

ADAPTATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF MEXICAN VERNACULAR ELEMENTS IN ART MUSIC: A CASE STUDY OF MANUEL PONCE'S *SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO*

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SUMMARY. The adaptation of folk traditions into composed art music has played a crucial role in shaping national musical identities. This article explores the ways in which Mexican vernacular elements are integrated, transformed, and recontextualized within composed works, with a particular focus on the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* by Manuel M. Ponce. By examining the broader processes of adaptation, the authors aim to highlight how composers navigate the balance between preservation and innovation, using folk material as a foundation for new artistic expressions. The analysis addresses melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic transformation techniques, situating Ponce's approach within a broader historical and cultural framework.

Keywords: Folk-adaptation, Mexican Nationalism, Stylization

Introduction: The Role of Vernacular Music in Art Music Contexts

Vernacular music is traditionally transmitted through oral means, meaning that instrumental traditions are learned by ear, imitation, and communal practice rather than through written notation. This mode of transmission fosters stylistic fluidity and regional variation, as performers adapt and reinterpret musical material over time. In contrast, art music is codified through notation, allowing for structural complexity, theoretical refinement, and consistency

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in transmission. The integration of folk elements into composed art music establishes a dynamic interaction between these two traditions—one characterized by spontaneity and collective memory, the other by formalized composition and analytical development. This aesthetic and stylistic fusion not only preserves and recontextualizes vernacular traditions within new artistic frameworks but also enriches art music with distinctive rhythmic, modal, and timbral characteristics. Moreover, the adaptation of folk material within composed works plays a critical role in shaping national and regional musical identities, reflecting broader cultural and historical processes.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, composers sought to integrate folk traditions into composed art music as a means of shaping national identities. In Central and Eastern Europe, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály documented and incorporated peasant melodies into their works, creating a fusion of folk idioms with modern harmonic and rhythmic structures. George Enescu blended the modal inflections and asymmetrical rhythms of his homeland with classical forms, creating a highly expressive and distinct national style. Drawing from traditional Romanian *doinas* and folk dances, his compositions integrate improvisatory melodic contours with sophisticated harmonic language, transforming oral folk material into elaborate structures while preserving the spontaneity and ornamentation characteristic of local peasant music. Through his compositions and pedagogical influence, Enescu bridged the gap between rural musical traditions and Western concert music. Similarly, in Spain, Manuel de Falla drew on Andalusian traditions, particularly flamenco, infusing his compositions with the expressive qualities of regional folk music.

In Mexico, composers such as Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas developed a distinctive national style by integrating indigenous and mestizo musical elements into their symphonic and chamber works⁴. Chávez's *Sinfonía india* employs melodies and percussion drawn from Yaqui traditions⁵, while Revueltas's *Sensemaya* incorporates Afro-Cuban rhythmic structures⁶. Manuel M. Ponce, a key figure in Mexican musical nationalism, explored the fusion of vernacular idioms with classical forms, an approach exemplified in his *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. Alongside contemporaries such as José Pablo Moncayo and Blas Galindo⁷ – whose works transformed mariachi and huapango rhythms

⁴ Nutt, Katharine Ferris. "Carlos Chávez: Exponent of Nationalism." 1948. 7 3 2025, pp. 72-74. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=hist_etds>.

⁵ Nutt, Katharine Ferris. "Carlos Chávez: Exponent of Nationalism." 1948. 7 3 2025, p. 72. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=hist_etds>.

⁶ Zambrano, Helga. "Reimagining the Poetic and Musical Translation of "Sensemaya"." *Ethnomusicology Review* 19 (2014), p. 6.

⁷ Chase, Gilbert. "Creative Trends in Latin American Music-II." *Tempo* 50 (1959): 25-28, pp. 27-28.

into symphonic textures⁸—Ponce contributed to a broader movement that redefined the role of folk material within composed music.

By examining Ponce's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, the current article will explore how vernacular elements are adapted and transformed within art music. The case study provides insight into the broader processes of folk integration, revealing how composers mediate between oral traditions and formalized composition to construct new, yet culturally rooted, musical expressions.

1. Methods of Adaptation and Transformation in Composed Music

The adaptation of Mexican folk music into art music has required composers to carefully balance preservation with innovation. This process involves modifying traditional melodies, rhythms, harmonic structures, and formal designs to fit within a concert setting while retaining the essential characteristics of vernacular music. Whether through direct quotation, stylized reinterpretation, or structural expansion, composers have employed a variety of techniques to incorporate folk material into composed works. This chapter explores four primary methods of transformation—melodic integration, rhythmic adaptation, harmonic expansion, and structural considerations—focusing on Mexican composers while drawing brief comparisons with similar nationalist movements in Europe and Latin America.

