

South of the Río Bravo

BY Álvaro Bitrán

Founded in Mexico in 1982, the Cuarteto Latinoamericano began its career with a mainly Eurocentric repertoire. The ensemble members have since become champions of—and acknowledged specialists in—Latin American chamber music. Here's the story of how it happened—plus a personal guide to recommended composers and works.

Last night, as we were playing before a packed and enthusiastic audience in the beautiful Austrian city of Graz, I felt once again the magic that turns up only every once in a while: The four of us, deeply taken into the music, were swimming smoothly through the musical phrases and enjoying every moment of it—rediscovering our friendship in every note and slowly savoring what we have built in so many years of dialoguing in semicircle. Gestures, glances, pauses, accents, *glissandi* ... our secret language. Cities, hotels, trains, nostalgia, laughter, planes, crises, and affections flying over our heads with a silent flapping of wings.

Today, totally relaxed and starting a 24-hour trip back to my home in Mexico City, I think about what made this miracle possible. And I say miracle because a quartet, like any other chamber music ensemble, is an extremely fragile entity, susceptible to destruction by many factors—incompatibility of personalities, health, money, difference of goals, among others.

In order to have survived 32 years as a string quartet, we must have done many

things right. But I have no doubt that the most important thing I have to mention here is that we have been lucky!

Another factor, not in the original planning, helped shape our career—our Latin American repertoire. Like any other string quartet, we started by approaching the classics: Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, etc. As a matter of fact, our first recordings (in LP, by the way) included String Quartets by Borodin, Grieg, Ravel and Dvořák. And on our first tour we played Grieg in Norway and Brahms in Germany.

For three summers in a row, we had the privilege of studying with the legendary Amadeus Quartet in Köln, Germany. There we learned the basic concepts of the art of string quartet performance: precision in playing together, producing always a beautiful tone, being careful about balance, becoming obsessive about intonation, and so forth. Applying those concepts to the contemporary and Latin American repertoire as well has been our obsession ever since.

Our first serious incursion into the Latin American repertoire happened 30 years ago, when we were asked by the National

Autonomous University of México to record the four String Quartets by the early 20th-century Mexican composer **Silvestre Revueltas**. We fell instantly in love with those great pieces, and they have since become an essential part of our repertoire. They are short, concise, and extremely original. Number 4 has the subtitle “Música de Feria” (which could translate as “Music of the Fair”) and is possibly the piece we have played the most in all these years. It is a work that manages to combine in a fantastic manner the sound of an imaginary Mexican town (in which we can hear a band, fireworks, and cries of vendors) with a modern language, close perhaps to Stravinsky. Revueltas’s Quartet No. 2 carries the subtitle “Magüeyes,” as the first movement is based on an old Mexican song of that name. Quartets Nos. 1 and 3 are more abstract. According to the late illustrious Mexican conductor Eduardo Mata, Quartet No. 3 is the greatest of them all.

By our fifth year of existence we seriously began to modify our repertoire; but the decisive moment was the release in 1994 of our first CD, with works by Argentina’s Alberto Ginastera, Brazil’s Heitor Villa-Lobos,



The Cuarteto Latinoamericano: Saúl Bitrán, Arón Bitrán, Álvaro Bitrán, and Javier Montiel

and, of course, *Revueltas*. That disc was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the five best albums of the year, and we felt it like a push in the right direction.

From then on, we started to see a clear interest from the presenters in our Latin American repertoire. That sent us on endless journey of research, and by today we play more than four hundred Latin American works, of which about half have been written for us.

One of the main problems we have faced during this research effort has been trying to find the scores and parts for the works that were *not* written for us; most are not published, let alone available commercially. Therefore, thanks to a grant by the Mexican government, we are undertaking the big

project of uploading most of these pieces in PDF to our website at no cost for the users. They should be ready by mid-2014.

I know very well that when trying to put on paper a list of some Latin American pieces for string quartet, I will be unfair by leaving out many works and composers that should be here. Therefore, instead of taking the ugly seat of a judge, I have decided, for this article, to concentrate on the pieces that the Cuarteto Latinoamericano has played most often during our years together.

First of all, there are those composers whom we consider the classics: Silvestre Revueltas, Heitor Villa-Lobos and Alberto Ginastera. Of the same generation but with a smaller output for quartet are the Mexican

composers Carlos Chávez and Manuel M. Ponce and Julian Orbón of Cuba.

And then comes a very long list of younger composers.

But first I will talk about our classics.

The 17 quartets by **Heitor Villa-Lobos** are undoubtedly the most important quartet cycle written in Latin America and probably one of the most important written in the 20th century. They are the core of the Latin American repertoire for string quartet.

We consider them as important as the Shostakovich or Darius Milhaud cycles. Numbers 1, 5 and 6 are clearly nationalistic, as they even quote at times Brazilian children's or folk songs. I think Quartet No. 3, a beautiful and virtuosic work, shows the

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significant influence of French music, probably due to the many years that the composer lived in Paris.

As far as Quartet No. 7 goes, the four of us agree that it is the greatest of them all. (Yes, sometimes we agree!) Written in four movements, it lasts approximately thirty-five minutes. It is an exuberant work and full of gorgeous melodies. However, we noticed, to our surprise, that it is not a best hit with audiences. The reason for that might be an intriguing opinion given to us by a radio producer from Radio Saarbrücken in Germany: “It has too many ideas...”

Quartet No. 17 is a very nice one, with a gorgeous cello solo in the slow movement. It’s one that is always well received by audiences and fits nicely in any program.

