

**COLLECTION**  
**BBVA FOUNDATION - NEOS**

**Alberto Ginastera**  
**Popol Vuh · Cantata para América Mágica**

**OF HUMANKIND AND THE WORLD'S CREATION**

**Alberto Ginastera and Myth Transformed into Sound**

Alberto Ginastera is the most important composer Argentina has yet produced, standing alongside Heitor Villa-Lobos of Brazil and Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas of Mexico at the forefront of Latin America's classical modernists. Born in Buenos Aires on 11 April 1916, he was of Catalan extraction on his father's side and Italian on his mother's and started music lessons at an early age. From 1928 to 1935 he studied at the Alberto Williams Conservatory (named after the founding father of Argentina's national music), and from 1936 to 1938 at the Conservatorio Nacional. His first work to attract attention was *Impresiones de la puna* for flute and string quartet (1931–34), whose refined folk inflections set it clearly apart from its conventional surroundings. His breakthrough came in 1937 with the suite from his ballet *Panambí*; and by 1941, with his ballet *Estancia*, the twenty-five-year-old Ginastera had become one of the internationally renowned composers of his generation. These works, sustained by ecstatic rhythms, a folk ethos, and at times searing dissonance, are the ones that most present-day listeners associate with the name of Ginastera, a sort of *gaucho* Bartók. Two symphonies, composed in 1942 and 1944, were later withdrawn by the composer, who thereafter avoided the genre altogether. He produced a voluminous and multi-faceted body of orchestral and piano pieces, fascinating chamber music and vocal works – including the highly advanced and much-discussed operas *Don Rodrigo* (1963–64), *Bomarzo* (1966–67), and *Beatriz Cenci* (1971) – and the powerful *Turbae ad Passionem Gregorianam* for the Philadelphia Orchestra (1974). His instrumental concertos, including one each for harp and violin and two each for piano and cello, have more or less found a foothold in the international repertoire. From 1941 to 1969 Ginastera worked in Argentina as a teacher and leading administrator apart from two interruptions (1941–48 and 1952–55), one because he was *persona non grata* under the Péron régime, and the other on a post-war fellowship to the United States. From 1971 until his death on 25 June 1983 he lived in Geneva with his second wife, the Argentine cellist Aurora Nátola. It thus comes as no surprise that, besides piano music, he also made seminal contributions to the cello literature.

Ginastera's music falls into four periods. First came his national phase, which thrived on the use of open-string guitar chords and *malambo* rhythms. The second period, which spanned the 1940s and 1950s, witnessed his complete mastery of complex forms. In this respect he resembles Bartók, though in a wholly independent manner, with dense

chromaticism, intricate motivic textures, symmetrical architectural balance, and an overall feeling of improvisation. The 'expressionist' third period, lasting into the 1970s, saw his contribution to twelve-tone technique and bears witness to his study of Webern and Schoenberg, though it was Alban Berg who earned his deepest admiration. It was in this progressive period that he wrote the cantatas *para América Mágica* (1960) and *Milena* after Kafka (1971) as well as his three operas. After relocating to Europe he increasingly sought to merge all the elements at his disposal. The following excerpt from a late interview with L. Tan represents his own testimony on this fourth period, which gave rise to his central composition *Popol Vuh*: "I am evolving ... The change is taking the form of a ... reversion ... to the primitive America of the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas. This influence in my music I feel as not folkloristic, but ... as a kind of metaphysical inspiration ... What I have done is a reconstitution of the transcendental aspect of the ancient pre-Columbian world."

*Cantata para América Mágica*, composed in 1960, is based on Ginastera's own selection of apocryphal pre-Columbian sources, recast in modern form by his first wife Mercedes de Toro, with whom he was married from 1941 to 1969. It was commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation and premièred in Washington, DC, by the soprano Raquel Adonaylo and the National Symphony Orchestra under Howard Mitchell on 31 April 1961. The scoring is extremely unusual: thirteen percussionists on more than fifty instruments (including an impressive number of indigenous items), one celesta, and two pianos offset the solo voice, thereby heightening its singularity as the sole 'melodic' instrument against an alien, ritually contrasting backdrop. Owing to the extreme demands it places on the singer's technique, tone, and powers of expression, the cantata is rarely performed, although the percussion section mirrors the mental drama of the overriding monody with a rare amalgam of colors and moods. The world as we know it is displayed here in its genesis and flowering, its conflicts and fears, and its ultimate destruction. It is doomed to perish, and another unknown world shall arise in its stead. A detailed introduction to this key work in Ginastera's oeuvre can be found in Hanns-Werner Heister's *Trauer eines Halbkontinents und Vergegenwärtigung von Geschichte* (Sorrows of a Southern Continent and Visualization of History), published in a book on Ginastera issued in 1984 by his principal publisher, Boosey & Hawkes (ISBN 3870902043). At least by the time of this work Ginastera's voice was no longer narrowly Argentinean or Latin American: it had become a pan-American voice for the cultures antedating the Christian-European conquest.

