Twentieth-Century Latin American Choral Music: An Introductory Survey

by John McIntyre

In his pioneering book, *Music of Latin America* (1945), Nicolas Slonimsky lamented the "history of neglect"[1] that characterized the prevailing attitude toward the music of Central and South America. He had discovered a vital body of music that was largely unknown and unstudied outside its birthplace. In the decades since Slonimsky's investigation, musicologists such as Gilbert Chase, Vasco Mariz, Robert Stevenson, Gerard Béhague, and Robert L. Parker have published works in an effort to broaden knowledge and appreciation of Latin American music.

This "history of neglect" has had lingering effects on Latin American choral music of the twentieth century. Although the major Central and South American composers of this century—Heitor Villa-Lobos of Brazil, Carlos Chávez of Mexico, and Alberto Ginastera of Argentina—all composed significant choral works, performances of their music by choirs in the United States have been relatively few.

Perhaps the nationalism of the music—its strong connection with the history, culture, and the land of the countries in which it arose—is both an attraction and a barrier to those who stand outside the Spanish, Portuguese, and aboriginal traditions that underlie the music of Central and South America. Study of the music and culture of Latin America, as well as the incorporation of its art and history into the curricula and repertoire of musical institutions in the United States, are vital to realizing the importance of Latin American culture in this country. Choral musicians have a part to play in helping to overcome the "history of neglect" identified by Slonimsky nearly half a century ago.

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The Choral Tradition in Latin America

When the Spanish and Portuguese began to colonize the New World at the turn of the sixteenth century, they found more than a land of great exploitable wealth. The aboriginal societies of Central and South America had relatively sophisticated musical and religious cultures in which dance, instruments, and singing all played significant roles.[2] Roman Catholic missionaries found that church music served to attract natives to their faith. Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries, among others, taught chant and polyphony, organized schools of music, and, to some extent, even encouraged composition of liturgical music among the indigenous peoples.[3] European culture was dominant, often suppressing non-Christian traditions. Church and state were intertwined, yet there was significant aboriginal participation and some local influence on the music of that time.

The dominance of Catholicism alongside the musical culture of the Native Americans gave Latin America a strong choral tradition. The choral singing of converts was praised by a local bishop in Mexico as early as 1531, and the first liturgical music book was published in that country in 1556.[4] The major musical centers throughout the Colonial period and into the early nineteenth century were cathedrals; even secular music (which in a theocratic system is sometimes difficult to define) was primarily performed by church musicians.[5]

The nineteenth century saw the development of national independence for Central and South American states. As nations emerged, so did the quest to determine a national body or style of music. The dominance of the Catholic Church in musical culture waned; the age of Italian (or Italianate) opera and the virtuoso arrived. These developments, as might be expected, resulted in a decrease in the prominence of choral music in cultural life. In Brazil, for example, only seventeen

years after the departure of the Portuguese royalty from Rio de Janeiro, the Imperial (formerly Royal) Chapel choir was reduced to twenty singers.[6]

It was in the area of education that choral music was revived during the revolutionary nineteenth century. In Mexico, composer, educator, and author José Mariano Elízaga (1786–1842) founded a short-lived conservatory in 1825 and wrote important theoretical treatises. Robert Stevenson compares Elízaga's work in Mexican music education with that of Lowell Mason in the United States.[7] Brazil, whose early cultural development generally postdated that of Spanish-American states, established the Music Conservatory of Rio de Janeiro in 1847; soon after, the Brazilian government began a program of school music instruction.[8] Philharmonic societies developed and became particularly important in Argentina during the nineteenth century.

These developments might be said to have adversely affected the progress of indigenous art music,[9] yet it was the creation of national identities, the lessening of the church's influence, and the development of a less aristocratic system of musical training that allowed the growth of significant composition in twentieth-century Latin America. This is not to imply that the influences of the Colonial era are not felt today, nor that the place of sacred choral music has disappeared. Rather, the combination of a strong choral tradition in the church (and its incorporation of aboriginal elements) with the musical nationalism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries provides a framework for understanding Latin American choral music of this century.

