
RESEARCH REPORT

A Re-evaluation of the Chilean Composer Carmela Mackenna Subercaseaux (1879–1962)*

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Although there are numerous studies that reconstruct, from different perspectives, the history of Chilean classical music, the presence of women in this history has been scarcely documented and researched. This absence has been constant throughout different periods of Chilean history, from colonial times (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), to the formation of the Republic in the nineteenth century, through to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹

In principle, one might think that this exclusion is caused by the establishment of a musical canon linked to the National Conservatory of Music—the highest, and, at times, only institution of musical education in Chile since its foundation in 1850—which favoured the musical production of male composers. However, although this is indeed an important factor to consider, the invisibilisation of women is multifactorial, and rather than being linked to

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¹ Juan Pablo González Rodríguez, ‘Perspectivas de la musicología en Chile (1952–2015),’ in *Perspectivas y desafíos de la investigación musical en Iberoamérica. Memorias del Coloquio Iberoamericano sobre Investigación Musical 2015*, ed. Yael Bitrán Goren and Cynthia Rodríguez (Ciudad de México: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Secretaría de Cultura, 2016), 53–82; Josefina Pérez González, *Las historias de la música en Hispanoamérica (1876–2000)* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2010); Víctor Rondón, ‘Historiografía musical chilena, una aproximación,’ *Resonancias* 20, no. 38 (2016): 117–38; Luis Merino Montero, ‘La música en Chile entre 1887 y 1928: compositores que pervivieron después de 1928, compositores en las penumbras, compositores olvidados,’ *Neuma* 7, no. 2 (2013): 23–79.

their marginalisation from the canon, it seems to be better explained by their marginalisation from the institutional framework. By this I mean that, when analysing the participation of women in Chilean music, we can note that the scarcity of these women in historical accounts, especially until the middle of the twentieth century, is not only because their public activities as actors in musical life have been overlooked by historiography, but in most cases they did not access formal education at the conservatory. Thus, they did not write symphonic works, did not premiere music in public, and had only limited participation as instrumentalists in orchestras.² This exclusion had repercussions for women from all economic and social backgrounds, including late access to professional studies in music, limited opportunities for the publishing and circulation of printed works, little programming in symphonic and chamber concerts, almost no access to positions of power (such as direction of orchestras, journals, or institutions), and an indifference towards engaging with musical fields with high female participation, such as performance, research and education.³

Against this background, my research aims to contribute to the visibility of women in the history of Chilean classical music by highlighting the musical work of Carmela Mackenna Subercaseaux (1879–1962), a pianist, composer, and diplomat who developed her career in Santiago and Berlin during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴ The choice of this figure was based on three reasons: first, the quality of her music, which includes some forty chamber and symphonic works written in a musical language typical of the avant-garde of the beginning of the century; second, her interpersonal links with renowned artists and politicians in Chile and abroad, both in her role as a musician and as a diplomat; and third, the different historical contexts in which she lived.

To construct Mackenna's biography, I divided her life into three distinct periods based on the cities she lived in and the activities she carried out.⁵ The first, from 1879 to 1925, corresponds to her childhood and youth in Chile's elite society, during which time she began her piano studies in accordance with the training offered to upper-class girls. Although Mackenna did not attend the National Conservatory, she took private lessons with Bindo Paoli, a teacher from

² Leonardo Arce, 'Compositoras en Chile: una historia recortada,' *Revista Contenido. Cultura y Ciencias Sociales*, no. 6 (2015): 33–44; Raquel Bustos Valderrama, *La mujer compositora y su aporte al desarrollo musical chileno* (Santiago: Ediciones UC, 2012); Guadalupe Becker, 'Las mujeres en la música chilena: diálogos entrecruzados con el poder,' *Revista Transcultural de Música* 15 (2011); Lorena Valdebenito, 'Creación musical femenina en Chile: canon, estereotipos y autorías,' in *Música y mujer en Iberoamérica. Haciendo música desde la condición de género. Actas del III Coloquio Ibermúsicas sobre Investigación Musical*, ed. Juan Pablo González Rodríguez (Santiago: Ibermúsicas y CNCA, 2017), 112–23; Fernanda Vera Malhue, 'La composición musical de mujeres de élite durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX en Chile,' *Escena. Revista de las Artes* 79, no. 2 (2020): 126–47.