After Robert Page and the Philadelphia Orchestra had premièred Ginastera's monumental *Turbae ad Passionem Gregorianam* on 20 March 1975, the orchestra, under its principal conductor Eugene Ormandy, commissioned him to compose another work. That same year he embarked on the initial drafts for *Popol Vuh*, a purely instrumental translation of the Mayan creation myth *Popol Vuh*, or *Council Book*. The huge orchestra calls not only for triple woodwind and quadruple brass, but for two sets of timpani, four percussionists playing fifty instruments, two harps, a piano, and a large string orchestra. It was not until 1982, one year before his death, that Ginastera composed the bulk of the score. But he left the work unfinished: it is missing the movement dedicated to the 'new man', which was to have been set aside entirely for the percussion. A few years later, when the pianist Barbara Nissman performed Ginastera's First Piano Concerto with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin, she drew the conductor's attention to the abandoned

*Popol Vuh* manuscripts. During the rehearsals the two musicians quickly concluded that even the seven-movement version was a self-contained whole, and on 7 April 1989 Slatkin conducted the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in the work's première. In 1990 the same orchestra produced the first recording of the work for RCA. Since then *Popol Vuh* has attracted a cult following with its archaic modernity.

For the mythical element, Ginastera built on his *Cantata para América Mágica*, this time focusing not on humanity, its drama and destiny, but on the unique occurrence of the world's creation as described in the *Council Book*. This event closely resembles the account in the Christian Bible, whether in the significance of light (lightning, or electricity) or the Flood that drowns misshapen humanity. Remarkably, the world comes into being when birth is given to music. The first section, *The Everlasting Night*, is devoted to inchoate silence, the chaos before the creation – an uncanny grumbling in the nethermost registers in which the contrabass bassoon and bass tuba stand out and pallid timbres are occasionally interjected by the woodwind. Then the decision of the Divine Council to create the world bursts in with overwhelming force, soaring up to the glaring *altissimo* registers. *The Birth of the Earth* is conceived in musical terms: the fundamental is joined by the fifth of the marimba and leads to pentatonicism, the most primitive and benign form of melodic elaboration. The Adagio that follows, with its unprepared contrasts, introduces a previously nonexistent world, impulsively throbbing. *Nature Wakes* is dominated by a series of instrumental solos leading to a sort of variegated panorama of jungle life. *The Cry of Creation*, the work's dramatic center, intervenes like a sharp explosion of energy, at which point *The Grand Rain* begins, its inundating splashes ebbing away in a fragile violin solo. This is followed by the creation of mankind, *The Magic Ceremony of Indian Corn* (for "man is what he eats"), the only section sustained by rhythm, sublime and dance-like. The finale, *The Sun, the Moon, the Stars*, lends the work an overriding unity and splendor appropriate to the desire of the Creators – a hymn of praise for their creation. (It is quite natural to feel associations with a work similarly inspired by myth, the young Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite*.) The missing movement on mankind would probably, as in the *Council Book*, have related to the Creators' decision to darken men's minds in order to set a natural limit to their hubris. Listeners are unaware of its absence: on the contrary, *Popol Vuh* must be seen not only as a sort of orchestral *magnum opus*, but as one of the most fully coherent compositions Ginastera had written since the 1960s, a work immediately intelligible in its fusion of primitivism and craftsmanship. In Ginastera's *Popol Vuh* we experience myth transformed into sound.

Ginastera prefaced his score with the following brief summary of the Mayan creation myth: "All lay in suspense, in stillness, in silence; all was invisible, motionless. Nothing existed but space in the heavens, the peaceable sea and the mansion of shadows. Only the gods, the Creators, were in the water surrounded by brightness and sheathed in feathers: Tepeu, Gucumatz, Tzakol, Bitol, Alom, Qaholom ...

Then, together with the Spirits of the Heavens – Cakulha, the Force of Lightning, Chipi Cakulha, the Trail left by Lightning, Raxa Cakulha, the Splendor of Lightning – which make up the Heart of Heaven, they held council and ruled that at dawn life should be born. And they decided the likes of the creatures who would praise the work of creation.

And in the soft clarity and the silence of the dawn the earth was born from the bottom of the sea, with its forests, valleys, streams and high mountains. Soon after, the animals of

the mountains and jungles were created: deer, small birds and large birds of prey, pumas and jaguars.

Having finished the creation the gods spoke thus: 'Speak forth, cry out, chirp. That each one make his voice heard in our praise.' But the animals could not speak, they only croaked, cackled, roared. As they were unable to make them speak forth in their praise and name, the Creators decided to form men from mud, but these came apart. Then, they carved them out of wood, but they lacked blood and understanding. And then they destroyed them with great rains that darkened the whole face of the earth.

The sun, the moon and the stars were about to appear in heaven when the Creators found what should go into the flesh of man. And thus through the magic ceremony of maize man was created as the bright light of dawn was rising in the firmament."

Christoph Schlüren

*Translation from the German: J. Bradford Robinson*