




¡Cantaré!

Explores Music of Mexican Choral Composers in Minnesota Classrooms

Bruce W. Becker

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Editor's Note: The following article intends to show how composers from another land could, through conducting their commissioned compositions, enter into a cross-cultural experiment that is educationally and artistically beneficial. Moreover, it is hoped that public schools, colleges, churches, and community choirs might implement similar cultural experiments.

Introduction

All too often we hear negative stories about current affairs in Mexico. Yet a nation of 100 million citizens, with its deep historic traditions and rich cultural heritage, has much that is positive to offer the world. What do we know about Mexico's culture matters, especially its choral music?

Minnesota is home to thousands of Mexicans, the state's largest Latino group. Beginning in 2007, VocalEssence Artistic Director Philip Brunelle encouraged the board and staff of the Minnesota-based choral group to make Mexican choral music a focus of its attention. The result led to a unique initiative known as ¡Cantaré! [Let's Sing!], connecting composers from Mexico directly with elementary school, high school, college, and community choirs in Minnesota.

The Experiment

Philip Brunelle expressed the hope that by sharing a bit of the history of ¡Cantaré! more American choral directors might consider inviting Mexican composers—or composers from other countries—to work with their choirs, or invite composers to be in residence in their schools. The new music created for the

students is wonderful and invites a broader understanding of Mexican culture.

Brunelle observes, "In one high school choir, a Latino boy who was shy about admitting he spoke a language other than English, was asked by our ¡Cantaré! composer how many languages he spoke at home: and the boy said five. The rest of the choir was astounded and it gave this boy new-found pride in his culture. It is this broadening of experiences that helps young people embrace a wider world."

Brunelle and VocalEssence associate conductor Sigrid Johnson laid the groundwork for the ¡Cantaré! experiment in 2007 when they traveled to Mexico City to interview ten prospective composers, both men and women. They explained the uniqueness of the program and that these prospective composers would be pioneers, since no previous experiment had been linked to integrating Mexican choral music with music education in the broadest sense in the United States.

During the 2008–09 academic year, they invited three composers to serve as composers-in-residence: Sabina Covarrubias (elementary), Jorge Cózatl (high school), and Jorge Córdoba (college/community/church). Brunelle and Johnson believed that choosing the right composers was crucial to the project, not only considering their musical qualities, but also an ability to work with the students and teachers, to communicate with the larger choral and public community, and to tell their stories to the media, particularly the Latino press.

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Three Composers, Three Minnesota Residencies, Ten Choirs

Four Twin Cities-area elementary schools, three high schools, the St. Olaf Viking Choir, and the church choir of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús participated in the debut year of the *¡Cantaré!* experiment along with the VocalEssence Chorus and Ensemble Singers.

In October 2008, Covarrubias, Cózatl, and Córdoba visited Minnesota for two weeks to meet with their respective teachers and students, hear the choirs rehearse, and generate ideas for what they needed to compose. Following their October residencies, the three composers returned to Mexico and began composing music for each individual classroom and/or choir. They completed the various compositions by January 1, 2009 and sent them to VocalEssence Director of Community Engagement Kimberly Meisten for distribution to the teachers and directors so the choirs could begin learning the music.

VocalEssence developed a *¡Cantaré!* Teacher's Guide for the classroom teachers, which was intended to give students and teachers a better understanding of Mexican music and its historical context. The guide focused on a set of traditional songs that provided different stylistic examples of Mexican choral music. In addition to teaching about the music, related activities were developed to reflect current trends in arts education and arts-infused curricula in Minnesota.

In March 2009, the three Mexican composers returned for a second visit. During this one-week residency, they had the opportunity to hear how their music sounded, answer questions, and make necessary notational adjustments to the scores. For the Mexican composers, it was a "reality check" when they discovered that some of the young American singers had less musical training and experience than the advanced youth choirs they typically worked with in Mexico.

¡Cantaré! in Concert

The final visit was for one week in May 2009 when the composers returned to help the choirs prepare for the *¡Cantaré!* Community Concert held on May 12, 2009 at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. At this event, all of the music was premiered before an enthusiastic audience of 2000 members.