1.1. Melodic Integration

Mexican composers have employed both direct quotation of folk melodies and stylized reinterpretations of folk tunes in their concert works. In many cases, composers explicitly incorporate recognizable folk songs or indigenous melodies as thematic material. For instance, Carlos Chávez's *Sinfonía India* (1935) is built around three actual indigenous melodies drawn from the Yaqui, Huichol (Cora), and Seri peoples of northern Mexico⁹. These native themes are presented prominently and form the basis of the symphony's sections, which Chávez treats in a classical developmental manner. Similarly, José Pablo Moncayo's *Huapango* (1941) famously orchestrates three *sones*

⁸ Tonatiuh, García Jiménez. *Between Assimilation and Resistance of Western Musical Culture: Traces of Nationalism on José Pablo Moncayo's Viola Sonata*. Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University, 2014, pp. 10-11.

⁹ García Morillo, Roberto. *Carlos Chávez: Vida y obra*. Tiera Firme, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960, pp. 92-93.

jarochos from Veracruz – “El Siquisirí,” “El Balajú,” and “El Gavilán” – directly into the score. Moncayo follows advice from his mentor Candelario Huízar to “introduce the material first in the same way you heard it and develop it later according to your own ideas”, reflecting a clear initial statement of the folk tune before symphonic development¹⁰. This direct melodic borrowing lends an immediate folkloric character, anchoring each composition in the sound of Mexican vernacular music.

Other composers prefer a more stylized approach, creating original melodies that evoke the spirit of folk music without quoting specific tunes. Silvestre Revueltas, for example, often wrote folkloric-sounding themes that capture the inflections of rural songs or street music, rather than lifting melodies verbatim. His melodies in works like *Cuauhnáhuac* and *Sensemayá* are original yet feel idiomatically “folk” through their contour and repetition, an approach comparable to European nationalists such as Béla Bartók who sometimes invented folk-like themes to fit local idioms¹¹. In the same vein, Manuel M. Ponce’s compositions show a creative synthesis of folk inspiration and original invention. Ponce was a pioneer in connecting concert music with Mexican popular song traditions. Many of his pieces, like *Rapsodia Mexicana* No. 2 (1913), use well-known folk tunes (e.g. the Jarabe Tapatío melody) as a basis¹², while others emulate folk styles in new melodies. This balance of authentic folk quotation and stylized creation allowed Mexican composers to integrate melody in a way that feels both genuine and artistically original. Notably, Ponce’s own song “Estrellita” became so popular worldwide that it is often mistaken for an anonymous folk song, demonstrating how successfully a composed melody in folk style can enter popular consciousness¹³. Such examples underscore the range of melodic integration techniques, from literal folk quotations to inspired reimagining of folk tunes, in Mexico’s art music.

¹⁰ LAPhil. *Huapango* - José Pablo MONCAYO. n.d. [Accesed 6 3 2025]. Huapango, José Pablo Moncayo.

¹¹ Fisk, Josiah and Jeff Nichols. *Composers on music: eight centuries of writings*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997, p. 271.

¹² Vazquez Medrano, Oscar. *The Romantic Style in the Piano Works of Manuel M. Ponce The Romantic Style in the Piano Works of Manuel M. Ponce*. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2022, p. 56.

¹³ Hall, Graham F. “The Folia. Manuel Ponce and his Variations.” 1998. [Accessed 2 3 2025]. <https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/43117104/Hall_Graham_1998_compressed.pdf>.

1.2. Rhythmic Adaptation

A defining feature of Mexican folk music is its vibrant rhythm, especially the distinctive dance rhythms found in regional genres like the *son*, *jarabe*, and *huapango*. Composers adeptly incorporated these rhythmic patterns into their works, often preserving the characteristic hemiola and syncopation that give the dances their energy. In traditional *jarabe tapatío* (the Mexican Hat Dance), for instance, the meter famously alternates between a 6/8 feel and a 3/4 (or 2/4) feel, creating a playful shifting pulse¹⁴. Manuel M. Ponce's *Rapsodia Mexicana No. 2* employs the Jarabe Tapatío as thematic material, retaining its metric shifts (the dance moves from a 6/8 triple pulse to a 2/4 duple meter mid-piece). This kind of *sesquialtera* (the layering or alternating of two and three beat groupings) became a common technique in art music arrangements of folk dances¹⁵. Likewise, Moncayo's *Huapango* is propelled by the distinctive huapango rhythm of the Gulf coast: the composition is driven by the alternating triplet and duplet subdivision feel of the *son jarocho*. Moncayo literally orchestrates the folk rhythm – at one point the trumpet plays quarter-note triplets against a 6/8 accompaniment, exemplifying the 3:2 hemiola that is at the heart of the huapango dance groove. Throughout *Huapango*, syncopated accents and off-beat emphasis mirror the footwork of the folk dancers, bringing the raw verve of the Veracruz fandango into the symphonic hall¹⁶. Even in a concert setting, the listener can sense the underlying dance, as the composers carefully preserve the folk rhythm's profile while adapting it to orchestral textures.

