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Latin sounds spark classical program

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK -- Some of the last century's most enduring music mixed classical and vernacular sounds to create something earthy, organic and apart. Composers from Bela Bartók to Duke Ellington were dab hands at integrating the "high" and the "low," although Latin Americans seemed to have a special knack for it, too.

Brazilian Heitor Villa-Lobos comes immediately to mind as one of those composers with an ear to the street. But there were other such talents from his part of the world, as Mexican conductor Alondra de la Parra and the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas reminded an audience of enthusiastic supporters on Thursday at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall.

De la Parra, 25, founded her New York ensemble originally as the Mexican American Symphony Orchestra, which debuted at Town Hall as part of 2004's Mexico Now festival. The group's new name reflects a wider brief to showcase repertoire created from Canada to Argentina.

Works by the Argentinean Astor Piazzolla and Mexican Silvestre Revueltas were the heart of Thursday's concert. Famously (although at first, infamously), Piazzolla created "tango nuevo" -- tango with a modernist edge; it's now one of the New World's signature sounds, beloved by jazz and classical types alike. Prime among his later, more formal pieces for the concert hall is "Tangazo," a 15-minute fantasy for orchestra.

"Tangazo" begins darkly, gradually (not unlike Strauss's "Metamorphosen"). De la Parra and her charges managed the shift from brooding low strings to lyrical violins with a dramatic sweep not always apparent in recordings of the piece. The elegiac mood soon explodes into rhythmic boldness, and De la Parra made sure the music snapped to and fro, like a dancer's whirling skirt. The composer was cruel to the horn player, though, demanding long, exposed lines; you could practically see sweat beading on the soloist's forehead as he strangled a few notes.

Although known for "Sensemayá" -- the Mexican "Rite of Spring" -- Revueltas remains one of the 20th century's best-kept musical secrets. Top German conductor Erich Kleiber was a Revueltas fan, compiling a suite from his 1934 film score "Redes" (Nets). Revueltas' music often has an electric aura; the orchestra made the most of the suspense and hallucinatory sonorities in "Redes," with the percussive climax an orgiastic rush.

Although De la Parra's all-business podium technique centers on time-keeping rather than exhortation, she obviously has charisma to go along with her precocious organizational skills. She commissioned a new Double-Bass Concerto for the event by Venezuelan composer Paul Desenne. The soloist was 21-year-old Venezuelan bassist Edicson Ruiz -- a member of the Berlin Philharmonic at age 17, one of its youngest players ever.

Desenne had to compose his score in three months, a tall order. There are few concertos for double-bass perhaps because it's an instrument that, when spotlighted, sounds out of tune even when the player hits the mark perfectly -- as did Ruiz, a remarkable musician. Although there was some attractive wooziness in the brass à la Villa-Lobos, the piece seemed rhythmically crude and thematically non-descript.

Brazilian composer Mozart Camargo Guarnieri's euphonious "Encantamento" opened the concert, and Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story" Overture was the closer. Even if the horn soloist came to grief again on the tune of "Somewhere," the young orchestra spun Bernstein's irresistible music like a top. "Danzon" No. 2, by the Mexican Arturo Marquez, made for an alluring encore; a reprise from the Bernstein

capped the night, but not until De la Parra had gently rehearsed the audience on when to come in with its shouts of "Mambo!"

PHOTO CAPTION: Alondra de la Parra, 25, is the founder/conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas.