

**CULTURAL COUNTERPOINTS:  
Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America**



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“The Sounds of Mexico: Music in the OCIAA Documentaries”**

**Abstract:**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. American perceptions of Mexico were shaped by images of violence and social upheaval due in part to the armed struggle of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). These images were perpetuated in silent films in which Mexicans were consistently portrayed as villains and thieves. These negative perceptions began to shift at the beginning of World War II, after Mexico allied itself with the United States and joined the war effort. This shift in perception is evident in the propagandizing film project initiated by the U.S. government’s Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs: a series of documentary films, narrated by Hollywood actors, intended not only to educate U.S. Americans about Mexico but rectify past negative representations of Mexicans and showcase a Mexican culture with both cosmopolitan and folkloric dimensions. Generally speaking, film scoring practice dictates that music deemed traditional to a narrative subject’s geographical backdrop be used to provide the appropriate atmosphere. These documentaries however, present a musical potpourri of re-arranged Mexican *canciones* and *sones*; they repeat a sonic reinforcement of general Mexicanness regardless of the regional location and culture depicted. Although attempting to shift from stereotypes, the documentaries—enforced by the compiled underscoring—replace negative representations of Mexico with a romanticized and exoticized version of Mexican culture aimed at U.S. tourists. Through these films and their music, we can see a transnational bridge developing between the United States and Mexico, and an attempt to strengthen diplomatic relations.

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**Editorial Disclaimer:**

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**“The Sounds of Mexico: Music in the OCIAA Documentaries”<sup>1</sup>**  
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During the 1940s, the Office for the Inter-Coordinator of American Affairs (OCIAA), an organization responsible for the cultural and economic relations of the United States and Latin America during World War II, sought to produce and distribute several short films or travelogues about Mexico in an effort to enhance Good Neighbor relations after Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho declared war on Germany and established an alliance with the United States. Headed by Nelson Rockefeller, the OCIAA undertook wide-ranging initiatives to institutionalize Good Neighbor themes and Latin American locales and topics in Hollywood films. The depiction of Mexico was especially handled with care due to past derogatory representations of Mexicans that graced the silver screen during Hollywood’s silent and early sound period. Because of the conflict during the armed struggle of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), U.S. Americans perceived Mexicans as violent and unruly, given to revolt and uprisings, and the film industry solidified these views, representing the Mexican, in particular the Mexican *charro*, typically as a thief, a rapist, and a murderer. Other stereotypes include the Mexican as an oafish or clownish character or, in films starring Ramón Navarro, the exotic Latin lover.

The OCIAA took an active role in initiating a pro-Allies cultural campaign and film became an important part in propagandizing the inter-American relationship. At the OCIAA’s encouragement, major players at Hollywood studios, such as MGM and Warner Bros., formed the Motion Picture Society of the Americas (MPSA) as a liaison organization with the OCIAA’s motion picture division. The purpose of this organization was to ensure that film topics relating to Latin America be treated with proper research and government cooperation so as to not perpetuate negative stereotypes or present any type of discrimination that could harm the new alliances.<sup>2</sup> An important component to this campaign was the use of music. The MPSA and the OCIAA were adamant that the

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<sup>1</sup> I owe special thanks to the Margaret Herrick Library Special Collections for access to their material regarding the Motion Picture Society of the Americas and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> This was particularly crucial for documentary films aimed at providing a reliable view of society.

use of authentic Latin American music be used in any Hollywood production in order to convey the necessary respect for each Latin American country.<sup>3</sup> Film music that incorporated Latin American music, it was believed, would be the cultural bridge between the nations and aid in the war effort recovery. This paper focuses on how the MPSA and the OCIAA used film music in their documentary travel shorts as a necessary tool in enforcing the Good Neighbor policy and as a strategy for reversing past derogatory and uninformed representations of Mexico and Mexicans.

In efforts to attain authenticity in films, both fiction and documentary, and to move away from negative embellishments and stereotypes, the MPSA sent an advisory list to the major Hollywood studios. On this list of twenty-two taboos, film officials included the following:

4) Don't imagine that every Mexican wears a "Charro" suit or that every Argentinian dresses as a "Gaicho". Remember that all Latin Americans—at least in the cities—are as up-to-date in their clothes as the people in the United States.

6) Don't use Latin American music in a Latin American scene that does not belong to the country the scene represents.