³ Bustos, *La mujer compositora y su aporte al desarrollo musical chileno*; Raquel Bustos Valderrama, *Presencia de la mujer en la música chilena* (S. 1.: LibrosEnRed, 2015); Fernanda Vera Malhue, 'La educación musical femenina en Chile durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX, mitos y resabios,' *Revista Átemus* 3, no. 6 (2018): 8–17; Luis Merino Montero, 'Los inicios de la circulación pública de la creación musical escrita por mujeres en Chile,' *Revista Musical Chilena* 64, no. 213 (2010): 53–76; Daniela Fugellie, Sergio Araya, and Constanza Toledo, 'Biografías de intérpretes de música docta en Chile. Una muestra representativa y muchas tareas pendientes,' *Revista Musical Chilena* 77, no. 239 (2023): 191–97.

⁴ To learn about Mackenna's works, I recommend visiting two webpages that present results of research projects dedicated to some of her lieder. The first project was led by Gonzalo Cuadra and Gonzalo Simonetti (see: <https://antologiadelacancion.uahurtado.cl/carmela-mackenna/>), while the second was led by Camila Osses (see: <https://www.artsongaugmented.org/carmela-mackenna>).

⁵ My introductory version of Mackenna's biography, based on secondary sources, is available online (in Spanish) at: <http://basedeconciertos.uahurtado.cl/public/bio/46>.

Figure 1. Carmela Mackenna in Montevideo as the wife of the Chilean ambassador to Uruguay and Paraguay. 'Homenaje a una república hermana,' *Selecta*, 2.15 (1918): 10. This source has been obtained thanks to the 'Anáforas' project for the digitisation of Uruguayan periodical publications, developed by the Faculty of Information and Communication of the University of the Republic of Uruguay. For other similar resources, see <https://anaforas.fic.edu.uy/>.



the institution, thanks to whom she reached a high level of skill on her instrument. After her marriage to the politician Enrique Cuevas Bartholin in 1902, Mackenna devoted her time to accompanying her husband's activities (see Fig. 1), and made use of her skill as a pianist on numerous occasions when receiving international visitors and organising social gatherings.

The second period I worked on corresponds to her life in Berlin. After accompanying her husband in different cities during the 1910s, both migrated to the German capital in 1926 (during the period of the Weimar Republic). There, Mackenna continued her piano training with Conrad Ansoerge (1862–1930) and began studying composition with the German musicologist Hans Mersmann (1891–1971), a specialist in the avant-garde. It was less than a decade later, during the rise of the Third Reich, that Mackenna established herself as a composer, creating and premiering most of her musical output, including her piano concerto (*Klavierkonzert*), which premiered in Berlin and Santiago in 1934. In this same period, however, the Reichsmusikkammer banned Mackenna's composition teacher from musical life because of his advocacy of *Neue Musik*, an aesthetic prohibited due to its classification as '*Entartete Musik*'.⁶ As for Mackenna, the absence of testimonial sources such as letters or diaries from this period

⁶ Erik Levi, *Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994); Joan L. Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005); Michael H. Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (New York; Oxford: OUP, 1997).

has so far made it impossible to know what stance she took towards Nazism. Nevertheless, my research has revealed an important aspect of her life: in 1934, Mackenna was appointed Cultural Attaché at the Chilean Embassy in Germany, an appointment likely made possible after her separation from her husband and her new single status in a foreign country. This fact, unknown as such until now,⁷ is of fundamental importance in the study of Mackenna's life, as it reveals her status as a political actor engaged in the diplomatic corps that represented Chile *vis-à-vis* Hitler's government. Although the implications of this role are not yet known, it has certainly opened up a new line of research for the understanding of her life in Nazi Germany.

Finally, the third period addressed in my research corresponds to her last years, after she left Germany—some time in 1940. The precise reasons for her departure are unknown, but we may assume that the outbreak of the Second World War precipitated her exit from the country. During this period, Mackenna travelled to New York and established contact with Nicolas Slonimsky (1894–1995) and Charles Seeger (1886–1979), two prominent members of the Music Division of the Pan-American Union. Until now, Chilean links with this institution had only been studied through the cultural diplomacy work of Domingo Santa Cruz (1899–1987), a bastion of the National Conservatory.⁸ Mackenna's appearance in the correspondence of the Inter-American Music Center provides new insights into how international relations between musicians from Latin America and the United States were built outside of official institutions.

