

An Analytical Comparison of Manuel M. Ponce's Intermezzo no. 1 and no. 2

Luis Ramirez

York University

ramirezl@yorku.ca

In this essay, I will analyze two of Manuel M. Ponce's works for piano, *Intermezzo no. 1*¹ and *Intermezzo no. 2*², and by comparing them I will discuss the possible presence of "anxiety of influence", term coined by the author Harold Bloom.³ I argue that Ponce does not go through a major stylistic makeover, but rather embraced the modernist trends of the beginning of the 20th century as compositional tools to explore his deeply rooted romantic language.

Background

Manuel María Ponce was born on December the 8th, 1882 in Fresnillo, Zacatecas, but soon after his family moved to the city of Aguascalientes in the Aguascalientes state, where he would be raised for most of his childhood. He was the youngest from a large family, and music was very commonplace in his household. He started taking piano lessons from his sister Josefina when he was 4 years old⁴ and from very early on displayed a remarkable piano technique and passionate musicality. When he was 19 he moved to Mexico City and studied piano with Vicente Mañas and harmony with Eduardo Gabrielli.⁵ ⁶ There he began to establish a crucial network of colleagues - artists, musicians, and writers - that would later become indispensable members of the nationalistic movement of Mexico.⁷

Ponce's compositional training was based on the harmonic language of the European tradition of the 19th century. Ponce developed an affinity for this romantic style, but the geographical differences and delayed development between continents, as well as his interest

¹ Manuel M. Ponce, *Intermezzo No. 1* (Mexico City: Repertorio Wagner, 1920), [https://imslp.org/wiki/Intermezzo_No.1_\(Ponce%2C_Manuel\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Intermezzo_No.1_(Ponce%2C_Manuel)).

² Manuel M. Ponce, *Intermezzo No.2*, ed. Sergio Castellanos (United States: Peer International, 1963), [https://imslp.org/wiki/Intermezzo_No.2_\(Ponce%2C_Manuel\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Intermezzo_No.2_(Ponce%2C_Manuel)).

³ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴ Corazón Otero, *Manuel M. Ponce and the Guitar*, trans. J. D. Roberts, Guitar Studies Series ; v. 3 (Westport, CT: Bold Strummer, 1994), 7.

⁵ Pablo Castellanos, *Manuel M. Ponce: Ensayo*, 1 ed., Textos de Humanidades 32 (Ciudad Universitaria, México, D.F: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Difusión Cultural, Unidad Editorial, 1982), 22.

⁶ All translations from books originally in Spanish are my own.

⁷ David Lopez Alonso, *Manuel M. Ponce.*, 1. ed. (México: Ediciones Botas, 1971), 15.

in the popular music of Mexico at the time were factors that allowed him to build his own language within the norms of the music of the Romantic period.

During his early years, he received a lot of attention by reharmonizing popular tunes⁸ and writing original songs that despite not using folk tunes, sounded as familiar as them. From early on he was fascinated with folkloric tunes and pondered about the use of them in his music. Even after going to Germany to expand his compositional vocabulary and studied with Martin Krause, he was “urged to start digging out Mexican folk music.”⁹ Throughout his career he was eager to learn more compositional tools, even after his recognition in Mexico as one of the most important composers of the time. This led him to take several trips where he studied under teachers of the highest calibre such as Paul Dukas and Nadia Boulanger.¹⁰ This education was crucial in the expansion of his stylistic boundaries.

One of Ponce’s most significant trips was his visit to Europe in October of 1925, where “looking to acquaint himself with contemporary compositional techniques, Ponce enrolled at the École Normale de Musique in Paris to study composition under Paul Dukas”.¹¹ His European experience allowed Ponce to embrace a modernistic language more akin to the current times. Remarkably, despite this evolution of his language his Mexican traits were able to break through and be displayed throughout his eclectic oeuvre.

Castellanos divides Ponce’s music into four periods outlined by his travels.¹² In the first one between 1891 and 1904, Ponce wrote music in the traditional style of the Romantic period

⁸ Jorge Barrón Corvera, *Manuel M. Ponce - A Bio-Bibliography*, 1st ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 6.

