COPLAND AND MEXICO

Presented in partnership with TEXAS PERFORMING ARTS and THE BUTLER SCHOOL OF MUSIC at THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN and the AUSTIN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA with support from the NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
The handling of the soundtrack in Redes (1936) may strike us today as awkward and more than a little bit strange. It is an example, reasonably common during the transition period to sound film (1927-1932), of what is known as a “part-talkie.” This is essentially a hybrid of silent and sound film, with abrupt alternations between scenes treated in silent film fashion with scenes of talking. This kind of alternation never really disappeared from filmmaking—shots of landscapes in films today, for instance, are frequently accompanied, as they are in Redes, only by music. But in the part-talkies the juxtaposition is often stark, and audiences today, accustomed to smooth aural modulations between scene types, are liable to attribute the abruptness of the part-talkie to technical shortcomings and discount its aesthetic effect.

The best part-talkies—and although a late example Redes falls into this class—incorporate the juxtaposition into the idea. It matters when the film talks, when it does not, and how it passes from one state to the other. In this respect, it is not so much a question of the quantity of conversations in Redes and how they reflect the struggles of people confronting the net of economic relations closing in across the world, as to the way music present an image where hope for a better world is mixed with grief over a world that would allow such suffering.

In the standard release print of Redes, both dialogue and music are recorded, and Revueltas’ music is beautifully composed to sound in the film. It must labor mightily against the technology, a strain that is central to its affective character. In live performance, this musical struggle against technology is transformed into an opposition. As music—it perhaps the world it represents as well—is freed from the grim determinism of the recording, it must labor mightily against the technology, a strain that is central to its affective character.
Silvestre Revueltas at the Dawn of His “American Period”:
ST. EDWARD’S COLLEGE, AUSTIN, TEXAS (1917-1918)

Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) is widely recognized as one of the most important composers of the Mexican nationalist movement, perhaps second only to Carlos Chávez (1899-1978). Drawing inspiration from primitive indigenous cultures, folklife in contemporary Mexico and a modernist aesthetic that favored complex plays on meter and rhythm, the works Revueltas produced in a tremendous burst of activity during the last decade of his life — Janitzio (1933), Sensemayá (1938), and La noche de los Mayas (1939), for example — came to form the basis of his nationalist image. The image was further burnished by collaborations with Carlos Chávez and the Orquesta Sinfónica de México (1929-35) and his involvement with the leftist League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists in the mid-1930s.

At odds with his “nationalist” image, however, are the years Revueltas studied and worked at St. Edward’s College (now St. Edward’s University) in Austin, Texas (1917-18); the Chicago Musical College (1918-20 and 1922-24); and in Mobile, Alabama, and San Antonio, Texas (1926-28). His reputation as an avant garde nationalist composer of twentieth-century Mexico notwithstanding, a balanced account of Silvestre Revueltas and his music needs to consider the formative years we can refer to as his “American period” — a period that began in the city of Austin, Texas in 1917. There we find Revueltas concertizing regularly to rave reviews as a solo violinist and as a member of municipal groups that laid the foundation for the Austin Symphony Orchestra. It is also in Austin that Revueltas met the most important influence in his early musical life — a Catholic Brother of the Holy Cross named Louis Gazagne whose written memories of Revueltas offer a rich account of the Mexican composer’s life as a student and musician in the capital city of Texas.