

## Enrico Chapela



Photo: Enrico Chapela, © Bernd Uhlig

The noise of the world – and the silence after  
A portrait of the Mexican composer Enrico Chapela  
by Jürgen Otten

Like many other words, syncopation has its etymological origins in the Greek language, formed from the words *syn* (together) and *koptein* (beat). While the term defines a temporary period of unconsciousness in medicine and signifies the omission of an unstressed medial vowel between two consonants in linguistics, syncopation in music has come to be used as a very pointed form of rhythmic interleaving. A note that is expected to come next as part of the natural flow is either withheld or anticipated. Either way, we hear a rhythmic dislocation.

Latin-American composers have always made ample use of syncopation. However, it is not the mere effect they are after. It is part of their conception of music. And so it comes as no surprise that syncopation plays an important part in Enrico Chapela's oeuvre. None of his works, different though they may be in terms of music, semantics or their architecture, do without syncopation as a means to define or at least emphasize their style. This points towards a further hallmark of Chapela's music: He is fond of asynchronicity, non-simultaneity; the idea of resistance.

It was not until ten years ago that the artist, who was born in Mexico City in 1974, began composing. Following courses at the Centro de Investigación de la Música in his hometown, he undertook further studies in Paris, where he received significant impulses from Horacio Vaggione and José Manuel López López. A closer look at his extremely rapid development within this fairly short time period reveals two things: firstly, his extraordinary output, and secondly, linked to this output, a stupendous increase in the complexity of his scores.

Enrico Chapela started life as a guitarist. This is reflected in compositions such as *Melate Binario* for acoustic guitar, or *Crucigramma* for string quartet and guitar quartet. The year 2003 saw the premiere of Chapela's first large-scale work, the symphonic poem *Ínguesu*, a work which is compelling not only on account of its artistry but also in its formal and tonal brilliance. Amazingly, the music is based on a football game. Not just any game, though. For *Ínguesu* was commissioned by the Carlos Chavez symphony orchestra, an orchestra whose name pays homage to Mexico's most prominent composer, whose musical thinking had been a notable influence on Chapela.

In order to write the ultimate national musical drama, as he himself confessed, Chapela decided to set Mexico's heroic and historic victory over Brazil's dream team at the 1999 Confederations Cup in Mexico City to music. With its remarkably short duration of nine minutes, *Ínguesu* is typical of Chapela's aesthetics: reminiscent of Webern in its condensation but totally different in its tonal character. The music is rigorously pointed, a true tonal drama that is a perfect reflection of the character of an exciting football game. The suspense Chapela creates is electrifying; it gradually takes on a sense of nervous neuroticism, soon becoming virtually intolerable and finally turning into an explosion of fortississimo, a moment that has a redemptive quality. In its percussive energy (Chapela uses kettledrums and four sets of percussion instruments), this work (as well as some others) reminds us of Stravinsky's Parisian ballets – *Sacre*, *Petrushka* and *the Firebird*. In Chapela's music, however, this energy is linked with motives taken from Mexican and Brazilian folk music, as well as football chants familiar to every Mexican child.

The degree to which this music is marked by refined (poly)rhythmic structures sets it apart from folkloristic (and thus potentially affirmative) music. Chapela, as becomes obvious, is a master of dramaturgy. A good description of this opalescent, kaleidoscopic symphonic poem is what Adorno once wrote about Beethoven's late works: that the process of reduction is immanent in the music. In fact, this is true of all of Chapela's music. Its material is no longer extensively explored and developed but is presented in condensed form.

The resulting atmospheric density in Chapela's compositions is further enhanced by a process of crystallization. Not unlike North-American minimal music, Chapela uses very few (fixed) motives as patterns that become players in a game. Again and again these motives recur in the musical sphere, forming a framework that holds it together. It would be wrong, however, to describe these motives as leitmotifs as employed in late Romanticism, or even in a Wagnerian sense, since they are characterized by the rhythmic spirit of contemporary modernism rather than by a melodious potential for illusion.

