19TH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN PIANO MUSIC

The Seeds of Nationalism

By Oscar Macchioni

Latin American music and culture have always had an important place in the world. When discussing classical Latin American music today, we usually refer to works composed during the 20th century, when composers created music with a strong sound identity. We can unequivocally identify music by Alberto Ginastera and Astor Piazzolla (Argentina), Heitor Villa-Lobos (Brazil), Ernesto Lecuona (Cuba) or José Pablo Moncayo (México). However, the seeds of Latin American nationalistic music were planted in the late 1800s by composers such as Alberto Williams and Julián Aguirre (Argentina), Chiquinha Gonzaga and Ernesto Nazareth (Brazil), Ricardo Castro and Julio Ituarte (México), Ignacio Cervantes and Manuel Saumell (Cuba) and Teresa Carreño and Federico Vollmer (Venezuela), to name a few.

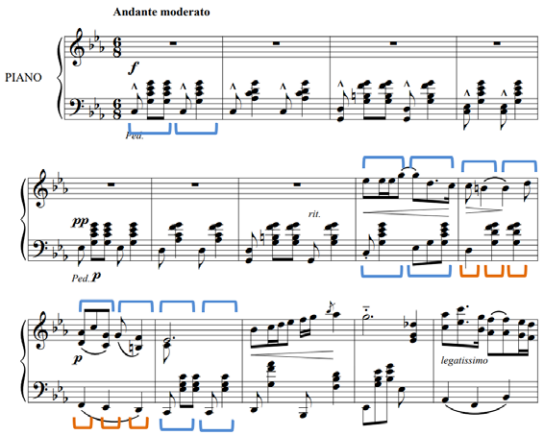
Looking at the production of classical Latin American composers of the 19th century, we can see a trend of European influences. Latin American composers and audiences favored the European "salon" music and dance styles of the time. In addition, the 19th century was the "century of the piano." The most famous piano virtuosos— Chopin, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, Liszt—lived and composed during this period, and Latin American composers were not immune to imitating them, especially Liszt's virtuoso and rhapsodic style. In fact, in 19th-century Latin American classical music, there are plenty of mazurkas, waltzes, polkas, sonatas, nocturnes, études, fantasies on famous European operas' themes and religious works. Even though most Latin American countries speak Spanish, composers used French, Italian and German titles. Not until the late 1800s can we find compositions incorporating nationalist idioms both musically and grammatically.

The following compositions illustrate late 19th-century Latin American composers' tendencies to nurture the unique musical styles of their countries. Most examples are suitable for the late-intermediate and early-advanced levels. While many aspects are worth exploring in these pieces, I curated them to provide concrete and practical performance tips for students and teachers alike. All the compositions are available online and at the IMSLP library.

Julián Aguirre—Argentina

Aguirre was born in Buenos Aires in 1868 and died in the same city in 1924. He wrote more than 50 piano pieces. Aguirre is considered one of the pioneers of Argentine nationalism. *Aires Nacionales Argentinos, 1er Cuaderno: 5 Tristes Op. 17* was composed in 1888 (?) and contains five pieces: "Triste No.1 Jujuy," "Triste No.2," "Triste No. 3," "Triste No. 4 Córdoba" and "Triste No. 5 Córdoba." Triste means "sadness" and most likely depicts the lonely and melancholic life of the *gauchos* (countrymen) who lived in the extensive Argentina plains. *Jujuy* and *Córdoba* refer to two Argentine cities.

"Triste No.5, Córboba," *Andante moderato,* is in C minor. Its longing and rhythmically rich melody soars over the broken chords' accompaniment. It is written in 6/8 and contains the typical polyrhythms and hemiolas that this time signature can accommodate; sometimes it is in 2, sometimes in 3; sometimes one hand is in 6/8 while the other is in 3/4. Usually, the change from 6/8 to 3/4 happens at the end of phrases, like punctuation marks.



Example 1: "Triste No. 5 Córdoba," mm. 1–14

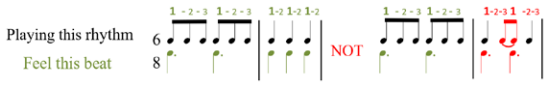
In Latin American music, the feeling of the different subdivisions in the beats is essential, either simultaneously or changing from measure to measure. When those two time signatures occur simultaneously, like in measures 9 and 10 of Example 1, we encounter a hemiola. I like to refer to the feeling of playing hemiolas as "a little out of focus." Coming out of that rhythm, in this case, it is most important to strictly feel the binary quality of the 6/8 time signature.

In addition, the performer must be flexible to switch between the feeling of 6/8 and 3/4 without altering the length of the measure or feeling syncopations and hemiolas where they are not intended, such as measure 16.

