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Latin composers revive a connection to folk art

By **Janelle Gelfand**, jgelfand@enquirer.com
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Latin American music is chic again, says Mexican-born composer Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon, 40, because of renewed interest in folk and world music.

In the '30s and '40s, Latino music had a strong American presence, largely thanks to American composer Aaron Copland. Copland (1900-90), regarded as one of America's most important composers, visited Mexico for the first time in 1932, inspiring his orchestra piece *El Salon Mexico*. In the '30s and '40s he traveled extensively in South America, including one trip as a musical ambassador for the State Department. There he developed friendships with many composers, such as Argentina's Alberto Ginastera, and promoted their work in the United States.

But after World War II, contemporary music shifted to an abstract style that was grounded in the listener-unfriendly 12-tone school.

"Nationalism was seen as poisonous. Mexico was left out of the view consisting of the Darmstadt School (a school associated with serial music in the '50s)," says Dr. Zohn-Muldoon, a former faculty member at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, now at the Eastman School in Rochester, N.Y.

Today's nationalism in music is different from that of the '30s, he says.

"Now it's more about celebrating the elements of your culture," Dr. Zohn-Muldoon says. "It's a nationalism that's not political. At its best, it lets you revive that connection to folk art that always has been important to classical arts."

From the '30s, Carlos Chavez's name stands out, a Mexican composer who also conducted the Mexico Symphony Orchestra. Musicians are rediscovering the music of Alberto Ginastera and Astor Piazzolla from Argentina, Heitor Villa-Lobos from Brazil and Silvestre Revueltas, a Mexican composer who wrote 10 film scores.

And now there is an explosion of new work coming out of Latin America, Dr. Zohn-Muldoon says.

The names pour out: Mexican composers Juan Trigos Ruanova, Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez, Mario Lavista and Javier Alvarez. In Ecuador, there's Diego Luzuriaga. Venezuelans include Ricardo Lorenz, Adina Izarra, Arcangel

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Castillo and Diogenes Rivas.

From Cuba comes Tania Leon. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra commissioned her splashy orchestra piece *Carabali* in 1991. Her 1994 opera, *Scourge of Hyacinths*, was staged by Robert Wilson and premiered in Geneva.

Puerto Rican composer Roberto Sierra and Argentinians Mario Davidovsky and Jorge Liderman have been working in the United States for decades.

These composers all have something to say, says Dr. Zohn-Muldoon.

"They have a very sophisticated craft. They have individual voices and it comes through in the music," he says.



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