

Principia College Music Department Presents

Landscape No. 3
El Ángel: Music for Mexico City

Dr. Rose Whitmore, organ
James Hegarty, synthesizers

March 15, 2018
Cox Auditorium

- I Fuente de Cibeles
- II Danza de los Voladores
- III El Ángel

With a film by James Hegarty

A short story

This journey, like most, began many years ago. I still have the artifact, a gift from my grandparents. Today it is in my office, draped across a cabinet like a tablecloth. But it is, in fact, a *serape*, just the right size for someone, me, to wear if I were still about three feet tall.

For some reason, it has always seemed obvious to me that I should know Mexico better.

In September of 2017 I spent five days living in a rental apartment in the Juarez neighborhood of Mexico City. Tonight's performance grew out of this visit. It is, in some ways a *cinéma vérité* (or more properly, direct cinema) of my experience. This is one man's impression of a city – an incredibly multidimensional place filled with amazing people doing very, very interesting things. Sometimes they call it CDMX, Ciudad de Mexico. I hope this performance opens a door and invites you in.

I arrived too early to check in to my apartment, so I took a walk. I ended up at a traffic circle just below the border of Colonia Juarez and Roma Norte. Mexico is a city of neighborhoods. Many began as small independent towns built on islands in a shallow swampy lake. Early in the 20th century, the lake was drained and development of the city exploded. Today, these neighborhoods, the Colonias, are packed in against each other in a megalopolis of 8.8 million people.

At the center of the traffic circle stands an unusual fountain, the Fuente de Cibeles. It depicts the goddess Cybele, the roman goddess of fertility, riding in a chariot pulled by two lions. It is a replica of a fountain of the same name in Madrid, Spain. Spanish descendants living in Mexico presented the fountain as a gift to the city in a gesture of friendship and unity.

I hung out, enjoyed the vibe, watched the cars, the busses, the people, listened to music blaring from a store sound system, walked past enticing restaurants and smelled the cooking. During my time in the city, this place became a touchstone. I kept thinking about it in the back of my mind, my first impression, coming back to me over and over. As I began to consider what I wanted to film, what *look* I wanted to communicate, what imagery I wanted to capture, this place drew me back.

As I was moving about the intersection shooting from various angles, someone asked me, in English, what I was doing. It was a man and woman who told me they had recently moved to the neighborhood from Houston to set up a graphic design studio. We talked a bit about the city, the scene, and what it was like relocating to a new country. It was easy to feel a part of this place, it was comfortable, relaxed, warm, and lively. The kind of place I will always love. Scene one: cool and embracing.

Another afternoon, after visiting the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporaneo located in Chapultepec Park, the sound of flute music in the distance drew me in. Following the music, I arrived in a clearing among the trees. In the center of the clearing, a very tall blue pole reached upwards towards the sky. At the top of the pole, a man was playing a modal tune on a wooden transverse flute. The scene that unfolded was like nothing I had ever seen before. Scene two: majestic and graceful.

The Friday night of my visit coincided with the country's celebration of Independence Day which traditionally begins on the eve of September 16. Music concerts and galas were planned in several

locations around the city. The main event was in the Zócolo, the enormous square upon which the President's residence and the Metropolitan Cathedral are sited. But in my neighborhood, the celebration was to be held at the Angel of Independence, El Ángel, a golden statue placed atop a 118 foot tall column in the center of a major intersection on the Paseo de la Reformation. Scene three: heroic and free.

The Apple Store and Other Things



Postmodernism. For some reason, that's the way I see things. I don't know if it is because our world has just become such an amalgam of artifacts and references, or somehow that's how I'm filtering/understanding things. But it hit me pretty clearly in Mexico City. In fact, I was shocked how much I learned about how I see things and the way I process their meaning. We live in a completely un-simple world. So that may be why it takes awhile to sort through stuff.

On Sunday, my last day in country, I walked to the beautiful Christian Science church. It's painted pink with flowering vines draped around the windows. It's a perfect example of the mixed French-Mediterranean Mexico City architectural style referred to as Porfirian, labeled in reference to the era of President Porfirio Díaz who presided over the first wave of extensive urban development at the turn of the 20th century. Just before turning down a small side street off the Paseo de la Reforma, I stopped to look in the window of the Apple Store. The building, a turn of the 20th century mansion

converted into a commercial space was framed by the glass and steel structure of one of the forty-story office buildings that line the Paseo.

An awareness of old and new had been simmering throughout my visit. The Metropolitan Cathedral, built between 1587 and 1813 hit me pretty hard. This is the real thing, folks. Not just an early 20th century recreation, but real Spanish Baroque architecture. An artifact of the Colonial era, but the real thing never-the-less. As I walked through the Colonia Centro, the old city, contemporary boutiques occupied retail spaces in authentic Baroque and Classical era buildings. The mix of a tangible past with contemporary life was everywhere. Mid-century modern, eastern bloc minimalism, the late romantic Porfirian style, all *blended* with the boutiques and restaurants of a hyper-modern urban scene.

Organ and synthesizer, two cutting edge means of musical expression connecting across time and context. Just as walking down the Calle Madero in Mexico City blew me away with the realization of the immediate presence of hundreds of years of history in one swirling interconnected *sopa* of flavors, shapes, textures, and references, the music that began to form in my ears reached out to capture the essence of multiple centuries and touched upon time as transcendent.

It is up to the artists, the architects, the builders, the planners, those with vision to see, not the juxtapositions, but the connections that form the basis of relationships. Metaphorical Lego blocks that come together in unforeseen ways that ultimately build bridges and forge links across distances, that coningle aesthetics and methods, that demonstrate the universality of ideas and the potential of implementation that comes about when distinctions, borders, differences are rendered irrelevant.

The music tonight is not classical, baroque, electronica, house, techno, electro-acoustic, minimalist, or ambient. It is music that dissolves the artificial borders of division and seeks to discover what just might be possible otherwise, when there are no boxes holding ideas in isolation and no lines that can't be crossed.

Discover a place without borders, without the distinctions of style or expectation – or false assumptions – and there is beauty there. This is a place of freedom and hope, discovery, and the joy of life lived in open hearts.

Free ebook of my time in Mexico City:

Mexico City: Impressions in Words and Photographs

Download at <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/766997>

2019 Spring Break IFE Abroad Program

Next Year, professional musician and Mexico City resident, Ashley Alarcon, and I will lead a one-week program connected with a course we will teach entitled “Music in Context: Mexico City.”