Béhague notes that, "while musical nationalism was largely abandoned in Europe after about 1930, it remained very much alive in Latin America until the 1950s."[10] The desire to incorporate native folklore, popular musical currents, and other national elements into art music continues even to this day, though the circumstances in which this nationalism appears are often quite different from those in which Villa-Lobos, Chávez, or Ginastera wrote. For example, contemporary Cuban-born composer Rodolfo Guzmán states that nationalism is his primary motivation as a composer, though he has not lived on the island of Cuba since the takeover by Fidel Castro in 1959.[11] Perhaps this aspect of nationalism is more a backward than a forward look, more nostalgic than the national fervor that characterized the first half of this century, yet it shows that nationalism remains a motivating factor among Latin American composers.

This survey will concentrate on the choral works of three major twentieth-century Latin American composers: Heitor Villa-Lobos of Brazil, Carlos Chávez of Mexico, and Alberto Ginastera of Argentina. All are recognized as outstanding composers in general, both within and beyond the borders of their homelands, and all composed significant choral works.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959)

The earliest and most prolific of the three composers, Villa-Lobos is at once a colorful and enigmatic figure in the history of Latin American music. A largely self-taught musician, his works show an eclecticism and an originality that relate to his serious study of both art and popular music. He transcribed Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* for chorus and cello ensemble (cello was one of his primary instruments of study). At the same time, he played and absorbed Brazilian popular music, playing guitar in instrumental groups generically termed *chôros.* (He later adapted this term to identify a series of fourteen compositions which shows the influence of popular music.) His affinity for the works of Bach, as well as the similarity he perceived between Bach's counterpoint and the instrumental style of Brazilian folk music,[12] were the bases for his *Bachianas Brasileiras.* Popular, folk, and aboriginal rhythms, melodies, and instruments all found their way into Villa-Lobos's music, and he is still

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considered the preeminent Brazilian composer, even three decades after his death.

David Appleby's exhaustive catalog of Villa-Lobos's works lists no fewer than 140 works for chorus,[13] ranging from the one-minute unaccompanied *Uirapuru,*[14] to the thirteen-minute secular cantata, *Mandu çarará,* for large orchestra, chorus, and children's choir, to the thirty-minute *Missa São Sebastião*[15] for three-part unaccompanied choir.[16] He also wrote chamber works that use wordless voices as instruments, e.g., *Nonetto* (1923) for wind, percussion, and mixed chorus,[17] and the *Quatuor* (1921) for flute, alto saxophone, harp, celeste, and female chorus.[18]

Many of Villa-Lobos's choral works would be considered impractical to perform today because of their unusual instrumentations and their somewhat sparing use of the chorus. (The *Nonetto* and *Quatuor,* however, were recorded by Roger Wagner in the 1950s.) Curiously, *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 9* was composed for chorus *or* string orchestra.[19] In its combination of long vowels and rapid rhythms, this work looks at first like a tortuous warmup exercise.

Chôros No. 10,[20] second of the three works of the *Chôros* series to employ chorus, begins with a long, evocative series of orchestral bird calls, with the chorus entering toward the end as it sings a savage ostinato that is overlaid with a lyrical melody related to popular song. Again, the chorus has no literary text as such, only a variety of vocal sounds.

The unaccompanied sacred works of the Brazilian composer tend to be less unorthodox and more practical for the choral musician. These include works such as the early *Ave Maria*[21] and *Padre nosso,*[22] which have enjoyed some popularity in past decades.

The major work of this genre is the *Missa São Sebastião* (1937). Composed for three-part chorus (each part of which may be doubled at the octave), it can be performed by women's, boy's, men's, or mixed choirs. Its form is derived from the liturgical Mass, with the incipits of the Gloria and Credo reserved for intonation by the celebrant. The name comes from Brazil's patron saint, and each movement originally bore a subtitle referring to an attribute of the saint. The Agnus Dei, for example, is subtitled "*Sebastião! Protector do Brasil!,*" reflecting Villa-Lobos's nationalistic spirit.

