

***Mysteries from the  
Ancient Nahuatl***

***Barton McLean***

## MYSTERIES FROM THE ANCIENT NAHUATL

by Barton McLean  
Nahuatl texts translated into  
English by Daniel Brinton.

A large choral-instrumental-electronic tape work with narrator and soloists, affording a multidimensional view of Nahuatl culture of ancient Mexico and the Southwestern U.S., drawing exclusively from the rich storehouse of Nahuatl poetry.

This hour-long work can be performed in its entirety in two ways (using the same music in either): either as a basic choral-instrumental concert oratorio (with tape) or, in its more elaborate form, as a ritual-tableaux with costumes, modest staging, lighting, slide projection, props, scenic design, and, for Ritual of the Dawn, a solo or small ensemble dance.

### INSTRUMENTATION

2 flutes (1. - picc.)  
2 oboes  
2 clarinets  
Piano  
Harp

4 percussion  
Narrator  
SATB chorus (with several choral  
soloists in each section)  
Conductor  
Stereo tape

### Section

I. The Intoxication of the Flowers

II. Hymn to the All-Mother

III. Incantation

IV. Ritual of the Dawn

V. Toward the Hereafter

### Instrumentation

Ins. ensemble,  
narrator, tape

All forces.

12'

Full instrumentation,  
but sparingly.

8'

2 fl, 1 cl, pno,  
hp, perc. 1-4.

15'

Full forces.

20'

Sections I-II, IV, and V are each designed to be independent concert works. All five works draw heavily on world music idioms, in some instances, such as the main idea in the Hymn derived from a Zuni Indian chant, quoting directly; in other instances, preserving a feeling of a certain idiom. Musics of many cultures from Africa, the Americas, and the Far East were integrated in an overall personal style.

## THE TEXTS

The pre-Columbian Nahuatl civilization had developed a richness of philosophy and literature comparable to our own today in many ways. The particular genius of its poets is to be found in the way they combine traditional Indian traits of basic directness, naivete, and sincerity with highly stylized and sophisticated syntax and ideas. Another impressive feature is the startling range of expressive power contained in the poems, from the gentle wonder of the birth of a baby to the bitter-sweet "ecstasy" of a citizen slated to have his still-beating heart cut out in sacrifice by the obsidian knife. The following typical excerpt illustrates the feeling of identification with nature, the Nahuatl view of life and death, and the powerful but subtle irony and poignancy that pervade much of the poetry.

we only came to sleep  
we only came to dream  
it is not true  
no it is not true  
that we came to live on the earth  
we are changed into the grass of springtime  
our hearts will grow green again  
and they will open their petals  
but our body is like a rose tree  
it puts forth flowers and then withers

Throughout the poems is a feeling of oneness with nature and God (often described as the same), coupled with a feeling of awe of the natural inexorable forces which are all-powerful and which shape their destiny. The many allusions to natural beauty and joy are often tempered with hints of impending death, but a death that is part of the natural process of life.

## THE MUSIC

As can be imagined from the dimensions of the performing forces used, a wide range of expressive possibilities results. A highly contrasting series of connected tableaux is presented, having musical continuity but not connected through any sort of plot. Several musical threads run throughout the work, such as the narrative and certain musical idioms ("nature", "impending doom", "joy of life"). A central concept of the text, the developing awareness of man and his relation to nature, and the way this awareness enables him to confront the concepts of birth, life, joy, despair, and death, is articulated musically by employing an all-pervading sound complex symbolizing nature and the Nahuatl God-force (electronic sounds, various percussion, piano, harp effects) from which the human elements (human narrative, solos, choral chants, woodwinds, native percussion) emerge, triumph, and recede back into the natural sounds, which are sometimes mysterious, sometimes pleasant, sometimes terrifying, and sometimes sublime.

