

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Silvestre Revueltas

Born December 31, 1899, Durango, Mexico.

Died October 5, 1940, Mexico City, Mexico.

Suite from *Redes* (Nets)

Revueltas composed the score for the film *Redes* in 1934–35. The concert suite performed at these concerts calls for an orchestra consisting of flute and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones and tuba, timpani, cymbals, tam-tam, Indian drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately sixteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's only previous subscription concert performances of Revueltas's *Redes* were given at Orchestra Hall on October 24, 25, and 26, 1974, with Eduardo Mata conducting.

Born on the last day of the nineteenth century, Silvestre Revueltas helped to lead the music of Mexico into a new era. His was a brief, difficult, and colorful life. He lived and worked in Mexico City; Mobile, Alabama; San Antonio, Texas; and Chicago. He fought for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, periodically spent time in mental institutions, and died of alcoholism at the age of forty. Revueltas did not begin to compose seriously until the last ten years of his life, and his career is largely one of unfulfilled promise. He is something of a tragic figure, like the alcoholic hero of *Under the Volcano*, the Mexican novel by Malcolm Lowry, who lived in Cuernavaca during Revueltas's final years.

"I do not think I was a child prodigy," Revueltas has written, "but I showed some inclination for music quite early, as the result of which I became a professional musician." Silvestre started to play the violin at the age of seven, and at thirteen, he went to Mexico City to study violin and composition. Three years later, he decided to further his studies abroad—not in Europe, but in the United States, first at Saint Edward College in Austin, Texas, and then, for two years beginning in 1918, at Chicago Musical College, where he studied violin under Sametini and composition under Felix Borowski, who was also the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony. (The Orchestra did not play Revueltas's music until after Borowski's death in 1956, denying him the pleasure of writing about his own student's progress.)

Revueltas returned to Mexico in 1920, and, although he later spent more time in Chicago and elsewhere in this country, Mexico remained his home for the rest of his life. In 1929, Carlos Chávez, an influential composer, conductor, and pianist, asked Revueltas to serve as the assistant conductor of the Mexico Symphony Orchestra. (They had toured together in the mid-twenties, giving twenty-six recitals of music for violin and piano.) Revueltas settled in Mexico City, became one of the principal players in the development of musical life there, and began to devote more of his time to serious composition.

In many ways, Revueltas was a self-made composer. Despite his training in conservatories in Mexico City and Chicago, he always said he never learned much there, but later "found better teachers in the Mexican people and my country." He remained indifferent to many of the conventions of music and musical form. The novelist and composer Paul Bowles has remarked how Revueltas epitomized the true revolutionary to a younger generation of Mexican musicians, because he "went straight toward the thing to be said, paying as little attention as possible to the means of saying it."

Revueltas's musical style draws from many sources. "I like all kinds of music," he said. "I can even stand some of the classics, and some of my own works, but I prefer the music of the people of the ranches and villages of my country." The way his compositions reflect the music of Mexico and the spirit of its people has always attracted notice. "I have never used popular or folkloric themes," he said, by way of clarification, "but most of the tunes, or rather motifs that I have used, have a popular character." Like the great Spaniard Manuel de Falla, Revueltas's absorption of his country's indigenous style is complete. As Paul Bowles writes, "there was an intuition functioning that transformed folk music into art music with a minimum of purity lost."

Revueltas's major works all date from the 1930s—he completed his first orchestral score, *Cuauhnahuac*, in 1930. This was an unusually rich and exciting time for the Mexican arts, with the painter Diego Rivera, recently married to Frida Kahlo, at the height of his powers, and the country's young film industry particularly active and adventuresome. In 1933, Paul Strand, the pioneering photographer—Susan Sontag called him "the biggest, widest, most commanding talent in the history of American photography"—went to Mexico to record images of its people at the invitation of Chávez, who had recently lured Aaron Copland to visit as well. Chávez and Strand soon began discussions about a documentary about the social and economic struggles of the Veracruz fishing village of Alvarado, eventually adding, as director, the young Austrian Fred Zinnemann (who would later make such Hollywood landmarks as *High Noon*, *From Here to Eternity*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *Julia*). While the film was still in the planning stages, a new government, under Lázaro Cárdenas, came to power and Chávez's role in the project was given to Revueltas, leading to a break in the relationship of the two composers.

Redes (Nets), as the work was eventually titled, became the first of Revueltas's ten film scores. (It was released in the United States as *The Waves*.) The sixty-minute film, which blurs the line between documentary and fiction, was filmed on location with a mix of professional actors and untrained fishermen and their families. *Redes* focuses on the poor Veracruz fishing community and its battles with big business, labor unions, and politics. Revueltas composed most of his score before shooting was finished.

The film score eventually became one of Revueltas's few well-known works in the concert suite arranged by the legendary Viennese conductor Erich Kleiber that is performed this week. In two parts, the suite begins with music associated with the strife of the fishermen and leads to a lament for the funeral of a village child. The first part ends with the festivities of a fishing party. Part 2 includes music for a fight scene, continues with another dirge, and concludes with a scene of fishermen returning to land with the body of a dead friend. Revueltas's score, even its evocations of a village fiesta, has nothing to do with picture-postcard scenery. Despite its touches of light popular music and what Copland praised as Revueltas's "wonderfully keen ear for the sounds of the people's music," the score for *Redes* is painted, above all, with a bold and unsparing kind of realism.

"All his music seems preceded by something that is not joy and exhilaration, as some believe, or satire and irony, as other believe," the Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote. "That element, better and more pure . . . is his deep-felt but also joyful concern for man, animal, and things. It is the profound empathy with his surrounding which makes the works of this man, so naked, so defenseless, so hurt by the heavens and the people, more significant than those of many of his contemporaries."

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