

Salón Latino Chamber Music Series: Viola Music of Latin America PROGRAM NOTES

José Pablo Moncayo (1912–1958)

Sonata para viola y piano (1934)



Best known today for his popular orchestral work *Huapango*, Mexican composer José Pablo Moncayo was an accomplished pianist, percussionist, educator, conductor, and composer who wrote a variety of works not just for orchestra but for solo piano and small ensemble as well. A student of Carlos Chávez (1899–1978) at Mexico's National Conservatory, Moncayo, along with three other young pupils of Chávez—Daniel Ayala (1906–1975), Salvador Contreras (1910–1982), and Blas Galindo (1910–1993)—became part of the Grupo de los Cuatro (Group of Four), which championed the creation and performance of new music while also exploring ways to imbue compositions with both personal and national styles.

Moncayo's chamber works date to the early part of his career, and between 1933 and 1936, he wrote four sonatas, many of which have only recently become known to the public through posthumous publication. Moncayo's **Sonata for viola and piano** was written in 1934 but published only in 1991. The work is cast as a standard, three-movement sonata form but breaks away from many harmonic and melodic traditions associated with Western music, reflecting both modern practices and many elements of what Chávez identified as Aztec music. The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, opens with a mostly pentatonic melody supported minimally by an often percussive piano part, a possible reference to imagined primitivism or perhaps to Moncayo's own experience as a percussionist. The second movement provides ample contrast with its more lyrical melody. The block construction and parallel movement of the opening accompaniment suggests pandiatonicism, another technique loosely associated with many Mexican nationalist composers and their evocation of a distant past. As in the first movement, the prominence of minor thirds and perfect fifths also implies a simplicity often vaguely associated with folk and indigenous music.¹ The third movement, a lively finale in a rondo form, combines mixed meters and asymmetrical phrases in a veritable tour-de-force. Whether interpreted as a nuanced expression of imagined Aztec music within nationalist composition or an exercise in modern practices, Moncayo's Sonata for Viola and Piano represents the composer's earlier ventures into chamber music and reveals an interest in mastering standard forms while developing a personal style.

Juan Orrego-Salas (1919–2019)

Mobili (1967)

Born in Santiago, Chile and remembered fondly not only as a composer and educator but also as the founder as Indiana University's Latin American Music Center, Juan Orrego-Salas belonged to a generation that shaped and defined mid-twentieth-century American and Latin American Music. A student of Randall Thompson and Aaron Copland among others, as a composer Orrego-Salas was prolific, writing in



¹ Pandiatonicism refers to a musical practice in which the notes of a diatonic scale are used in a piece but no single note functions as a tonic.

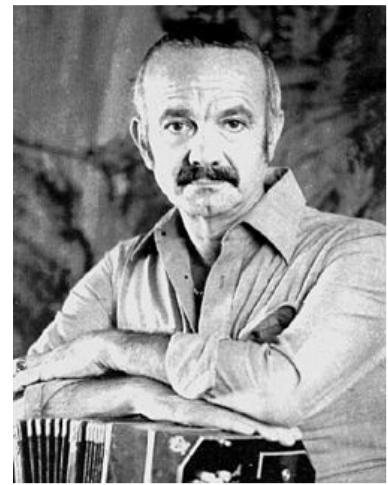
nearly all genres in a career that spanned decades, continents, and styles. Chamber music comprises only a small fraction of Orrego-Salas's works, and in his for viola and piano, we find both a sensitivity to the intimate nature of chamber music and idiomatic writing for the viola. Written in 1967 and dedicated to musicians Pauline and Manuel Díaz, *Mobili* was one of the few pieces Orrego-Salas wrote to receive its premiere in the composer's native country. As the title of the work suggests, just as shapes shift when a mobile moves, so too do melodies and motives transform throughout the work. This consideration and interaction of sonic and spatial relationships is perhaps unsurprising, as Orrego-Salas initially studied architecture before dedicating his life to music. Like the music itself, the titles of the four movements—Flessible (Flexible), Discontinuo (Discontinuous), Ricorrente (Recurrent), and Perpetuo (Perpetual)—reflect the various motions and spatial configurations possible of a mobile.

Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992)

Dos piezas breves (1987)

Le Grand Tango (1982)

The music of Astor Piazzolla is undeniably entwined with the history of tango, and even in the composer's earliest works, we can find elements that betray his deep connection to this art form. Born in Mar Del Plata, Argentina to Italian immigrants, Astor Piazzolla spent much of his childhood in New York, where he listened to a mixture of jazz, classical, and tango orchestra recordings and performances. Piazzolla returned to Argentina, joining the orchestra of Aníbal Troilo as a bandoneonist while later studying composition with fellow Argentine Alberto Ginastera. Following a brief stay in Paris, in which famed pedagogue Nadia Boulanger encouraged Piazzolla to continue along his path as a tango performer, Piazzolla returned to Argentina, forming in 1955 the Octeto Buenos Aires, whose approach to tango performances blended jazz, classical counterpoint, and traditional elements of tango. Piazzolla spent the next four decades composing for and playing in various ensembles whose recordings and performances would take him across the world.



Written in 1949 while a student of Ginastera, but published in 1987, *Dos piezas breves* is Piazzolla's only work composed expressly for the viola. The first movement, "La Noche" (The Night) demonstrates Piazzolla's awareness of the tonal and timbral range of the viola, from the frequent use of harmonics and glassy *sul ponticello* effects, to the brooding melody that spans the range of the instrument. The second movement, "Tanguano" hints at Piazzolla's idiosyncratic *nuevo tango* style, utilizing syncopations and accents with deeply contrasting sections that seem to suggest the two partners in the dance.

Originally written for solo cello, *Le Grand Tango* contains more of the stylistic characteristics associated with Piazzolla's mature *nuevo tango* style—constant syncopations, including ubiquitous 3-3-2 rhythms, countermelodies, percussive effects, ostinatos, and tango gestures such as the *arrastre*, among others. The work was commissioned in 1982 by Efraín Paesky for famed cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who ultimately did not play the piece until 1990, as he was initially unimpressed by the score but later realized the work's brilliance and Piazzolla's style. Today, *Le Grand Tango* remains one of Piazzolla's most popular pieces, existing in multiple arrangements, including tonight's version for viola and piano.