

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



**Labonville, Marie (Illinois State University):
“Roque Cordero (1917–2008) in the United States”**

Abstract:

Roque Cordero is universally acknowledged as Panama’s finest composer. Like many Latin American musicians of his generation, he was an energetic, visionary man of multiple talents that included composing, writing, conducting, and teaching. During his long career he was honored with numerous national and international commissions, awards, and recognitions. Most of his compositions are based on the twelve-tone technique, which he used with some freedom. He imparted Panamanian flavor to many of these works by his use of folk rhythms and his careful choice of pitch materials.

Cordero was largely self-taught as a composer until, in 1943, he began seven years of musical study in the United States. In 1950 he returned to Panama, eager to improve music education in his country and create a truly professional symphony orchestra. During the next sixteen years, however, he faced a series of political and economic obstacles that were mitigated only slightly in 1957 when he gained international recognition as a composer. In 1966, frustrated and disappointed, he left Panama to accept a three-year post at Indiana University as assistant director of the Latin American Music Center and teacher of composition. After that he found other professional opportunities in the United States, where he spent the rest of his life. Nevertheless he remained loyal to his homeland, retaining his Panamanian citizenship and proudly signing his correspondence “Roque Cordero, Panamanian Composer.” This paper explores Cordero’s education, career, and reception, as well as the documentation of his work, in Panama and the United States.

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Roque Cordero (1917–2008) in the United States

Marie Labonville, Illinois State University

“Cultural Counterpoints:

Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America”

Latin American Music Center, Indiana University

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Good afternoon! I am Roque Cordero’s biographer, and I have been collecting information about him for the past three years. I knew him, however, for a very short time. We planned to work together on his biography starting in the autumn of 2008. In October of that year we spent a week getting to know each other, while he regaled me with detailed anecdotes from his musical past. He complained that other people had published inaccurate information about him, so I promised that he would read my manuscript before it went to the publisher. Sadly, about a week after my visit he became ill and was no longer able to meet with me. In late December, only two months after our meeting, he passed away unexpectedly. Fortunately, his family has been very supportive of my work and has allowed me open access to his papers, which for the moment are in Dayton, Ohio, in the home where he lived during the last eight years of his life. By visiting this private archive several times per year, I have been able to learn about Cordero through his own words and music—via published interviews, his unpublished memoirs, his correspondence, his writings, and his scores. I have also been able to see him through the eyes of journalists who wrote about him, music critics who commented on his compositions, and graduate students who analyzed selected works in theses and dissertations. I have not yet learned all there is to know about him, however, because my research among his papers is ongoing. His career spanned some sixty years so there is a great deal of material to be sifted and examined, and I have not yet found everything I need to see. This afternoon I am sharing what I have learned so far, and I look forward to learning even more in the coming months.

Before I describe the remarkable trajectory of Roque Cordero’s life, I would like to provide an overview of his career, much of which developed in the United States after

he left his native Panama in 1966 [see the appendix for a timeline]. Cordero was an energetic musician who was active as a conductor, educator, writer, and composer. Most of his music is based on the twelve-tone technique, which he used with some freedom. His mature works include approximately 12 pieces for piano, 14 for orchestra, 5 for string orchestra, 3 for soloist and orchestra, 32 for chamber ensemble, 5 for chorus, 1 for chorus and orchestra, 2 for ballet dancers, and 1 film score. His other output includes a harmony method, a counterpoint method, and a solfege method,¹ plus at least 60 prose writings. A number of these writings deal with music in Panama, music education, or the issue of musical nationalism. His productivity has been honored with numerous commissions, honors, and awards, including—to name only a few—a Guggenheim fellowship, two decorations from the government of Panama, two international composition prizes, and the Koussevitzky International Recording Award.

Cordero's memoirs reveal that, all his life, he continued to feel amazed at the unusual and unexpected path his life had taken.² The fact is that nothing in his earliest years foreshadowed his future career as a composer of international stature. He was born in 1917 into a non-musical working-class family of color who lived in Panama City. During his childhood most public schools had no music program, nor was there any public conservatory in the country. Further, his family was poor, and so private music lessons were out of the question. And finally, during his boyhood he felt no particular attraction to music even though he regularly heard live performances on Sundays, at band concerts in the park.³

His later development as a composer was made possible by, as he put it in his memoirs, many “amazing circumstances” that began once he reached adolescence.⁴

¹The harmony and counterpoint methods are unpublished.