The Mexican composer's perspective goes beyond the limits of what is considered serious music. With its rhythmic interlocking and cross-fading, elements that are immanent to Chapela's style, a work such as *Irrational Music* has a visible archaic and vitalistic quality. Equally distinctive, however, especially in the highly expressive (and at times highly aggressive) suite *La nato es neta* for rock trio and acoustic quintet, are the influences of an aesthetics epitomized by, amongst others, the American experimentalist John Zorn. Another aspect evident in Chapela's music – both in *Irrational music* and in *S.O.S.* for chamber ensemble, written in 2005 – is a tendency towards clustering structures made up of glissandos and multiphonics that open up like an expander and then contract again but at the same time are marked by a process of dialogue. The finesse d'esprit is achieved in the listener's perception: a closer look at the score reveals that what appears to be a clichéd expression of chaos, indifferent in its use of sound, is in fact rigorously based on the principle of canonic imitation. As with all precisely organized music, accurate, both affective and analytical listening for structure is to be recommended.

In Chapela's music, you can never be sure that things will not take surprising turns. Although they seem at first to disturb the organics of the music, a detailed analysis shows that they are precisely calculated and follow a dramaturgical logic. In the work S.O.S. mentioned above, the musical development is interrupted several times. Suddenly, the tonal hardness that pervaded the music is challenged by a melancholy melos that appears like an antiphon of sensibility. The combination of those traditionally divergent patterns of sound is a deliberate device chosen by Chapela. His intention is to set both the noise of the world (likely to be drowned out regularly by the daily swell of noise in his hometown of Mexico City) and the silence before and after to music, hoping to grasp what is in between. The idea of a 'body of sound' takes on an immediate, palpable meaning in his works. For those bodies of sound vibrate so strongly that you cannot resist their fascination.

## FULL ORCHESTRA

### ínguesu

#### Symphonic poem

2003

9 min

for orchestra

2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl.2.dbn-4.4.2.btrbn.tuba-timp.perc(4):I=güiro/vibraslap/2susp.cym(ride & crash)/2L. latin snares(timbales)/picc.SD; II=maracas/xyl/marimba/bass dr;  
III=t.bells/bongos/4tom-t/whistle; IV=tam-t/vib/congas/TD-harp-pft-strings

*"ínguesu , a musical evocation of a historic Mexican-Brazilian football game, proved an ideal opener" (Allan Ulrich, Financial Times, 12 Aug 2009)*

*"The Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra's program on Monday evening was the highlight ... It began with ínguesu (2003), a piece of inspired madness ... the action follows the game play by play: at one point the conductor signals a penalty, and a trombonist is ejected. ínguesu is not brain surgery, as new music sometimes is, but Mr. Chapela's vivid scoring and energetic style hopping (Minimalist chugging blossoms into full-fledged neo-Romantic give and take) keep it entertaining, even for a listener uninterested in soccer..." (Allan Kozinn, New York Times, 13 Aug 2009)*

*"True, there have been pieces about American football (Ives' tone poem depiction of a Yale-Princeton game) and baseball, but Ínguesu might be the first piece of program music based on a World Cup soccer final! ... The performance of Chapela's piece was a highlight at Tanglewood's Festival of Contemporary Music earlier this month. The Festival Orchestra gave a convincing performance that reminded listeners of ínguesu's purely musical appeal ... ínguesu employs snatches of popular melody, but its overarching rhetorical conflict is a postmodern one: between the ostinati of minimalism and a taut, refreshing take on neoromanticism. Rather than troping Teutonic masters, Chapela's romanticism restores its sense of adventure and eschews overwrought gesture ... One hopes that Chapela's homage to soccer turns into a curtain-raiser on many subsequent concert programs." (Christian Carey, sequenza21.com)*

9790202532157 Study Score (paperback)

**World Premiere: 09 Nov 2003**

National Centre of Arts, Blas Galindo Concert Hall, Mexico City, Mexico

Carlos Chavez Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Teresa Rodriguez

