Building a Conduit: Connecting Mexican Choral Music to Our Choral Community

As a Mexican-American choral (choir) conductor, I have become increasingly aware that, while I often see published music of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Argentina, and Venezuela, there is very little music available from United Mexican States (UMS). This repertoire is rarely performed or known to the most of USA’s choral community. By researching UMS’s musical history, styles, and composers, I discovered a rich choral music tradition fueled by the cultural hybridity that occurred in the New World. After I found pockets of published collections in libraries (usually in the rare book areas) across the USA, my research interest then became clear: I need to work to help connect the choral music of the UMS to the conductors in the USA.

In completing my research, I traveled to libraries where there was Mexican choral music and catalogued my findings in an annotated bibliography. Once the bibliography is completed, I will submit it to academic journals. Secondly, I plan to create my own arrangements and orchestrations of Mexican choral music for publication allowing other conductors to perform this repertoire. One of these arrangements is being performed on my conducting recital. Finally, I plan to have my writings and arrangements provide historical and cultural context.

Using a fully funded IC Academic Challenge Grant, earned with the help of my professor, Dr. Janet Galván, I traveled to five libraries in New York, California, and Texas to catalogue their scores (music) for my annotated bibliography. When studying a specific score, I noted citation materials, composer, structure of the score and events, personnel, text and translation, time period, performance practice, and place of discovery or origin.

The first draft of my annotated bibliography, completed in December of 2018, catalogues over one hundred Mexican choral works. A resource of this kind will be a contribution to the literature and ongoing Latin American music research. Despite this repertoire's appearance in published collections, most are unpublished in a “performance ready” medium; they are difficult to obtain. I will expand upon this first edition in my doctorate because there is so much more to explore.

When creating my own orchestration or arrangement of Mexican works, I fell back on my research to keep my creations within performance practice parameters. So far, I have completed two projects: an orchestrated villancico (choral music genre) and choral arrangement of a Mexican waltz. A majority of my bibliography findings look as if they are unaccompanied, but instruments (with slight variations) would have doubled the voices. My orchestrated villancico follows this practice and has been updated to include modern instruments and women’s voices (who would not have been permitted to sing this repertoire). I have also arranged a Mexican waltz tune by the UMS’s first well-known female composer, María Grever. It is arranged
for unaccompanied choir where the lower voices function like instruments accompanying the melody in the style of the Mexican waltz.

To tie all of this together, my capstone recital on March 6, will feature my orchestrated villancico, my Mexican waltz arrangement, a ranchera (mariachi) tune, and a haunting folk song. The Ithaca College Choir, who has learned the works in cultural and historic context, will sing the performance and I will conduct it. By providing a focused recital topic for the students in Choir, they have been able to learn about this special repertoire. By rehearsing in historical and cultural context, I have upheld this long tradition of the choral department so that students do not just learn music but sing the music more authentically.

My research has the potential to have a profound impact on the choral community in the USA all while giving a voice to the temporarily muted repertoire of the UMS. Currently, it remains a unique resource that will continue to grow over time; some day, I hope to code all of my findings into an online searchable database. For now, the choral music of the United Mexican States will continue to survive through my research, arrangements, and performances.