

Juan Bautista Plaza (1898 -1965)

Fuga Criolla

Considered to be one of the foremost Venezuelan composers of his time, Juan Bautista Plaza worked along with some of his compatriots to promote nationalistic styles of their home country, however Plaza was considered to be at the forefront of incorporating these nationalistic principles with more traditional ‘classical’ European genres. One of his first major works integrating these forms was the *Fuga Criolla* (1931) which would incorporate popular Venezuelan songs and dances into the fugue form. Later he would compose a ‘partner’ work, *Fuga Romántica Venezolana for String Orchestra* (1950) in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Bach’s death, however the two works are most often performed separately.

Plaza first began his studies in Caracas (first in medicine and law, and then eventually in music), but later received a scholarship to study in Rome at the Pontifical Academy of Sacred Music (1920-1923), where he earned the title of Master of Sacred Composition. Upon his return to Venezuela he was appointed as the Master of Chapel at Caracas Cathedral, remaining in that position until 1948. He was a professor at the Escuela Nacional de Music (1924-28 & 1936-62) where he taught harmony and composition, as well as music history and appreciation to developing composers and performers. As such, Plaza was considered one of the leading figures of his era in both Venezuelan music education and musicology.

The composer’s efforts to improve various musical institutions in Venezuela are considered by scholars

to have paralleled the work of other Latin American musicians such as Carlos Chávez of Mexico, among others. These efforts included creating a music school for children, as well as helping to organize Venezuela’s first choral society along with the country’s first well-established symphony orchestra. In addition, he would go on to develop a series of radio programs on music appreciation to further educate audiences who could then more fully understand the pieces being performed. He would also publish numerous articles about music and local concerts in Caracas’ newspapers and magazines.

Plaza would go on to compose works in a variety of genre including sacred music (masses, motets, and hymns); choral music (madrigals and songs); songs for voice and piano; instrumental works for piano, guitar and organ, as well as for two pianos and piano four-hands; chamber music and works for string orchestra as well as symphonic works; and arrangements for orchestra, band, and choirs. In 1936, he and his wife Natalia Pietersz Rincón spent nearly a decade researching and cataloguing a collection of old manuscripts that had been found in the basement of the National School of Music. They eventually published a set of scores in 12 volumes (1943) from Venezuela’s colonial period, with the composer writing additional scholarly articles about the works. All of these pursuits led to Plaza becoming Venezuela’s Director of Culture (1944-46), as well as continuing as professor of music at the National School of Music, becoming the director from 1948 until his retirement in 1962.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No.9 in D minor Op.125 “Choral”

The original title Beethoven gave to this work was *Symphony with Final Chorus on Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy’*. However, initially, he never intended his Ninth Symphony to include voices, having composed an instrumental fourth movement, which later was used as the final movement of one of his string quartets (*String Quartet in A minor, Op.132*). The sketches that can be found throughout his lifetime show that many aspects of this symphony can be attributed to ideas he formulated in various stages of his composing career, some as early as 1793 and some as late as 1823. The idea for including voices in a symphony was something he originally intended to save for his Tenth Symphony, according to notes he left, feeling that he had gotten to the point where he had explored all that he could with instrumental symphonic works. And the idea for setting Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy’ went back to his first period, when he was reading a great many philosophical works.

Beethoven began writing the first three movements of this symphony in 1818. In 1822 he sold the rights for the symphony to the London Philharmonic, but never completed the solely instrumental work as promised. It was in 1823 that the various ideas came together, where he would set Schiller’s ‘Ode to Joy’ and include voices in the previously all-instrumental work. But he still struggled with how to incorporate the voices musically when they had been silent for the first three movements. After much contemplation he apparently had a sudden image as has often been quoted:

“One day he burst into the room and shouted at me: ‘I got it! I have it!’ He held his sketchbook out to me so that I could read: “Let us sing the song of the

immortal Schiller”; then a solo voice began the hymn of joy.”

Schindler in October 1823

This idea was re-worked some in the final composition, with the recitative first heard in the instruments and then taken over by the solo baritone: “*O friends, not these tones; instead let us sing more pleasing and joyful ones.*” This vocal recitative was seemingly a call to the orchestra to give way to the voices.

The premiere of the Ninth Symphony was presented in Vienna on May 7th, 1824 and was received extremely well, although Beethoven, not being able to hear the applause himself, had to be made aware of the warm reception:

“His turning around, and the sudden conviction thereby forced on everybody that he had not so before because he could not hear what was going on, acted like an electric shock on all present and a volcanic explosion of sympathy and admiration.”

Paraphrasing Schiller’s original text, the Joy that is the ‘spark of the gods’ and so passionately presented here in the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, is indeed ‘touched with fire, [and perhaps why] we come,’ in hopes that ‘all men on earth [shall indeed] become brothers.’

April L. Racana / Music Specialist at Nishimachi International School where she has taught since 1992. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music), as well as a post-graduate fellowship at Northwestern University, and the Japan Studies Program at International Christian University.