Beyond meter, Mexican composers infused their works with the lively syncopations and rhythmic drive characteristic of folk and popular genres. In many *sones* and dances, the upbeat is stressed, or phrases cross the barlines, reflecting Afro-Indigenous influences in Mexico's music. Composers often notated these syncopations precisely or used percussion to reinforce folk rhythms. Carlos Chávez's writing highlights this: in *Sinfonía India*, the indigenous themes come with complex rhythmic patterns – the score features "13 changes of rhythm in the first five pages" to accommodate

¹⁴ Escalante, J. Arturo Chamorr. *Mariachi Antiguo, jarabe y Son: Aimbolos Compartidos y Tradición Musical el las Identidades Jaliscienses*. Jalisco: Secretaría de Cultura, Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, 2006, p. 85.

¹⁵ Hiley, David and Thomas E. Stanford. "Sesquialtera." *The New Grove dictionary of music and musicians*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. 6th Edition. Vol. 17. London: Macmillan Publishers, 1980. 20 vols. 192-193.

¹⁶ BIPOC Keyword Database. *Huapango - Jose Pablo Moncayo*. n.d. [Accessed 6 3 2025]. <<https://equity.nbsymphony.org/musical-pieces/huapango#:~:text=Time%20Stamp%3A%200%3A53%20—%201%3A19,Triplet%20%20%2C%20%2017>>.

the irregular phrasing of the native melodies¹⁷. The result is a dynamic, ever-shifting metric structure that still feels natural, because it follows the folk source. Similarly, Silvestre Revueltas embraced non-European rhythms in his compositions. His famous work *Sensemaya* (1938), based on an Afro-Caribbean poem, is a powerful example of integrating a *quasi-folk rhythm* into art music. The piece throbs with an Afro-Cuban ostinato and layered syncopations; Afro-derived clave patterns and heavy percussion give it a “*boldly rhythmic, hypnotic*” character¹⁸. Revueltas’ use of complex cross-rhythms and irregular accents in *Sensemaya* and other works shows how Latin dance rhythms (even those outside Mexico) were transformed into symphonic language. This approach has parallels in the broader Latin American scene – for instance, Cuban dances like the danzón were orchestrally developed by composers such as Arturo Márquez, and Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera infused his scores with the malambo (a gaucho dance in shifting meter)¹⁹. In Mexico, the fusion of folk rhythms with Western art music techniques created compositions that are both rhythmically sophisticated and deeply rooted in the national musical soil. By transplanting the son huasteco’s rapid violin figurations or the jarabe’s foot-stomping accents into orchestral and chamber works, Mexican composers ensured that the *pulse* of the people remained alive in their concert music.

1.3. Harmonic Expansion

Traditional Mexican folk and dance music often relies on straightforward harmonic frameworks, which composers expanded and enriched in their classical compositions. In many regional songs, vocals or violins move in parallel thirds and sixths, a hallmark of mestizo folk harmony that gives a sweet, resonant sound. This can be heard in countless rancheras and sones where two voices harmonize a third apart, or a guitarra and violin double a melody in sixths. Folk pieces also frequently use modal scales and modal cadences – for example, the Mixolydian mode (major scale with a flat-7) is common, yielding cadences that may finish on the dominant or use a subtonic

¹⁷ Kahn, Joseph and Elizabeth Kahn. “Espirito Latino.” n.d. *Austin Symphony*. [Accessed 7 3 2025]. <<https://austinsymphony.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Program-Notes-MW1.pdf#:~:text=Chávez%20employs%20three%20authentic%20Indian,was%20invited%20to%20conduct%20the>>.

¹⁸ Ortiz, Edward. “Exploring the enduring influence of composer Silvestre Revueltas.” 9 10 2023. *Chicago Symphony Orchestra*. [Accessed 5 3 2025]. <<https://cso.org/experience/article/15601/exploring-the-enduring-influence-of-composer#:~:text=Think%20Afro>>.

¹⁹ Plesch, Melanie. “Resisting the Malambo: On the Musical Topic in the Works of Alberto Ginastera.” *The Musical Quarterly*, 101.2/3 (2018): 157-215, p. 157.

VII chord instead of a leading-tone resolution. Such techniques, while harmonically simple (often oscillating between I and V chords or using the “Andalusian” cadence in minor), carry a strong flavor of tradition. Composers writing art music did not discard these folk harmonic traits; rather, they initially embraced them to invoke authenticity, then stretched them with chromatic and modern elements. A vivid illustration comes from Aaron Copland’s observations when incorporating Mexican folk tunes: “most of the tunes use meters of 6/8 or 3/4... Copland applied standard folk music practices... such as harmonizations in parallel thirds and sixths” in *El Salón México*, along with other folk ornaments²⁰. Mexican composers similarly preserved parallel harmonizations and open-string sonorities as a nod to folk practice, before adding their own harmonic twists.