Figure 1. Villa-Lobos, "Missa São Sebastião"

The Mass is set in the style of a Renaissance motet, with imitative entrances alternating with more homophonic passages. Although basically tonal rather than modal, its Renaissance flavor is enhanced by the presence of frequent cadences at the unison or octave and a generally melismatic treatment of text. The work has little repeated thematic material, except in the Kyrie, yet it achieves a unity by returning to the C-minor tonality and imitative textures of the Kyrie in the Agnus Dei.

There are moments of great drama, as at the end of the Gloria (Figure 1), where the "Amen" builds imitatively to a fortissimo B-flat major chord. Also notable is the long, arching melisma on the word *sepultus* in the Credo (Figure 2). Both these sections show Villa-Lobos's intricate rhythmic demands in their juxtaposition of duplets and triplets, a device that is most striking in the Sanctus.

A few other choral works by Villa-Lobos that deserve mention are two late works—*Magnificat-Alleluia* (1958) for contralto, chorus, and orchestra (or organ),[23] and *Bendita Sabedoria* (1958), chorales on biblical texts for SATB with *divisi* in all parts.[24] *Chôros No. 3* (1925) for seven wind instruments and male chorus, subtitled "*Pica-Pao*" or "The Woodpecker,"[25] is a four-minute, novel work based on a Pareci Indian theme.

Figure 2. Villa-Lobos, "Missa São Sebastião," Credo (mm. 107–112)

Figure 3. Chávez, "Tree of Sorrow"

Carlos Chávez (1899–1978)

Chávez is the principal figure of twentieth-century art music in Mexico. His early musical training was similar to Villa-Lobos's in its inclusion of indigenous music; but, in general, Chávez's training was classical in the European tradition. He studied piano with Manuel M. Ponce (often considered to be the first Mexican nationalist composer) and harmony with Juan B. Fuentes. He studied scores and treatises on his own and began composing his first symphony at the age of fifteen.[26]

A connection with the rich cultural history of Mexico remained a part of Chávez's work throughout his career. Robert Parker, in his 1983 biography, notes that Chávez's formative years were dominated by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and by its aftermath.[27] An emphasis placed on the arts by the early post-revolutionary regime resulted in a commission for Chávez to compose a ballet based on Aztec culture. The ballet, *El fuego nuevo* for mixed chorus and orchestra (1912),[28] is called his first "Mexican" work.[29]

During the 1920s, Chávez spent time in Europe and in New York, but the bulk of his life's work was accomplished in Mexico. He is remembered not only as a composer but also as a conductor, teacher, and administrator. He founded several symphony orchestras, as well as the choral ensemble of the National Conservatory of Music.[30]

In sharp contrast to the voluminous choral output of Villa-Lobos, Chávez composed only fifteen choral works, none of them sacred. He also used vocal effects in his ballets as a sound resource, as did Villa-Lobos and the French Impressionists whom Chávez admired (Ravel is said to have been his idol).[31] In his choral works, Chávez did not limit himself to Mexican or even Spanish-language poetry. English poets such as Shelley, Keats, and Byron are represented in his unaccompanied works; he also composed a cantata, *Prometheus Bound*,[32] a twenty-minute work for chorus, soprano solo, and orchestra, using Trevelyan's English translation of the classical tragedy of Aeschylus.

Tierra mojada[33] (1932) is Chávez's earliest *a cappella* work (alternately scored for chorus with oboe and English horn). This piece, whose title may be literally

translated as "Wet Earth," is a rhythmically complex setting of an early poem by Ramón López Velarde.

The other major *a cappella* works of Chávez come in two groups: the first, several works composed in 1942; and the second, six madrigals composed to English, American, and Nahuatl Indian poetry.[34] Among the earlier works are *Three Nocturnes,*[35] settings of English poetry in a style that applies Chávez's harmonic language (incorporating chromaticism with quartal and quintal sonorities) in a madrigalesque form.[36] The other works from the 1942 collection are *A Woman Is a Worthy Thing* and *A! Freedome.*[37] The latter is a setting of an old Scottish text by John Barbour. The basic tonality of the work and its tertian harmony contrast with Chávez's tendency to employ seconds or sevenths in climactic passages.

Tree of Sorrow[38] (1942) is Chávez's arrangement of a Spanish folk song. It is characterized by minor and Phrygian modality, hemiola, and sweeping plaintive lines framed by the ostinato repetition of the words "tree of sorrow" (Figure 3).