²Roque Cordero, “Roque’s Memoirs” (transcription of informal oral memoirs dictated during the 1980s and 1990s; typescript, private collection of Roque Cordero). These memoirs were dictated into a tape recorder while Cordero and his wife made lengthy automobile trips. As she drove, he spoke into a tape recorder in a conversational manner, telling the story of his life as though he were speaking directly to her. She later transcribed the tapes into a 183-page typescript that was intended for members of the family.

³Roque Cordero, “Remembranzas de Roque Cordero,” *Revista Lotería* (Panama City) no. 368 (September–October 1987): 16.

⁴Cordero, “Roque’s Memoirs,” 1.

These so-called “amazing circumstances” came in the form of timely coincidences that continued to appear in his life even during middle age. Whenever he was ready to move forward in his musical or professional development, the right opportunity would mysteriously present itself at the right time. This began in his early teens while he was attending a vocational school where he was studying to become a plumber. One day, the music teacher announced that the school had purchased some string instruments and was looking for students to learn how to play them. Cordero was not interested, but later that day the first of those “amazing circumstances” changed the entire direction of his life. As he was leaving the school building he noticed the music teacher in a corner, surrounded by a group of students who were raising their hands. Not knowing what was going on, Cordero joined the group and raised his hand also, and the teacher grabbed it and said, “Here is the hand of a violinist.” Thus Cordero began to learn the violin, joined the school orchestra, and discovered that he enjoyed it.⁵

Before long he joined the school band as well, on clarinet. He did not yet know how to read music, but simply imitated the more experienced students. He played well enough, however, that he was soon able to join one of the city’s municipal bands—the Firemen’s Band, where he was the last clarinet.⁶ He later commented, “The only music that I heard and performed during my adolescence was fantasies on Italian operas and selections from Spanish zarzuelas, in addition to marches, danzas, tangos, and pasillos. The [Panamanian] composers of that time, whose footsteps I could follow . . . only wrote popular music.”⁷

This exposure to popular styles led Cordero, around the age of fifteen, to compose his first piece, a tango for solo clarinet.⁸ His school band director looked at the crudely notated melody and realized that Cordero did not understand how to read music, so he told him that he needed to learn solfège—which Cordero then did on his own, with the help of a solfège book and some scores of popular pieces for piano. After that he composed a new dance melody, but found himself unable to create the piano

⁵Ibid., 2–3.

⁶Ibid., 4–5.

⁷Cordero, “Remembranzas,” 16.

⁸He gives age of “about fourteen” in his memoirs (p. 4) and age fifteen in “Remembranzas” (p. 16).

accompaniment because he knew nothing about chords. Therefore he set himself to study harmony on his own, at the public library, and before long was able to harmonize his new dance tune.⁹

By that time Cordero had begun working as a copyist for the Firemen's Band, which enabled him to learn enough about the instruments to arrange his newly harmonized dance melody for that ensemble.¹⁰ He became more confident and wrote several other band pieces in a popular vein. In spite of the success of these lightweight pieces, he experienced a desire to compose in a more serious style.¹¹

A growing interest in the orchestra led him to study the few symphonic scores available to him at the time.¹² By the year he turned twenty-two he had composed his first orchestral piece, a work he titled *Capricho interiorano*. This piece derived its distinctly national flavor from references to the rhythm and melody of a well-known folk dance of the *mejorana* genre.¹³

At this point Cordero realized that he had reached the limit of what he could compose without systematic formal instruction, so he stopped writing. For the next four years he composed nothing, though he played viola in the new Symphony Orchestra of Panama and taught music at his former secondary school.¹⁴ He also began studying the melodic and rhythmic elements of Panamanian folk dances, with the hope of giving his future creations a national flavor without using direct musical quotes.¹⁵

The time was right for another "amazing circumstance." At the University of Panama, Cordero enrolled in a music appreciation class taught by an American named Myron Schaeffer. Schaeffer noticed that Cordero was far ahead of the other students, and

⁹Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 4–6.

