

Manuel
PONCE
Guitar Music • 3
Four Guitar Sonatas
Aleksandr Tsiboulski



Manuel Ponce (1882–1948)

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Sonata I ‘Mexicana’ • Sonata clásica (Hommage à Fernando Sor) • Sonata III Sonate romantique (Hommage à Schubert)

A Mexican composer and pianist with Romantic roots and a strong interest in Mexican folk-music, Manuel María Ponce Cuéllar was in his early forties and an established figure in Mexico City’s musical scene when he chanced upon the guitar. The occasion was a performance in 1923 by visiting Spanish guitar virtuoso Andrés Segovia (1893-1987), which Ponce was reviewing for *El Universal*, one of the main newspapers of the Mexican capital. The meeting that followed gave rise to a life-long friendship between Ponce and Segovia, and a composer-performer collaboration that yielded one of the largest bodies of music for the classical guitar in the twentieth century.

In the amicable correspondence that followed their first meeting, Ponce sent Segovia *Una pagina desde México*, a one-page impressionistic vignette ending with a short quotation of a Mexican folk-dance. A short time later, when that page became the third movement of a four-movement *Sonata I*, Segovia would write to Ponce:

*“I am pleased to take advantage of the occasion having recently played your beautiful Sonata in Madrid to the applause of the public, assent of the critics, and effusive admiration of the musicians. I am sending your proof of all three things: the public has asked me for it again, the critics praised it without pedantry or reservations, and as an example of the pleasure of the musicians, I will cite to you that of de Falla, before whom I played the andante and the finale, without revealing the name of the author, and he was truly enchanted.”**

The work, nicknamed *Sonata mexicana*, belies its name and Mexican musical references; its aloof wit, relentless forward momentum and jazziness demonstrate the engaged interest of the Romantically-grounded Ponce in the prevailing musical aesthetic of 1920s Paris, a place he would soon make his home for eight years, and where his collaboration with Segovia would flourish.

The rich correspondence between the composer and guitarist documented in the *Segovia-Ponce Letters*, reveals a tremendous personal empathy and, on Segovia’s part, a pattern of robustly directed encouragement. He solicited compositions from Ponce, closely guided their formal and stylistic outlines, and then edited, fingered, and prepared them for publication in Schott’s *Editions Andres Segovia* series, a prestigious vehicle for Segovia’s efforts to expand the repertoire through new works and arrangements.

A second Ponce guitar sonata composed in 1926, was never published, and was lost when Segovia’s Barcelona apartment was looted during the Spanish Civil War.

*“My house in Barcelona, with my library, music, tapestries, prints, paintings [...] has been cleaned-out. [...] Among the things that cause me the most pain, having been left back in Spain and destroyed, are your manuscripts.”**

Sonata III was completed in 1927, when Ponce was immersed in the Parisian musical scene, studying with Paul Dukas, and editing a Paris-based Spanish-language music journal. It embodies a striking mixture of stylistic traits, revealing Ponce’s romantic-era musical roots, his pianistic affinity for Chopin, his cautious embrace of Parisian musical trends, as well as his responsiveness to Segovia’s requests for music with a Spanish-sounding element. The first movement, with its Chopin-like theme, is dominated by passages of soaring romantic drama, but is persistently, sometimes whimsically interrupted, by passages of contrasting character and register. The second movement, *Chanson*, is a perfectly graceful setting of a Spanish folk-song save for a momentary shimmering middle episode that owes a debt to Debussy. The final third movement is a rondo reminiscent of a robust Chopin polonaise in the rhythm of its main theme, but recalling a harpsichord toccata in some of its figuration, and echoes of Andalusia in the harmonies of its episodes. It is punctuated by unexpected

interludes, one of which recalls Gregorian chant, and the other, slow, jazzy and seductive, which returns repeatedly towards the end.

Sonatas IV and *V*, better known as *Clásica* and *Romantique*, are subtitled as homages to Fernando Sor and Franz Schubert, respectively. More than homages, however, they are insightful, loving and minutely-crafted imitations which 'retrofit' the guitar repertoire with large-scale pieces from musical epochs Segovia might have felt under-represented in the guitar's catalogue. The guitarist was certainly well aware of Ponce's penchant for imitating past musical styles and was happy to exploit it, sometimes to the point of mischief when he actually misrepresented a number of Ponce's pseudo-Baroque works as being by a fictional lutenist-composer of the period.

As his friendship with Ponce grew closer, Segovia became increasingly prescriptive with his compositional instructions, stipulating the number of movements that works should have, and requesting significant and detailed changes. In one letter to Ponce, after a series of requests to alter an earlier draft of *Sonata clásica*, Segovia wrote:

"[S]ince I have the fortune of having a real Sor, of greater talent than his predecessor, writing a sonata for guitar, I do not want this sonata to be inferior to one of Haydn's for piano. I beg you, then, dearly, to do what I tell you."^{*}

On another occasion, at a concert in New York City, Segovia took the liberty of interspersing the completed movements of the *Sonata clásica* with those of a Sor sonata that was on the programme, apparently without announcing Ponce's authorship of the introduced movements.

Sonata clásica is nominally an homage to the guitarist-composer Fernando Sor (1778-1839). The music, as well as Ponce's background as a pianist and non-guitarist composer, however, would suggest that his inspiration was as much Haydn and Mozart as it was Sor. Many passages throughout the four movements echo a Mozartean take on the Italian operatic style, while the *Ménueť*, like so many of Mozart's, has the character of an extremely playful *scherzo*.

