

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



**Gibson, Christina Taylor (The Catholic University of America):
“Double Meanings in Carlos Chavez’s *Horsepower*”**

Abstract:

Gala crowds braved torrential rain and thunder to see the premiere of Carlos Chávez’s ballet *H.P.* (*Horsepower* or *Caballos de Vapor*) on March 31, 1932. The performance was directed by Leopold Stokowski, choreographed by Catherine Littlefield, and featured sets and costumes by Diego Rivera. It marked the first major performance of Chávez’s music in the U.S. Advance publicity emphasized a utopian Pan-American reading of the scenario; it advertised the composer’s use of son, *tango*, and *zandunga*, Rivera’s tropical fruit costumes, and Stokowski’s research trips to Mexico.

A close study of Chávez’s manuscript score indicates, however, that the composer’s public support of a Pan-American reading was contradicted by the quasi-hidden dystopic program evident in the score. There the son and *zandunga* are overwhelmed by aggressive, dissonant, mechanical “Northern” sounds, closely identified with the U.S. Although Chávez managed to conceal his true program from Stokowski, Littlefield, and U.S. critics—the overt message of American cooperation was far more appealing than the co-optation represented in the score—the existence of the alternate program wrecked havoc on the necessarily collaborative art of ballet production, rendering the *H.P.* premiere confused and confusing. As a result, reviewers concurred that, “It was more of a sensation before it began than after it was over.”¹ In this paper I will examine evidence for a hidden program in Chávez’s music for *H.P.*, and analyze its affect on the performance and reception of the work.

How to Cite this Paper:

Gibson, Christina Taylor. “Double Meaning in Carlos Chavez’s *Horsepower*.” Paper presented at the Latin American Music Center’s Fiftieth Anniversary Conference “Cultural Counterpoints: Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America,” Indiana University, Bloomington, 2011. Available from *IUScholarWorks* (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/15504>); accessed [Date Accessed].

Editorial Disclaimer:

This paper was presented at the Latin American Music Center’s Fiftieth-Anniversary Conference titled “Cultural Counterpoints: Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America,” Indiana University, Bloomington, October 19-23, 2011, and was accepted on the basis of its abstract, which was peer-reviewed. This paper is presented as submitted by the author, who has authorized its dissemination through *IUScholarWorks*.

¹ Robert Reiss, “H.P. Presentation is Swell Occasion but Lacks Timely Proletarian Touch,” *Philadelphia Record*, 1 April 1932, 11.