¹⁰Ibid., 6–7.

¹¹Cordero, "Remembranzas," 16.

¹²Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 17.

¹³"La chorrerana," according to Cordero in his "El serialismo y el elemento panameño en la obra de Roque Cordero" (lecture, n.p., n.d. [probably Panama City, 1995]; typescript, private collection of Roque Cordero), 4. He later used other melodic elements of "La chorrerana" in movement 6 ("Mejorana") of his *Eight Miniatures* (1944, rev. 1948) as well as in *Sonatina Rítmica* (1943) and *Música para Cinco Metales* (1980) (ibid.).

¹⁴Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 9–10; "El serialismo," 3.

¹⁵Cordero, "El serialismo," 3.

arranged a scholarship for him to study music education in the United States at the University of Minnesota. No composition scholarships were available, but Schaeffer felt that once Cordero was in Minnesota, he would be able to find a way to study composition.¹⁶

So great was Cordero's desire to improve as a composer that he accepted this opportunity at once, even though he did not speak English. Three months later, in March of 1943, he arrived in the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, bringing with him the only two compositions he felt worthy of consideration: his *Capricho interiorano* for orchestra, and a work for band titled *Reina de amor*. The very next month, a third "amazing circumstance" affected his life in a most positive way. He conducted his band piece in a university concert—and in the audience, by coincidence, was John Sherman, music critic of the *Minneapolis Star*. Sherman was impressed, and a few months later introduced Cordero to Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony. Mitropoulos looked at Cordero's orchestra piece and commented on his mastery of orchestration, but observed that Cordero needed to learn counterpoint. He then offered to pay for Cordero to study counterpoint with Ernst Krenek at Hamline University in nearby St. Paul, Minnesota. The following morning Cordero met Krenek, who would become his teacher for the next three and a half years.¹⁷

Shortly after meeting Krenek, Cordero decided to learn more about his new teacher by visiting the library. There, he discovered Krenek's little book titled *Studies in Counterpoint Based on the Twelve-Tone Technique*, in which Krenek clearly explained the dodecaphonic method. As Cordero read his teacher's explanations, he realized that if he completely mastered the twelve-tone system, he would be able to find a way to use it while still maintaining his own identity. He asked Krenek to teach him the method, but Krenek was hesitant. He knew that Cordero wanted to be a "Panamanian composer"—and Krenek believed that a Central European technique was unsuited to the sensibility or aesthetic of a Latin American. Cordero responded that he wanted mastery of the technique in order to use it in the service of his personal aesthetic. Krenek believed that

¹⁶Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 11–12.

¹⁷Ibid., 12–18.

Cordero's goal would be very difficult to attain, but he agreed to teach Cordero the method anyway, to see what might result.¹⁸

For a short time Cordero continued composing in a tonal style, but in 1944 he made his first attempt to use the twelve-tone technique while imparting a Panamanian flavor.¹⁹ In 1946 he finally felt he had achieved his ideal of marrying the twelve-tone system to the Panamanian element. That year he completed his *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano, which convinced Krenek that his pupil had indeed found a way to use the twelve-tone method while still maintaining his identity as a Latin American composer.²⁰

From that point forward, Cordero used the twelve-tone technique for the majority of his pieces, though he felt free to break Schoenberg's rules for musical reasons. Usually, he would notate an idea and then see how it could be transformed into a row.²¹ In order to bring Panamanian elements into his pitch materials, he crafted his rows in such a way that they would create melodies or harmonies that had tonal characteristics without being explicitly tonal.²² Sometimes he even altered the order of a row or repeated certain pitches. He gave Panamanian flavor to his rhythmic materials by incorporating rhythms of folk dances such as the *mejorana*, the *punto*, the *cumbia*, the *pasillo*, and the *tamborito*.²³ His rhythmic language was further characterized by ostinato, changing meters, and great vitality.