By the way, I should mention here that Villa-Lobos himself was a very accomplished cellist, and therefore most of his quartets have very challenging and prominent cello parts. But without a doubt, the one that has appeared in our programs the most is No. 5.

The three String Quartets by **Alberto Ginastera** are also part of our core repertoire. Quartets Nos. 1 and 2 have accompanied us without interruption during our entire career. No. 1 is probably one of our most-played pieces. Quartet No. 3 is also a work of genius, but it calls for a soprano for the last movements, and therefore we don’t play it as often. Quartet op. 20, No. 1 (1948), began Ginastera’s period of “subjective nationalism,” in which elements of folk music are used but without direct quotations. Quartet no. 2, op. 26, marks the beginning

of the composer’s so-called neo-expressionist period. Ginastera makes use here of polytonalities and micro-intervals. The third String Quartet, op. 40, is a unique encounter between two 20th-century movements: surrealism in literature and serialism in music. The piece has five movements, four of which include a soprano part.

Quartets 1 and 2 are a lot of fun to play, although No. 2 is definitely much more demanding technically and five minutes longer than No. 1.

Aaron Copland referred to **Julián Orbón** as “Cuba’s most gifted composer of the new generation,” and Orbón’s Concerto Grosso is undoubtedly the greatest work written by a Latin American composer for string quartet and orchestra. And I say Latin American composer, because Orbón, though he was born in Spain and died in the USA, spent most of his life in Cuba.

The work calls for a very big orchestra and it is really structured as a Concerto Grosso, with constant dialogues between the quartet and the orchestra. The orchestration is lush, difficult, and gorgeous. The quartet part on the other hand is rather austere, beautiful and not very demanding technically. We recorded it for the Dorian label in 1991 with Eduardo Mata and the Simón Bolívar Orchestra of Venezuela and have played it since then with many orchestras, including the L.A. Philharmonic under Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Seattle Symphony with Gerard Schwarz.

By the way, Julian Orbón has a magnificent String Quartet, written in 1950.

And of course there is the great Argentine **Astor Piazzolla**, according to some reliable sources the most-played 20th-century composer worldwide last year (topping Bartók, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky)! Nevertheless, most of what you hear from string quartets by Piazzolla are arrangements. Fortunately we have two exceptions: the *Five Tango Sensations*, written for bandoneón and string quartet and the great *Four for Tango**, a

short but very exciting piece for string quartet alone. Both pieces were commissioned and premiered by the Kronos Quartet.

Recently, we discovered the beautiful music of Brazilian composer **Francisco Mignone** (1897–1986); and we recorded, on a Sono Luminus CD, two of his String Quartets, a selection of very inspired short pieces, and a lovely Seresta (serenade) written for a string octet (two string quartets). This disc won the Latin Grammy 2012 for Best Classical Album.

Now down to business: following is a list of some of our most-played pieces written by the post-classics generation of composers:

Quartet No. 2, by **Mario Lavista** (b. México, 1943). Subtitled “Reflejos de la Noche,” this is a haunting piece written entirely on natural harmonics. Lavista has written six String Quartets in all.

String Quartets, Nos. 1–7, by **Alejandro Cardona** (b. Costa Rica, 1959). His music is very powerful and exciting, mixing Afro-Caribbean elements with modern Western harmonies. We play Quartet No. 2 the most.

Metro Chabacano*, by **Javier Alvarez** (b. México, 1956). This work has become an audience favorite and as of today has 44,059 views on YouTube.

Variations on Paganini’s Caprice No. 24*, by **Javier Montiel** (b. México 1954)

Yiddishbbuk*, by **Oswaldo Golijov** (b. Argentina, 1960)

Mambo 7/16*, by **Roberto Sierra** (b. Puerto Rico, 1953)

Wapango*, by **Paquito D’Rivera** (b. Cuba, 1948)

“La Calaca”* (last movement of *Altar de Muertos*), by **Gabriela Ortiz** (b. México, 1964)

Presto II by **Miguel del Aguila**. (b. Uruguay, 1957)

Also recommended are the following
Piano Quintets:

Clocks, by Miguel del Aguila

Seis Piezas a Violeta, by Gabriela Ortiz

Quintet op. 29, by Alberto Ginastera

Piano Quintet (2002), by Jorge Liderman
(b. Argentina, 1957; d. USA, 2008)

And Guitar Quintets:

Fragmentos del Pasado, by Orlando Jacinto
García (b. Cuba, 1954)

Triptico, by Roberto Sierra

Inca Dances, by **Gabriela Lena Frank** (b. USA, 1972). This piece won the 2009 Grammy for Best Contemporary Composition.

Boliviana, by Miguel del Águila

We have recorded all of the works mentioned above, except for Ginastera's Piano Quintet and Miguel del Águila's *Boliviana*. The pieces followed by an asterisk are available on our YouTube channel.

It is impossible to know how many more years of quartet playing the Cuarteto Latinoamericano shall still enjoy. In any case, I feel very fortunate and extremely grateful with life for having given me the opportunity of making a living playing quartets.

And I also feel very happy about having helped making this Latin American repertoire more known and available worldwide. We often receive inquiries about parts or recordings of this repertoire from places as far afield as South Africa, Australia or Israel. We feel this music deserves to be played more often and I hope to have helped making that possible.

Álvaro Bitrán is the founding cellist of Cuarteto Latinoamericano.



Watch the Cuarteto playing much of its repertoire: www.youtube.com/user/CuartetoLatAm