12) Don't make any pictures on Latin America without the proper research and technical advice, and if necessary the sanction and consent or approval of the government involved.<sup>4</sup>

In order to comply with these points, the MPSA encouraged Hollywood studio music departments to establish specific libraries which would house transcriptions and arrangements of Latin American music, orchestral and popular. Strenuously advocating for this system was Charles Seeger, who played an imperative role in educating Hollywood film composers in Latin American musical styles, genres, and practices. In a letter to the MPSA on December 10, 1943, Seeger compiled his own list of points that studio music departments should abide by concerning the use of research facilities. Seeger argues that the composer must conduct background study and collect authentic source material for the underscoring. He further states: "Before he can depart frankly

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<sup>3</sup> Good Neighbor relations involving the Hollywood film industry is most commonly seen in Walt Disney's 1942 animated feature *Saludos Amigos*, which features music by several South American performers. It was this interaction that the MPSA attempted to replicate in the shorts about Mexico.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum, "MPSA Regulations," 19 August 1941, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, <http://www.oscars.org/events-exhibitions/features/latin/index.html>.

upon an artistic treatment of a foreign form, the composer must literally steep himself in the music of a country or region in its true historical perspective to the production in hand. The ideal method, used by Disney in “Saludos Amigos”, is to make original direct recordings in the field of the subject. But if an actual native form is used in a score, only the best native performers should be employed to render it. It is by all means desirable not to attempt imitations of a native form.”<sup>5</sup>

Seeger assembled a bibliography of Latin American folk song transcriptions and collections for the composers to use as references, which included Beatrice and Max Krone’s *Songs of our Latin American Neighbors* and *Spanish and Latin American Songs* and Xavier Cugat and Richard Romero’s *The Other Americas: Album of Typical Central American and South American Songs and Dances*.<sup>6</sup> Specifically for topics on Mexico, Seeger developed a reading list of Mexican music literature for music department directors, which consisted of Ruben Campos’s *El folklore y la música mexicana*, Carlos Chávez’s *Toward a New Music*, Alba Herrera y Ogazón’s *El arte musical de México*, and Gabriel Saldivar’s *Historia de la música en México*.<sup>7</sup> Also, a separate list was compiled by the S.M.A.C.E.M (Mexican Union of Authors, Composers, and Editors of Music) in October 1943 for the MPSA consisting of several Mexican composers whose music, the union felt, would be beneficial to the Hollywood industry. Included in this list are Agustín Lara, Manuel Esperón, Manuel Ponce, and others. Composers are given a brief biography, which includes a short list of their popular works marked with numbers 1-26. The numbers are a classification reference system for each song, providing its most suitable function in a film.<sup>8</sup> From Seeger’s collaborations and the involvement of Mexican musical organizations, the studio music departments had the necessary tools to utilize and incorporate Mexican music in films.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Seeger to the Motion Picture Society of the Americas, 10 December 1943, Latin-America (Music) f. 465, Motion Picture Society of the Americas, Margaret Herrick Library Special Collections, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as MPSA-MHLSC).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Seeger, “Latin American Folk Song Books”, n.d., Latin-America (Music) f. 465, MPSA-MHLSC.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Seeger, “Reading List of Mexican Music”, n.d., Latin-America (Music) f. 465, MPSA-MHLSC.

<sup>8</sup> S.M.A.C.E.M, “List of Mexican Composers”, 29 October 1943, Latin-America (Music) f. 465, MPSA-MHLSC.

The OCIAA shorts were produced in direct collaboration with the Mexican Tourist Association for educational purposes and as a result, the OCIAA felt the films should be screened in a 16mm format rather than in large commercial release so as to easily reach schools, museums, libraries, and other educational centers. It is important to note the shorts were envisioned to depict the Mexican point-of-view for the U.S. American audience in efforts to promote Good Neighbor solidarity and tourism for U.S. American families who could no longer vacation in Europe. In a letter written to Nelson Rockefeller in February 1942, the Coordination Committee of Mexico suggested several themes for the shorts, which included the Aztec and Mayan ruins, the floating gardens of Xochimilco, native dances and costumes, and the new, modern tourist accommodations. In order to understand the Mexican standpoint it was highly recommended that the studios screen notable examples from the Mexican film industry, such as Fernando de Fuentes's *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936) and Joselito Rodríguez's *¡Ay Jalisco, no te rajes!* (1941) and also encouraged the utilization of Mexican music, declaring: "Mexican music is to most people exceedingly pleasing, and it is possible that some of the local production, sufficiently revised might get over very well in the states."<sup>9</sup> In addition, the MPSA and the Mexican Department of Tourism agreed that Hollywood stars, such as Orson Welles, Tyrone Powers, and Linda Darnell would narrate the shorts, "accompanied by Mexican background music."<sup>10</sup>

Several films showcased one specific region, such as in *Picturesque Patzcuaro* (1942), which details the way of life on Janitzio with a tag line, "nets and life are all tangled up on Janitzio" and *Guadalajara* (1942), described as a "city of foreign values." Other films, specifically those concentrating on Mexico City, highlight Mexico's rich cultural heritage juxtaposed with clear signs of modernism and progress. For example, Eric Zolov notes the film *Mexico City* (1946), narrated by Orson Wells, takes the spectator through the unfamiliar canals of Xochimilco and the mysterious Aztec pyramids, providing a sense of Otherness and escape mingled with adventure. After experiencing a day of the unfamiliar, the spectator may settle down in the new lush and

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Coordination Committee for Mexico to Nelson Rockefeller, 2 February 1942, Mexico (films) f. 488, MPSA-MHLSC.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Francis Alstock to Alejandro Buelna, Jr. Department of Tourism (SEP), 27 February 1942, Mexico (films) f. 488, MPSA-MHLSC.