⁹ Dan Malmström, *Introduction to Twentieth Century Mexican Music* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1974), 37.

¹⁰ Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Rostros del nacionalismo en la música mexicana: un ensayo de interpretación*, 1. ed., *Vida y pensamiento de México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 116.

¹¹ Luis Francisco Gaytan, “An Introduction to the Piano Music of Manuel M. Ponce” (Ph.D., Louisiana State University, 2014), 18, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/1325.

¹² Castellanos, *Manuel M. Ponce*, 18.

whilst already exploring a “Mexican identity” in his writing.¹³ The second period, from 1905 to 1924, contains his trips to Italy and Cuba, where he began to embrace a different soundscape rich in rhythmical devices and virtuosic playing.¹⁴ The third period between 1925 and 1932 covers his second trip to Europe where he learned the modernist trends and experimented with modal writing, non-functional harmony, bitonality, and other compositional mechanisms of the neoclassical, impressionist, and modernist styles.¹⁵ The last period was after returning to Mexico from 1933 to 1948, where he sought to embrace the popular and indigenous music and assimilate it into his own, initiating a current of nationalistic pride in Mexican artists and carrying with it a rediscovery of Mexican culture and identity.^{16 17}

Ponce’s ability to reconcile the modernist elements of the classical music tradition with the folklore of Mexican music was of great importance to the advancement of culture in the Mexico of the early 20th century. He “injected in the music of his homeland a vast amount of new musical elements that permitted a cultural stylization with endless harmonic and rhythmic resources.”¹⁸ Many artists of a wide variety of disciplines followed suite, with Ponce spearheading a cultural movement that not only brought Mexico up to date with the current state of affairs, but most importantly embraced and brought the culture of Mexico to an international audience. Ponce’s fame connected him with some of the most prestigious performers from all around the world, such as Jascha Heifetz¹⁹, Arthur Rubinstein²⁰, and

¹³ Works such as *Balada Mexicana*, *Estrellita*, *Mazurkas*.

¹⁴ Works such as *Suite Cubana*, *Elegia de la distancia*, *Rapsodias Cubanas*.

¹⁵ Works such as *Suite Bitonal*, *Miniaturas*, *Serenata no. 3*.

¹⁶ Castellanos, *Manuel M. Ponce*, 45.

¹⁷ Works such as *Ferial*, *Cuatro danzas Mexicanas*, *Instantáneas Mexicanas*

¹⁸ Otto Mayer-Serra, *Panorama de la música mexicana: desde la independencia hasta la actualidad*, 1. ed. (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1941), 148.

¹⁹ Christina Gibson, “The Music of Manuel M. Ponce, Julián Carrillo, and Carlos Chávez in New York, 1925-1932” (Ph.D., University of Maryland, 2008), 68, <http://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/8532>.

²⁰ Dahlia Guerra, “Manuel M. Ponce: A Study of His Solo Piano Works and His Relationship to Mexican Musical Nationalism” (D.M.A., University of Oklahoma, 1997), 6, <https://shareok.org/handle/11244/5462>.

Andres Segovia²¹. These performers championed Ponce's music during their tours and Ponce became a icon of Mexican music during the beginning of the 20th century.

Intermezzo no. 1 (1920's)

Ponce's *Intermezzo no. 1* for piano is written in a very traditional Romantic style, with influence that follows the tradition from a direct lineage of the *Intermezzi* by Brahms or Schumann, although its mood also resembles Mendelssohn's *Songs without words*. There is no consensus on the year it was written, although most writers place it around the 1920's.²² Based on the style and its similarity to other of his works around the time, it is fair to assume that it is an earlier work of Ponce. With the "Intermezzo" title one can imply that he is treating this piece as an independent entity, not part of any larger work. Smith goes further with the connotation of the title explaining that "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."²³

The work is short and simple; Vasquez describes it as "a perfect synthesis between technique and poetry."²⁴ Ponce's melodic writing was heavily inspired by the music of Chopin, yet he is able to create a very unique melodic language that stands out because of its "contours and phrase twists."²⁵ Ptacnik writes: "The theme is of a single inspiration, with reduced dimensions and ternary form - with brief introduction and a coda - that achieve a perfect equilibrium. Maybe these are the reasons why it holds a special place in the heart of the

²¹ Peter Stephen Poulos, "Towards a Contemporary Style: Manuel M. Ponce's Neoclassical Compositions for Guitar" (M.M., University of Cincinnati, 1993), 22, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/230892210/abstract/7E67553D73A34FF6PQ/1>.

