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LA NOCHE DE LOS MAYAS: A MISUNDERSTOOD FILM AND ITS MUSIC

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Introduction

My interest in *La Noche de los Mayas* began to form when I read *Cartas íntimas y escritos*.¹ This is a recompilation made by Rosaura Revueltas of letters and writings by his brother Silvestre Revueltas. The book made every bibliographical research on Revueltas before 1982 meaningless and it is referenced in nearly all of the research conducted on Revueltas today. In his letters and writings Revueltas freely describes his thoughts and emotions with incredible detail. They contain first hand proof of how Revueltas composed his music and in some cases the reasons for it. It is only recently that scholars such as Eduardo Contreras Soto, Roberto Kolb and Robert Parker have worked meticulously on documenting his life and works to provide a fresh understanding of the mind of Silvestre Revueltas. Today's research of Revueltas' music points to the same direction; Revueltas' pinnacle of compositional technique was in his film music.

The intention of this study is to explore and evaluate the film *La Noche de los Mayas*. I will research the making of the movie and what surrounded the production in 1939. In addition to this, I will seek a perspective of the music of Revueltas and its relation with the film. With this research I intend to acknowledge the importance that this film had in its time, and expectantly decipher the enigma that impedes its popularity today compared to other films of the 'Golden Age' of cinema in Mexico.

Silvestre Revueltas' path to Film Music

Silvestre Revueltas once wrote, "The spirit of Mexico is deep within me."² Historically Revueltas was mistaken for a composer who would incorporate traditional folk tunes into his music, but today this history is corrected. Unlike other composers of his time, Revueltas did not exploit Mexican folklore and music, but instead subtly formed a compositional style that is comparable to a 'nationalistic' compositional manner like that of Sergei Prokofiev or Dimitri Shostakovich to Russia. His music has gained vast popularity in contemporary music society, and it is the subject of research for many musicologists and musicians around the world.

Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) lived a life filled with emotions, passion and tragedy. Known to the world as almost certainly the greatest composer Mexico has produced, Revueltas was also one of the finest violin players of his time. At a very young age his talent was noticed, and eventually he was sent abroad to nourish his evident talent. Revueltas completed most of his studies outside Mexico thanks to his father who wanted only the best for his son. He then spent his youth in Chicago where he was accepted to study violin and composition at the "Chicago Musical College." To this day a medal is held at the college in his honor for his achievements in excellence.

1 Silvestre Revueltas, *Cartas íntimas y escritos*. 1a ed. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982.

2 "El espíritu de México está muy dentro de mí..." (All translations in this article are made by me unless otherwise noted.)

Revueltas came from a poor family and struggled all his life with this issue. He had to juggle his scholarly pursuits with a working life. Because of this, Revueltas played in many orchestras for film theaters to make ends meet. The experience that this provided was directly influential on his compositional career. From his first known musical writing, there exists an air of imagery and movement that would later in his life represent his musical form of composition. In the text *Mexican Movies in the United States: a History of the Films, Theaters, and Audiences, 1920-1960* Rogelio Agrasánchez' describes how Revueltas moved from playing in these theaters to being commissioned to compose the music for them. Most of his films were later presented in the same theaters were Revueltas once performed.³

In his lifetime, he composed eight films scores in a period of five years. His first commissioned score was for the film *Redes* in 1935.⁴ The rapid success that the film attracted in combination with the quality of the music quickly provided Revueltas with a career in the film industry. Revueltas' patriotism drew him to the nationalist themes that the films of this period evoked. All the film scores that Revueltas composed were for movies that served as government propaganda or films with a sense of patriotism and nationalistic pride for Mexico. Revueltas' greatest achievement as a composer came from his ability to compose new music that evoked the Mexican spirit without using folksy or *cliché* tunes. In the course of the next few years, Revueltas rapidly became known for his film scores and was asked to write the scores for many of the new films being produced. These include *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1936), *Ferrocarriles de Baja California* (1938), *La Bestia Negra* (1938), *El Indio* (1938), *La Noche de los Mayas* (1939), *Bajo el Signo de la muerte* (1939), and *¡Que viene mi marido!* (1940). In his text "La Música de Silvestre Revueltas para Cine y Escena," Eduardo Contreras Soto provides a discussion on how Revueltas suffered from severe depression resulting from the death of his mother.⁵ For Revueltas this depression came at the peak of his compositional career in the film industry. Even though his final film scores produced income, he announced his retirement from film composing. Not long after, a complicated case of pneumonia, in combination with his alcoholism, took his life in October of 1940 at the age of 40.