To elevate folk material into the concert realm, composers expanded these basic harmonies using the tools of 20th-century music – chromaticism, altered chords, and even polytonality. Carlos Chávez provides an example in *Sinfonía India*: while the themes themselves are indigenous and diatonic, he supports one slow melody with “an austere succession of chords built from fourths” instead of traditional triads²¹. This quartal harmony under a folk tune produces a more modern, open sound, enriching the simple melody with new colors. Chávez and others also weren’t afraid to modulate away from the original mode of a folk tune, or to superimpose unexpected bass lines beneath it, creating gentle dissonances that add depth. Silvestre Revueltas took an even more radical approach to harmony. Influenced by European modernists, Revueltas “employed dissonance [and] polytonality” in works that still carried folk resonance²². We find similar harmonic expansions in the works of Manuel M. Ponce, who after studying in Paris, infused his arrangements of Mexican songs with late-Romantic and Impressionist harmonies. For example, in Ponce’s piano and guitar pieces based on folk melodies, one might encounter unexpected chromatic chords or French-influenced modulations that go beyond the original tune’s three-chord setting²³. This technique of reharmonization is comparable to Béla Bartók’s approach in Europe – Bartók

²⁰ Heninger, Barbara. “El Salon Mexico.” [Accessed 1 4 2001]. *Redwood Symphony*. 7 3 2025. <[https://redwoodsymphony.org/piece/el-salon-mexico/#:~:text=In%20creating%20his%20potpourri%2C%20Copland,response%20const ructions%20](https://redwoodsymphony.org/piece/el-salon-mexico/#:~:text=In%20creating%20his%20potpourri%2C%20Copland,response%20const%20ructions%20)>.

²¹ Orbón, Julián. “Las sinfonías de Carlos Chávez (part 2).” *Pauta: Cuadernos de teoría y crítica musical* 6.22 (1987b): 81-91, p. 86.

²² Antokoletz, Elliott. *A History of Twentieth-Century Music in a Theoretic-Analytical Context*. New York and Abington: Routledge, 2014, p. 194.

²³ Witten, David. *The Eclectic Piano Music of Manuel M. Ponce*. n.d. [Accessed 8 3 2025]. <<https://www.naxos.com/MainSite/BlurbsReviews/?itemcode=8.223609&catnum=223609&filetype=AboutThisRecording&language=English>>

often kept the folk melody intact but surrounded it with sophisticated accompanying harmonies and contrapuntal lines, effectively *re-coloring* the tune²⁴. Mexican composers followed suit: they maintained the folk song's outline (sometimes even the parallel thirds in the melody's harmonization, as a sentimental touch) but beneath and around it they introduced richer chords, occasional blue notes or pentatonic mixtures, and bold key shifts. The result is a harmonic expansion that respects the folk source's simplicity yet elevates it, allowing vernacular music to blossom within complex, modern textures. This blending of the *familiar* (simple diatonic folk harmony) with the *foreign* (chromatic and experimental harmony) gave Mexican nationalist compositions a distinctive sound – warm and rooted, yet innovative. It echoed techniques used by Spanish composers like Manuel de Falla (who merged Andalusian modal folk themes with Debussy-esque harmony) and other Latin American composers such as Villa-Lobos, thereby placing Mexico's folk-based art music in an international context while retaining its unique harmonic character.

1.4. Structural Considerations

When adapting folk material into concert works, Mexican composers also considered large-scale form, integrating traditional melodies within established classical structures like sonata-allegro, theme and variations, and rondo forms. Rather than simply stringing folk tunes together, many composers carefully fused folk content with Western classical architecture, achieving a synthesis of form and content. A clear example is Chávez's *Sinfonía India*, which, although a single-movement work, has a sectional design that matches that of the three-movement symphony. Chávez treats each indigenous melody as a thematic subject: one functions like an opening allegro theme, another as a slow movement, and the last as a finale theme, all played without break but fulfilling the roles of a multi-movement structure²⁵. In effect, he places folk melodies into a symphonic argument, demonstrating that native material can undergo classical development (motivic fragmentation, modulation, recapitulation) just as European themes do. Similarly, Manuel M. Ponce often cast folk-based pieces in classical forms. His *Rapsodia Mexicana* No. 2 (1913), which uses the Jarabe Tapatío tune, is structured as a rhapsody – a free but coherent form where the folk theme is introduced, varied, and reappears in new guises. Ponce also wrote more orthodox forms: for instance, his early piano works, and orchestral suites sometimes resemble dance

²⁴ Orbon, Julian. "Carlos Chavez's Symphonies." *Carlos Chavez and his World*. Ed. Leonora Saavedra. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. 62-76, p. 70.