In 1950 Cordero's musical studies came to an end, seven years after he had first arrived in the United States at the age of twenty-five. By then he had not only graduated from Hamline University with a bachelor's degree, but he had also married his classmate Betty Johnson, studied conducting in New York, received a Guggenheim fellowship, and accepted commissions. Further, he had met important North American composers including Henry Cowell, Aaron Copland, and Edgard Varèse, and had become

¹⁸Cordero, "El serialismo," 1–2.

¹⁹In *Eight Miniatures* (1944), a work for chamber orchestra that included three movements named after Panamanian dances: movement 3, "Pasillo"; movement 4, "Danzonete"; movement 6, "Mejorana" (Cordero, "El serialismo," 3). He revised the work in 1948 (*ibid.*).

²⁰Cordero, "El serialismo," 4–5.

²¹Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 138.

²²Cordero, "El serialismo," 4; here Cordero refers to Alban Berg's employment of the same principle in his *Violin Concerto*.

²³*Ibid.*, 4–5.

acquainted, during a summer course at Tanglewood, with several Latin American composers including Alberto Ginastera and Juan Orrego-Salas.²⁴ In August of 1950, eager to make use of what he had learned, Cordero returned to Panama accompanied by Betty and their infant son. Little did he realize that he was about to face sixteen years of political and economic obstacles.

Almost immediately, Cordero discovered that his education and energy were not welcomed by certain Panamanian musicians, who evidently felt jealous or feared that he might take away their jobs. A national conservatory had been established during the previous decade, but in spite of Cordero's obvious qualifications, no position was offered to him. After a short while he managed to obtain a part-time post there, but at an insultingly low salary. Before long, however, his salary and teaching responsibilities increased and he was appointed assistant director, and then director, of the institution. He implemented a number of reforms in the curriculum and staff but his reforms were frequently resisted by people who, in Cordero's opinion, preferred mediocrity to high standards.²⁵

Despite his demanding schedule at the conservatory, Cordero found time to write articles and concert reviews and to compose in the evenings. In 1956 he learned of an international composition contest connected with the Second Festival of Latin American Music in Caracas, Venezuela. He realized that this festival was an important opportunity to represent Panama in the international music scene, and decided to write his second symphony for the occasion.²⁶ His symphony did win one of the prizes, and in March of 1957 he traveled to Caracas to attend the festival and hear the premiere of his symphony. While there, he interacted with many Latin American composers including, to name only a few, Carlos Chávez, Alberto Ginastera, Aurelio de la Vega, and Juan Orrego-Salas.

After winning that prize, Cordero's life began to improve. The cash award helped his family's financial situation and the Panamanian musicians who had been opposing

²⁴The other Latin American musicians he met at Tanglewood included Antonio Estévez, Julián Orbón, Héctor Tosar, Oscar Buenaventura, and Eleazar de Carvalho (Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 24).

²⁵Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 35–42; see also 48, 52, and 127–128.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 42–43, 127–128.

him had to tone down their attacks, though they never ceased entirely.²⁷ He began receiving commissions from other countries.²⁸ He also began traveling in the United States and Latin America giving lectures and guest conducting, and participating in gatherings such as the Inter-American Music Festivals in Washington and the meetings of the Inter-American Music Council, of which he was a founding member.²⁹ These trips brought him into contact with the leading composers of many nations. He himself, in fact, had become the leading composer of his own country.

In 1964 Cordero resigned as director of the conservatory in order to become the conductor of the national orchestra of Panama. He felt a responsibility to improve the orchestra so it would educate his countrymen about classical music, and so it could give respectable concerts in 1970 to honor Beethoven on the second centennial of his birth.³⁰ Cordero's plans for the ensemble were not, however, given the moral and financial support necessary to carry them out. Therefore he must have welcomed the opportunity, in April of 1965, to get away from it all by traveling to the United States to participate in two inter-American musical events—one here in Bloomington, and the other in Washington. It was a trip that would, ultimately, change the direction of his life.

²⁷Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 52.

²⁸He received commissions from the Minneapolis Civic Orchestra in 1958; the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in 1959; the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in 1961; cellist Adolfo Odnoposoff in 1963; the Third Festival of Latin American Music of Caracas in 1965; and Hamline University in 1966 (Roque Cordero, "Roque Cordero / Compositor, director de orquesta y educador panameño / Ficha biográfica" [curriculum vitae, n.d. (1988?), typescript, private collection of Roque Cordero], 3–4).

