Ornstein: Modernist Dilemmas, Personal Choices* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); and Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11–24.

5. Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131.

6. On the New Music Society, see Rita Mead, *Henry Cowell's New Music 1925–1936: The Society, the Music Editions, and the Recordings* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981).

7. These included poet José Juan Tablada, and composers Enrico Fabini from Uruguay, and Acario Cotapos from Chile.

8. The *New York Times* covered the February 1928 Pan-American Congress in Havana, which included discussions of closer cooperation in the form of mutual scientific, health, and cultural societies.

9. Sidney Robertson Cowell attributed the idea of the PAAC to Chávez, though she was also biased against Varèse for perceived slights against her husband: "[Henry] said Carlos brought the idea to him." Interview transcript with SRC, Henry Cowell Papers, JPB 00-03, Music Division, New York Library for the Performing Arts (henceforth NYPL).

10. Varèse to Chávez, 20 July 1927, Fondo Carlos Chávez, Archivo General de la Nación (henceforth AGN). Original in French; Spanish translation in Gloria Carmona, *Epistolario selecto de Carlos Chávez* (México City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 78–79. All translations from *Epistolario* are mine.

11. Revueltas to Chávez, n.d., 1927, AGN; Carmona, *Epistolario selecto*, 83.

12. Henry Cowell to Harry Cowell, 2 February 1928, Cowell Papers, NYPL.

13. Henry Cowell to Olive Cowell, 23 February 1928, Cowell Papers, NYPL. As of this writing, I have not been able to locate the drawing.

14. Cowell's dedication to promoting and publishing Charles Ives's music, for example, has had especially far-reaching consequences for its reception.

15. None of these plans came to pass. Cowell never visited Mexico.

16. On Cowell's promotion of Latin American composers, see Rita Mead, "Latin American Accents in *New Music*," *Latin American Music Review* 3/2 (1982): 207–28.

17. Cowell to Chávez, 10 July 1928. All correspondence between Chávez and Cowell cited in this essay can be found at Fondo Carlos Chávez, AGN. Copies courtesy of the editors.

18. Henry Cowell, "Carlos Chávez," *Pro Musica Quarterly* 6/4 (June 1928): 19–23.

19. Cowell to Chávez, 7 August 1928, AGN.

20. Buhlig performed Sonatina for Piano in the New Music Society concert on 24 October 1928 ("by request," according to the program). Mead, *Henry Cowell's New Music*, 102.

21. Cowell to Chávez, 28 August 1928, AGN. Chávez made tentative plans to return to New York in 1929 to present a series of chamber concerts. Whether these were intended to be PAAC concerts is unclear; they never happened.

22. In 1923 Clare R. Reis, along with several Guild members disenchanted with Varèse's authoritarian hand, formed a new concert society, the League of Composers. See Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 217–19.

23. Paul Le Flem, "Le deuxième concert de musique américaine," *Comoedia*, 15 June 1931.

24. Christina Taylor Gibson, "The Reception of Carlos Chávez's *Horsepower*: A Pan-American Communication Failure," *American Music* 30/2 (2012): 157–93. Carol Hess's

*Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), which also discusses *H.P.*, came too late to my attention to be discussed here.