To today's musical audience, perhaps one of the most famous examples of this rhythm is Leonard Bernstein's "America" from *West Side Story.* As in this example, most of the time, there is no time signature change written out, but it is crucial to feel it as if there was one.

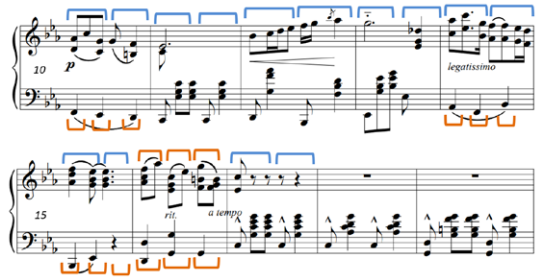
Example 2: Rhythm, Leonard Bernstein's "America"

It is more effective to count straight numbers and not to use complicated counting systems. The task here is to align notes to the counting and not to spend time thinking about what to say. Also, it is more natural and easy to count straight numbers than combinations of number and letters as in most counting systems used in the U.S. I recommend counting subdivisions such as: 1-2-3-4; or 1-2-3, etc., always emphasizing the beat. Like most polyrhythms, feeling and internalizing them is far better than strict counting and over-analyzing.



Example 3: How to feel and perform different subdivisions of 6/8

In "Triste No. 5", measures 10, 14 and 15 contain hemiolas; the right hand plays in 2 while the left hand plays in 3. Measures 11, 12 and 13 and 17 must be felt in 2, while measure 16 must be felt in 3.

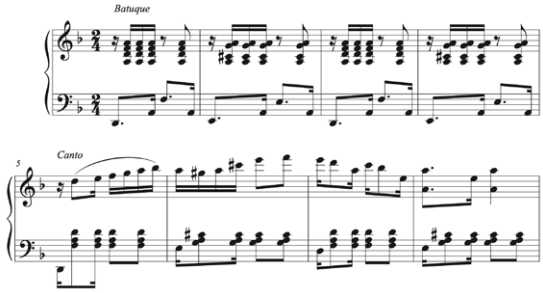


Example 4: "Triste No. 5," mm. 10–19, rhythmic combinations

Chiquinha Gonzaga—Brazil

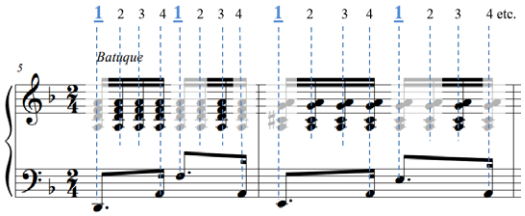
Gonzaga, whose real name was Francisca Edwiges Neves Gonzaga, was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1847 and died in 1935. The daughter of a mestizo mother and a white father, she was a composer, pianist and conductor. She was a pioneer in integrating popular Brazilian rhythms such as the Brazilian tango and *choro.* Perhaps the most famous and recorded composition by Gonzaga is *Córta-Jáca* ("cut the jackfruit") or *Gaúcho,* a Brazilian tango also known as maxixe. It was originally composed for the operetta *Zizinha Maxixe.*

Gaúcho employs a variety of syncopated rhythms and has three distinctive parts as marked on the score: *Batuque, Canto* and *Coro e Dança. Batuque* is a music and dance genre from Cape Verde, and in Brazil, it means drumming. The enslaved people used it in different social practices. The short interactions between *Batuque* and *Canto* in the A section resemble the call and response structure. *Coro e Dança* defines the B section as it has a less active melody, mostly in descending patterns.



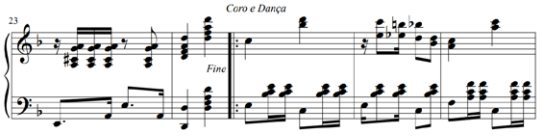
Example 5: *Gaúcho,* mm. 1–8

The rhythmic complications can be resolved by counting out loud the subdivision of the beat, 1-2-3-4, as performed first with hands separately, then together, always emphasizing beat one with an accent. Make sure that there is a visual and spatial correlation between the notes and the numbers. I also recommend practicing repeating the chords on the rests, then playing as written, to ensure the notes are placed rhythmically correctly.



Example 6: *Gaúcho,* counting mm. 1–2

Like all music with an abundance of syncopations, pedal consideration must be made to ensure clarity and separation of the notes. By remembering that *Batuque* means drumming, we could assume that very little or no pedal would apply to this section. On the contrary, the section labeled *Canto* ("sing") could benefit from discretely using the sustain pedal to create a human voice-flowing effect.