²² Paolo Mello, liner notes for *Manuel María Ponce Complete Piano Works*, vol. 2, Álvaro Cendoya (Grand Piano, 2012), 7.

²³ Joseph Smith, "Rare Finds: A Mexican Intermezzo," *Piano Today*; Katonah, N. Y., Spring 2008.

²⁴ Carlos Vasquez, "El Mensaje Musical de Manuel M. Ponce.," *Revista del Conservatorio*, March 1964, 15.

²⁵ Castellanos, *Manuel M. Ponce*, 53.

audience, performers, students and professionals.”²⁶ The *Intermezzo* is undoubtedly Ponce’s best-known romantic piano piece. He dedicated this *Intermezzo* to Adolfo de la Peña Gil, one of his publishers.²⁷

Stylistic Analysis

The *Intermezzo no. 1* represents the early stages in Ponce’s compositional periods. It is an example of Ponce’s skillful lyricism in the instrumental format. Some Mexican characteristics are the parallel thirds used extensively throughout the work and a sentimental theme, emphasized by the *Moderato Malincolico* marking at the beginning. There is a certain lack of depth that I would attribute to its formulaic writing, stereotypical harmonic sequences, and obvious cadential arrivals. That being said, it is precisely all of these factors that make this piece really easy to listen - it does not ask a lot from the listener and still it provides a pleasant listening experience; perhaps this is why it became one of his most known works. **Harmonic**

Analysis

The introduction is a long pedal point on a B, the V of the key, E minor. The thirds motif introduced on the right hand of the first measure is the source from where he derives the main pattern for the melodic swaying on the right hand throughout the piece. The main theme **a** shown in Figure 1 is first heard with the anacrusis into measure 8 and up to measure 16, consisting of three phrases (8 measures) with the first two being two measures long and the third one being four. The chord progression in these measures follows the traditional tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic format, with a sequential pattern expanding the tonic region.²⁸

Figure 1: Ponce’s *Intermezzo No. 1*

²⁶ Paolo Mello, “Proyecto Editorial Manuel M. Ponce Escuela Nacional de Música, UNAM,” *Revista Digital Universitaria*, February 10, 2006, 5.

²⁷ *Canciones Mexicanas: Lejos de ti ; Las Mañanitas* (Mexico: De la Peña Gil Hermanos, 1917), Worldcat, <http://www.worldcat.org/title/canciones-mexicanas-lejos-de-ti-las-mananitas/oclc/25685185>.

²⁸ See Appendix 1, mm. 8-16.

Main theme **a**, mm. 8-16:

A variation of the first theme, **b**, follows up almost identical in its harmonic background but the melodic contour this time moves up an octave instead of only a sixth, and it continues with constant sixteenths instead of separate phrases.²⁹ Both of these themes remain in e minor and are finished with a perfect authentic cadence. Section **c** in measures 23-27 begins with what appears to be yet another variation of **a** since it continues the same formula of constant sixteenths parallel thirds, however the initial E minor chord is now an E major chord as the secondary dominant of iv.³⁰ This time, instead of landing into the dominant, the subdominant is expanded with an alternation between iv₆ and V in the second half of section **c**³¹ until finally landing on a cadenza-like arpeggiation of V-VImaj7 moving down the register and slowing the pace down until a complete stop on the dominant.³² The remaining music is an exact repetition of **a** and **b**,³³ finalizing with a coda **e** that emulates the introductory dominant pedal and leading into a final cadence of Fr₄₃ - V_{7b13} - i.³⁴

Formal Analysis

²⁹ See Appendix 1, mm. 15-23.

³⁰ See Appendix 1, mm. 23-24.

³¹ See Appendix 1, mm. 28-33.