²⁹He gave lectures at the Universidad de Chile and the Universidad Católica of Buenos Aires in 1960; at the Universidad de Costa Rica in 1961; at the Conservatorio Nacional de Música of Mexico City in 1961; at the Instituto Guatemalteco-Americano in Guatemala City in 1961; at the II Conferencia Interamericana de Educación Musical in Santiago de Chile in 1963, at four simultaneous gatherings hosted by the Latin American Music Center of Indiana University in 1965 (from printed programs, press clippings, and published transcripts in the private collection of Roque Cordero). Guest conducting included appearances with the Orquesta de Cuerdas de la Radiotelevisora Nacional de Colombia in 1959; the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Colombia in 1959; and the Orquesta Filarmónica de Chile in 1960 (Cordero, "Roque Cordero / Compositor," 4).

³⁰Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 55; see also his open letter to President Marco A. Robles and Minister of Education Rigoberto Paredes, published as "Carta abierta de Roque Cordero al Presidente de la República y al Ministro de Educación Na[ciona]l," *La Estrella de Panamá* (Panama City), September 8, 1965.

First, Cordero visited Indiana University to attend four gatherings hosted simultaneously by the Latin American Music Center: (1) the Third Spring Festival of Music of the Americas, (2) the Fourth General Assembly of the Inter-American Music Council, (3) the First Inter-American Composers Seminar, and (4) the Second Inter-American Conference on Ethnomusicology. He heard a performance of his first string quartet, gave a lecture titled “The Public and Live Music,” and participated in a round-table discussion that included composers and ethnomusicologists.³¹ More importantly, he met two men who within the next few years would offer him the professional opportunities that would keep him in the United States for the rest of his life. Those two men were Ronald Freed, of Peer Southern music publishing company, and Arthur Corra, the director of the Indiana University contemporary music ensemble.³²

After leaving Bloomington, Cordero went to Washington to attend the Third Inter-American Music Festival and then returned to Panama, where once again he faced political and financial struggles as conductor of the national orchestra. The orchestra was improving, but unfortunately the government did not support his aspirations to professionalize the ensemble by paying the orchestra members a respectable salary and hiring additional musicians from abroad. At the same time, Cordero noticed that the conservatory had begun regressing from the point to which it had risen while he had been its director. In frustration, he published an open letter to the president of Panama and the minister of education. In this letter Cordero asserted that if the government did not support the orchestra as it merited, he would have to leave Panama—with deep sadness—so he could dedicate himself to composition in a more favorable artistic climate. Unfortunately, his strongly worded letter brought about only a very slight improvement in the orchestra’s miserable financial condition.³³

Fortunately, however, Cordero was rescued from this discouraging situation by another timely “amazing circumstance.” This one came in the form of an offer from Juan

³¹Information is from the printed program. Cordero’s talk “The Public and Live Music” was published in 1967 as “El público y la música viva” (see the bibliography). The round-table discussion was part of a session titled “Nationalism, Traditional Music, and the American Composer.”

³²Cordero, “Roque’s Memoirs,” 77 and 85.

³³*Ibid.*, 57–59; 65. His open letter to the president and minister of education (“Carta abierta . . .”) was cited previously.

Orrego-Salas to become assistant director of the Latin American Music Center here, and to teach composition as well. At the time, Orrego-Salas was the director of the Center but also taught private composition students and courses in Latin American music. He had a secretary, but needed someone more knowledgeable to assist him so he would be able to enhance the services of the Center and have more time for his students and his own creative activity.³⁴

Maestro Orrego-Salas told me that he favored Cordero for the position because Cordero was interested in composing music with national roots, whereas Orrego-Salas himself did not share that particular interest. Orrego-Salas believed that, in order to broaden the scope of the Center, it would be beneficial to hire a composer whose artistic point of view was different from his own.³⁵ His other reason for selecting Cordero, he told me, was that he liked him very much, as a friend.