²⁵ García Morillo, Roberto. *Carlos Chávez: Vida y obra*. Tiera Firme, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960, pp. 92-93.

suites or sonatinas where each movement draws on a folk-dance rhythm or melody, but the overall form (exposition-development-recapitulation) is maintained. By projecting Mexican melodies onto forms like the sonata-allegro or ABA song form, composers ensured their music was accepted on classical concert programs while still evoking the pueblo. Composer Blas Galindo, a student of Chávez, explicitly aimed to “merge Mexico’s folk and popular music into formal classical forms”, composing works such as concertos and symphonies that incorporate folk motifs within their traditional frameworks²⁶. His *Sones de Mariachi* (1941) is essentially a folkloric medley arranged for orchestra, but it is artfully unified and symphonically developed, with recurring motifs and transitions that give it a rondo-like cohesion. In short, Mexican national composers demonstrated that folk material could serve not just as local color but as structurally significant thematic content in large-scale works.

The efforts of Mexican composers to naturalize folk elements in classical forms were part of a broader nationalist movement in music, influenced by European and Latin American precedents. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European composers from nationalist schools had shown the way: Dvořák wove Bohemian folk-inspired themes into symphonies and string quartets, Edvard Grieg wrote Norwegian dances and folk songs within sonata forms, and Spanish composers like Isaac Albéniz and Manuel de Falla built entire works around indigenous dances (the *andaluz* dances, *cante jondo* songs, etc.) shaped into suites and ballets. This legacy was not lost on Mexican musicians. In fact, Mexican composers were often in dialogue (literally and figuratively) with their foreign counterparts. The Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, who famously collected folk songs and transformed them into art music, had a kindred spirit in Carlos Chávez. Chávez in 1930s was described as “a kindred spirit to Béla Bartók... Like Bartók, Chávez synthesizes indigenous music with Western instrumentation”²⁷. The philosophy behind works like Chávez’s *Sinfonía India* closely parallels Bartók’s approach: using scholarly-collected folk melodies and placing them in symphonic form to create a nationalist statement within a European art form. There were direct personal connections as well. Ponce’s studies in Paris (with Paul Dukas) and friendships with composers like Manuel de Falla reinforced the idea that one’s own country’s melodies and dances could be elevated to high art. Indeed, Falla’s successful integration of Spanish folk idioms (e.g. in *El sombrero de tres*

²⁶ Kahn, Joseph and Elizabeth Kahn. “Espiritu Latino.” n.d. *Austin Symphony*. [Accessed 7 3 2025]. Program-Notes-MW1.pdf

²⁷ Huston Symphony. *A Salute to Mexico’s Independence*. 7 9 2010. [Accessed 8 3 2025]. <<https://houstonSymphony.org/a-salute-to-mexicos-independence/#:~:text=the%20strength%20and%20durability%20of,folk%20music%20its%20elf>>.

picos) provided a template for Latin American composers. Mexican composers took these influences and forged their own path. They would embed a *son jalisciense* or a Yucatecan *jarana* into a sonata or a suite, much as European nationalists embedded polonaises or gigues into theirs, but often with an even stronger declarative purpose given Mexico's post-revolutionary cultural policies. By using Western classical forms as a vessel and Mexican folk elements as the content, composers like Chávez, Revueltas, Moncayo, Galindo, and Ponce created works that simultaneously paid homage to European structural craft and celebrated Mexican heritage. The synthesis of form and folk content in these works exemplifies the methods of adaptation and transformation at the heart of Mexican nationalist music: a dialogue between tradition and innovation, between the local and the cosmopolitan, ultimately yielding a rich repertoire that feels both familiar and new.

2. Case Study: Ponce's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*

Manuel M. Ponce's *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (sometimes called *Sonata Breve*, composed c.1930–32) is a showcase of Mexican musical nationalism filtered through a refined late-Romantic and Impressionist lens²⁸. Like many nationalist composers of the early 20th century, Ponce deliberately integrated folk melodies, dance rhythms, and modal harmonies from his homeland into classical forms²⁹. He had collected and harmonized hundreds of Mexican folk songs (*canciones*) and often used these or original folk-like themes as the basis for works in sonata, suite, or variation form³⁰. Influenced by Mexican cultural figures (e.g. José Vasconcelos) who urged artists to develop a national style³¹, Ponce blended vernacular elements with European forms much as Bartók did with Hungarian folk music or Manuel de Falla with Spanish flamenco. However, Ponce's approach retained a lush lyricism and chromatic warmth – a product of his Romantic heritage and Parisian training with Paul

²⁸ Gaytan, Luis Francisco. *An introduction to the piano music of Manuel M. Ponce*. LSU Doctoral Dissertations, 2014, p. iii.

²⁹ Serres, Jean-Michael. *Notes on Manuel Ponce (1882–1948) and His Works*. 14 2 2025. [Accessed 8 3 2025]. <<https://www.jeanmichelserres.com/2025/02/14/notes-on-manuel-ponce-and-his-works/#gsc.tab=0>>

³⁰ Aguilar, Alexandro and Roger McVey. "The Folk Influences on the Piano Works of Manuel M. Ponce." 2023. *Scholarworks Boiesstate*. [Accessed 8 3 2025]. <<https://scholarworks.boiesstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2546&context=icur#:~:text=,tap%20dance%29%20dancing>>.