³² See Appendix 1, m. 39.

³³ See Appendix 1, mm. 39-55.

³⁴ See Appendix 1, mm. 55-64.

The Intermezzo no. 1 is written in a very typical ternary ABA form, with a short introduction and coda. The introduction is a 7-measure presentation of the right-hand rhythmic motif that will be used throughout the work (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Ponce's *Intermezzo no. 1*

Introduction, mm. 1-7:

The musical score for the introduction of Ponce's *Intermezzo no. 1* (measures 1-7) is shown. It is in 2/4 time and E minor. The score is for piano. The right hand has a rhythmic motif of eighth notes, and the left hand has a bass line with a pedal point. The introduction is marked 'Introduction' and 'Piano' (p). The score is divided into measures 1-7. The first measure is a whole rest. The second measure has a right-hand chord and a left-hand quarter note. The third measure has a right-hand chord and a left-hand quarter note. The fourth measure has a right-hand chord and a left-hand quarter note. The fifth measure has a right-hand chord and a left-hand quarter note. The sixth measure has a right-hand chord and a left-hand quarter note. The seventh measure has a right-hand chord and a left-hand quarter note. The score is labeled with 'Introduction' and 'A section' (a). The piano part is marked 'Piano' (p). The right hand has a rhythmic motif of eighth notes. The left hand has a bass line with a pedal point.

The A section is divided into part **a** and **b**, and the content of A after B is exactly the same material, which reflects the formulaic construction of the work. The only minor distinction between these two iterations is that on the second beat of measure 23 there is an E on the left hand and on the same place of measure 55 the pitch is now a quarter note B.³⁵

The development, or section B, is divided into two parts **c** and **d**. These two function as a simple expansion of the tonality and transition back to the recapitulation with a cadenza-like flurry of arpeggios. After the second A the coda proceeds with the same rhythmic motif (Figure 2), arriving at the first quarter notes of the piece since the introduction, slowing down dramatically the pace.³⁶ The rests provide a lot of suspense in contrast with the constant motion of the piece so far, finalizing the work on a soft and high E minor chord.

Intermezzo no. 2 (ca. 1933)

³⁵ See Appendix 1, mm. 23, 55.

³⁶ See Appendix 1, mm. 60-62.

The Intermezzo no. 2 for piano was written circa 1933³⁷ during his studies in Paris, and it is a distinct contrast from its antecesor. Ptacnik describes this intermezzo as a “beautiful example of impressionism.”³⁸ Although during this time he was certainly experimenting a lot with an impressionistic soundscape, I disagree with Ptacnik. In my opinion this work shows a much more mature romantic writing, so I would consider this particular intermezzo as more akin to a late romantic category. He dedicated this work to Joaquín Amparán, colleague and friend who would become director of the National Conservatory of Music from 1960 to 1967.³⁹

Stylistic Analysis

As mentioned before, this work displays a lot of traits from the late romantic music period. These traits are: dense pianistic texture, unresolved dissonances, harmonic ambiguity, non-functional chords, distant modulations, and an overall sense of longing and suspension with the prolongation of resolution throughout the piece. Despite these modernist traces, Ponce is still somewhat harmonically conservative.

Harmonic Analysis

Despite the denser and more ambiguous harmonic texture, there is still a hint of functional intentions in the chords Ponce employs. As innovative as his language may seem, it never completely departs from the principles of the tonal system. Most chords are heavily embellished with nonharmonic tones, mainly suspensions and generally emphasizing dissonances. The key of the piece is implied as G-sharp minor, even though there is never a single instance of this chord throughout the piece.⁴⁰

The piece begins with a V-pedal on a D-sharp, and specifically this emphasis on V remains a recurrent characteristic throughout the work, which contributes to the general feeling

³⁷ Barrón Corvera, *Manuel M. Ponce - A Bio-Bibliography*, 271.

³⁸ Mello, “Proyecto Editorial Manuel M. Ponce Escuela Nacional de Música, UNAM,” 8.