Chávez's works for chorus and orchestra tend to be more characteristically Mexican than many of the unaccompanied choruses. *La paloma azul* (1940)[39] is an arrangement of a popular *canción,* best known to Americans as adapted by Aaron Copland in his orchestral work *El Salón México. La paloma azul* uses a small but colorful orchestra: flute, piccolo, oboe, e-flat and b-flat clarinets, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, timpani, two guitars, and strings. In Chávez's choral works with orchestra, the instrumental parts are more complex and more difficult than those for the choir.

Llamadas (Calls, subtitled *Proletarian Symphony,* 1934) is one of the most outwardly nationalistic and political of Chávez's works, with text taken from the folk poem *Ballad of the Mexican Revolution.*[40] It was composed while Chávez was director of the National Conservatory of Mexico and first performed by a chorus which included members of the Night School of Art for Workers.[41]

El sol (The Sun, subtitled *Mexican Ballad*)[42] is similar to *Llamadas* in that it dates from 1934, utilizes choir and large orchestra, and has a choral part originally

Figure 4. Chávez, "El sol," recurring motive

conceived for amateur singers. The work is unified by a recurring motive found in many of Chávez's works.[43] Two instances of this four-note motive are shown in Figure 4. Colorful and energetic, *El sol* lasts approximately seven and a half minutes, and possesses a high degree of singability and an easily learned Spanish text.

In all of his choral works, Chávez strives to write in accordance with his self-professed artistic credo:

> The composer should be integrated into the musical life of the present and should have in himself a full sense of reality about his work and about the meaning it will have for the public at whom it is directed. I might say, in default of a better expression, that music ought always to be playable and audible. The composer will understand this only when he lives constantly in the actual presence of music. On this point, the case of Bach is profoundly illustrative.[44]

Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983)

Paradoxically, of the three composers surveyed in this article, the one whose output of choral music was the smallest composed the choral work that may be best known. Alberto Ginastera's *Lamentations of Jeremiah* (1946)[45] has become a standard of the choral repertoire and is one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century sacred choral literature. It is therefore regrettable that Ginastera's catalog of over sixty works includes only two other choral pieces (excluding opera choruses).

Ginastera received his musical training in his native Argentina. One of his choral works, *Psalm 150,* op. 5 (1938) for chorus and orchestra,[46] was composed as a final project for his studies at the National Conservatory of Argentina and earned him the highest honors of the institution.[47] As was the case with Chávez, Ginastera's early ballet music established him as a nationalistic composer. The major ballet, *Estancia,* based on Argentinian country life, remains one of his best-known works.

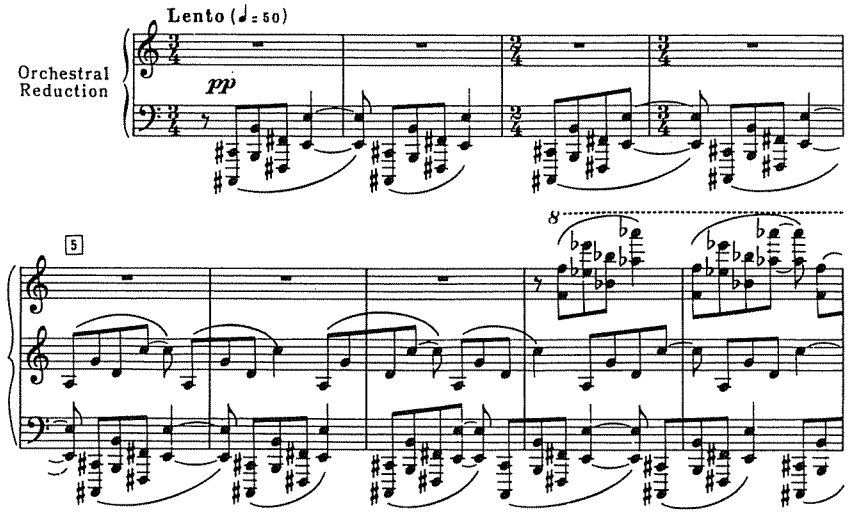

Figure 6. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

During his adult life, Ginastera experienced times of favor and disfavor within his homeland's volatile political environment. He spent his last years primarily in the United States and Switzerland, where he died at the age of sixty-seven. Like Villa-Lobos and Chávez, Ginastera's contributions to music education in his country were significant.