Musicological and Historiographical Problems

From the beginning of this research on Mackenna, my aim was twofold: first, to construct an updated biography of her (the only one existing so far dates from 1983),⁹ which would emphasise her gender and migratory status in interwar Berlin; and second, to study her music so that it could be promoted and disseminated among Chilean musicians in the future. During the research process, however, I added a third objective: to determine how Mackenna exercised her role as a woman diplomat, as interrogating women in politics is still in its infancy in early twentieth-century Latin American studies.¹⁰ To achieve this last objective, I proposed as a method the compilation, analysis, and synthesis of various written sources, including the

⁷ Víctor Farías mentions this detail in *Los nazis en Chile* (Santiago: Seix Barral, 2000), 534, but it has not until now been published in any academic or popular works on Mackenna.

⁸ Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Carol Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbour: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream* (New York: OUP, 2013); Amanda Minks, 'Inter-American Mediations: Charles Seeger, Domingo Santa Cruz, and the Politics of Transnational Musical Exchange,' *Latin American Music Review* 41, no. 1 (2020): 93–119.

⁹ Raquel Bustos Valderrama, 'Carmela Mackenna Subercaseaux,' *Revista Musical Chilena* 37, no. 159 (1983): 50–75. This biography is constructed as a linear chronology without connection to historical, social, political, and cultural context. It describes some aspects of Mackenna's youth, marriage, and stay in Berlin, and analyses some of her works, such as her *Klavierkonzert*. Although it is a valuable introduction to Mackenna's life—especially since there are no other studies dedicated to her—Bustos's biography ignores the context of the dictatorship in which Mackenna developed most of her work. It also does not address her status as a pianist or a diplomat, and does not interrogate the artistic and political links she established both in Chile and abroad.

¹⁰ Paula Bruno, Alexandra Pita and Marina Alvarado, *Embajadoras culturales. Mujeres latinoamericanas y vida diplomática, 1860–1960* (Rosario: Prohistoria Ediciones, 2021); Dina Berger, 'Raising Pan Americans: Early Women Activists of Hemispheric Cooperation, 1916–1944,' *Journal of Women's History* 27, no. 1 (2015): 38–61; Juliette Dumont, 'Chilean Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Internationalisms: An Entangled History (1927–1940s),' in *Culture as Soft Power: Bridging Cultural Relations, Intellectual Cooperation, and Cultural Diplomacy*, ed. Elisabeth Carbó-Catalan and Diana Roig-Sanz (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 99–120.

Carmela Mackenna Documentary Fund, located in the Music Archive of the National Library of Chile (Santiago).

I began my work with this archive because it contains the sketches, originals, and copies of all Mackenna's known work (see Fig. 2). My expectation was to use this music to establish a chronology of her career as a composer, then to delve into the production context of each of her pieces, and subsequently build a history of her music. Unfortunately, however, the scores contained in the collection are, for the most part, independent editions rather than manuscripts. This means that the scores have very few markings, such as commentaries, performance indications, corrections, or notes, so the information that can be taken from them concentrates more on their value as music than as documents. In contrast, Mackenna's harmony and counterpoint notebooks, written in both Spanish and German, do contain her annotations, and

Figure 2. Mackenna's notebook during her studies with Mersmann, c.1929. On this page, she works on melodic forms with variations on the same motif. The upper part of the sheet seems to have some more developed exercises. Music Archive of the National Library of Chile (Santiago), Carmela Mackenna Documentary Fund. For further information, please contact archivodemusica@biblioteca.gob.cl.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation on a five-line staff. The top section contains several lines of music with red markings and annotations. Below the music, there are several lines of text in German, written in red ink, which serve as labels for the exercises. The text includes:

- Musikschule*
- Forme*
- 1-3: Rhythmus?*
- 2. fac: VS + MS*
- 3. VS + MS + MS*
- 4: Rhythmus erklären*
- 5-6: MS / MS*
- 1) Wiederholung*
- 2) Sequenz*
- 3) Entsprechung*
- 4) Gegensatz*
- 5) Abwandlung*
- 6) Entwicklung*
- Dem qz 28 Fu*

The page is divided into two columns by a vertical red line. The left column contains exercises labeled 1) through 5), and the right column contains exercises labeled 2) through 6). Each exercise is accompanied by a musical staff with red markings and a corresponding German label. The labels describe various melodic forms and variations, such as repetition, sequence, correspondence, contrast, variation, and development.

these details allow us to understand the ways in which she learned to compose, and interpret how she related to the world around her.

