



jason vieaux

manuel ponce the guitar sonatas



A z i c a

## manuel maría ponce (1882-1948) the guitar sonatas

One autumn day in 1992, in New Orleans, four young guitarists were playing in the finals of the Guitar Foundation of America competition, the most prestigious such event in North America and arguably one of the most important in the world. The final performer began with the fiendishly difficult set piece, followed by a Baroque work, a Romantic guitar etude, and a gritty modern piece – a program well-designed to demonstrate his versatility as well as his virtuosity. His final piece, Ponce's *Sonatina meridional*, began propitiously enough, but then in the pause between *Campo* and *Copla*, a string broke. He hastily retreated off-stage, replaced the string, and returned to complete his program, adjusting the tuning of the slipping new string several times as he played. He managed to play *Copla* with a musicality and sensitivity which re-established his rapport with this most difficult of audiences, then ripped into *Fiesta* with a joyful abandon that brought the entire program to a conclusion just within the time limit. The first prize was duly awarded to him, the youthful Jason Vieaux. The story is appropriate here, not only to illustrate Vieaux's prodigious sang-froid, but to demonstrate his long term affinity for the works of Ponce.

Manuel María Ponce (1882-1948) was born in the provincial Mexican town of Fresnillo (Zacatecas). Beginning at the age of six, he received piano lessons from his sister; his musical studies progressed from rural maestros to the Conservatory in Mexico City. In 1912 he wrote the beloved *Estrellita*; its lilting melody made him famous, but his failure to secure the copyright cost him the financial security such an international "hit" might have brought. He continued his studies in Havana, Bologna, Berlin, and (with Paul Dukas) in Paris in 1925-33. Thereafter, Ponce returned to Mexico City, where he taught at the Conservatorio Nacional and on the Facultad de Música of the University. Like many Latin American composers of his generation, Ponce wanted to create a national musical tradition for his country. His works have broader appeal than those of his few rivals, such as Chávez or Revueltas, and it would not be unreasonable to proclaim him Mexico's greatest composer. Although Ponce wrote many works for orchestra, piano, a violin concerto, and many song settings, these works tend to be less well-known today than his music for guitar, which is fundamental to that instrument's 20th century repertoire.

The celebrated guitarist Andrés Segovia (1893-1987) gave his first recital in Mexico City in 1923. Ponce, always active in music journalism, wrote a glowing review of the concert; the two met, and a lasting friendship was forged. Segovia was concerned about developing the guitar's

contemporary repertoire and urged Ponce to compose for the instrument. Ponce readily complied; the "Allegretto, quasi serenata" (now the third movement of Sonata No. 1) was his first effort, and Segovia was delighted. The remainder of the sonata was completed in the middle of the same year; Segovia soon began to perform it, and was gratified by the public response. In return for championing the music of Ponce before international audiences, Segovia also asked many favors. Ponce provided him not only with brilliant new works for the guitar but also with faux-Baroque compositions which were attributed to the likes of Sylvius Leopold Weiss and Alessandro Scarlatti, so that a significant proportion of Segovia's concerts in the next decades consisted of music by his Mexican friend. Although dozens of composers answered Segovia's call for new repertoire, Ponce remained his favorite, as evidenced by their long and mutually advantageous friendship.

Ponce's Sonata No. 1, often called *Sonata mexicana*, was one of the first guitar sonatas of the 20th century. Of the first movement, *Allegro moderato*, Ponce scholar Miguel Alcázar observes that the theme which appears in the initial two measures is similar to a villancico from Guanajuato called "Salve, niño hermoso." The second movement, *Andantino affettuoso*, is in the unusual meter of 5/8. The third movement, *Allegretto, quasi Serenata*, as noted above, was the first piece Ponce ever wrote for the guitar. Toward the end, Ponce quotes a theme which Alcázar identifies as "Vamos a tomar atole," a fragment of a *Jarabe Tapatío* (a Guadalajara dance, the most famous example of which is well-known in the United States as the "Mexican Hat Dance"). The last movement, *Allegretto un poco vivace*, is in the form of a Rondo. Segovia performed this sonata throughout his career, sometimes omitting the third movement. To emphasize the Mexican character of the piece Segovia also provided each movement with an exotic title: "Bailecito del rebozo" (little shawl dance); "Lo que sueña el ahuehuete," or, sometimes, "El Ahuehuete recuerda" (the ahuehuete is the Mexican bald cypress tree); *Intermedio tapatío* (Guadalajaran Intermezzo); and "Ritmos y cantos aztecas" (Aztec Dances and Songs).

A Sonata No. 2 in a minor was composed before 1926, because it is mentioned in the correspondence of that year. It did not meet Segovia's complete satisfaction because he asked Ponce for a new *Andante* movement. Segovia apparently had the only copy of the manuscript, and it was lost when Segovia's apartment in Barcelona was looted in 1939, during the Spanish Civil War. The Sonata No. 3 in d was completed in 1927 and published the following year. The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, ends on a b minor chord, a fact which concerned the musically conservative

Segovia but which he came to accept. The second movement is a haunting Cancion and the final movement, *Allegro non troppo*, is a rondo which features a guitar tremolo, indicative of Ponce's growing confidence at writing idiomatic guitar music.

Sonata No. 4 (1927-28) was published in 1929 as *Sonata clásica* (Hommage à Fernando Sor). Sor was an important Spanish guitarist and composer (1778-1839), one of the first true masters of the six-stringed instrument. By the early years of the 20th century Sor was known through his etudes, an invaluable contribution to guitar pedagogy, and through the early opere published in the 1820s by Meissonnier which were still available in print in Paris from Meissonnier's successor, Heugel. Segovia had sufficient admiration for Sor to request Ponce's composition in homage to him, but he also was ignorant of Sor's later works and his many compositions not for guitar, and underestimated his talents. In some programs, Segovia even attributed Ponce's piece to Sor. To the Mexican composer he wrote, "I have the fortune that an actual Sor with more talent than his predecessor writes a sonata for the guitar..." (quoted in Alcázar, p. 75). The first movement, an *Allegro* in a, features repeated notes in the bass, after the fashion of the early 19th century guitarists. The *Andante* in C and the *Menuet & Trio* in the same key are also reminiscent of Sor's sonatas; the *Menuet* was added at Segovia's request, with Sor's *Opp. 22* and *25* as obvious models. The fourth and final movement is a lively *Allegro* in A in rondo form.

Sonata No. 5 was written in the late spring and summer of 1928, was published in 1929 as *Sonata romantique* (Hommage à Schubert qui aimait la guitare). After receiving the first three movements, Segovia wrote to Ponce on Sept. 18, 1928, "I am enthusiastic about the Sonata. I work night and day... it is the only thing I work on." On the 30th, Segovia wrote that he had "jumped upon the Finale like a hungry dog." He added that "You will see how well the three previous movements go. The *Andante* is delicious: among the best that Schubert did not write. I spend all day playing it. The guitar sounds delicious." The four movements—*Allegro non troppo*, *semplice*; *Andante*; *Moment musical (Vivo)*; and *Allegro non troppo e serio*—are filled with *Lieder*-like melodies and Schubertian harmonies.

The *Sonatina meridional*, one of Ponce's most beloved pieces, was written in 1930 in response to Segovia's request for a sonatina "of a purely Spanish character." In 1932 he wrote to Ponce, "Not even in Albéniz is there something with the vigor and the power of the *Allegro* (*Campo*), nor the poetry of the *Andante* (*Copla*) so admirably blended with the poetic sound of the guitar.

With the *Folia* variations, it is the work that I like best. That one big and this one small." The guitarist and the composer tinkered with it for several more years until it assumed its final form in 1933, when Segovia premiered it in Paris. Apparently it was Segovia who named the movements *Campo*, *Copla*, and *Fiesta* for the Schott edition (1939), and he also may have added the "meridional" to the title.

The tireless Ponce wrote at least two more sonatas, both of which were (along with the Sonata No. 2) lost in the destruction of Segovia's Barcelona apartment. The unique copy of Ponce's Sonata "Homage to Bach" was gone, as well as a *Sonat(in)a* "Homage to Tárrega." Segovia begged Ponce to make him new copies, but only a single movement of the "Homage to Tárrega" remained among Ponce's papers in Mexico City. Ponce also arranged for Segovia a sonata by Paganini, originally scored for guitar and violin. While this work is sometimes listed among Ponce's sonatas, it was not an original "Homage to Paganini," but rather a revision of an existing composition. Segovia also requested from Ponce an "Homage to Albéniz," but this was apparently never written. Consequently, this recording represents the complete extant sonatas of Ponce, at least those which we know to have survived. There remains one glimmer of hope for others from the Mexican maestro: Segovia's Barcelona apartment was reportedly looted rather than simply vandalized. At least two more Ponce sonatas and countless other treasures may today be languishing in some Spanish attic or bank vault, waiting to be rediscovered.