Ginastera's musical style was quite conservative, always displaying great integrity of form. His use of twentieth-century techniques such as serialism and polytonality became more common after 1958 in his self-described "neo-expressionistic" period.[48]

Ginastera's *Psalm 150* dates from his early period of "objective nationalism."[49]

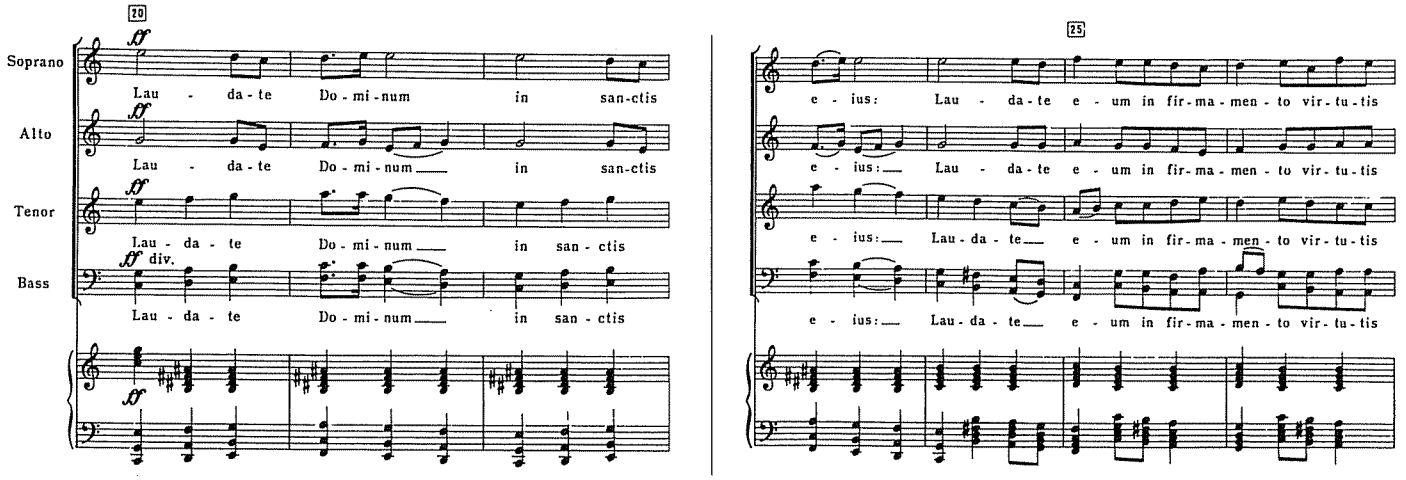

Figure. 7. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

Figure 8. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

The work shows a maturity of craft that is characteristic of the Argentine's output. It also reveals seeds of the neo-expressionism that is the norm in his later works. All twelve chromatic tones appear in the opening and are divided into three congruent sets based on the interval of the fourth which is played in a type of canonic repetition (Figure 6). Broad polychords then follow. The chorus enters with a direct, declamatory statement of the first line of the psalm, "Laudate Dominum in sancti eius," in strong homorhythmic, triadic fashion against a background of extended tertian sonorities in the orchestra (Figure 7). Later in this first section, the chorus becomes more imitative and melismatic (Figure 8), while the orchestra maintains the steady *lento* quarter notes that characterized the choral entrance.

A *vivace* section follows with the text, "Laudate eum in sono tubae," set in rich vocal harmony, while sections of the orchestra play both duplets against triplets and fanfarelike figurations (Figure 9). The activity gradually decreases, and note values lengthen. At m. 192, the choir sings a fanfare on the words, "cymbalis bene sonantibus" (Figure 10). Here, as at the very first choral entrance, Ginastera uses an unadorned major triad, this time E-major. In the final verse of text, the choir and orchestra subside to *pianissimo* with three repetitions of the word "Dominum" in E major, this time with added sixth and ninth.