³⁹ “Conservatorio Nacional de Música (México),” *Wikipedia*, November 15, 2018, [https://es.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conservatorio_Nacional_de_M%C3%BAsica_\(M%C3%A9xico\)&oldid=112021810](https://es.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conservatorio_Nacional_de_M%C3%BAsica_(M%C3%A9xico)&oldid=112021810).

⁴⁰ See Appendix 2.

of irresolution even finishing the work with a half cadence on V. The first part of the first theme **a** could be thought of as a V-VI-VII₆ progression, seen in measures 1 and 2.⁴¹ Measures 3-6 show the second part of this phrase, a chromatic two-line counterpoint on a V pedal point. Measure 7 begins like the main theme, but it further develops into a transitional phrase that expands on the sigh-like motif introduced at the very beginning of the piece on the second and third eight notes of the left hand. This “suspension” motif is a main feature of the work that Ponce employs extensively, and in measures 8-11 he uses it as propulsion for growth towards the climactic point of this first section on measure 12, rising chromatically on the right hand and with contrary motion on the left.⁴²

Measures 12-13 presents the same first theme **a** transposed to imply the key of the V, D-sharp minor, by landing on its corresponding V, the A-sharp. The main difference to the first iteration is that the chords now contain some added tones and the melody is now being played in octaves. The second part of the phrase is also transitional but this time concluding the first section, slowing the pace down and centering on an A# major chord that enharmonically modulates to Bb.⁴³

The second section of the work is contrastingly subdued and emphasizing a modal melodic character and homophonic movement. Measure 18 begins in $\frac{5}{8}$ with an introductory right-hand melody moving mainly in fourths and fifths. The following section **e** moves around several modes and one could make the argument that this section displays the impressionist nature of the work. It begins in B-flat dorian from measure 18 to measure 21 accelerating its harmonic rhythm with C-flat lydian on m. 22, B-flat phrygian on m. 23, B dorian on m. 24, and alternating between B-flat₇ and G-flat₇ on m. 25. The left hand in this section changes to the

⁴¹ See Appendix 2, mm. 1-2.

⁴² See Appendix 2, mm. 8-12.

⁴³ See Appendix 2, mm. 12-17.

corresponding pedal point on each measure, and the accompaniment moves in perfect fourths down and up cyclically.⁴⁴

The next seven bars of sections **f** and **g**⁴⁵ are densely chromatic and are hard to understand in the traditional vertical sense. These measures are better understood as the result of the chromatic counterpoint alternating from one hand to the other. Each measure of section **g** moves higher in register, transitioning into a variation of section **e**⁴⁶ now with the melody on the inner part of the right hand.

By elongating and emphasizing the melodic line on the left hand, measures 37-44 are an expansion of section **d**.⁴⁷ The expected section **e** is interrupted by a fragment of section **h**, alternating with **e** and then taking over.⁴⁸ The final B-flat of **h** works as the enharmonic A-sharp, which acts as the secondary dominant of D-sharp, the V of the original key G-sharp minor, implied once more at the beginning of the recapitulation.⁴⁹ The recapitulation presents the first theme again but expands the notation to octaves under the dynamic marking of *ppp*. This contrasting rendition of the theme is intentional to set the dramatic growth towards the climax on measure 66. This time, sections **a** and **b** are expanded with octaves and a higher register. Measures 60-64 are equivalent to measures 7-11 with one crucial difference - measure 65 is an extension of this climactic build-up and acts as way to maintain the suspense and prolongate the dynamic growth, slowdown of tempo, and arrival to the climax.⁵⁰ Despite feeling like a cadential V-I, the movement from 65 to 66 is technically a secondary dominant A-sharp to D-sharp. The first theme is presented again in its fullest version, both hands playing

⁴⁴ See Appendix 2, mm. 18-25.

⁴⁵ See Appendix 2, mm. 26-32.

⁴⁶ See Appendix 2, mm. 33-36.

⁴⁷ See Appendix 2, mm. 37-44.

⁴⁸ See Appendix 2, mm. 45-48.

⁴⁹ See Appendix 2, mm. 53-54.

⁵⁰ See Appendix 2, mm. 64-65.