modern accommodations that lined Mexico City's boulevards: "The hotels are modern, down to the bellboy shining buttons. Whether you speak Spanish or not, you can get the best food you ever ate. Strange fish and exotic fruit. Then, worn out from trying to see everything at once, you can rest weary bones in rooms like these."<sup>11</sup>

While the MPSA boasted research facilities for Mexican and Latin American music and several Mexican composers were highly recommended and encouraged for productions, the OCIAA documentaries did not utilize a diverse underscoring. The shorts consist of Mexican music selections, arranged and orchestrated, but the same music appears in several films, arranged in a different order. This includes *La Golondrina* by Narciso Serradell, *Cielito Lindo* by Carlos Fernández, the corrido *La Adelita*, the waltz *Sobre las olas* by Juventino Rosas, *Guadalajara*, and *Marcha Zacatecas* by Genaro Codina.<sup>12</sup> The reasons for these specific choices are not certain, but the organization of the music mirrors the compilation of mood music for silent film, such as Erno Rapee's *Motion Picture Moods For Pianists and Organists*.<sup>13</sup> According to letters and memos from the MPSA to Francis Alstock of the OCIAA, several films had to be rescored for an undisclosed reason. Charles Wolcott, the Latin American music authority with Disney studios, soon became in charge of re-scoring, but it becomes evident the studios opted for the stock music track, re-arranged into a compilation for each film that enforced a comfortable and safe ambience.<sup>14</sup>

In the beginning of *A Town in Old Mexico* (1943), we hear selections of the orchestral stock music, *La Golondrina* (commonly used as a farewell song) (:00 - :34), an unknown waltz (:35), *La Adelita* (1:35), and a short trumpet fanfare that transitions back to the stock track. The music is subtle, dubbed at a lower dynamic and mixed underneath

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Zolov, "Discovering a Land "Mysterious and Obvious": The Renarrativizing of Postrevolutionary Mexico," in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexican Since 1940*, ed. Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 238-39.

<sup>12</sup> Various shorts also incorporated sections from Carlos Chávez's *Sinfonia India* to accompany images of the pyramids (*Sundays in the Land of Mexico*), and selections from Bizet's *Carmen* for bullfight scenes (*Mexico City*).

<sup>13</sup> I should note here that *La Golondrina* is the only musical entry for Mexico, labeled as a "Mexican National Song."

<sup>14</sup> It is possible that Wolcott composed the stock music, but I have not determined this for sure. It is probable that several composers, including Vittorio Gianni, arranged different parts of the stock music and the tracks were mixed together when necessary. The composers are not credited for the films.

Orson Welles's soothing dialogue track, and follows constructions established by the Classic Hollywood film score with lush strings and non-abrasive brass with gentle and smooth transitions from one song to another. The underscoring does not change in tone color or dynamic and remains fairly static, providing a calm atmosphere to the tranquil images of the Mexican landscape, perhaps negating for the spectator past sentiments that Mexico was considered a violent country. This occurs delicately as a trumpet sounds at the mention of the Aztecs and Spanish influence and the stock underscoring gently downplays the reference to "centuries of bloody human sacrifice."<sup>15</sup>

In the film, *Veracruz*, the stock music track incorporates *Marcha Zacatecas* to provide an atmosphere of pomp and splendor when the image and dialogue tracks emphasize city monuments and government buildings then moves to the stock music when alluding to life on the "picturesque streets" of Jalapa.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately missing from several of these shorts is music specific to the filmed regions. The narratives mention musical practices and feature performers, but the on-screen music is muted, opting instead for the stock musical track. For example, in the short *Tehuantepec* the popular regional dance *La zandunga* is discussed while featuring dancers and marimba players. We see the marimba players performing yet we do not hear the sounds of their instruments or music. In another short, *Guadalajara*, mariachi ensembles are featured yet we do not hear the music they perform: the sounds are replaced once again by the stock track.

What messages are sent with this stock underscoring? Although using examples of Mexican music with originally composed segments, the reuse of the same music implies that regardless of region, culture, and population, the music remains the same throughout the country. If the regional music was available, the music directors opted to not incorporate it into the films, providing a narrow musical outlet for spectators with the use of the "tourist" stock track. Although attempting to reverse negative representations, the shorts succeed in pushing forth certain assumptions and depictions in a documentary format meant to convey the Mexican point-of-view. The cultural borrowing and re-

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<sup>15</sup> Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, *A Town in Old Mexico*, c. 1943. Located in the Pacific Film Archive, UC Berkeley.

<sup>16</sup> Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, *Vera Cruz*, c. 1943. Located in the Academy Film Archive, Los Angeles.

interpretation of Mexican music for U.S. American audiences enforces the building of transnational bridges for diplomatic relations, but the repetitive use of this stock music for several diverse Mexican topics illustrates a hesitancy to provide a complete aesthetic representation.