Cordero accepted the position, and in the summer of 1966 moved with his family to Bloomington. His new responsibilities included handling correspondence for the Latin American Music Center, giving private composition lessons, teaching a course from time to time, and substituting for Orrego-Salas when he was off campus. He even had time to compose several new pieces. Every year, he worked with Orrego-Salas on the programming of the annual Spring Festivals of Latin American music, each of which featured several concerts. Cordero's music always appeared in these festivals, and Orrego-Salas has told me that Cordero's pieces were very successful with the audiences.³⁶

The musical environment at Indiana University greatly impressed Cordero. He found the teaching staff to be very professional, and the students, very interesting and talented. He recalled that his teaching load was heavy and that he even had to teach on Saturdays—but he enjoyed working with the students, because they were interested in acquiring knowledge. One of his disappointments, according to his memoirs, was that he was never invited to conduct any of the university orchestras even though he had been the conductor of the national orchestra of Panama. His other sadness was that none of

³⁴Juan Orrego-Salas, interview by the author, Bloomington, Indiana, November 23, 2010.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

Indiana University's fine orchestras ever played any of his compositions, which were only performed during the yearly Spring Festivals.³⁷

Cordero's employment at Indiana ended in the summer of 1969, but no other teaching positions were available. He had no plans to return to Panama, however, because he had already burned his bridges there. Fortunately, a new "amazing circumstance" enabled him to remain in the United States. One day he was contacted by Ronald Freed, whom he had met in April of 1965 during the four simultaneous conventions hosted by the Latin American Music Center. Ronald Freed worked for Cordero's publisher, Peer Southern, and was calling to offer Cordero a newly created position as music editor. Cordero accepted, and in September of 1969 moved to New York to begin a new phase of his career.³⁸

A considerable part of Cordero's duties at Peer Southern involved correcting scores that were about to be published, including some by composers in South America. One of his more interesting projects involved editing Charles Ives' Second Symphony, which Peer Southern had published earlier—in 1951—with many errors. In preparation for a new edition, Cordero went to the music library at Lincoln Center to look at Ives' sketches and discovered that, although many of the errors were simple mistakes by the copyist, the last few bars of the printed score were completely different from Ives' manuscripts. After considerable effort, Cordero eventually discovered how that had happened.³⁹ Another absorbing project involved traveling, in 1970, to several capital cities in South America to meet with composers and offer them the opportunity of publishing through Peer Southern.⁴⁰ Cordero enjoyed these responsibilities, which left him time to compose two new works and oversee the premieres of two others that he had

³⁷Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 69–70.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 78.

³⁹Cordero tried energetically but fruitlessly to find out who had altered Ives' ending, and finally, long after he had left Peer Southern, he questioned Lou Harrison and learned from Harrison that he and Henry Cowell had changed the ending—but they had done so with Ives' approval (Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 80–82).

⁴⁰Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 82–84.

completed earlier. He was able to take a break, in May of 1970, to participate in a music festival in Rio de Janeiro, where he also served as a juror in a composition contest.⁴¹

After about two years at Peer Southern, Cordero began to think about returning to education although he did not actively seek another teaching post. As it turned out, he need not have looked, because another unexpected “amazing circumstance” brought him a fulfilling teaching position at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. In June of 1972, while still at Peer Southern, Cordero received a telephone call from Arthur Corra, whom he had known at Indiana University where Corra had been the director of the contemporary music group. Corra had left Indiana since then and was now chair of the music department at Illinois State University. He offered Cordero an excellent salary to become the university’s first professor of composition and teach a course in twentieth-century musical styles. The contract would involve nine months of teaching per year, so the other three months could be used for composing. Cordero accepted the offer immediately and spent the remaining weeks of the summer designing the new course in twentieth-century styles. At the end of August 1972 he and Betty, and their youngest son, moved to central Illinois.⁴² It was the beginning of a twenty-eight year relationship with Illinois State University.

Cordero was very happy with his new situation. He enjoyed the support not only of his supervisor, Arthur Corra, but also of the Dean of Fine Arts. His colleagues were friendly and he found many students eager to learn. His schedule allowed him time to compose and to do research in the library so he could refine his course in twentieth-century styles.⁴³ Before long, his teaching responsibilities expanded to include classes in orchestration as well as form and analysis.⁴⁴ He also conducted performances of contemporary music and created a series of annual concerts featuring Latin American compositions. In the larger campus community, he networked with Latin American colleagues from other departments and co-founded the Organization of Latino Employees, whose acronym was OLÉ.

