



## Silvestre Revueltas (1899–1940): New Biographical Revelations

*Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo. Apuntes autobiográficos, diarios, correspondencia y otros escritos de un gran músico.* Compiled by Rosaura Revueltas. Presentación by Manuel Enríquez (Mexico City, Ediciones Era, 1989. 262 pp. Bibliography and discography. 16pp. of photographs)

During the more than half-century since his death at Mexico City in the early morning hours of October 5, 1940, the fame of Silvestre Revueltas—born the last day of 1899 at Santiago Papasquiaro in Durango state—has ascended to heights reached by only two or three other composers in recent Mexican history.

His father, José Revueltas Gutiérrez, was a native of the mining town of San Andrés de la Sierra (Durango state), as was also his mother Ramona Sánchez Árias. Their first five children, born at Santiago Papasquiaro were in order: Silvestre, Fermín, José Maximiliano (who died in infancy), Consuelo, and Emilia. The remaining seven were born at Durango city: Rosaura, José (*Enciclopedia de México*, XII, 6941, states however that José was born November 20, 1914, at Santiago Papasquiaro, not Durango City), María del Refugio, Maura, María de la Luz, María and Agustín.

Father José earned a livelihood to support his extended family (including not only eleven children but his widowed mother, maiden sister Luz, and members of his wife's family) travelling throughout Mexico as salesman of a wide variety of necessities, always reaping appropriate commissions.

Silvestre—as early as aged three (according to an

autobiographical sketch completed at Mexico City January 13, 1938)—became enamoured of the village band, and before age six began music lessons, with Hilarión Eslava's *Método de solfeo* as the local teacher's textbook. At age seven he began studying violin in Colima (which place was in 1907 the family headquarters)—continuing at Ocotlán, then at Guadalajara during successive family moves. At eleven he was enrolled in the Instituto Juárez at Durango city, and in 1911 gave his first public violin recital at the Teatro Degollado in Guadalajara. Fearing that music would not gain Silvestre a living wage, his father obliged Silvestre to study also arithmetic and other basics. But when he began working in a clothing store at age 12, the owners preferred listening to him play the violin.

Between 1913 and 1916 his father placed him in the national conservatory at Mexico City, where he studied violin with José Rocabruna, and theory (leading to composition) with Rafael J. Tello. In his autobiographical sketch he professes already venerating Bach in those early years and pacing the avenues hoping to become another tormented Beethoven.

Thence his father sent him to Saint Edward's College, run by the Holy Cross Fathers at Austin, Texas, where he remained two years, 1916 to 1918. His musical mentor there was Brother Louis Gazagne, a native of Paris who left France in 1903 for the United States, and who was to become a missionary in India from 1920 to 1940. In two letters to Silvestre's sister Rosaura, both written at South Bend, Indiana (March 4, and April 20, 1946), where



Brother Gazagne then taught at Central High School, he recalled Silvestre's two years at Austin. Accompanying him at a piano on the fourth floor, Gazagne heard him play, always from memory, Bach, Sarasate, and Kreisler. Although father José sent Silvestre pocket money, Silvestre spent it all on music. Gazagne on his day off, Thursday, completed the boy's requirements by going to music stores in Austin to buy scores that they then played together after evening prayers. In a letter home written in January 1918, Silvestre mentioned being already invited to play the Kreutzer Sonata at an upcoming concert (whether at school he did not say).

Gazagne tried teaching him basic piano, but Silvestre preferred finding his own chord combinations and devising his own fingerings. Sensing that music consumed his whole soul, the teachers at St. Edward's overlooked his negligence in the classroom. He constantly dreamed of visiting Spain in order better to imbibe the spirit of Spanish music.

His father's prosperity that had permitted his enrolling simultaneously Silvestre and his brother Fermín (1903–1935) at St. Edward's College, also enabled him to send both to Chicago in the fall of 1918. Fermín studied at the Chicago Art Institute, Silvestre at the Chicago Musical College—where from the fall of 1918 to the spring of 1920 he was the sole Mexican student of Leon Sametini (violin) and Felix Borowski (composition). At an unspecified date during that biennium father José visited the two brothers living together in Chicago, coming away none too pleased with their bohemian ways.

In 1920 Silvestre married a singer who spoke only English, Jule Klarecy, by whom he had a daughter Carmen in April 1922. In the fall of 1922 he returned to the Chicago Musical College for a further two years of advanced music study with Vaslav Kochanski (violin) and Otakar Ševčík (composition). From 1924 to 1926 he gave recitals in Mexico, frequently including twentieth-century music and occasionally being accompanied at the piano by Carlos Chávez. During his 1926 tour to the north of Mexico with Lupe Medina (singer) and Francisco Agea (pianist) as assisting artists, he crossed the border at Laredo, and for the next two years directed and played in moving picture theater orchestras at San Antonio, Texas (where he was concertino in the Teatro Azteca orchestra), and at Mobile, Alabama.