4-part chords outlining the melody. Section **c** is presented in a much shorter format and an inconclusive feel to it.⁵¹

The first two measures of **i** - the coda - allude to the middle section, with certain similarities in rhythmic and melodic movement to section **g**.⁵² In the same way as in the development, these two measures are driven by the contrapuntal movement, and do not carry a sense of functional harmony. This chromatic lines provide the necessary contrast for the last iteration of the first theme to attain a sense of arrival.⁵³ Nevertheless, this piece finishes with a feeling of incompleteness arriving to a half cadence with both hands on a D-sharp.

Formal Analysis

Despite the increased ambiguity of harmonic construction, the formal structure of the Intermezzo no. 2 maintains a rather traditional formula. The piece still reflects a clear ternary ABA construction with a coda at the end, with the sections outlined by the key changes. Section A begins with sections **a** and **b**, with second part of A being a transposition of **a** a fourth below, and **c** as a transitional phrase.⁵⁴ Section B is divided into **d** used as an introduction to the melodic theme in **e** and **f** and **g** working together as an interlude before going back to **e** and leading into the recapitulation with **h**.⁵⁵ The recapitulation follows the traditional forms in which the second part of the theme is presented in the main tonality. The coda consists on a two bar allusion to section **g**, before presenting one final iteration of **a**.

Stylistic comparison

The contrasting character between these two works is evidence of Ponce's ability to synthesize new compositional trends without compromising his language. He "created an expressive quality that was consistently evident despite the different genres and styles of

⁵¹ See Appendix 2, mm. 68-69.

⁵² See Appendix 2, mm. 70-71.

⁵³ See Appendix 2, mm. 72-74.

⁵⁴ See Appendix 2, mm. 1-17.

⁵⁵ See Appendix 2, mm. 18-53.

pieces.”⁵⁶ Both intermezzi evoke a wistful mood, indicated with “Moderato Malincolico” on no. 1 and “Andante serioso” on no. 2. In no. 1 it is the lyricism that drives this melancholy through the ups and downs of the harmonic progression and the chords’ functional roles, and the expressivity can be pushed even further with the implied rubato that the music demands from the performer. No. 2 presents a similar elasticity in the management of the tempo that highly relates to this character construction, but the desolation and grieving is instead effectively achieved with piercing dissonances, harmonic suspensions, and dramatic dynamic swells.

An interesting difference between the works is that No. 2 contains a much more contrasting second section. In no. 1 the B section continues with an almost identical melodic contour, the same rhythmic motor, virtually the same chord progression and still within the same harmonic region.⁵⁷ However, in no. 2 the B section introduces a completely different character from the first one, emphasizing melodic development above a soft atmospheric cloud of modal and quartal explorations.⁵⁸

Both of these works use the title of “Intermezzo” to categorize them as stand-alone pieces. Interestingly, Ponce did not group these works together as a set, but alongside no. 3 they came to be known as Ponce’s *Three Intermezzi*.

Harmonic comparison

The most evident difference in the harmonic construction of these works is the functional clarity of no. 1 as opposed to the harmonic ambiguity of no. 2. No. 1 has memorable melodies, sequential progressions, and easily identifiable phrases and cadences that ease the listening experience. In contrast, in no. 2 Ponce seems to intentionally blur any sense of

⁵⁶ Michelle C. Yip, “Stylistic Development in the Piano Works by Manuel Maria Ponce (1882-1948)” (Ph.D., University of Cincinnati, 2008), 52, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?0::NO:10:P10_ETD_SUBID:82374#abstract-files.

⁵⁷ See Appendix 1, mm. 24-39.

⁵⁸ See Appendix 2, mm. 18-53.

resolution as detailed in the harmonic analysis. More so, he embeds the melodic line in a denser texture that resists any obvious identification.

Although no. 2 does present certain sequential patterns, they are chromatic transpositions and not the commonly used “circle of fifths” sequence as in no. 1.⁵⁹ In addition, the vertical plane - the harmonic construction of chords and cadential arrivals - is emphasized in no. 1, but in no. 2 Ponce focuses on the horizontal plane, the contrapuntal weaving of melodic lines and suspension of resolutions. For example, in section **b** of no. 1⁶⁰ there is a secondary melody on the left hand, but most of the notes fit vertically with the corresponding chord changes each bar. In contrast, measures 4-6 and 57-59 of no. 2 are more easily understood as two horizontal chromatic lines above a D-sharp pedal point.