25. Taylor Gibson, "The Reception of Carlos Chávez's *Horsepower*," 173.
26. Cowell to Chávez, 20 April 1932, AGN.
27. Chávez to Cowell, 29 April 1932, AGN.
28. Chávez to Cowell, 13 February 1933, AGN.
29. Cowell to Chávez, 7 April 1933, AGN.
30. Cowell mentioned the journal again in October 1934, this time in connection with Charles Seeger. See Leonora Saavedra, "The American Composer in the 1930s: The Social Thought of Seeger and Chávez," in *Understanding Charles Seeger, Pioneer in American Musicology*, ed. Bell Yung and Helen Rees (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 57–59.
31. Leonora Saavedra, "Of Selves and Others: Historiography, Ideology, and the Politics of Modern Mexican Music" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2001), 231–32.
32. Chávez to Henry Allen Moe, 17 December 1930, AGN.
33. Chávez to Cowell, 23 May 1932, AGN.
34. Henry Cowell, "Towards Neo-Primitivism," *Modern Music* 10/3 (1932–33): 151.
35. *Ibid.*, 150.
36. Amadeo Roldán had already composed his *Rítmicas V* and *VI* for percussion (1930), which shared the distinction with Varèse's *Ionisation* (1929–31) of being the first all-percussion works in Western music.
37. Castañeda and Mendoza were invited by Chávez to work at the Conservatorio Nacional and conducted research for this publication within the Academia de Música Mexicana.
38. Carlos Chávez, "Revolt in Mexico," *Modern Music* 13/3 (1936): 39.
39. *Ibid.*
40. See Leonora Saavedra, "Los escritos periodísticos de Carlos Chávez: Una fuente para la historia de la música en México," *Inter-American Music Review* 10 (1989): 77–91.
41. Carlos Chávez, "The Two Persons," *The Musical Quarterly* 15/2 (1929): 153–59.
42. Carlos Chávez, *Toward a New Music: Music and Electricity*, trans. Herbert Weinstock (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937).
43. Henry Cowell, "Our Inadequate Notation," *Modern Music* 4 (1927): 29.
44. Cowell to Chávez, n.d. [early 1929], AGN.
45. Chávez, *Toward a New Music*, 14.
46. Comte's law of three stages was particularly influential to Mexican intellectuals, including Chávez. It was widely believed that modernism represented the final "scientific" stage. See Leonora Saavedra, "Music, Evolutionism and National Identity in Mexico," paper read at the American Musicological Society's annual meeting, Seattle, 2004.
47. Chávez, *Toward a New Music*, 16.
48. Or so Cowell reported to his father in a letter dated 12 March 1928, Cowell Papers, NYPL. This could not be corroborated in the Chávez-Knopf correspondence at the Fondo Carlos Chávez, AGN.
49. "The Impasse of Modern Music," *Century* 114/6 (October 1927): 671.
50. Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930; 2d ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xi.
51. *Ibid.*, xv.
52. *Ibid.*, xii. On Cowell's theosophical upbringing, see Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
53. Cowell, "Our Inadequate Notation," 29.
54. Chávez, "The Two Persons," 155.
55. Cowell, "Our Inadequate Notation," 30.
56. Chávez, *Toward a New Music*, 58–59.

57. Chávez, "The Two Persons," 155.
58. Chávez, *Toward a New Music*, 36–37.
59. On the player piano as a formative music technology, see Timothy D. Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music,'" *Ethnomusicology* 51/2 (2007): 281–305.
60. Cowell, "Our Inadequate Notation," 32.
61. Chávez, *Toward a New Music*, 45–46.
62. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
63. *Ibid.*, 62.
64. *Ibid.*, 163.
65. Cowell's influence in this respect on John Cage, Lou Harrison, and his other students is well documented. See, for example, Leta Miller, "Henry Cowell and John Cage: Intersections and Influences, 1933–1941," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59/1 (2006): 47–112.
66. Salomón Kahan, "Impresiones musicales: Un genio de la música moderna," *El Universal Gráfico*, 5 September 1932, quoted and translated by Leonora Saavedra in "Revisiting Copland's Mexico," paper read at Indiana University, 21 October 2011.
67. Silvestre Revueltas had composed a song on an anti-lynching theme, "Canto de una muchacha negra," to Langston Hughes's poem "Song for a Dark Girl" in 1938.
68. On Villaurrutia, see Frank Dauster, *Xavier Villaurrutia* (New York: Twayne, 1971).
69. Xavier Villaurrutia, *Contemporáneos* 11 (September–October 1931): 157–59.
70. Blues poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* include "Lament Over Love" and "Bound No'th Blues."
71. My translation.
72. The work was premiered by the New York Philharmonic on 25 June 1940.
73. Deborah Cullen, "The Allure of Harlem: Correlations Between *Mexicanidad* and the New Negro Movements," in *Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Deborah Cullen (New York: El Museo del Barrio and Yale University Press, 2009), 126–51; Mary Kay Vaughn and Theodore Cohen, "Brown, Black and Blues: Miguel Covarrubias and Carlos Chávez in the United States and Mexico (1923–1953)," in *Open Borders to a Revolution: Culture, Politics, and Migration*, ed. Jaime Marroquín Arredondo, Adela Pineda Franco, and Magdalena Mieri (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013).
74. Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
75. See Saavedra, "The American Composer in the 1930s." Cowell expressed interest in composing proletarian music in a letter to Chávez of 12 October 1934, but he never did.