On January 30, 1927, Carlos Chávez, now in New York City, had a mutual friend, Ricardo Ortega,

write Silvestre in San Antonio urging him to continue composing and saying how much he desired again seeing Silvestre and uniting forces. On March 7, 1927, Ortega relayed a further message from Chávez, who had both praise and blame for an orchestral composition received from Revueltas, named *Batik*. A fortnight later Ortega reported having given a copy of *Batik* to Edgard Varèse for his criticism. Chávez's advice came more to the point: study Rimsky-Korsakov's treatise on instrumentation and orchestration. Chávez himself wrote directly to Revueltas a letter dated March 11, 1927, taking exception to an *Elegía* sent by Revueltas, because it smelled too much of Wagner. He abhorred the name *Batik*, urging Revueltas to change it. The beginning and ending he found acceptable, but not the passages of accompanied melody.

On May 31, 1927, Ortega urged Silvestre to seek employment as a violinist in the Philadelphia Orchestra. But by that date Revueltas had shed his first wife and was living contentedly with Aurora Murguía in San Antonio.

On March 5, 1928, Chávez wrote (still from New York where he then lived at 5 Minetta Street) urging Revueltas to send at once a new work to be played in the upcoming second Pan-American composers' concert. On August 15, 1928, Ortega informed Revueltas that miracles had transpired: Chávez upon returning to Mexico City had organized a symphony orchestra ready to play a concert August 26 that would include Debussy's *Iberia*, Tchaikovsky's *Concerto*, Opus 23, *Don Juan* of Richard Strauss, and a piece by Rafael J. Tello.

As an extremely unhappy epilogue to his United States career, Revueltas sometime between August 15 and November 4, 1928 suffered an "accident" (whether at Mobile or San Antonio is not clear) that left him the rest of his life with an unprepossessing facial scar. Ortega, still his staunchest ally, considered it prudent—because of the nature of his "accident"—not to inform Silvestre's mother (father José was dead) or any other member of the family then resident in the capital.

On December 18, 1928, Chávez—residing at 4<sup>a</sup> calle de Sinaloa, no. 135, in Mexico City—sent Revueltas, then living at 317 Wickes Street, San Antonio, an offer to come direct the student orchestra of the National Conservatory (of which Chávez was now director) and to teach violin, for which duties he offered Revueltas a daily "\$12.00 to \$14.00."

Upon arriving in time to play Mozart's *Concerto No. 5* with Chávez's Orquesta Sinfónica de México February 3, 1929, and to start conservatory classes that same month, Revueltas also found Chávez ready to use him as subdirector of his Orquesta Sinfónica de México (OSM) until their rupture in October 1935.

Leaving Aurora Murguía behind in San Antonio, Revueltas in 1930 took as his third consort Ángela Acevedo, by whom he had three daughters (of whom only Eugenia survived infancy). In 1930 he composed *Cuauhnhuac* (premiered by the OSM under his baton June 2, 1933) and *Esquinas* (premiered November 20, 1931). To 1931 belonged his symphonic poem *Ventanas* (November 4, 1932), *Dúo para pato y canario* for voice and chamber orchestra, and three string quartets. In 1932 he composed three pieces for violin and piano, a string quartet that he called *Feria*, and the symphonic poems *Alcancías* and *Colorines* (premiered August 30, 1932). On August 31 (1932) he sent Nicolas Slonimsky, 491 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, the score of *Colorines* with a cover letter stating that it had been premiered the night before under his own baton "with enormous success." In May of 1933 he sent the head of the Fine Arts Division of the Mexican Secretariat of Education a letter declining appointment as director of the National Conservatory. As reason for refusing the offer, he stated that the duties of director would interfere with his composing, which he "considered important."

To 1933 belong his *Toccata* for violin and chamber orchestra (seven winds), *8 X radio* for eight chamber players (premiered October 13), his ballet *El renacuajo paseador*, and his orchestral panorama, *Janitzio* (October 13, 1933; revised 1936). As a program note for the latter he wrote with characteristically bitter laughter:

Janitzio is a fishermen's island in Lake Pátzcuaro. Romantic and sentimental visitors have embraced the lake, which is really ugly, and have written music about it. Not to be left behind, I too have added my tiny bit, urged by my infinite desire for glory and renown. Posterity will be delighted, no doubt, by these efforts to stimulate tourism.

After *Janitzio* came *Planos* and *Caminos* in 1934, together with film music for the documentary *Redes*. In 1935 Revueltas followed *Redes* with film music for *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*. After his break with

Carlos Chávez that year, he founded his own short-lived rival Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional in the spring of 1936 which he conducted gratis until the year's close. Elected *secretario general* of the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios in 1936, he closed the year with an orchestral *Homenaje a Garcíá Lorca* (premiered Madrid, September 22, 1937; already in 1935 a victim of alcoholism, he started composing his tribute to the slain Spanish poet while in a "drying out" sanatorium).

