



Manuel Ponce

A Mexican Intermezzo

BY JOSEPH SMITH

A few issues ago, Ronald Gilmore of New York wrote to *Piano Today*, suggesting that we print something by Manuel Ponce. Mr. Gilmore—we are way ahead of you! The eloquent left-hand solo *Malgré tout*

appeared in the Winter 1999 issue, and was reprinted in the Steinway Library anthology, *Rare Finds*. But certainly Ponce merits a further inclusion. The E minor Intermezzo is one of those gratifying pieces with a high ratio of effect to difficulty—its mood of sweet, nostalgic melancholy is achieved with a minimum of notes.

Manuel M. Ponce (1882–1948) was early recognized as the leading Mexican composer of his day, and his career was so continuously successful and productive as to be biographically boring. It is the great irony of Ponce's life that he is remembered primarily as a composer for the guitar. Andres Segovia, in his quest to establish the guitar as a serious concert instrument, prompted important composers to write works for him, and Ponce rapidly became his favorite living composer, as well as a close personal friend. Letters from Segovia to Ponce constantly wheedle and flatter him into composing new major works, and Segovia's championship undoubtedly brought Ponce his greatest international fame. But Ponce was himself a distinguished pianist, and he left a vast body of highly idiomatic piano music—the piano works outnumber the guitar works by more than two to one.

In fact, the fine CDs of Ponce piano music by David Witten (Marco Polo 8-223609) and Jorge Federico Osorio (Cedille CDR 90000 086) duplicate only two little pieces, and Ponce's short but elaborate "concert metamorphosis" of his famous song *Estrellita*, which I included on my CD of *Familiar Melodies* (Briosio BR 126), appears on neither. Ponce's piano works range from the folkloric to the neo-baroque. I believe that the neglect of Ponce's piano works is due to simply to the absence of a comprehensive print collection of his music.

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Ponce's Intermezzo is a single piece, not part of a set. This makes the title a problem. What does the word itself mean? Something that comes between, of course. But it also carries a connotation: because the term was used in eighteenth-century Italian opera for short, comedic works interpolated between

the acts of serious operas, the term tended to suggest lightness and playfulness.

It is the greatest composers who do the most violence to the meaning of musical terms, because their misuses are most widely disseminated and set a precedent. As his Op. 4, Schumann composed a cycle *entirely* of "intermezzi"—presumably, with these quirky pieces Schumann was referring to the word's connotation, and not its literal meaning. Later, Brahms's first two examples embody the term's traditional meaning. In the piano sonata, Op. 5, the intermezzo, appearing between the scherzo and finale, is a ghostly reminiscence of the slow movement, and as an unexpected addition to an otherwise traditional four-movement form, it is certainly appropriately named. He then titled the third of his four Ballades, Op. 10, "intermezzo." Here, perhaps, Brahms acknowledges the word's connotation: this movement, while not exactly humorous, is grotesquely sinister and serves as an interlude between the more cantabile pieces that surround it.

But in his Op. 76, he violates both literal and connotative meanings of "intermezzo." Here, we find two intermezzi in a row, rather than between other types of pieces. Further, they are lyric rather than playful or energetic—the vigorous pieces in the set are entitled "capriccio." Brahms has somehow redefined the word to mean a gentle and pensive piece. His Op. 117 consists exclusively of three such "intermezzi." The good news: Brahms has found an ideal form for his reflective later piano pieces. The bad news: the popularity of these pieces has utterly destroyed the meaning of the word. (The present Ponce example—an independent piece—is an "intermezzo" in the Brahms sense.)

How did this happen? When Beethoven and Schubert were students, some knowledge of the Italian vocal style was considered essential to any composer. Both these composers studied with Salieri, and both wrote vocal pieces in Italian. (Beethoven's most famous example is his concert aria, *Ah! perfido*). Later, though, mastering the Italian style no longer seemed relevant to the romantic composers. (Schumann, who felt that the overwhelming popularity of Rossini opera impeded the acceptance of serious German music, had a severe allergy to the Italian style.) As result, the once internationally accepted Italian musical terms were now in the hands of composers with little or no knowledge of Italian. They sometimes defined the terms by what they inferred—often incorrectly—from the usage of previous composers, and sometimes defined them by sheer whim. The result is "preludes" that precede nothing, serious "scherzos" (jokes), and "intermezzos" between nothing. What a mess! The only thing lacking is a sonata beginning with a "finale."

See music by Ponce on the following pages.

INTERMEZZO

MANUEL PONCE

Moderato malinconico

p

5

p

9

13

un poco rubato

Rit. marc. il canto *

17

Rit. *

Rit. *

21

poco a poco animando

25

e cresc.

29

33

non legato

f sciolto

36

dim. sempre e rall.

39

Tempo I

pp

43

rubato

47

Red. marc. il canto * *Red.* * *Red.* *

51

accel. e dim.

Red. * *Red.* *

55

8va

59

p

ppp