³¹ Serres, Jean-Michael. *Notes on Manuel Ponce (1882–1948) and His Works*. 14 2 2025. [Accessed 8 3 2025]. <<https://www.jeanmichelserres.com/2025/02/14/notes-on-manuel-ponce-and-his-works/#gsc.tab=0>>

Dukas – giving his folk adaptations a unique voice. Below is a movement-by-movement analysis, focusing on how Ponce adapts Mexican folk elements in melody, rhythm, and harmony, how he fits them into classical structures, and how the violin-piano duo interacts to bring these elements to life.

2.1. Historical and Stylistic Context

Manuel M. Ponce composed his *Sonata Breve* for violin and piano in 1930 while studying in Paris at the École Normale de Musique under the mentorship of Paul Dukas. This period marked a significant shift in Ponce's compositional style, as he absorbed elements of Neoclassicism and Impressionism, evident in his increasing use of modal harmonies, thematic economy, polytonality, and refined counterpoint³². Unlike his earlier, more overtly Romantic works, *Sonata Breve* reflects a growing interest in formal clarity and brevity, aligning with contemporary trends in French modernism. However, despite these European influences, Ponce's music remained deeply connected to his Mexican heritage.

The *Sonata Breve* exemplifies a fusion between French and Mexican idioms, integrating folk-inspired melodic contours, dance rhythms, and harmonic inflections within a refined chamber music setting. While Ponce does not explicitly quote Mexican folk material, he assimilates its modal characteristics, rhythmic flexibility, and improvisatory spirit into the structural framework of a violin-piano sonata. This case study examines how Ponce subtly adapts vernacular elements, transforming them into an idiomatic yet distinctly personal musical language.

2.2. Movement I: Allegretto Mosso – A Folk-Inspired Sonata Form

2.2.1. Melodic Adaptation

The first movement unfolds in a compact sonata-allegro form, structured around three primary themes, each shaped by Mexican folk influences. The first theme (A), introduced in the piano and later taken up by the violin in a progressive stepwise ascent, exhibits a distinctive cantabile lyricism with an improvisatory character, reminiscent of traditional Mexican *canciones* and their stepwise melodic motion. Unlike strict folk melodies, however, Ponce infuses the line with chromatic passing tones and wide intervallic leaps, enriching its expressivity.

³² Vazquez Medrano, Oscar. *The Romantic Style in the Piano Works of Manuel M. Ponce The Romantic Style in the Piano Works of Manuel M. Ponce*. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2022, pp. 2-3.

E.g. 1

Allegretto mosso

Violin

Piano (left hand)

dolce

f

cresc.

f

12

19

25

Vln.

Vln.

Vln.

Violin

Piano (left hand)

dolce

f

cresc.

f

12

19

25

Vln.

Vln.

Vln.

**First theme introduced by the Piano (left hand),
then taken over by the Violin, mm. 2-28.**

The second theme (B) contrasts the first by introducing wider interval leaps and syncopated rhythms, possibly evoking the rhythmic drive of Mexican *son huasteco*. This section's freer phrasing mirrors the spontaneous, non-repetitive nature of oral folk traditions, yet remains carefully structured within the sonata's harmonic framework.

The third theme (C) introduces a dance-like rhythmic energy, characterized by detached articulation, syncopation, and frequent hemiola shifts, hallmarks of Mexican *huapango* and *jarabe* traditions. Similar to the first theme, it is first introduced by the piano. Only several measures later will the violin reiterate it, in an imitative manner. Its punctuated accents and rapid violin figurations recall the violinistic style found in rural Mexican ensembles, reinforcing Ponce's ability to evoke folk idioms without direct quotation.

E.g. 2

Violin

Piano

42

42

p

p *scherzando*

130

130

p

p

Third theme: piano, mm. 42-43; violin, mm. 130-131.

2.2.2. *Rhythmic and Harmonic Adaptation*

Ponce employs subtle rhythmic displacement throughout the first movement, creating a sense of fluidity and asymmetry that enlivens the sonata form. While the overall meter is stable, the interplay between the violin and piano introduces syncopated figures and rhythmic suspensions that momentarily obscure the underlying pulse.

Ponce's harmonic language in *Sonata Breve* incorporates modal colors and subtle chromatic shifts, enriching the work's tonal framework. While the sonata remains grounded in tonal organization, Ponce occasionally employs plagal cadences (IV-I) and parallel mode alterations (major-minor inflections) to soften tonal resolutions, lending a more fluid, folk-inspired quality. Additionally, his use of chromatic expansion and quartal harmonies in transitional passages introduces a harmonic flexibility that reflects his exposure to modernist techniques during his Parisian studies. Rather than fully abandoning tonal stability, Ponce refines it, creating a synthesis between classical form and folk-inspired harmonic expression³³.