A succession of young singers took the stage for the world premiere of eleven works written expressly for them and for the occasion, conducted by their respective composers. Several works called for indigenous instruments: seed maracas, goat hoof sonaja, and black mud flutes, and whistles. Not all the music was in Spanish; the high school combined choirs performed *Xtoles*, a work by Jorge Cózatl in the Mayan language.

The Sagrado Corazón de Jesús Church Choir, VocalEssence Chorus and Ensemble Singers, and Viking Chorus of St. Olaf College combined forces for *Encontrarás a Dios* by Córdoba, in which the audience was invited to sing along.



Sabina Covarrubias conducts students at Orchestra Hall for the debut *¡Cantaré!* concert on May 12, 2009. Photo by Stephen Maturen.

in Minnesota Classrooms

Composer Sabina Covarrubias was deeply affected by working with the Minnesota choirs and conducting in the Orchestra Hall concert. After returning to Paris, where she is in graduate school, she e-mailed, "I arrived home after a long trip. I got here and I really feel that I am not the same person. ¡Cantaré! really changed me in many positive ways. It was an amazing experience."

Ana Luisa Fajer, Consulate of Mexico-St. Paul, expressed herself in a note, saying, "I am still moved; speechless about what happened [last] night. It was so wonderful, that words are really not enough to express my

gratitude and Mexico's gratitude for what you have accomplished!"

Repeating the Experiment

One measure of any experiment is whether it can be successfully repeated. In the case of ¡Cantaré! the program has been repeated and even expanded. In 2009–10, VocalEssence invited Diana Syrse (high school) and Jesús Lopez (elementary) to be composers-in-residence, and asked Jorge Córdoba to return for a second year to serve as a mentor for the new composers.

Because the year 2010 in Mexico marked the bicentennial of Mexico's independence, the experiment served as an important and exciting year:

In addition to the choirs from elementary and high schools, ¡Cantaré! assembled a youth choir from five area Latino Catholic parishes. The 2010 season finale concert was presented at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis to an enthusiastic audience. The proud parents' rushed to the front of the church at the end of the concert to photograph their children with the composers.

In 2010–11, the third year of ¡Cantaré!



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four composers participated: Diana Syrse returned, joined by Jesús Echevarria, Lilia Vazquez, and Horacio Uribe. Again, the focus was on grade school classes and high school choirs. Each year, the program planners contacted schools in the area to determine who might be interested and, in the case of the grade schools, which grades and teachers wanted to be involved.

Coda

Thanks to a new appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature, designated funding for the arts and environment allowed VocalEssence to place two of the composers (Diana Syrse and Jesús Echevarria) in Worthington, Minnesota. Located in the southwest corner of the state, Worthington has the largest rural Latino population in Minnesota. Two final concerts took place in 2011—one in Worthington on April 28,

and one in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on the twenty-fourth of May.

To make some of the music developed through *¡Cantaré!* more widely available, a new online publication series, <www.vemusicpress.org> was launched. The Web site currently offers five compositions by *¡Cantaré!* composers. Perusal scores, performance notes, translations, and audio recordings are available for each composition. The avowed goal is to make this music available beyond the borders of Minnesota, but more importantly to further the cross-cultural values inherent in learning and performing this music.

The “experiment” was successful intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically. The layers of cultural and communal interaction between the composers, students, and the community escape measurement. One can say, however, that the experiences garnered from the first contact with the score, the

presence of the composers in the classroom, and the performance of the music will have lifelong meaningful influences yet to be experienced.

Jesse Bethke Gomez, president of Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio, noted,

¡Cantaré! played an extraordinary role in bringing Minnesota and Mexico closer in ways that have helped us to learn about each other; [the experience] has opened the door to greater understanding and, through this magnificent artistic vision, in working together through the expression of choral music, two great peoples were united as one.



Lilia Vázquez visits her students at Ramsey International Fine Arts Center in Minneapolis. (2010). Photo by Stephen Maturen.