⁴¹This was the II Festival de Música da Guanabara; Cordero’s *Música veinte* was premiered on that occasion. For his activities as a juror see “Roque’s Memoirs,” 82–83.

⁴²Cordero, “Roque’s Memoirs,” 84–87.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 151.

In this favorable environment, Cordero flourished as a composer. The performers on the teaching staff were excellent, so he felt stimulated to create many new works for them. He also wrote for the student orchestra and fulfilled commissions from outside the university. He maintained his habit of regular professional travel, presenting his music at national and international festivals and accepting invitations to lecture and guest conduct.⁴⁵ His accomplishments were rewarded with grants, commissions, and official honors. For example, in 1974 he won the Koussevitzky International Recording award for his violin concerto. In 1977, his third string quartet earned the chamber music prize at an inter-American music competition in Costa Rica. And in 1983, he became the first and only professor of music at Illinois State University to be honored with the title of Distinguished Professor. Cordero later commented in his memoirs that the support he received at Illinois State University made him feel truly appreciated as a composer and conductor.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, in Panama, Cordero's success in the United States had become a source of pride within much of the music community. He became a legendary figure there, and was invited back to Panama City several times to give lectures and seminars and to receive official recognition.⁴⁷ Although Cordero appreciated these invitations and

⁴⁵His destinations during his professional travel while a full-time professor at Illinois State University included, among others: the Ives Centennial in New Haven and New York in 1974; Panama, to arrange music for the Ballet Folklórico in 1974; an unidentified festival in Houston in 1974; the Music Educators National Conference, Atlantic City in 1976; an unidentified festival in Maracaibo, Venezuela in 1977; the twentieth Inter-American Music Festival in 1978; Panama, for five weeks of lecturing and teaching in 1978; the Fifth Interamerican Conference on Music Education, Mexico City in 1979; the First Encounter of Music Educators of America and Spain in 1982; the International Society of Music Education, Eugene, Oregon in 1984; the International Society of Music Education, Innsbruck, Austria in 1986 (from Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 81, 88–91, 90, 105, 92, 94, 175, 95–96, 101–102; Cordero, "Roque Cordero / Composer," 3). Guest conducting during this period included appearances with the Illinois State University Symphony Orchestra, the Bloomington/Normal Symphony Orchestra, the Conjunto de Música Contemporánea, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the Gusman Hall Chamber Ensemble, Miami (Cordero, "Roque Cordero / Composer," 4).

⁴⁶Cordero, "Roque's Memoirs," 88.

⁴⁷These trips to Panama included one in 1974 to receive the "National Honor" Gold Medal from the Caja de Ahorros (Cordero, "Roque Cordero / Composer," 2; "Roque's Memoirs," 90); one in 1978 for five weeks of teaching and lecturing ("Roque's Memoirs," 94–95); one in 1982 to receive the Grand Cross in the order of Vasco Núñez

awards, they did not entirely make up for the poor treatment he had received when he had actually labored there.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he remained fiercely proud of his nationality. He kept his Panamanian citizenship and always signed his correspondence “Roque Cordero, Panamanian composer.”

In 1987, when Cordero celebrated his seventieth birthday, he was obliged by law to withdraw from full-time teaching. For the next thirteen years, however, he continued to teach composition, part-time, at Illinois State University. He also continued to produce his yearly concerts of Latin American music. He filled the rest of his hours with composing, attending international festivals,⁴⁹ and accepting commissions as well as invitations to lecture and guest conduct.