This work was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts  
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## INSTRUCTIONS FOR PERFORMANCE

### COORDINATION

Two distinct types of sections prevail as follows:

I. Conductor gives section cues with two hands (double bar) or one hand (single bar), along with holding up fingers to correspond with the section number. The section will then play itself out, and any further subsection cueing will be written in the parts. In each section one of the following markings are included to help conductor to know when next section begins:

- A. ● refers to a specific cue to watch for, either from tape or live performer.
- B. ○ means that the conductor should not listen for a cue, but rather estimate the number of seconds as indicated in the conductor part. IN ALL CASES EXCEPT TAPE TIMINGS, INDICATIONS OF NUMBER OF SECONDS IS ONLY APPROXIMATE.

II. Conductor conducts traditional meter.

- A. √ refers to these sections.

III. Hybrid sections are those with characteristics of I and II. They should be dealt with as follows:

- A. √ (same as above) the section is traditionally conducted throughout (as in II, Section M-4).
- B. √ the section is traditionally conducted for only part of the section. Conductor then awaits the next cue (as in II, Section J-1).

### PARTS

Each part contains (a.) music to be played, (b.) conductor line with timings and any indications, and (c.) any individual cues from other players. In hybrid sections, those parts that are non-metered will have the number of bars indicated in the part so the performers can follow the conductor's beat.

### RHYTHM



As fast as possible.

Proportional notation. Follow general indication as to number of seconds. Sustain all notes. Avoid imitating regular pulse.

?

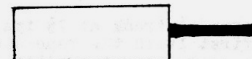
(When outside a box) Brief pause.

IMPORTANT: The rhythmically free character of much of the work (i.e., non-coordination between parts) depends on the non-coordination of beats between any two or more sounding parts. Because of this, the following notational devices are employed:

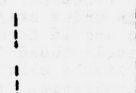
### NOTATIONAL DEVICES OF THEMATIC PROCESS

- 1. | : | ————— Keep repeating until next cue.

2.



Phrases within boxes played or sung in random order as follows:



Go on to another phrase without pause.

Same, but repeat whatever phrase is indicated.

?

Go on to another phrase after specified pause.

3.



Insert this material in the middle of an ongoing passage. Be sure to resume previous material after the ( ), including previous dynamics.

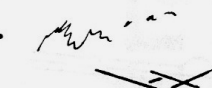
4.



↑

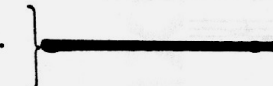
When two kinds of thematic material are given, this is a schematic of how the performer is to merge the second with the first, with the second finally dominating.

5.



Various kinds of graphic representation, usually at climactic points. Indicates general pitch, intensity areas. Performer plays wild gestures.

6.



Improvise in the manner of the preceding material, utilizing its pitch, rhythmic, dynamic characteristics in general.

### PITCH

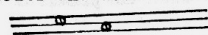
In all non-metered sections and in all boxes, accidentals pertain only to the note they precede, with the exception of repeated notes in the same staff. This also pertains to all of the Fifth Movement, including its traditionally-metered sections. In all other instances (i.e. traditionally metered sections of movements I-IV) traditional rules of accidentals apply (i.e., an accidental holds true for the whole bar in that staff, and is cancelled after the bar). Thus, it is quite possible, in hybrid sections of movements I-IV, to have both sets of pitch rules operating simultaneously in different parts.

Piano and vibraphone clusters should be chromatic or semi-chromatic whenever practical.

THE TAPE (Which is stereo,  $\frac{1}{2}$  track at  $7\frac{1}{2}$  ips, head out)  
The conductor should first learn the tape cues with a stopwatch, since much of the tape score is not traditionally notated. Please do not use stopwatch in rehearsal or performance, however, since to do so would result in undue stiffness and rigidity. A-440 tuning note precedes tape, and should be used as a reference. If tape is out of tune, use a variable speed deck. In performance, do not be concerned with the inevitable slight deviations between tape & score timings. As the work progresses, the tape performer, before a section is played, should cue it up so that the end of the leader is right on the playback head. Conductor will always cue tape player, who will have his/her own part similar to the other parts. Careful attention to balance between tape and live forces is essential. It should not be necessary to adjust volume levels once the work begins, if the initial balance is good.