1939: The Film Industry in Mexico

Between 1935 and 1938 work in the Mexican film industry grew intensely. This constant growth came to a halt in 1939 when the industry grew to a point at which it could no longer support itself. Based on the industry's growth in previous years, it was expected that at least 100 movies would be produced in 1939 alone. The reality was that in 1939 only 39 movies were produced and most of these films were not released. The film's producers were hesitant to present the film in theaters alongside the films being brought in from Hollywood. These films had an advantage over the films being produced by the Mexican film industry and the producers of the film were concerned about recouping their investments in the oversaturated market. To compensate for this, former president Lázaro Cardenas obliged every cinema in Mexico to expose at least one Mexican movie per month.

3 Rogelio Agrasánchez, *Mexican Movies in the United States: a history of the films, theaters, and audiences, 1920-1960*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2006), 23-34.

4 Silvestre Revueltas composed the score for the film *Redes* in 1934-1935. It was released in the United States as *The Waves*.

5 Eduardo Contreras Soto, "La música de Silvestre Revueltas para cine y escena," *Heterofonia* nos. 111-12 (July 1994- June 1995): 5-14.

With the excess films from the Hollywood industry hitting Mexico at their peak, only two films conserved a nationalist thematic pride. These two movies were Chano Urueta's *La Noche de los Mayas* and *Los de abajo*. Urueta was indisputably the most talented director in the industry at that time. While other directors produced movies of foreign inspiration, Urueta did everything in his power to detach himself from the 'great' foreign productions and create a grand Mexican tradition.

1939 was definitely a very hard year for the film industry in Mexico. While Cardenas would try to satisfy the common people as well as the producers, the film industry in Mexico plunged. The effect was alarming. Producers were unable to finance their independent productions to the same extent as the film industry in other countries. At that time, Argentina rose in the film industry for its ability to finance their productions. This period produced over 50 movies, giving them, for the first time, the reins in the production of Spanish-language films. Meanwhile, the end of the war in Spain in 1939 led to the revival of film manufacturing and gave Spain a corner on the market. In 1939 Mexico produced mostly low budget movies. This left a stigma on Mexican cinema of the period shadowing most of the movies produced this year.

Emilio Riera's *Historia documental del Cine Mexicano 1938-1942* meticulously catalogs the events of the Mexican film industry and proves that although 1939 was a devastating year for the industry, Mexico's National Film Committee, *Comite Nacional de Cine en Mexico* (UTECEM), still saw the importance of a number of films from the year and acknowledged them with high honors. These honors included the awards for best movie to *La Noche de los Mayas*, best director to Fernando de Fuentes for *La Casa del Ogro*, best actress to Isabela Corona for *La Noche*, best photography to Gabriel Figueroa for *La Noche*, best music to Silvestre Revueltas for *La Noche*, best edition to Emilio Gomez for *La Noche* and best scenery Jose Rodriguez Granada and Roberto Montenegro for *El Capitán Aventurero*.⁶

La Noche de los Mayas

Conductor Jose Ives Limantour arranged Revueltas' film score into an orchestral four movement suite and premiered it with the Guadalajara Symphony Orchestra on January 30, 1961. Many scholars who research Revueltas' music question the authenticity of the work, though in essence it stays very much attached to what the film reflected. I will mention some audio examples and make reference to recordings of this arrangement; which is the version most often performed in concert halls today.⁷ Limantour arranged the suite using Revueltas' original score. This explains why there is so much material contained in the suite that is not used in the context of the film. Limantour's arranged suite is divided into four parts, just as the original film score. It is important to mention that Revueltas did not name these four parts, rather Limantour named them based on his judgment of what was happening during the film. Revueltas' actual distribution contains only 'cue' spots and scenes markings. The first movement of Limantour's arrangement is titled *La Noche de los Mayas* (Night of the Mayans), the second *Noche de Jaranas* (Night of 'Revelry'),⁸ the third *Noches de Yucatàn* (Nights of Yucatan) and last movement, *Noches de Encantamiento* (Nights of Enchantment). The music that

6 Emilio Riera, *Historia documental del Cine Mexicano 1938-1942*, (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1992), 89-107.

7 A percussion cadenza was added in the final movement by Enrique Arturo Diemecke, the conductor of the *National Symphonic Orchestra of Mexico* 15 years ago with the permission of the Revueltas family.

8 The word 'Jarana' also refers to the name of a traditional dance which blend traditional and native influences.

appears in the film, mostly without any edition, is generally contained within the first and second movements of Limantour's suite. The third movement is included within the context of the film, but is heavily edited by Limantour to produce a cohesive standalone movement. The fourth movement, however, is not heard within the film itself. The reason for not hearing any of the themes of the last movement is because the music was intended to highlight the 'native percussion music' of the film which, in the end, Urueta leaned more towards the use of Cornelio Cardenas' 'Mayan Melodies' in a more diegetic fashion. The end of the last movement is a restatement of the theme of the first movement. This addition made by Limantour was to highlight how Revueltas repeats the first movement to end the movie.

