

Tracing Ginastera's Map

The theme of this year's Focus! festival is the music of Latin America. The bulk of the works, as Joel Sachs points out in his article (opposite), are by contemporary composers, but there are also nods to the region's rich musical past. On January 27, Carlos Miguel Prieto conducts the Juilliard Orchestra in Alberto Ginastera's monumental Harp Concerto and other works. Faculty member Manuel Sosa considers Ginastera's legacy.

By MANUEL SOSA

In many ways, Alberto Ginastera was a cartographer, a man who embraced his world, who understood that coordinates are also possibilities, that longitude and latitude are meeting places. Perhaps influenced by Amerigo Vespucci's adventurous example, Ginastera realized early on that he could also draw his own map, with lines connecting his South America to audiences, musicians, and institutions alike around the world. He would eventually become one of the most influential Latin American composers of the 20th century, deeply rooted in the complex fabric of his native Argentina but equally invested in the European musical heritage.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1916, by the time Ginastera was in his early 20s he'd had his first international commission, *La Estancia*, for Lincoln Kirstein's American Ballet Caravan. That was followed by a Guggenheim Foundation award that financed time in the United States (1945–47), where he attended Tanglewood and cemented a lifelong friendship with Aaron Copland. As the lines in Ginastera's map intensified, the 1950s brought important commissions, among them his fantastic String Quartet No. 2, premiered by the Juilliard String Quartet at the 1958 Inter-American Music Festival in Washington, D.C.

Ginastera's colorful and rhythmically driven Harp Concerto was commissioned in 1956, but it was not completed and premiered until 1965. The concerto presents a solo instrument that strives to strike a balance between its rhythmical needs and its melodic desires as it battles the different instrumental families of an insistent and incisive full orchestra, one that also includes a battery of 28 percussion instruments. Typically, Ginastera achieves a high degree of intensity, direction, and drama through the strategic juxtaposition of rhythmic and melodic folk elements with flowing nonfolk gestures, creating a vibrant space through a process of addition and subtraction. You feel the ghost of his beloved instrument—the guitar—in his writing for the harp, and the symbiosis between the two instruments, essential to the nature of the piece, may be the main reason behind the unusually long time it took him to complete it. But once he did, the concerto became an important addition to the harp repertoire and went on to become one of his most popular and performed works as well as one of the most influential Latin American concertos.

Ginastera's epic *Cantata para América Mágica* (1961)—a synthesis of South American folkloric elements and prosody with 12-tone procedures—illustrated the possibilities of combining folk materials with European procedures and was instrumental in his being named, in 1962, director of the Instituto Di Tella's new Center for Advanced Musical Studies (CLAEM), in Buenos Aires. He transformed it into an immensely influential platform for creativity and experimentation while remaining invested in advancing a deep sense of locality. He invited Copland, Dallapiccola, Nono, Xenakis, and others to lecture at the center, which housed a generation of remarkable young composers who would develop a more intimate, vibrant, and relevant understanding of what it means to be a Latin American composer. Meanwhile Ginastera's opera *Don Rodrigo* inaugurated the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center in 1966 and his *Bomarzo* had a successful world premiere in Washington, D.C., only to be banned at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires weeks later, an act of oppression by the totalitarian government that would eventually persuade Ginastera to move to Geneva.

The international commissions continued; he completed his opera *Beatrice Cenci* just in time for the opening of the Kennedy Center, in 1971, and in 1974, soprano Benita Valente and the Juilliard String Quartet premiered Ginastera's lyrical five-movement Third String Quartet in Dallas. Later, attempting to reconnect with Latin America, he gathered inspiration from the Mayan book of creation for his towering *Popol Vuh*, a Philadelphia Orchestra commission that was unfinished at his death, in 1983.

For many, Ginastera was a nationalistic composer, for others he was a committed universalist. In a sense, he was both: he passionately advanced the idea of an art that was genuinely Latin American but also eagerly universal, and he advocated a sort of rediscovery of the continent through a conscious assessment of its innate expressive potential. At heart he was an intensely pragmatic artist who relished in his acute understanding of the Latin American sense of time, as he lived within the space of his flexible melodic intuition. His map is still intact, and as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of his birth, the lines are still resonating and signaling a visionary sense of structure and direction to younger composers everywhere, but especially to those from Latin America.

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