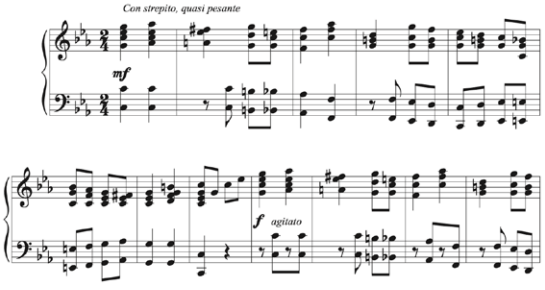


Example 7: *Gaúcho,* mm. 25–28, *Coro e Dança*

Manuel Saumell Robredo—Cuba

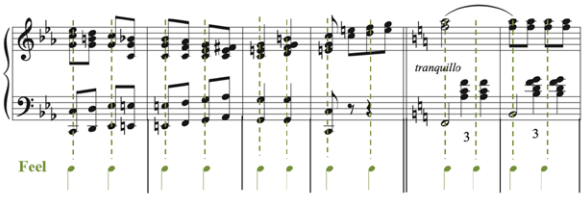
Robredo, born in Havana in 1817 and died in 1870, is credited with being the first to cultivate Cuban nationalism. His compositions of note are the more than 50 *Contradanzas*. They are all concise, miniature pieces containing two parts. According to Cuban musicologist Alejo Carpentier, these parts are thought out: The first part is always classically written, while the second part is Cuban, folkloric, in essence. Of the 50-plus contradanzas surveyed, the majority are in 2/4 or 6/8 time signature.

Luisiana, contradaza was dedicated to Louis M. Gottschalk. The entire piece is written in 2/4. After a boisterous first part *Con strepito, quasi pesante* (with din, almost heavy), a very melancholic, calm melody emerges over triplets in the left hand, creating an intensively rich rhythmic juxtaposing.



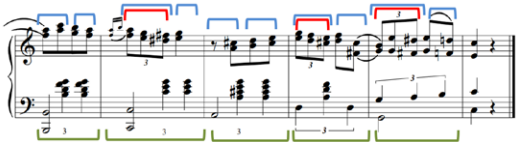
Example 8: *Luisiana,* mm. 1–12

The performer must feel this *contradanza* entirely in 2 and be careful not to change to 3 in the second half (mm. 17). The left-hand triples should feel as such and not in 3, like in a waltz. In this case, it is best to feel the whole measure, not the beat. This is very different from the feeling and execution described before with the 6/8 time signature.



Example 9: *Luisiana*, mm. 13–18

The second part is entirely written in polyrhythms, where measures 23, 27, 29 and 30 are the most complicated to perform. Here, the right hand must keep the binary feeling throughout. Again, it is advised to feel the whole measure, not each beat.



Example 10: *Luisiana,* mm. 26–31

Teresa Carreño—Venezuela

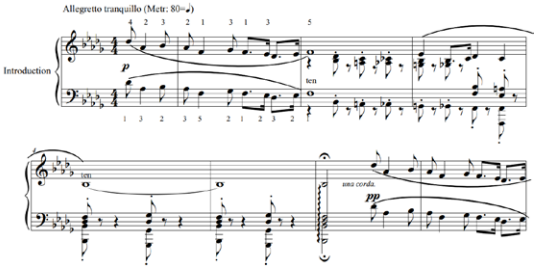
Teresa Carreño was born in Venezuela in 1853 and died in New York City in 1917. She was a prodigy and an acclaimed concert pianist, composer and conductor who played for presidents Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson at the White House. Although Carreño's piano music was mainly composed earlier in her life and resembled European musical styles prevalent in that era, she frequently incorporated *merengues* (a popular music and dance from the Caribbean) in her compositions.

Un Bal en Rêve. Fantaisie-Caprice Op. 26 (*A Ball in Dreams. Fantasy-Caprice*) is a sectional piece that starts with an Introduction followed by interchanges between *Le Sommeil* (*The Sleepers* or *Sleep*) and *Le Rêve* (*The Dream*). An interlude, *Le Rêve S'Eteint* (*The dream disappearing*), is placed before ending with *Le Rêveil* (*The Awakening*). By using different rhythms and musical atmospheres, Carreño portrays someone's dream of a ball.

It is written in D-flat major, and the time signature alternates between 4/4 (Introduction

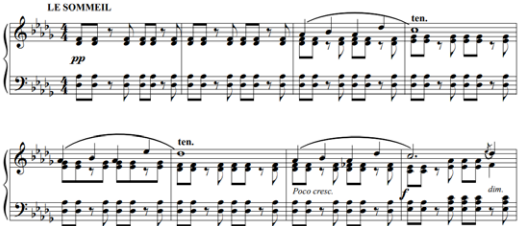
and *Le* Sommeil), and 6/8 (*Le Rêve, Le Rêve S'Eteint* and *Le Rêveil*). Like most of Carreño's music, the score is well-crafted with precise tempi, dynamics, characters and fingering indications. Although this work is not highly challenging, a couple of important technical issues need to be resolved.