– Richard M. Long

#### Sources:

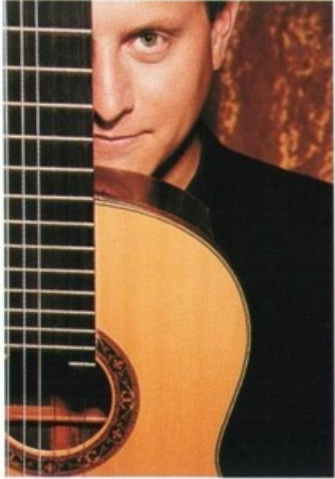
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## jason vieaux



Guitarist Jason Vieaux is widely recognized as one of the most exciting performers of his generation. His dynamic concert programs are highlighted by his effortless virtuosity, natural musicianship and an engaging manner with audiences worldwide. These attributes have earned him a busy schedule of solo, chamber and concerto engagements, performing a wide range of repertoire spanning the Renaissance to the music of our time.

Concert tours have taken him to Spain, France, Canada, Mexico, Southeast Asia and New Zealand, and he has performed in most of the major North American cities. Vieaux's duo with renowned flutist Gary Schocker is also in demand after their successful tour of Hawaii.

Jason Vieaux's two recordings for Naxos Records have collectively sold over 30,000 copies internationally. *Laureate Series Guitar Recital* (8.553449), featuring Latin American guitar music, won the coveted Rosette from *The Penguin Guide*, and is in Gramophone's *Classical Good CD Guide* and *The NPR Guide To Building A Classical CD Collection*. This CD is his first recording for Azica Records. Future projects will feature Spanish composers and music of Bach. As a duo, Gary Schocker and Jason Vieaux's first CD, *Dream Travels*, is also on Azica.

Jason Vieaux won the prestigious Guitar Foundation of America International Competition in 1992 and was honored as a top prizewinner in the Naumburg International Guitar Competition. He resides in Cleveland, enjoys golf and an

occasional game of pool, and is on the Conservatory Faculty of The Cleveland Institute of Music. Mr. Vieaux is also affiliated with Astral Artistic Services in Philadelphia.

"Taut" guitar by Paul Fischer, 1998

This record is dedicated to my parents, Mary Jane and Alan Vieaux; who, in two different ways, allowed and encouraged me to develop as a musician.

In my preparation of this recording, I was able to study Ponce's original manuscripts for two of the sonatas. I would like to thank Nicholas Goluses and Jonathan Leathwood for their generous assistance, as well as Dr. Peter Segal for his insight into the Ponce-Segovia relationship. I would also like to thank my family for their love and support; Bruce, Alan, Jim and Richard; Martha, Kenneth and the staff at Jonathan Wentworth Associates, Ltd.; Vera Wilson and the staff at Astral Artistic Services; all the musicians I've worked with or listened to that help me learn about music.

– Jason Vieaux, 2001

*This Azica release was recorded "live to two-track" at the recording sessions. No mixing was done subsequent to the recording sessions. The intent of this technique is to capture the artist's performance without alteration by the recording process. There have been no analog stages since the original analog to digital conversion at the sessions. All editing and transfers have been done in the digital domain to preserve the sound quality produced during the artist's performance.*

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## Sonatina meridional 10:23

1. Campo 5:05
2. Copla 2:44
3. Fiesta 2:34

## Sonata mexicana 12:54

4. Allegro moderato 3:16
5. Andantino affettuoso 4:19
6. Allegretto, quasi serenata 1:19
7. Allegretto un poco vivace 4:00

## Sonata clásica 17:05

8. Allegro 6:24
9. Andante 3:23
10. Menuet and Trio 3:47
11. Allegro 3:31

## Sonata No. 3 15:48

12. Allegro moderato 6:50
13. Cancion - Andante 3:33
14. Allegro non troppo 5:25

## Sonata romántica 22:42

15. Allegro moderato 7:01
16. Andante espressivo 6:06
17. Allegretto vivo "Moment musicale" 2:52
18. Allegro non troppo e serio 6:43

**TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 79:05**

**Producer:** Alan Bise

**Recording Engineer:** Bruce Egge

**Digital Editor:** Alan Bise

**Art Direction:** James Covert

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1-3 Sonatina meridional 10:23

4-7 Sonata mexicana 12:54

8-11 Sonata clásica 17:05

12-14 Sonata No. 3 15:48

15-18 Sonata romántica 22:42

**TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 79:05**



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