In this sense, the scores function as a testimony to Mackenna's musical life, reflecting different social, political and cultural contexts. Some even make use of recognisable musical languages, particularly those composed under the influence of Mersmann. For example, the *Klavierkonzert* (1933) has a complex rhythmic development consistent with the Hindemithian *Neue Sachlichkeit* style, and also includes popular music that was in vogue during the 1920s in Berlin, such as jazz and tango. Similarly, Mackenna's ballet *Musique pour deux pianos* (1936) presents various reminiscences of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913), both in rhythmic and metric aspects as well as in pitches and melodies. However, most of the works in the Carmela Mackenna Documentary Fund do not shed light on the composer's life story, since no direct correspondence between her biography and her music has been established beyond the milestones related to her formative process.

This setback forced me not only to find new sources that I had not considered at the beginning of the research, but also to confront the writing of her biography from other angles. Regarding the first point, after completing my field work in the Music Archive of the National Library, I began to review the documentary collections of the Chilean Embassy in Berlin in the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile. There, I found two types of sources: annual ministerial reports, which provided information about the main bilateral economic agreements and the diplomatic corps in force at the time; and documents issued by the ambassador, some of which were confidential. In the first type of documentation, I was able to identify the years in which Mackenna was Cultural Attaché of the Embassy, as well as some of her activities as musician—such as her honourable mention in a composition competition in Frankfurt in 1936. In the second type, I found personal appraisals of Mackenna written by the ambassador Luis de Porto Seguro, which were documented in letters addressed to the Chilean foreign minister and in embassy reports. Likewise, in order to study the production contexts of Mackenna's music, I identified three German archives that might have documentation relating to her stay in Berlin, which I intend to visit in the upcoming months: the Archiv der Deutschen Jugendmusikbewegung (Witzenhausen), which may hold writings by Mersmann; the Archiv des Konzertlebens des Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung (Berlin), which may hold Mackenna's concert programmes from the 1920s and 1930s;¹¹ and the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (Frankfurt am Main), which may hold recordings of the premiere of the *Klavierkonzert*. In addition to this research, I have studied the Chilean, Uruguayan and German press of the time extensively.¹² These sources have provided me with the most information about Mackenna's movements, her musical activities, and the social connections she established with people from different nationalities and specialisations, including the Italian pianist Maria Carreras (1877–1966), the Polish pianist Arthur Rubinstein (1887–1982), the Italian composer

¹¹ Mackenna's performances are documented in the German press, specifically in the Leipzig-based *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and *Zeitschrift für Musik*. See Claudia Friedel, *Komponierende Frauen im Dritten Reich. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion von Lebensrealität und herrschendem Frauenbild* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1995), 177, 227–29.

¹² Some of the newspapers and magazines consulted include *Acción Femenina* (Montevideo, 1917–1925), *El Mercurio* (Santiago, 1914–1922, and Valparaíso, 1827–1923), *La Estrella* (Valparaíso, 1921–1922), *Selecta* (Montevideo, 1917–1919), *Sucesos* (Valparaíso, 1902–1917), *Signale* (Berlin, 1913–1941), *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1874–1943), and *Zig-Zag* (Santiago, 1905–1964).

Arturo Luzzatti (1875–1959), the German poet Gerda von Below (1894–1975), and the Chilean sculptor Tótila Albert (1892–1967).

With regard to the second point—finding new angles from which to approach writing Mackenna’s biography—I decided to construct a history about the different times and places in which she lived, or her different contexts, to establish how these impacted on Mackenna and how she established her agency within them.¹³ This approach changed the course of my research, as Mackenna’s migratory experience in various cities—Santiago until 1907; Valdivia (Chile) between 1907 and 1909; London in 1909; Stockholm in 1914; Montevideo (Uruguay) between 1917 and 1921; Berlin between 1926 and 1940; New York in 1943; Buenos Aires in 1945, and Petropolis and Rio de Janeiro in 1945, among others—placed my research in the field of the transnational history of music. With this development, new problems appeared that I had not previously considered, and which became very interesting facets to analyse.

New Perspectives

Although my initial interest in studying Mackenna was based on the invisibilisation of women in the history of Chilean music, I soon realised that her relevance to this history transcended her gender. In other words, her life story, her professional trajectory, and her musical production are important for Chilean classical music because they reveal numerous problems in which gender might be a determining factor, but is definitely not the only one.