The Introduction sounds almost like a ragtime or march.



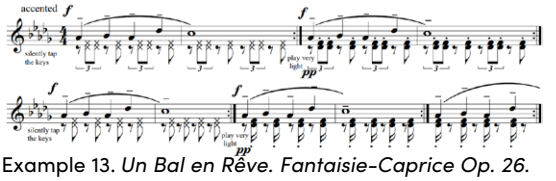
Example 11. *Un Bal en Rêve. Fantaisie-Caprice Op. 26.* Introduction mm 1–8.

Le Sommeil section has a straighter rhythm and an interesting melody reminiscent of the "Happy Birthday" song.



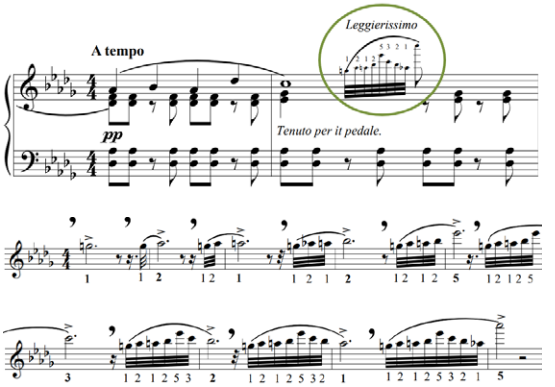
Example 12. *Un Bal en Rêve. Fantaisie-Caprice Op. 26. Le Sommeil* 10–17

The right-hand voicing may be challenging. Thus, I recommend first practicing by playing the melody very strongly while silently tapping the lower voices without sound, using the correct fingering, with different rhythms as shown below, then apply to left hand. Secondly, play the lower notes very lightly, *pianissimo* and *staccatississimo*, felling the notes' length of the melody. Repeat these two exercises several times. Internalizing this rhythm (triple followed by a duplet) will benefit when playing *Le Rêve* section. Although it may look different, the sonic result is the same. Lastly, play hands together as written.



Example 13. *Un Bal en Rêve. Fantaisie-Caprice Op. 26. Le Sommeil.* Practicing voicing.

In the *Le Sommeil* section, there are some embellishments passages that need technical attention, such as those found in measures 38–50 and similar. I suggest practicing by adding notes. Each new note should be felt as the downbeat, while the previous ones should be felt as an anacrusis. Breathing before each group is essential, and a steady tempo with strict rhythmic values must be observed while performing this exercise. This type of practice secures the passage and makes every note even, clear and crisp.

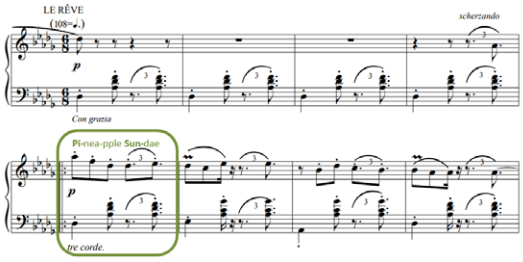


Example 14. *Un Bal en Rêve. Fantaisie-Caprice Op. 26. Le Sommeil* 37–38

Perhaps the most challenging part is *Le Rêve* sections, which incorporate a *merengue* rhythm. *Merengue* originated in the Dominican Republic and quickly spread throughout other Latin American countries. In 2016, the *merengue* was included in UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The most distinctive characteristic of the *merengue* is the use of *quintillo* (fives), a syncopated rhythmic figure not to be confused with quintuplets.

It is essential to feel the change from ternary to binary subdivisions within a measure and to align the notes visually and rhythmically.

Verbalizing music is beneficial, and teachers may use words such as pi-*nea-pple* sun-*dae* to internalize this complex rhythm.



Example 15. *Un Bal en Rêve. Fantaisie-Caprice Op. 26. Le Rêve* mm 53–60

Conclusions

The 19th-century Latin American nationalistic piano music is a narrow niche. While there are many composers and compositions, not all of them reflect a nationalistic style, and it is hard to find scores and or precise information about the pieces.

When teaching and performing Latin American piano music influenced by folklore, we must remember rhythm is essential. Rhythms can be clarified by maintaining a solid beat, feeling the syncopations, emphasizing the accents, using a more detached touch, and using a discrete or no pedal.

For those wishing to explore other 19th-century Latin American composers that preceded and cemented today's well-known nationalistic style, and due to the length constraints of this article, I have created a resource sheet accessible using the accompanying QR code. It is not a complete list of Latin American countries and composers, but rather a selection and suggestions of appropriate repertoire of early nationalistic style, scores, books and other resources.

Resources

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