E.g. 3

The image shows a musical score for Violin and Piano. The Violin part is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 2/4 time signature. It features a half note G4 (marked *sf*) and a half note F#4. The Piano part is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. The right hand features a chromatic descent: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The left hand features a quartal structure: B3, F#3, E3, D3.

Chromatic descent and quartal structures, mm. 60-61.

2.2.3. *Structural Considerations*

Despite its folk elements, the movement retains a coherent sonata structure, demonstrating Ponce's ability to assimilate vernacular material into a sophisticated formal design. The development section fragments and recombines motivic elements, treating the themes with contrapuntal interplay that showcases the dialogue between violin and piano. This section also intensifies chromaticism and harmonic ambiguity, momentarily destabilizing the folk-like simplicity of the exposition before a recapitulation that reaffirms the thematic material, now subtly transformed through motivic variation.

³³ Covarrubias Ahedo, Virginia. *Three Main Chamber Music Works for Strings and Piano by the Mexican Composer Manuel M. Ponce*. Miami: University of Miami, 2008, pp. 70-71.

2.3. Movement II: Adagio – A Mexican *Canción* Reimagined

2.3.1. Melodic and Expressive Adaptation

The second movement functions as a short lyrical intermezzo, stretched on the span of 16 measures, evoking the sentimentality of Mexican serenades and *canción ranchera* traditions. It is divided into three sections, each individualized by its own melodic profile, unrelated to the others. The violin presents a long-breathed, deeply expressive melody, characterized by ornamental slides (portamenti), expressive appoggiaturas, and phrase-ending sigh motives, all techniques commonly associated with folk vocal styles. These expressive means are not necessarily indicated verbatim by the score, but the aesthetic, melodic and harmonic profile of the movement strongly supports and encourages an extended interpretative personal license on the part of the performers. Ponce's melody retains the flexibility and quasi-improvised nature of oral tradition but is sculpted into a refined through-composed form that eliminates the strict periodic repetition found in many folk tunes.

E.g. 4

The image shows a musical score for the first section of the second movement, measures 1-3. It is written for Violin and Piano. The Violin part is in the upper staff, and the Piano part is in the lower staff. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The Violin part features a long-breathed melody with ornamental slides and expressive phrasing, marked 'pp' and 'ma espressivo'. The Piano part provides a delicate accompaniment with chords and arpeggios.

First section of the second movement, mm. 1-3.

2.3.2. Rhythmic and Harmonic Treatment

Unlike the first movement's dance-like rhythms, the Adagio is rhythmically free, mimicking the fluid pacing of a sung *canción*. Ponce employs rubato-like phrasing, allowing the violin to stretch its melodic line in an almost vocal fashion. Beneath this, the piano provides a delicate accompaniment reminiscent of guitar strumming.

E.g. 5

Third section of the second movement, mm. 12-16.

Harmonically, this movement explores chromatic inflections and modal mixture, frequently shifting between major and minor modes to heighten expressivity. The use of extended tertian harmonies and impressionistic sonorities (e.g., added sixths, unresolved suspensions, and whole-tone progressions) lends an ethereal, introspective quality, further bridging folk and modernist aesthetics and, also, bearing witness to the French impressionistic influence that Ponce's compositional style undertook during his years in Paris.

2.4. Movement III: Allegro alla spagnuola – A Folk Dance Transformed

2.4.1. Spanish and Mexican Dance Influences

The final movement introduces a fiery, rhythmically driven character marked "*alla spagnuola*", signaling a hybrid of Spanish flamenco and Mexican *son* dance rhythms. The primary theme is built on rapid violin figuration and syncopated piano accompaniment, resembling the percussive drive of Andalusian *zapateado* and the virtuosic improvisatory violin flourishes of *son huasteco*.

E.g. 6

Violin

Piano

$\text{♩} = 76$
Allegro alla spagnuola

p sautillé légèrement

pp

Third movement, typical *huasteco* violin structure, mm. 1-4.

Ponce's adaptation of flamenco elements is particularly evident in the harmonic structure. The movement is grounded in the Phrygian mode, a characteristic of Spanish folk music, but Ponce modifies it by raising the third degree (creating a "false Phrygian" effect), a common practice in flamenco and mariachi traditions. This adaptation lends a distinctly Mexican identity to what initially appears to be an Iberian gesture³⁴.

2.4.2. Harmonic and Structural Transformation

The movement employs hemiola rhythms and rapid shifts between triple and duple meter, reinforcing the folk dance's kinetic energy. Ponce's syncopated left-hand piano figures resemble strumming patterns found in Spanish guitar accompaniment, while the violin's rapid bowing techniques emulate the aggressive articulation of flamenco and *huapango* fiddlers.

E.g. 7

Violin

Piano

p légèrement

p

Vln.

Pno.

f

Third movement, *huapango* style accompaniment, mm. 25-32.

