

Flower vendors, magazine stands, sidewalk cafés, bike commuters, tortilla makers, taxis, taco carts, produce markets, cathedrals, restaurants, urban fashionistas, and high rise apartment buildings make up the bustling neighborhood of Condesa in the heart of Mexico City. With a population of 8 million (20 million counting the surrounding metropolitan areas), Mexico City is one of the biggest cities in the world. This was my home for nine days while I was studying Spanish and researching Mexican piano music. My fascination with all things Mexican, including the culture, history, language and the composer, Manuel M. Ponce (1882-1948), enticed me to visit.

In the city, a simple walk down the sidewalk is a carnival for the senses. Lively Latino pop music drifts from store fronts, locals conduct business transactions, the smell of sizzling tacos wafts from street corners, students tap on their computers at wi-fi hot spots, and friends meet over coffee. In contrast, pockets of tranquility abound in the many green spaces and parks scattered throughout the city. In the evenings, multi generations mingle in neighborhood squares as they eat ice cream, relax on benches, stroll, and listen to street musicians.

My immersion experience included a home stay with a Mexican family made up of Ana and her two daughters, Abby, and Mariana. I rented a lovely room in their home overlooking a golden yellow church, Santa Rose de Lima. Ana and I became fast friends as she guided me around the city by metro, bus, taxi, subway, and foot. Together, we explored the Palacio Nacional, the Historic District, the house of Freda Khalo, and the impressive Museo Nacional de Antropología.

The Freda Language School was a thirty-minute walk from the apartment. On the first day of classes, instructors divide students into small groups according to ability. Hector, my instructor, an engaging Mexico City native and linguistic expert, covers a variety of topics. We discuss Mexican customs, history, grammar, and street slang. The classes, lasting four hours daily, are intense and conducted completely in Spanish.

On the music side of the experience, with an internet search, the help of Ana, and stroke of good luck, I connected with Manuel Ponce aficionados. The catalyst for this connection was Maestra Eva Medina, a specialist in Mexican piano music and a professor at a local music conservatory. With Eva, I attended concerts, piano lessons, and gatherings with many local musicians. Eva is a former student of Maestro Carlos Vasquez. The ninety-year old Vasquez enjoyed a long career as an international concert pianist and is the foremost authority on Manuel M. Ponce's music. He is the heir to Ponce's estate and is considered to be the composer's "spiritual son".

On a Saturday afternoon, I met Maestro Vasquez in his home. Surrounded by photographs and mementos of Manuel Ponce, Vasquez invited me to sit at the piano and play. It was dream come true as I played for forty minutes on the elegant grand piano that once belonged to Manuel Ponce. The Maestro introduced me to his good friend and Ponce's biographer, Emilio Cervantes. It was a magical afternoon of Mexican piano

Magic Moments in Mexico City by Laura Dean
July 26, 2011

music, conversation, and new cross-cultural friendships. My new friends loaded down my backpack with gifts of biographies, piano scores, and CD's. In addition, I was invited to return to Mexico City to play a series of concerts next year.

This experience exceeded my expectations in all areas including the language immersion, the city sights, and the hospitable people. The city is steeped in history and traditions dating back to the ancient Aztecs and Mayans. At the same time, it is a modern cosmopolitan center bursting with cultural activities, museums, and parks. A visit to Mexico City offers a safe, rich travel experience with peaceful destinations and warm people eager to share their history and culture. Indeed, my new friends freely gave their time and energy as they welcomed me into their city and the music community like a long lost friend.

I plan a return trip to Mexico City in 2012 to study Spanish, continue music research, and play a series of concerts. Back in Seattle, production has begun on my first commercial solo piano CD, *Romanza de Amor*, featuring music of Manuel M. Ponce. The music of Ponce, like the city itself, is an eclectic mix of the old and the new. It is a beautiful blend of European influences and traditional Mexican elements. For more information about my recording project, current performance calendar, or to order a CD, visit: www.lauramusic.biz

Magic Moments in Mexico City by Laura Dean
July 26, 2011

Mexico City photos by Laura Dean

1. The Palacio De Bellas Artes in the Historic Center of Mexico City



2. Laura with her host family: Back left to right: Laura and Ana, Front left to right: Abby and Marianna



Magic Moments in Mexico City by Laura Dean
July 26, 2011

3. View from Laura's room: Iglesia Santa Rose de Lima



4. Laura sitting at Manuel Ponce's piano in the home of Maestro Carlos Vasquez



Magic Moments in Mexico City by Laura Dean
July 26, 2011

5. Maestro Carlos Vasequez, Eva Medina, and Laura in the home of Carlos Vasquez.