The remainder of this study will focus mainly on the first and second moments of Limantour's suite. The reason for this is that the first and second movements contain the least editorial work, leaving them the closest to the original film music of all of the movements.

The story of the *La Noche* is set in a Mayan tribe which subsists with very little awareness of the outer modern civilization. A hunter in the tribe named Uz (Arturo Cordoba) is in love with Lol (Estela Inda), a beautiful indigenous girl who seems to love Uz until the intrusion of a white explorer named Miguel (Luis Aldas). Miguel sells the 'chicle' trees which grow around the village that he and his envoy discover. This is where the love triangle happens. Miguel wants Lol, though there is never a sense of falling in love. In contrast to what the movie portrays, it seems that he rapes her and it isn't until this point that she falls in love with him. This profane relationship provokes the wrath of the gods, which in the movie translates to draughts and hunger for the village. Once the elders become aware of this relationship, they determine that the only logic solution is to sacrifice Lol in order to keep the Gods content. The movie concludes with Uz killing Miguel. Lol commits suicide after witnessing Miguel's death and 'magically' (or coincidental) it begins to rain, ending the curse of the village.

In Eduardo Contreras' "Historia de La Noche de los Mayas y de su Música," we understand the importance of *La Noche de los Mayas* being filmed in the unpopular Yucatan of the mid 1930's.⁹ The importance that the film had over the people in Merida was overwhelming. The making of *La Noche* was probably the most important event that had happened in the city. Everything surrounding the film at the time was published and sometimes exaggerated in the local media. One of the most interesting headlines noted that the music for the much anticipated film was written by local composer Cornelio Cardenas. More importantly it stated that the music was already recorded and ready to send to the editing departments. Despite these headlines, Urueta had already asked Revueltas to write a score for the film. At the end of the production, Cardenas' music plays a different role in the film. Cardenas music is used strictly in a diegetic role. Two very clear examples of this appear within the film. The first at (min. 00:51:13 to 00:54:25) were the villagers are playing the drums. This scene is designed to appear improvised, though it was written by Cardenas. The music that Revueltas wrote for this moment can clearly be heard in Limantour's arranged suite at the beginning of the variations of the last movement (min. 1:20 and following).¹⁰ The second is where Lol is singing to Miguel in her 'native' language although Miguel seems not to understand what she sings (min.00:36:15 to 00:36:34). This scene also plays a significant conceptual role within the context of the film. Urueta's use of a 'Mayan' folk song is related to the codices left by the Mayas that emphasize the importance of voice in Mayan culture.

9 Eduardo Contreras Soto, "Historia de La Noche de los Mayas y de su Música," *Camino blanco: arte y cultura*, (September November 2002): 47-52.

10 Silvestre Revueltas with WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln Semyon Bychkov, *Noche de Encantamiento*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6BM32A_9OU&feature=related (Accessed April 2010)

To highlight the reality of an undiscovered indigenous land, language plays a vital function in the narrative of the film. The whole movie is set in Spanish, though when the Mayans speak they do so in a poetic form. When the white people enter the village there is a translator from poetic-Spanish to Spanish. At first this seems slightly confusing because the first time this ‘issue’ is encountered one does not realize that the Mayans are actually speaking ‘Mayan’. As the movie moves forward, this theatrical approach to the language contrasts greatly when the camera is focusing on the villagers or the white men. Antonio Mediz Bollo, who wrote the novel for which the movie is based on, played an important role in the circumstance of the dialogues and use of theatrical gestures within the movie.

The opening credits feature an orchestral introduction by Revueltas. While it has become traditional to open a film with a grand fanfare, Revueltas chooses to open the film with a dramatic introduction, but he avoids the sense of a fanfare or march altogether. Example 1 demonstrates the equal importance of both the strings and the brass in the opening of the film. The credits emphasize, “Musical Illustration” by Silvestre Revueltas “Mayan melodies” by Cornelio Cardenas (min. 00:02:15-00:02:26) Both names appear in the same shot, side by side; today the music is credited mostly to Revueltas. Cardenas’ score seems to have been lost within the production of the film. Cardenas’ score was almost certainly never fully composed. Potentially, this could have even been set up as a publicity stunt to signify the local community and its relation to the film. During all the commotion in Merida, Revueltas was never mentioned until the end of the production of the film. There is no record of Revueltas actually being in the Yucatan during the filming, and certainly no headlines in any newspaper acknowledged him as the composer for the film. The only actual proof is a letter from Urueta to Revueltas asking him if he had received the material to compose the score for *La Noche*. If Revueltas was mentioned more often than Cardenas, the community in the Yucatan wouldn’t have supported filming in the ancient ruins. It was very important that the local entities permitted the shooting in the actual sites because they play a major role in the film.