³⁴ Covarrubias Ahedo, Virginia. *Three Main Chamber Music Works for Strings and Piano by the Mexican Composer Manuel M. Ponce*. Miami: University of Miami, 2008, p. 79.

Structurally, Ponce favors a rondo-like episodic form, with a recurring A theme punctuated by contrasting sections. The B and C sections introduce lyrical interludes, providing relief from the movement's rhythmic intensity while preserving folk-inspired melodic gestures, specific to *cante jondo*.

E.g. 8

The image displays a musical score for the third movement of Manuel Ponce's Sonata for Violin and Piano, specifically measures 47-60. The score is written for Violin (Vln.) and Piano (Pno.) in 3/8 time. It features a recurring 'cante jondo' melody. The Violin part (Vln.) and Piano part (Pno.) are shown. The Piano part includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *sf* (sforzando). The score is divided into three systems, with measure numbers 7, 12, and 17 indicated at the beginning of each system.

Third movement, *cante jondo* melody, mm. 47-60.

The coda accelerates, culminating in a flamenco-inspired percussive passage, where violin double stops and forceful piano chords mimic the interplay of dancers and guitarists.

2.5. Conclusion: Ponce's Folk-Classical Synthesis

Ponce's *Sonata Breve* represents a masterful synthesis of Mexican folk idioms and European chamber music traditions, bridging vernacular inspiration and classical refinement. Through melodic stylization, rhythmic

adaptation, harmonic expansion, and formal integration, Ponce demonstrates that folk material need not remain in its original form to retain cultural significance. His approach aligns with the broader nationalist movements in early 20th-century music, paralleling composers like Bartók, de Falla, and Ginastera. However, his lyricism, harmonic warmth, and subtlety of folk integration distinguish him within the Mexican nationalist school. The *Sonata Breve* stands as an exemplary model of how a composer can honor folk tradition while transforming it into a sophisticated art music expression, ensuring its continuity and evolution within the concert repertoire.

Conclusion

The adaptation and transformation of Mexican vernacular elements in composed art music illustrate the fluid relationship between folk traditions and classical concert music. This study has explored how composers like Manuel M. Ponce integrated melodies, rhythms, and harmonic structures derived from Mexican folk music into composed works, particularly through the lens of his *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. By situating this work within the broader context of nationalist movements in music, we have seen how the incorporation of folk elements serves both as a means of cultural preservation and as an avenue for innovation.

The first chapter provided an overview of how composers across Europe and Latin America sought to define national identities through folk materials. In Mexico, a similar movement emerged with composers such as Carlos Chávez, Silvestre Revueltas, José Pablo Moncayo, and Blas Galindo, each contributing to a distinct national sound through the transformation of indigenous and mestizo musical traditions. Ponce's role in this movement was particularly significant, as he not only collected and harmonized folk music but also embedded its stylistic traits into sophisticated concert compositions.

The second chapter analyzed the various methods of adaptation used in composed music, focusing on melodic integration, rhythmic adaptation, harmonic expansion, and structural considerations. It highlighted how Ponce and his contemporaries adapted folk melodies either through direct quotation or stylized reinvention, while also manipulating dance rhythms and metric patterns such as the *sesquiáltera* to imbue their compositions with a distinctly Mexican character. Harmonic expansion allowed composers to elevate simple diatonic folk harmonies into complex tonal landscapes, incorporating chromaticism and modal shifts. Structurally, Mexican folk material was successfully integrated into classical forms such as sonata-allegro, ABA song forms, and rondo structures, demonstrating that vernacular idioms could thrive within Western compositional frameworks.

The third chapter provided an overview of Ponce's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, offering concrete examples of how these adaptation techniques were employed within a single work. The sonata's first movement illustrated Ponce's ability to craft original themes that retain a folk character while undergoing classical development. The second movement revealed his skill in transforming a *canción*-like melody into an expressive violin-piano duet, enriched by harmonic and textural sophistication. Finally, the energetic third movement showcased his treatment of dance rhythms, blending *huapango* and *jarabe* influences with virtuosic violin writing and a dynamic interplay between the instruments. Through this analysis, it became clear that Ponce did not simply arrange folk music but reimagined it, allowing traditional elements to evolve within the art music tradition while retaining their core expressive qualities.

Overall, this article has demonstrated that the adaptation of folk elements in Mexican composed music is a process of both preservation and transformation. Composers like Manuel Ponce engaged in a delicate balance, ensuring that the essence of folk material was maintained while expanding its artistic potential through compositional techniques. This approach has not only enriched Mexico's classical music repertoire but has also contributed to the ongoing dialogue between vernacular traditions and composed art music. The continued interest in folk integration by contemporary composers suggests that this synthesis remains a fertile ground for artistic exploration, reflecting the dynamic nature of cultural identity in music. Future research could further investigate how modern composers continue to engage with these traditions in contemporary compositions, examining how digital media and cross-cultural exchange influence the evolution of folk elements in today's classical music landscape.

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