### Private Alleles

2010

6 min 30 sec

for orchestra

2.2.2-2-2.2.0.0-perc(2):I=marimba/tgl/t.bells/BD/Mexican bean(or tamb)/vib;  
II=marimba/Tlalpanhuéhuatl(Indian TD)/lg gong(or tam-t)/BD/t.bells-harp-pft(=cel)  
-strings

**World Premiere: 02 Dec 2010**

University of California, Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, CA, USA

Berkeley Symphony

Conductor: Joana Carneiro

## Shadow Moon Dance

based on the poem Drinking Alone With the Moon by LI BAI

2009

10 min

for orchestra

1.af1.1.corA.1.bcl.1.dbn-2.2.3.1.timp(=susp.cym).perc(3):I=vib/tam-t/gong(sm in water bucket, lo); II=crot/tam-t/t.bells/Taiko dr/marimba; III=susp.cym/whirly tube/tgl/rain stick/bamboo chimes/metal chimes-pft(=cel)-harp-strings; hn2, tpt2, timp, 1vln1, 1vln2, 1vla and 1vlc also play whirly tubes

## CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

### Irrational

2009

8 min

for chamber orchestra

1.1.1.bcl.1-1.1.1.0-perc(2):I=vib/2wdbl/2jam bl/4tom-t/crash.cym;  
II=marimba/tamb/cowbell/2cans/2bongo/2conga/crash.cym-pft-strings

*"Enrico Chapela's Irrational Music was a perfect curtain-raiser. The piece is based on Chapela's explorations of irrational numbers; but this was in no way indicative of a dry or cerebral surface. On the contrary, Irrational Music pulsates with vibrant energy. Its frequent time changes and energetic tutti pileups were deftly negotiated by New Paths. What's more, Chapela's music set the stage for the rest of the concert; serving as a foreshadowing of elements grappled with throughout the concert. The evening was often about music of deft negotiations – balancing massed orchestration versus delicate linear writing and intricate metric shifts with visceral 'dancing' rhythms." (Christian Carey, Sequenza21.com, 09 Jun 2009)*

**World Premiere: 05 Jun 2009**

City University, Graduate Center, Elebash Recital Hall, New York, NY, USA  
The New Paths Chamber Ensemble  
Conductor: David Alan Miller

### Li Po

2008/09

10 min

for chamber orchestra

1.1.1.1-1.1.1.1-perc(2):I=vib/gong/timp/tam-t(shared with II); II=crot/t.bells/Taiko  
dr/marimba/tam-t-strings(2.0.2.2.2); elec.soundtrack

*"You could listen to this work without knowing anything of its origins and still be swept along by the wash of colors, the sputtering mechanistic energy and the riot of instrumental and amplified sounds. For a while it seemed that "Li Po" was going to be an environmental piece, with sounds coming from speakers all over the hall. But then it broke into a raw, swinging triple-meter episode and started to sound like a spectral-electronic riff on West Side Story." (Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 09 Apr 2009)*

*"Chapela's Li Po, in many ways the most interesting work, is for large ensemble and is very much all over the map. Chapela uses sophisticated computer programming of French spectral school to fool around with phonic syllables, Spanish- and Chinese-based. But the electronics are only one layer. There are all kinds of compelling instrumental effects, exciting visceral rhythms, and tons on tones sliding around." (Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times, 09 Apr 2009)*

*"Chapela's Li Po gets the award for most energetic [of the programme]. The work was composed through an involved process that included the composer reading a Spanish poem into a tape recorder and translating the reading's pitches and notes into a musical score. A computer program or two got involved along the way; at any rate, there was little resemblance between spoken word and the resulting piece that I could discern. What emerged was a barrage of tightly intertwined instrumental and taped sounds, all over the place but tumbling over each other and closely related in timbre. It was difficult at times to tell where the tape sounds – wind, rain, buzz saws, frogs, whistles – stopped and in the instrumental sounds began. Ethereal and whomping episodes intervened, and then big slow waves. It was ten minutes of controlled mayhem, but that control was key – it gave the work shape and personality." (Timothy Mangan, Orange County Register, 09 Apr 2009)*