Figure 9. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

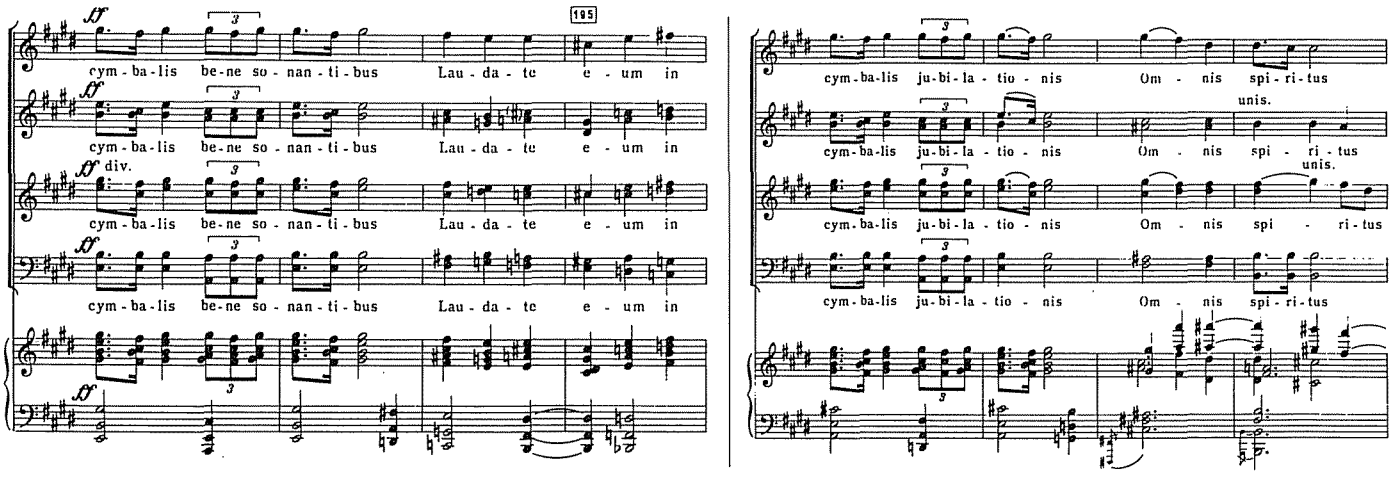

Figure 10. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

Figure 11. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

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The last orchestral transition, recalling thematic material from the introduction and transitions, introduces the coda—a lengthy, elegant Alleluia. A boys' chorus begins a simple four-note melody in long notes against arpeggiated major-seventh chords (Figure 11). The theme is passed between voices and is restated in different keys, modulating through the circle of fifths. The D-major tonality returns as the choir jubilantly combines half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, and quarter-note triplets, imitating church bells (Figure 12). The boys' chorus and just a portion of the choir sing the original Alleluia theme in *cantus firmus* fashion. The high drama Ginastera creates is climaxed with the use of *sforzandi* and grace notes in both voice and orchestral parts. The work represents eighteen minutes of highly dramatic music, with an almost classical formal balance.

Perhaps the most intriguing and least known of Ginastera's choral works is his *Turbae ad Passionem Gregorianam*, op. 43 (1974).[50] This work, for three male soloists, boys' or women's choir, mixed choir, and orchestra, uses texts from the Vulgate and *Liber usualis*. Even in this later work, Ginastera relies on sacred music traditions. The chorus represents the *turba* and stands in dramatic contrast to the soloists, who sing Gregorian chant. Béhague notes that a "clear evocation of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*"[51] combines with twentieth-century techniques such as shouts and whispers. The orchestra includes large wind and percussion contingents, as well as piano. The virtuoso work was commissioned and premiered by the Mendelssohn Chorus of Philadelphia with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1975.

Latin American Revival

Significant biographies and catalogs of Villa-Lobos and Chávez have recently appeared. Perhaps this scholarly interest will mark the beginning of a new appreciation for the rich musical heritage and creativity present in Latin America. Irving Lowens, speaking of Villa-Lobos, might well have included Chávez and Ginastera when he noted, "The wheel will turn, and his music will be heard with increasing frequency once again

outside his native land."[52] Perhaps this brief survey will serve as a point of departure for further studies of the broad choral heritage of the Western Hemisphere.