Mackenna’s status as an upper-class woman probably determined that she studied piano rather than another instrument (since in late nineteenth-century Chile singing and piano playing was still predominant among elite women).¹⁴ But, above all, this status limited Mackenna’s musical activity to private life, far from the concert halls, and, especially, far from the classrooms where composition was taught. To illustrate this point, it is worth noting that the first Chilean woman to study composition at the Conservatory of Music was María Luisa Sepúlveda, who obtained her diploma in 1918—by which time, Mackenna was already 39 years old.¹⁵ In this context, it is not surprising that she had to settle in another country to access composition studies, since the institutionalism of the National Conservatory of Music, coupled with her social role as the wife of a diplomat, restricted her possibilities to develop as a performer and composer.

On the other hand, Mackenna’s migratory status—which translated into multiple short trips to the places where her husband was designated, and a stay of more than a decade in Berlin after his retirement as ambassador to Uruguay—meant that she became acquainted with diverse South American and European cultures. This circumstance was common in the lives of male Chilean composers, who were used to going on international journeys as part of their musical training, but not as frequently or in such powerful situations as in the case of Mackenna, who was active in diplomatic legations. In addition, the move to Germany during the rise of

¹³ I was inspired by a recently published biographical work in which the author faced a similar problem with sources, as she had extraordinarily little information about the intimate life of her subject of study. See Tanya Harmer, *Beatriz Allende: A Revolutionary Life in Cold War Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Manuel Vicuña, *La belle époque chilena. Alta sociedad y mujeres de élite* (Santiago de Chile: RIL Editores, 2000).

¹⁵ See Catalina Sentis Acuña, ‘La compositora chilena María Sepúlveda Maira (1883–1958): Discursos historiográficos, exoneración y feminismo’ (MMus thesis, Santiago de Chile, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2020).

Nazism takes on a new aspect in Chilean international relations, as there are testimonies about the tensions that arose in the musical exchanges between the two countries during the 1930s, an issue that directly affected Mackenna's teacher, Hans Mersmann.¹⁶

These two factors effectively demonstrate the need to write Mackenna's story from a transnational perspective, since her gender condition prevented her professional development as a composer in Chile, and then the internationalisation of her career made her legacy invisible in her own country, where her music was scarcely programmed in concerts throughout the twentieth century. This circumstance could explain why she has been marginalised from the Chilean musical canon, given that she never managed to enter the institutional canon represented by the National Conservatory, unlike her male contemporaries, such as Luigi Stefano Giarda (1868–1952), Enrique Soro (1884–1954), Alfonso Leng Haygus (1884–1974)—who was, in fact, the husband of Mackenna's niece—Pedro Humberto Allende (1885–1959), and Alfonso Letelier Llona (1912–1994)

In summary, the first year of research for this project has been used to determine the edges around which Mackenna's biography will be historicised, taking into account the diverse historical, political, social, and cultural contexts in which she lived. Added to this is the discovery of her position as Cultural Attaché in Berlin, which was not a consideration at the beginning of this research, but which generated a new category of analysis of her exercise of power as a musician and representative of her country. The search for sources in and outside Chile to fill in the gaps in her life has also been broadened, and I intend to consult archives across Europe and the Americas in the medium term.¹⁷ This work will continue to be developed as part of my doctoral dissertation, currently in preparation at the Institute of History of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, under the supervision of Claudio Rolle. Finally, it should be noted that one of the projected outputs from this work is the creation of a catalogue raisonné of Mackenna's music, as well as a critical edition of her complete works—a project that will make her symphonic and chamber works available to both Chilean and international performers.

About the Author

Constanza Arraño is a musicologist and PhD candidate in History, based in Santiago de Chile. Her main research interest is twentieth-century Chilean classical music, which she works from the perspectives and methodologies of memory studies and the history of the present time. In 2023, her essay on contemporary Chilean opera from 1951 to 2020 won the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage's national research competition 'Haz Tu Tesis en Cultura' (Do Your Thesis in Culture).

¹⁶ See 'Becas Humboldt' in Domingo Santa Cruz Wilson, *Mi vida en la música: contribución al estudio de la vida musical chilena durante el siglo XX*, ed. Raquel Bustos Valderrama (Santiago: Ediciones UC, 2008), 472–73.

¹⁷ The research would also be enriched with the analysis of documents housed in the Inter-American Music Center, located in the Library of Congress, Washington; however, financial constraints mean it is not possible to guarantee this stage can be completed. For this reason, my priority is to review the documents from Germany, and, if additional funds can be obtained, I will then work with the Slonimsky and Seeger documents in the United States.