*"Chapela's Li Po makes virtuosic use of unconventional instrumental sounds – multiphonics, bowed percussion, glissando everywhere – and envelops them in voluptuous electronic textures. Yet the work is more than an onslaught of effects: tendrils of melody curl around the ear, harmonic colors glow eerily bright, rhythms have a folkish, danceable thrust." (Alex Ross, The New Yorker, Apr 2009)*

**World Premiere: 07 Apr 2009**

Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
Los Angeles Philharmonic  
Conductor: Esa-Pekka Salonen

## SOLO INSTRUMENT(S) AND ORCHESTRA

### Encrypted Poetry

2007

18 min

Percussion trio concerto

2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl.2.dbn-4.3.2.btrbn.tuba-timp.perc(3):I=double whistle(glissando whistle)/skull whistle(wind whistle)/crot/t.bells/marimba(shared with P2)/multi perc set(2TD/hi snare/3wdbl/ride cym/chin.cym)/cajón; II=skull whistle(wind whistle)/teponaxtli(log dr)/glsp(shared with P3)/marimba(shared with P1)/multi perc set(2chin.tom-t/med SD/tamb/2cans/sizzle cym/splash cym); III=skull whistle(wind whistle)/glsp(shared with P2)/vib/multi perc set(2timb/lo snare/3cans/crash cym) -pft-strings

**World Premiere: 19 Apr 2007**

University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music, Corbett Auditorium, Cincinnati, O  
Percussion Group Cincinnati, percussion; CCM Philharmonia Orchestra  
Conductor: Mark Gibson

### MAGNETAR

2011

25 min

Concerto for electric cello and orchestra

2(II=af).2(II=corA).2(II=bcl).2-4.3.2.0-timp.perc(2):I=crot/t.bells/vibratone/susp.crash/ta m-t/3tom-t(lo,med,hi)/BD(horizontal); II=vib/spring dr/tamb/4susp.cym(ride,crash,splash,sizzle)/3SD(lo,med,hi)/BD-harp-pft(=cel)-strings

*A major e-cello concerto ... rich in jazz, rock, and Latin-American influences, and quotations, that are seamlessly integrated ... For 25 minutes, Chapela charts a riveting narrative of sounds that create their own reality of love, excitement, and drama ... The crowd roared. (Strings Magazine, 24 Oct 2011)*

*The piece started with the orchestra members putting down their instruments and rubbing their hands together. When they did play, they produced whooshes of glissandi. The cello part was fast, furious, rhythmic... Here the cello wailed and wa-wa-ed and did things that an electric guitar can do and other things that it can't do. The spacey slow movement, in which the cello sounded underwater, also got interesting at the end. A kind of jazziness took over. The cello mimicked a trumpet wa-wa-ing with a mute and a saxophone. I imagined astronauts playing "St. James Infirmary" while on a spacewalk. The last movement was pedal to the metal. "Magnetar" in the end, was full of -- sorry, metal freaks -- charm. (Mark Swed, LATimes, 21 Oct 2011)*

**World Premiere: 20 Oct 2011**

Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, CA, USA  
Johannes Moser, cello; Los Angeles Philharmonic  
Conductor: Gustavo Dudamel

## Noctámbulos

2008

30 min

Concerto for rock trio and orchestra

2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl.tsax.2.dbn-4.3.2.btrbn.1-timp.perc(3):I=glsp/claves/darabouka/BD; II=almglocken/teponaxtli/gong/doumbek; III=kalimba/vib/steel dr/djembe; IV=almglocken/t.bells/marimbula/vib/Cajón-prep.pft-elec.git-elec.bass-dr-strings