#### PIANO PREPARATION

Insert bolts and wood screws as follows:



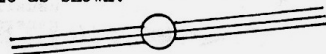
(Insert the bolt between a pair of the three strings)

Lengths should vary from 1" to 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

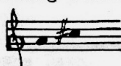
Aim for the deepest, richest sound quality with the least rattle. Do not subject the strings to undue tension. Use the longest, fattest screws and bolts for the lower strings. Strings to prepare:



Insert a dime as shown:



between the following strings:



In the event of the internal piano structure interfering with a particular note, choose the next convenient adjacent note. Generally, maintain the pitch contour as notated.

#### TEXT PRONUNCIATION

follows the system introduced by the Spanish missionaries immediately after the conquest. In general, the pronunciation is the same as that of Spanish. For specifics, see more detail in preface to the choral-piano score.

#### LIST OF PERCUSSION

Perc. I: Celesta  
2 conga drums  
2 triangles  
4 timpani (2 25", 2 28")  
vibraphone  
suspended cymbal

In addition to the regular beaters for these instruments, you will need:

s.d. sticks  
hr. rub. vibe mallets (2)

Perc. II: small gong  
4 conga drums  
3 suspended cymbals (dif. pitches)  
set tubular chimes  
triangle

bass bow & resin  
2 med. cord vibe mallets  
s.d. sticks  
(in addition to regular beaters for these instruments)

Perc. III: Orchestra bells  
tam tam  
3 bongo drums tuned apart  
bass drum  
suspended cymbal  
bell tree  
mirimba  
4 almglocken\*

In addition to the regular beaters for these instruments:

s.d. sticks  
bass bow & resin  
half dollar, quarter  
2 soft rub. vibe mallets

Perc. IV: orchestra bells  
suspended cymbal  
3 tom toms of differing tunings  
vibraphone  
28" timp. with suspended cymbal laid on top.  
4 almglocken\*

In addition to the regular beaters for these instruments:

s.d. sticks  
2 soft, 2 hd. rub. vibe mallets

\* Large, rounded cowbell-like bells, tuned or not. Also called Swiss cowbells or camel bells. May substitute variously-pitched large cowbells if these are not available.

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# I. The Intoxication of the Flowers

MYSTERIOUSLY, HAUNTINGLY

$\text{♩} = 120$

**A**

Piano fully prepared  
as in diagram.

①

Conductor takes cues  
from tape.

TP. SECT. I

Do not dip the pitch  
too soon.

ob. 2

2"

*mf*

1"

2"

Do not dip the pitch  
too soon.

fl. 1

*mf*

Do not dip the pitch  
too soon.

ob. 1

*mf*

3

4"

*p*

*mf*

*p*

*f*

*p*

*f*

5"

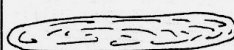
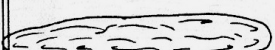
10"

15"

20"

25"

30"



2

fl. 1

fl. 2

obl.

ob. 2

(In unmetred passages,  
do not coordinate beats.)

cl. 1

cl. 2

pr. ob.

(ped.)

**B**

30"

35"

40"

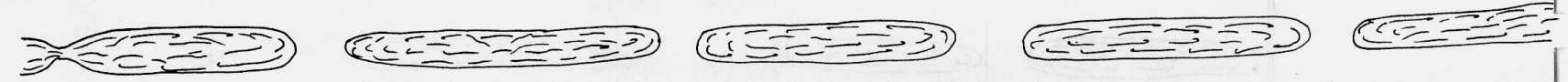
45"

50"

55"

1'

TP.





only during the most active tape passages. Imitate tape.

Handwritten musical score for percussion instruments, including piano (pno.), celesta, and various percussion instruments (SM. GONG, TAM TAM, Bowed).