From June to November of 1937 he travelled in Europe, achieving many performances in Republican Spain, but always driven on with the unfulfilled hope of eventually visiting the USSR—which along with two other members of LEAR travelling with him he had come to regard as an artists' paradise.

Letters to "Angelucha," his third spouse, document the progress of the LEAR trio. They reached Monterrey June 15, 1937, Laredo June 16, Nashville June 18, Roanoke (Virginia) June 20 (by which date he had become more than weary of his LEAR travelling companions). In New York, where he spent June 21-26 waiting for passage on the *Britannic* to Le Havre, he attended a Lewisohn Stadium concert conducted by Vladimir Golschmann, whom he rated as mediocre, but the Philharmonic players (especially the winds and brass) as "marvellous." The program (Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky's Sixth, *Nocturne* and *Scherzo* from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Liszt's *Les Préludes*) he called "horrible" (*programa horrendo*). His travelling companions who stayed with him at the Hotel Albert he berated for their constant lack of punctuality. He visited the tourist sites but always alone, because he could not abide their company.

Aaron Copland and the other musical intelligentsia were gone for the summer, only Minna Lederman of the League of Composers remaining, and she could promise him nothing. Nonetheless, he decided that he must return to New York, because only there could he make an enduring impact. During his last night in New York he visited Harlem, and had good words to say concerning the dancing.

Aboard ship he wrote lengthy letters to Angelucha, using his comrade Juan de la Cabada's typewriter. Landing at Southampton after an eight-day passage, he and his companions proceeded thence to Paris. By July 17 they had reached Barcelona, and on July 19 he wrote Angelucha from Valencia, on July 24 from Madrid, and on July 27 again from



Valencia where on August 15 he conducted the Orquesta Sinfónica de Valencia in rapturously received performances of *Caminos* and *Janitzio*. On September 29 he conducted the combined Orquesta Sinfónica de Madrid and the Orquesta Filarmónica (Pérez Casas, director) in a wildly applauded performance of *Janitzio* at the Teatro de la Comedia. At his other concerts at Madrid he conducted *Caminos*, *Colorines*, *Homenaje a García Lorca*, and *El renacuajopaseador*, always arousing febrile enthusiasm.

On September 27 he wrote Angelucha from Valencia, expecting immediate departure for Moscow, but instead he returned to Paris via Barcelona, where in the Palau de la Música Catalana, he conducted his farewell concert October 7—limited practice time obliging the orchestra to play only *Redes*, *Caminos*, and *Janitzio*. In his ten letters from Paris dated October 11 through November 18, 1937, he mentions having spent much time at the Louvre, having heard Munch conduct a magnificent performance of Brahms's Requiem; but he meantime became desperate for funds to return to Mexico. At last he and Carlos Pellicer were able to buy a third-class passage from France to Veracruz on a German steamer. Ironically, upon arriving at Mexico City, Revueltas learned that his friends in the Mexican Secretaría de Gobernación had at last sent the Mexican Embassy at Paris the long awaited funds needed for the dreamed-of trip to Moscow.

Upon resettling in Mexico City he in 1938 orchestrated *Sensemaya* and wrote film music (*El indio* and *Ferrocarriles de Baja California*, from which latter he derived *Música para charlar*); in 1939 he composed music for the films *La noche de los mayas* and *El signo de la muerte*. Committed again to the Sana-

torio de Tlalpan in 1939, after many previous visits stretching back to 1936 for recovery from alcoholism, he kept a diary published in five instalments by his brother José (1914–1976) in the newspaper *Excelsior* December 27–31, 1965 under the title "My life among the demented."

To obtain more details concerning his 1939 internment in the Sanatorio, Rosaura Revueltas in early August 1965 interviewed the director of the Sanatorio, Manuel Falcón. According to him, Revueltas's wife Ángela hardly ever visited him, nor did any erstwhile friends. On being discharged, Silvestre expressed his gratitude by promising to do anything that Doctor Falcón ever asked of him. The night of Revueltas's death from double pneumonia brought on from exposure during a drunken stupor, Dr. Falcón met him in a room of the Sanatorio. Aware that he was dying, Falcón asked him now to discharge the favor that the year before he had promised the doctor. "Will you allow yourself to receive last rites?" asked the doctor ("¿Acepta espirituales?"). Revueltas could only nod assent, after which the doctor hurried to find a Holy Family priest, who administered extreme unction when Revueltas was already unconscious.

The sixteen pages of plates in *Silvestre por él mismo* include a treasury of family photos, starting from a baby picture in his mother's arms (1900). Still handsome and erect in 1924, Revueltas during the 1930's allowed himself to gain excessive weight. Aaron Copland stands to his right (while Revueltas smokes a cigarette) in a picture taken in 1937 after an orchestral rehearsal. His alcoholic grossness in his last three years cannot have drawn either his third spouse or erstwhile friends to his side.