*"The evening's strongest impression was made by Noctámbulos, written by the Mexican composer Enrico Chapela for rock trio and orchestra at the request of the Sinfoniker and also premiered at this concert. The fundamental element of this work consists of the contrasting rhythms that evolve into a polyrhythmic structure. At the same time, powerful eruptions and a fascinating orchestration, compelling ostinati and irresistible drive are supplementary parameters. Chapela proves here his ability to compose and assign floating melodies to individual solo instruments – besides to the trio, mainly to wind instruments. The composition is full of refinement, which as a result of the music's vitality is perceived as entirely natural and often also as spontaneous." (Peter Zacher, Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten, Sep 8, 2008)*

*"...big, flamboyant fusion, largely dependent on intricate rhythmic cross-currents and deftly contrasted timbres..." (Steve Smith, The New York Times, Feb 3, 2009)*

**World Premiere: 06 Sep 2008**

Kulturpalast, Dresden, Germany  
Jens Legler, elec.gtr / Jesús Lara, b.gtr / Luis Miguel Costero, dr; Dresdner Sinfoniker  
Conductor: Olari Elts

## Noctámbulos (chamber orchestra version)

2008

30 min

Concerto for rock trio and chamber orchestra

2(I=picc).2(II=corA).1.tsax.2(II=dbn)-2.2.1.btrbn.1-timp.perc(4) -prep.pft-elec.git-elec.bass-dr-strings

## ENSEMBLE AND CHAMBER WITHOUT VOICE(S)

### Crucigrama

**2006** 19 min

for string quartet with guitar quartet  
9790202532218 **4 guitars, string quartet**

**World Premiere: 06 Dec 2007**

National Centre of Arts, Blas Galindo Concert Hall, Mexico City, Mexico  
Cuarteto Latinoamericano & EntreQuatre

### El Cuarto Camino

(The Fourth Way)  
**1996** 13 min

for string quartet

**World Premiere: 01 Jun 1996**

Claustro de Sor Juana, Mexico City, Mexico  
Camerton String Quartet

### Lo Nato es Neta

**2001-2003** 27 min

Suite for rock trio and acoustic quintets

elec.gtr-Bgtr-drum set;  
fl.cl.ob.tsax.bn-hn.2tp.t.trbn.tuba-perc(4);I=glsp/claves/darabouka;  
II=almglocken/kalimba/tabla; III=steel dr/teponaxtli/djembé;  
IV=t.bells/marimbula/cajón-prepared pft-strings

**World premiere incomplete: 29 Sep 2001**

Teatro, Aguascalientes, Mexico  
José White String Quartet  
Conductor: Enrique Barrios

### La Mengambrea

**2002** 13 min

for saxophone quartet

ssax.asax.tsax.barsax

9790202532164 **(Score & parts)**

**World Premiere: 01 May 2003**

National Centre of Arts, Blas Galindo Concert Hall, Mexico City, Mexico  
Anacrusax Sax Quartet

### Nanobots

**2010** 7 min

for chamber ensemble  
vln.vlc.db.bandoneon.pft

**World Premiere: 11 Apr 2011**

The Apex, Bury St Edmunds, United Kingdom  
Britten Sinfonia

### S.O.S.

**2005** 12 min

for chamber ensemble  
fl.cl-pft-vln.vla.vlc

**PIANO(S)**

---

**Duelo en vela**

**2008**

3 min 40 sec

for piano

9790202532300 **Piano**

**World Premiere: 31 Jul 2008**

Teatro Mecodonio Alcalá, Oaxaca, Mexico

Edith Ruiz, piano;

**INSTRUMENTAL**

---

**Melate Binario**

**2004**

6 min

for solo acoustic guitar

9790202532201 **Guitar (score & part)**

**World Premiere: 25 Nov 2004**

National Centre of Arts, Blas Galindo Concert Hall, Mexico City, Mexico

Gonzalo Salazar, guitar;

MISCELLANEOUS

**Bowsax**

2011

13 min

for string quartet and saxophone quartet

**World Premiere: 18 Jul 2011**

Vail Mountain School, Vail, CO, USA

Calder String Quartet / Mana Saxophone Quartet