Generally speaking, the compositional process for no. 1 follows a more formulaic procedure than no. 2. In no. 1 the melodic movement is driven by the harmonic region described each measure, to the point of being almost predictable. However, in no. 2 the melodic crafting increases in complexity and is composed with a more expressionistic drive.

Formal comparison

On my first hearing I had a hard time identifying a recurrent theme or a sense of formal composition when I first listened to the *Intermezzo no. 2*. This was possibly the intention of Ponce given all the aspects that obscure an obvious construction. Even though the formal construction of no. 1 is more blatantly symmetrical, when analysing these two works I made a crucial discovery: both intermezzi describe the same ABA form and a coda, with each section divided into two parts (Figure 3).⁶¹

Figure 3: Ponce's *Intermezzo No. 1 and 2*

⁵⁹ See Appendix 2, mm. 9-11.

⁶⁰ See Appendix 1, mm. 16-23.

⁶¹ Refer to appendices for specific measure numbers.

Comparison of formal structure:

I N T E R M E Z Z O # 1	A SECTION		B SECTION				A SECTION		Coda											
	Exposition		Development				Recapitulation													
	Part 1	Part 2	Part 1		Part 2		Part 1	Part 2												
	a	b	c		d		a	b	e											
	e:	i	i	[V]iv -		V		i	i	Fr-V-i										
I N T E R M E Z Z O # 2	A SECTION		B SECTION				A SECTION		Coda											
	Exposition		Development				Recapitulation													
	Part 1	Part 2	Part 1		Part 2		Part 1	Part 2												
	a	b	T _{sa}	c	d	e	f	g	e	d	e	h	e	h	a	b	a	T _{sc}	i	a
	g#:	V		d#: V		V (Bb)		g#: [V]		V		V		VII-V						

There are still a few differences, such as no. 1 beginning with an introduction, and the fact that no. 2 does change keys when going through the sections. Even though no. 2 is also built with two or four-measure phrases, there are more sudden changes between these phrases and even drastic interruptions of the melodic ideas. This comparison allows us to see more clearly that even though Ponce was growing and advancing his compositional methods, his architectural mentality remained fixed in traditional structures.

Anxiety of Influence

Many European composers struggled with the almost inescapable anxiety of influence from their precursors. As Straus puts it, “composers have felt an understandably deep ambivalence toward the masterworks of the past. On the one hand, those masterworks inspire

admiration, even reverence. At the same time, they also inspire the kind of anxiety that one often feels the presence of powerful, dominating, and intimidating figures.”⁶² Ponce is a particularly hard composer to analyze in this regard given his extraordinary facility to move around the spectrum of styles and genres across his lifetime. As Madrid explains, he is “an example of a composer who developed multiple identity as a strategic tool with which to negotiate his complex and contradictory ideological surroundings.”⁶³ He was a fast learner and adapted quickly to new compositional techniques. Paolo Mello writes:

One fundamental characteristic of Ponce’s work is the use he made throughout his career of different styles, reflecting his range of knowledge and mastery of different compositional techniques. Broadly speaking, his music ranges from the Romanticism of the previous generation of composers to a modernism which made sporadic appearances in his early works but really began to establish itself in the music he wrote during his time in Paris and thereafter.⁶⁴

He was able to move freely from one style to another, absorbing it merely as a compositional tool rather than a continuous stylistical spectrum that changes over years, or as Stevenson notes, he was “able to change with the times.”⁶⁵

In 1905 during his first trip to Europe, his teacher Enrico Bossi warned him: “Your style is too old-fashioned; your music would have been up-to-date in 1830 but not in 1905.”⁶⁶ He may have been old-fashion, but it is an indication that from early on in his career he had certain convictions of *what* to say. As Yolanda Rivas explains:

“Ponce defined himself as a romantic and individualist artist by generation and by conviction. The stylistic traits of his works - the sustained ‘expressivity’ throughout each work, the internal connection with the sentimental and with specific melodic schemes indicated a conscious decision of an affinity and a fundamental correlation

⁶² Joseph N. Straus, “The ‘Anxiety of Influence’ in Twentieth-Century Music,” *The Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 4 (1991): 430, <https://doi.org/10.2307/763870>.