Sonate romantique in A major is a unique and remarkable work in the guitar repertoire. Its comprehensive assimilation of Schubert's signature compositional features

makes it seem as if it were a lost work from that era. A spirit of lyricism prevails throughout the piece, tempering the traditionally fast first movement with a pastoral languidness. As with Schubert, this lyricism is periodically punctuated by dramatic interruptions and ominous major/minor harmonic shifts. The transcendent and song-like second movement *Andante* in the radiant dominant E major, gives way to a *Moment musical* in the dominant minor, whose child-like, music-box character is restrained by an unsmiling shadow which extends into the seriousness of the finale, which delivers few moments of light until near the end, where a remarkable extended passage of strummed chords, almost metaphorically transformative, allows the piece to finish; sternly, but in the major.

For many decades the identity of Ponce's guitar music has been defined by its place in the group of works guitarists refer to as 'the Segovia repertoire'. Because it is music dedicated to, and made famous by Segovia, his editions and recordings of these works have been implicitly taken to be an intrinsic part of the works' identities, casting Segovia, perhaps somewhat inadvertently, in the role of co-author rather than facilitator. A comparison of Ponce's manuscripts and Segovia's editions highlights the considerable reach of the editorial changes Segovia made to Ponce's works prior to their original publication, both to the notes, and, directly and indirectly, to the character of the works. While Segovia's general editorial approach was sometimes explained as a necessary part of making a non-guitarist composer's music more playable and idiomatic, Ponce's manuscripts demonstrate that the composer had a highly idiomatic approach to guitar writing. Ponce's manuscripts have thus provided curious guitarists an opportunity for a meaningful exploration of Ponce's possible musical intentions, one that might yield new readings of these pieces which supplement Segovia's printed and recorded legacy.

Listeners closely familiar with these Sonatas from other recordings may be surprised by some differences when listening to this recording. Although most alternative readings are relatively minor, they are quite frequent: usually a differently-voiced chord, or the occasional different note. In *Sonate romantique*, however, Ponce's manuscript reveals a substantially different development section in the first

movement, in addition to the many minor differences. Partial draft manuscripts for movements I and II of both the *Sonata clásica* and *Sonata III* are too early and incomplete to serve as principal sources for this recording, but they inform many localised decisions regarding chord voicing, register placement, and dynamics in particular passages. Where autograph manuscripts are not available, the usual editions, critically reviewed and supplemented by Segovia's and others' audio recordings, provide the source texts for this recording.**

I am especially indebted to the Italian musicologist and composer Angelo Gilardino for generous early guidance and consultation; to my mentors Timothy Kain and Adam

Holzman; to Miguel Alcázar and Paolo Mello for facilitating access to the Ponce Archive in Mexico City; and to Luke Altmann and Jula Szuster for their invaluable, patient assistance.

Aleksandr Tsiboulski

* *The Segovia-Ponce Letters*, edited by Miguel Alcázar, translated by Peter Segal, Columbus, OH: Editions Orphée, 1989.

** Texts of a number of the manuscripts used in the preparation of this disc are also reprinted in Hopstock, Tilman, ed. *Manuel Ponce: Guitar Works*. Mainz: Schott Musik International, 2006.



Aleksandr Tsiboulski

A former Fulbright Scholar, Aleksandr Tsiboulski has won numerous major competitions, including the 2006 Tokyo International Guitar Competition which led to an extensive Japan-wide tour. His musical interests range from Bach to Brazilian *choros*, research into the music of Manuel Ponce, contemporary chamber collaborations, early childhood music education, and working with the younger generation of Australian guitarists. His principal teachers were Timothy Kain, Ernesto Bitetti and Adam Holzman, while residencies at Canada's Banff Centre provided further significant mentoring opportunities. Aleksandr Tsiboulski maintains a rigorous performing schedule, as well as dedicated teaching studios in Adelaide and Melbourne. His first disc with Naxos, *Australian Guitar Music* (2010) [8.570949] was nominated for Best Classical Album at the ARIA awards. Current projects include recording a groundbreaking new guitar transcription of Bach's *Cello Suites*.

Photo: Sam Oster

Although he was already an established figure in Mexico City, Manuel Ponce's life was transformed after meeting the guitar virtuoso Andrés Segovia in 1923. Their subsequent life-long friendship and artistic collaboration started with the sprightly wit and airy playfulness of the *Sonata 'Mexicana'*. The *Third Sonata* reveals Ponce's romantic-era roots and his affinity for Chopin, while the *Sonata clásica* is both an homage to Fernando Sor and Mozart's delightful Italian operatic style. The remarkable *Sonate romantique* is almost like a lost work by Schubert. Peeling aside Segovia's editorial changes, Aleksandr Tsiboulski's performances return as much as possible to Ponce's original manuscripts.

Manuel PONCE

(1882–1948)

Sonata I 'Mexicana' (1923) 12:00		Sonata III (1927) 14:43	
1	I. Allegro moderato	9	I. Allegro moderato
2	II. Andantino affettuoso	10	II. Chanson: Andantino molto
3	III. Intermezzo: Allegretto, quasi serenata	11	espressivo
4	IV. Allegretto un poco vivace		III. Allegro non troppo
			5:28
Sonata clásica (Homage à Fernando Sor) (1928) 16:59		Sonate romantique (Homage à Schubert) (1928) 24:33	
5	I. Allegro	12	I. Allegro non troppo, semplice
6	II. Andante	13	II. Andante
7	III. Ménuet	14	III. Moment musical: Vivo
8	IV. Allegro	15	IV. Allegro non troppo e serioso
			7:21

Aleksandr Tsiboulski, Guitar

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