**Handwritten Annotations:**

- fl. 1, 2** (Flute 1 and 2) with a **p** (piano) dynamic marking.
- 7"** (7 seconds) duration for the first piano part.
- All 8va** (All Octave 8va) for the piano part.
- cl. 1, 2** (Clarinet 1 and 2) with a **p** dynamic marking.
- pno.** (piano) with a **p** dynamic marking.
- h.p.** (Hammered Piano) with a **p** dynamic marking.
- All 8va** (All Octave 8va) for the hammer piano part.
- pc. 1 CELESTA** (Percussion 1 Celesta) with a **p** dynamic marking.
- SM. GONG** (Small Gong) with a **f** (forte) dynamic marking and instruction: **Bowed** (aim for higher pitches).
- TAM TAM** with a **f** dynamic marking and instruction: **Bowed** (aim for higher pitches).
- 1'30"** (1 minute 30 seconds) duration for the first section.
- 1'40"** (1 minute 40 seconds) duration for the second section.
- 1'50"** (1 minute 50 seconds) duration for the third section.
- 10"** (10 seconds) duration for the fourth section.
- D** (Drum) marking.

The score includes musical notation for piano, celesta, and various percussion instruments, with handwritten annotations indicating dynamics, durations, and specific playing techniques.



*pn.*

♩ = 3" all 8va

*fp.*

all 8va

♩ = 2'

*pc. l*

♩ = 1'



(Cond.--cue next section after "drum")

2' *TP.*

③ 10"


2' 10" 2' 13"

*ngl.*Where thou walkest, O singer,  
bring forth thy flowery drum... →

6 | *pro.*  
*hp.*  
*pc. 1*  
**E** *pc. 3* BONGOS  
*mp* *f* *p* *f* *mp* *p* *3* *mf* *3* *3* ↑  
 (Improvise in like manner)  
 ① *nar.* 3"  
 let it stand amid the beauteous  
 feathers, let it be placed in  
 the midst of golden flowers.  
 That thou mayest rejoice in the  
 youths and the nobles in their grandeur.

CONGA DR. *pc. 2* *mf* *p* *pp*  
 ② (In unmeasured passages,  
 do not coordinate beats). *nar.*  
 Wonderful is it how the living song descended  
 upon the drum, how it loosened its feathers  
 and spread abroad the songs of the Giver Of  
 Life, and the coyol bird answered, spreading  
 wide its notes, offering up its flowery song of flowers.  
 ③ (Improvise in like manner)

*pro.*  
*hp.* *pp*  
*pc. 1* *pp*  
*pc. 2* *p*  
*pc. 3* *p*  
**F** ① (Cond. cues tape) *nar.*  
 It rains down precious stones  
 and beauteous feathers rather than words;  
 ② it seems to be  
 as one revelling in food,  
 ③ as one who truly knows  
 the Giver of Life

TP. SECT. 2 5" 10" 15" 20" 25" 30"  


*pro.*

*mp* *p* *f* *p*

*pc 3*

TAM TAM

*p* *mf*

**G**

*nar.*

May I yet for a little while  
have time to wreath flowers for the nobility:

*pc 1*

CELESTA

*mp*

8va

30" TP

40"

50"

1'

8

Handwritten musical score for piano and percussion. The score is divided into two main sections by a large vertical line. The left section contains piano parts for 8va and 8va, and a percussion part for PCL. The right section contains piano parts for 8va, 8va, and PCL, and a percussion part for CONGA DR. and BONGOS. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (pp, mp, mf, p). A large handwritten 'H' is present in the center of the page. Below the musical staves, there is a timeline with markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100. The timeline is marked with dots and numbers. A large handwritten 'H' is present in the center of the page. Below the timeline, there is a drawing of a landscape with mountains and a body of water. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style. The overall layout is a mix of musical notation, handwritten text, and a landscape drawing.

8va --- 7

8va --- 7

fl. 1, 2

mp

pp

pp

pp

CONGA DR.

BONGOS

May I here yet for awhile wind the songs around the drum.