⁶³ Alejandro L. Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and Ideas in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*, Studies in Latin American and Caribbean Music (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 84.

⁶⁴ Mello, *Manuel María Ponce Complete Piano Works*, 4.

⁶⁵ Robert Murrell Stevenson, *Music in Mexico: A Historical Survey*, Apollo Editions (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1971), 235.

⁶⁶ Stevenson, 233.

between his personal expression and a specific type of popular music that brought to him the melodic and affective elements he needed.”⁶⁷

Despite his trips to Europe and proficiency with the current compositional tools, I do not believe that Ponce experienced said “anxiety of influence” in Straus terms. Ponce’s compositional curiosity and his adventurous exploration of European techniques granted him with new ways of *how* to say, not *what* to say. Ponce succeeds in assimilating all these influences into his own compositional voice without losing individuality.

During Ponce’s trip to Europe in the 1920’s, a new indigenist movement was being initiated by his pupil Carlos Chavez, which “attempted to retract to much older roots, and despite is apparent anti-eurocentrism in clearly leaned towards a modernism parallel to the Stravinskian vanguard.”⁶⁸ In comparison, Ponce’s music was considered retrograde and conservative. To avoid this imminent comparison, he “worked in his music from within, based on purely musical considerations that allowed him to expand upon his formal goals and achieve an idiomatic modernization”.⁶⁹ Even in Europe, his eyes and heart were still looking back towards his homeland. Ponce had an “eagerness to explore, study and assimilate new styles, techniques and materials that lead to the creation of a large and eclectic catalogue.”⁷⁰

As Rivas explains, Ponce’s position towards foreign influences was that of “a curious artist, interested in what [the most current compositional trends] could contribute to the national music.”⁷¹ His goal as a curious composer was to expand his vocabulary, and his music is better understood as “the result of a continuous *assimilation*, not a linear but a spiral evolution of different styles and influences.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Moreno Rivas, *Rostros del nacionalismo en la música mexicana*, 99.

⁶⁸ Moreno Rivas, 115.

⁶⁹ Moreno Rivas, 115–16.

⁷⁰ Luis Francisco Gaytan, “An Introduction to the Piano Music of Manuel M. Ponce” (D.M.A., Louisiana State University, 2014), 67, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/1325.

⁷¹ Moreno Rivas, *Rostros del nacionalismo en la música mexicana*, 116.

⁷² Omar Herrera Arizmendi, “Manuel M. Ponce: Style and Aesthetics” (D.M.A., University of Houston, 2012), 5, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1317959763/abstract/83D60343297F4A78PQ/1>.

In my opinion, the differences reflected between these two works can be allocated to a growth of his compositional palette and facility to embrace new musical styles rather than a full-on aesthetic evolution of his language and philosophy. It may be possible that he experienced the latter when he began his exploration and incorporation of Mexican folklore into his music, but based on my analysis in these two particular works the transformation seems merely technical to me.

There is some definite change between the two works - his melodic treatment “becomes less tonal and more fragmentary; his harmonies become more chromatic and begin to include non-traditional progressions, non-tertian chords... an overall tendency[...]to conceive his works more horizontally than vertically, resulting in dissonant counterpoint and unresolved dissonances.”⁷³ However, I argue that these changes are as a result of a compositional development rather than stylistic alteration. That being said, the maturity and emotional growth from *Intermezzo no.1* to *Intermezzo no. 2* is undeniable, and despite these two works being “simple” character pieces, they demonstrate Ponce’s ability to mutate and synthesize a lifetime of experiences into his unique musical language that continues to infatuate audiences in Mexico and around the world.

⁷³ Barrón Corvera, *Manuel M. Ponce - A Bio-Bibliography*, 27.

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*all sources marked with an asterisk are in Spanish

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