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NOTES

[1] Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music of Latin America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1945), 3.

[2] Organization of American States, General Secretariat, Music Division, Department of Cultural Affairs, Washington, D.C. *Music of Latin America*, 1979, 1–5.

[3] Gerard Béhague, *Music in Latin America: An Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1979), 2, 4.

[4] Robert M. Stevenson, *Music in Mexico: A Historical Survey* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1952), 69, 84.

[5] Béhague, 69.

[6] Ibid., 111.

[7] Stevenson, 189. He also praises highly Elízaga's sacred compositions for choir and orchestra.

[8] Béhague, 111.

[9] Organization of American States, 8.

[10] Béhague, 124.

[11] Rodolfo Guzmán, "Compositional Accuracy," speech presented at the Composition Forum, University of Miami, September 1978.

[12] Luis Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo, "Villa-Lobos, Heitor," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.

[13] David P. Appleby, *Heitor Villa-Lobos: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 284–87.

[14] This unpublished choral work was adapted from the ballet score of the same title.

[15] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Mass in Honor of St. Sebastian* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1937). Available through Hal Leonard Music Publishing, 7777 West Bluemound Road, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53213; catalog no. 50230480.

[16] Most of Villa-Lobo's choral works, including some not cited here, are published by Editions Max Eschig of Paris. Eschig publications are sold in the United States by Theodore Presser Company, Presser Place, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania 19010.

[17] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Nonetto* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1954). Presser 512005100 (vocal score).

[18] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Quatuor* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1954). Presser 512005110 (choral score).

[19] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 9* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1984). Presser 511017270.

[20] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Chôros No. 10* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1928). Presser 597008420.

[21] More than one version of *Ave Maria* was published. One is Presser 512004780. Another is Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Ave Maria No. 20* (New York: Villa-Lobos Music, 1948).

[22] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *The Lord's Prayer* (New York: Edward B. Marks, 1951). Available in SATB, SAB, and SSA arrangements from Hal Leonard Publications, catalog no. 08405021.

[23] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Magnificat-Alleluia* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1986). Presser 512004790.

[24] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Bendita Sabedoria* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1958). Presser 512004780.

[25] Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Chôros No. 3: Pica-Pao* (Paris: Editions Max Eschig, 1978). Presser 597008420 (miniature score).