TP

10"

1'20"

130"



## II. Hymn to the All-Mother

CONGA DR.

pc.1 2" 10" 6" 2"

pc.3 3"

pc.2

①

chctus  
men  
(spoken)

0 - hua -yal  
mf

(Tentatively, as in an unruly crowd. Not together. Some men elongate the word)

nar. I labor in spirit

130" 140" 150" 155"

TP

The musical score is divided into four measures. The first measure (130") features a percussion line with a conga drum part (pc.1, pc.3) and a vocal line (pc.2) starting with a 2-second rest. The second measure (140") continues the vocal line with a 10-second rest. The third measure (150") features a vocal line with a 6-second rest and a piano accompaniment (TP) starting with a 3-second rest. The fourth measure (155") features a vocal line with a 2-second rest and a piano accompaniment (TP) starting with a 3-second rest. The piano accompaniment (TP) is a simple melody in the right hand, with a bass line in the left hand. The vocal lines are in a 2/4 time signature. The piano accompaniment is in a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The dynamics are marked 'p' (piano) for the percussion and 'mf' for the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in English and Spanish. The Spanish lyrics are: 'I, the singer, have entered many flower gardens, places of pleasure, where the dew spread out its glittering surface, where the coyol birds let fall their song, and spreading far around, their voices rejoiced the Cause of All'. The English lyrics are: 'I labor in spirit'. The tempo is marked 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The dynamics are marked 'p' (piano) for the percussion and 'mf' for the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in English and Spanish. The Spanish lyrics are: 'I, the singer, have entered many flower gardens, places of pleasure, where the dew spread out its glittering surface, where the coyol birds let fall their song, and spreading far around, their voices rejoiced the Cause of All'. The English lyrics are: 'I labor in spirit'.

10

ob.1

ob.2

pc.1

pc.2

nar.

full chorus

o - hua - ya,  
o - hua - ya!  
(Again, not together)

(Gradually more animated)

Some forth to the dance, ye lords,  
let there be abundance of turquoise and feathers;

1'55" 2' 2'10" 2'20" 2'25"



3

4

5



fl.2



K

4"

chorus

(This time together)

o - hua - ya, o - hua - ya!

{

nar May I be permitted to sing  
to thee, Cause of All, there  
may my soul lift its voice  
and be seen with Thee

and near Thee.

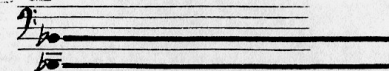
225"  
IP

230

240

250

255



[illegible]



fl.1 *f* *mp* *p*

# M

Choral parts:  
All sing WITH GUSTO.

pc1  
pc2

Pc. 2 & 3: Coordinate  
beats with chorus

③

basses

① V

Co-cau-le m-ohit-la oy-a mo-xu-cha ye-ua  
to-na-na te-u-me-cha-ue

fl.1 3" *mf* *f*

fl.2 3" *mf* *f*

ob.1,2 *mf* *f*

pno. (still prepared) *f* *p*

hp. *f* *p*

basic beat (4-5x) interpolation (1-2x)  
(bb, still predominates)

8"

mo-qui-ci-ca ta-mo-an-chan

TP

14

fl.1 locofl.2 locoobl.2

Loudly scrape the harp (inside) of piano strings with pieces of plastic (fragments of spiral binding or guitar pick) in each hand. Articulate each of the 3 strings per note (as opposed to jumping suddenly from one note to another), causing a loud, eerie, smooth "portamento" effect.

Note: If crossbars interfere, then up 8ve or down 8ve.



At first,  
frantically

Normal

pianoharp

(both)

pc1pc2

③ 5"

④ v

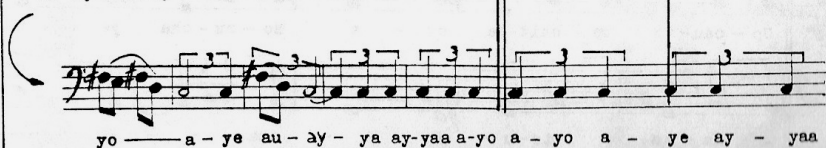
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Ah - hui-a oo - - cau - 1c xo -



ou-ay ou-ay - ye y-ya a



yo - a - ye au - ay - ya ay-yaa-a-yo a - yo a - ye ay - yaa



note: int. may  
follow int.

7"

TP