Cordero separated definitively from Illinois State University in 2000 and at the end of the year moved to Dayton, Ohio to be near his eldest son. He and his wife settled into a spacious house, where he maintained a lively e-mail correspondence with musicians all over Latin America. His health was excellent and he expected to live to be one hundred—but in November 2008 he became ill and passed away the following month, at the age of only ninety-one. He was mourned by his large and loving family, his Panamanian compatriots, his former students and colleagues, and the many Latin American musicians with whom he had formed lasting ties over the course of his long and memorable life. It has indeed been my privilege to get to know this remarkable man through his memoirs, his writings, his music, and the one October week I was able to spend with him before his final illness.

de Balboa at the presidential palace (“Roque Cordero / Composer,” 3; “Roque’s Memoirs,” 101); and one in 1995 to visit family and friends and give a lecture at the National Institute of Music (“Roque’s Memoirs,” 162). During the 1995 trip he was surprised to receive honors from both the National Institute of Music and the National Institute of Culture (*ibid.*, 167–168).

⁴⁸Cordero, “Roque’s Memoirs,” 101; 169–170.

⁴⁹Among others, he regularly attended the annual Forums of Caribbean Composers.

Appendix: Timeline

1917–1942: Panama City

- Early to mid-1930s. Becomes interested in music while playing violin in the school orchestra and clarinet in the school band; joins the municipal Firemen's Band; makes tentative attempts at composition; learns solfège and harmony on his own; works as a copyist for the Firemen's Band and thereby learns about instrumentation.
- Mid 1930s–1939. Writes several pieces for band in a popular style; begins conducting; writes first orchestral work in 1939, after which he stops composing until 1943 because he believes he has reached the limit of what he can create without systematic formal instruction.
- 1939–1942. Teaches music at his former secondary school and plays viola in the new Symphony Orchestra of Panama. In December of 1942 is offered a scholarship to study music education in the United States.

1943–1950: United States (Minnesota and New York)

- 1943–1947. Studies music education at the University of Minnesota and composition with Ernst Krenek at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Meets Latin American composers during a summer course at Tanglewood in 1946; receives a bachelor's degree from Hamline University in June 1947; marries classmate Betty Johnson soon after graduation and moves with her to New York.
- 1947–1949. Studies conducting in New York with Leon Barzin; meets Henry Cowell, Aaron Copland, Edgard Varèse, and other musicians.
- 1949–1950. Financed by a Guggenheim fellowship, moves to Marine-on-St.-Croix, Minnesota and spends a year composing. Decides to return to Panama to educate the next generation of composers.

1950–1966: Panama City

- 1950–1956. Arrives in Panama in August 1950; soon begins teaching at the national conservatory. In 1951 becomes assistant director of the conservatory, then director in 1953. Writes articles and concert reviews. Experiences continual opposition from Panamanian musicians who evidently feel territorial and/or jealous.
- 1957. Symphony No. 2 (1956) wins a prize at the Second Festival of Latin American Music in Caracas.
- 1958–1964. Because of the Caracas prize, earns more respect in Panama but continues to face obstacles due to politics in the local music community. Begins to participate regularly in international festivals and conferences.
- 1964–1966. In 1964 resigns the directorship of the conservatory in order to become conductor of the national orchestra; learns that the government does not support his aspirations to professionalize the ensemble. This disappointment motivates him to emigrate in mid-1966, after enduring sixteen years of work-related frustrations.

1966–1969: United States (Bloomington, Indiana)

Assistant director of the Latin American Music Center under Juan Orrego-Salas, and professor of composition. Handles correspondence; teaches composition students and a few classes; helps plan the annual Spring Festivals of Latin American music.

1969–1972: United States (New York)

Music editor at Peer Southern music publishing company. Conducts research and corrects scores; recruits South American composers to publish their works through Peer Southern.

1972–2000: United States (Normal, Illinois)

- 1972–1987. Professor of composition at Illinois State University. Teaches private lessons and classes in style, orchestration, and musical form. Participates in international festivals and other music-related events; organizes annual campus concerts of Latin American music; co-founds a campus organization for Latin American employees. In 1987 is obliged to withdraw from full-time teaching due to a law that requires retirement at age 70.
- 1987–2000. Teaches composition part-time at Illinois State University. Maintains his series of campus concerts of Latin American music; participates in international music festivals; accepts invitations to guest conduct.

2000–2008: United States (Dayton, Ohio)

In 2000 moves to Dayton, Ohio to be near his eldest son. Corresponds with musicians all over Latin America; attends concerts; authorizes his biography. Becomes ill in early November 2008 and dies on December 27.

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