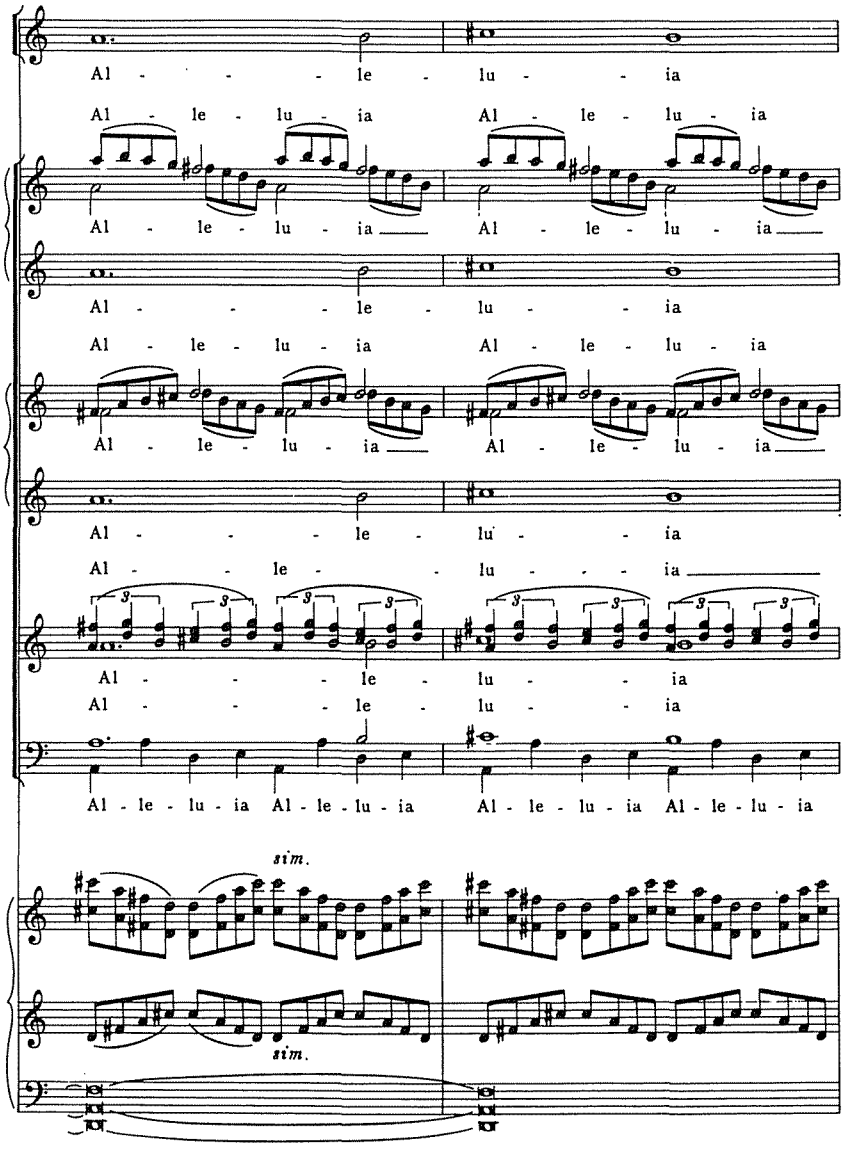

Figure 12. Ginastera, "Psalm 150"

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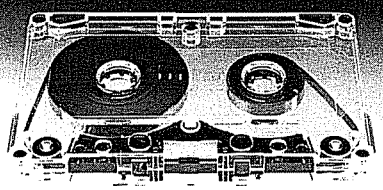

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[26] Robert L. Parker, *Carlos Chávez: Mexico's Modern-Day Orpheus* (Boston: Twayne Publications, 1983), 3.

[27] Ibid., i.

[28] Carlos Chávez, *El fuego nuevo*, unpublished.

[29] Slonimsky, 230–31.

[30] Parker, 9.

[31] Ibid., 5.

[32] Carlos Chávez, *Prometheus Bound*, unpublished, 1956.

[33] Carlos Chávez, *Tierra mojada* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1961). This out-of-print work is available via special order from the archives of Boosey & Hawkes, 52 Cooper Square, New York, New York 10003. Refer to archive no. B. H. Bk. 591.

[34] Carlos Chávez, *A Pastoral*; *Epistle to Be Left on the Earth*; *The Waning Moon*; *Rarely, Rarely*; *Nonantsin*; and *Nokwick* (New York: Tetra Music, 1976). *Nokwick* is set for speaking chorus. The selling agent for these works is Hal Leonard Publications, catalog nos. TO-775 to TO-780.

[35] Carlos Chávez, *Three Nocturnes* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1946). The first of these pieces is available from Hal Leonard Publications, catalog no. 9522.

[36] Parker, 64.

[37] These compositions were originally published by G. Schirmer in 1942 and are controlled by Hal Leonard Publications. They are not currently in print.

[38] Carlos Chávez, *Tree of Sorrow* (Arbolocu, te sequeste) (New York: Music Press, 1949). Presser 352-00113.

[39] Carlos Chávez, *La paloma azul* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1956). Also arranged for chorus and piano; orchestral parts are available on rental from Boosey & Hawkes. The vocal score is Boosey & Hawkes archive no. B. H. Bk. 643; a reprint of the work will be made available soon.

[40] Dan Mälmstrom, *Introduction to Twentieth-Century Mexican Music* (Ph.D. diss., University of Uppsala, 1974), 66–67.

[41] Parker, 114.

[42] Carlos Chávez, *El sol: Mexican Ballad* (New York: Mills Music, 1962). Not currently in print, the copyright for *El sol* is held by CPP/Belwin, 15800 NW Forty-eighth Avenue, Miami, Florida 33014.

[43] Robert L. Parker, "A Recurring Cell in the Music of Carlos Chávez," *Latin American Music Review* 12 (December 1991): 160–72.

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