Example 1. *La Noche de los Mayas* by Silvestre Revueltas. Movement 1, mm 1-4 ¹¹

¹¹ Example taken from Dissertation: Jonathan Borja. “Silvestre Revueltas’s *La Noche de los Mayas*: His Music on Film and on the Concert Stage” Masters diss., University of Missouri-Kansas, 2002.

One of the few prizes the film did not win was for scenery. This was because the sets were all genuine landscapes.¹² Gabriel Figuero developed the photography of the film. The majority of the film gives the sense that the space used is very wide, though in reality most of the important scenes take place in closed spaces.

After the opening credits, the music contrasts to the majesty of the opening to a melodious tune emphasized by the flute and the violin section (Example 2). At this moment in the film, the camera is panning scenes of the Yucatan Peninsula. This is truly a precious moment in the Mexican cinematic tradition as the scenes of the ruins of Yucatan can never again be shot in such a ‘virgin’ state. Urueta’s goal in the film’s introduction was to be able to portray the innocence of the community of the Mayan village. Revueltas writes in his cue notes, “... Historic innocence of the native peoples of Mesoamerica.”¹³

Example 2 *La Noche de los Mayas* by Silvestre Revueltas. Movement 1. mm 29-33.¹⁴

Molto espress. - Cantabile

Arguably the most important moment in the film is when Miguel is allowed in the village for the first time. Miguel gives Lol a glance that is noticed by Uz from the background. This at first seems like an innocent scene; despite the fact that in the music is contrasted with a dissonant interjection by the tuba exactly in the moment that Uz’s acknowledges the moment occurred (min. 00:17:20-00:18:13). This is a key point in the film because it foreshadows the events to come. For example, two of Revueltas’ *Noche de Jaranas* score examples contrast the upbeat cheery music of the strings with the descending second interval in the tuba. Most recordings of *Noche de Jaranas* do not make a big deal out of this moment, yet in the film, the tuba can clearly be heard overpowering the strings (min 07:05 – 07:11).¹⁵

12 The shooting in the film took places in the actual Mayan ruins in the peninsula of Yucatan; Chechenitza, Tulum and Cobà.

13 “...inocencia histórica de los indígenas de Mesoamerica.”

14 Example taken from Dissertation: Jonathan Borja. “Silvestre Revueltas’s *La Noche de los Mayas*: His Music on Film and on the Concert Stage” Masters diss., University of Missouri-Kansas, 2002.

15 Silvestre Revueltas with WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln Semyon Bychkov, *Noche de Jaranas*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTEh1A9Ur8E&feature=related> (Accessed April 2010).

Revueltas' sensitivity in bringing out particular moments in his film scores is fascinating. Despite having only a short period of time to complete the music for *La Noche*, he was able to create an atmospheric blend that allowed for the diegetic sounds of the movie to be carefully balanced with the sensation of originality in the score. Although the majority of the film's music is contained within the first thirty minutes of the film, its masterful craftsmanship begs for further analysis.

Conclusion

The film *La Noche de los Mayas* has barely survived the overwhelming attacks from the international film industry. Despite its popularity when it was premiered on Mexico's Independence Day, the film has been reduced to just a memory of its music. While the film only persists outside of the Mexican mainstream, its music is gaining incredible popularity worldwide. The film *La Noche* is truly an undiscovered work of art waiting for its re-mastering. Though the film has lost much of its attractiveness, the second film premiered that same year, *Bajo el Signo de la Muerte*, has survived time and industry attacks alike. *Bajo el Signo de la Muerte* was also directed by Urueta and the music was also written by Revueltas. Two things made this film more popular. The budget used for this movie was far higher than that of *La Noche de los Mayas*, allowing to improve some influential aspects of the film. For instance, the sound recording and musician quality in *La Noche* suffered from a very low budget and is greatly reflected in the quality of interpretation of Revueltas' score. Secondly, *La Noche* suffered from a low casting budget and couldn't compare with the superstar lineup used in *Bajo el Signo de la Muerte*; the later including legends like Mario Moreno 'Cantinflas.' Though Estela Inda's participation in *La Noche* was formidable, she was still not recognized as a treasure of Mexican cinema until later in her career.

Limantour's work with the music of Revueltas is pivotal to the survival of this music. If it wasn't for his genuine interest in preserving the film music, much of the material gathered by Limantour would have been lost. Hindemith wrote his own arrangement of *La Noche*, but this is just a 15 min. arrangement of the film score. Still Limantour's study on *La Noche* is much more focused, rounding up more of the visual content of the film, rather than just the musical.

I truly believe that the film will never gain a popularity after losing its momentum in the early 1940's though I still think that *La Noche* is an essential part of Mexican films and its research will lead (and has lead) further research in the area of cinematography. The legacy left by the combination of Urueta and Revueltas to the film scene is unique and plays an outstanding role in film studies.

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