



Sabina Covarrubias

La Ofrenda

MUSIC RESOURCE GUIDE
VocalEssence ¡Cantaré! Series



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La Ofrenda

Music Resource Guide

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La Ofrenda

Sabina Covarrubias Acosta (b.1977)

Difficulty Level

La Ofrenda (SA, guitar, percussion [played on the back part of a guitar]) might at first glance seem appropriate for young voices because of the two-part texture and story. However, the sheer amount of text and the tessitura might be more suited to junior high, high-school or even adult women's voices. There might also be possibilities for a junior high mixed group performing this piece, assigning the alto part to cambiata (boys experiencing the vocal mutation or voice-change associated with early adolescence).



Composer's Note

La Ofrenda is inspired by the Day of the Dead, which we celebrate in Mexico. In an effort to communicate the richness of this old tradition, explaining that it has nothing to do with Halloween and that is not sad or scary, but a joyful and mystical party, I wrote the story of a little child who thought he saw his grandfather during this celebration. The Day of the Dead takes place in Mexico each November 2, and one of the elements of this tradition is to set up a type of altar, called the *ofrenda*, which is a decorated table. There we remember a dead person, offering food and things that he or she used to like. The joyful celebration brings the family together to share music, stories and good food.

There is a dialog between the child, Gaspar, and the choir. Gaspar thinks he has seen his grandfather approach his *ofrenda* to get his coffee. We actually don't know if he really saw him or if that was a fantasy.

In the piece, the choir is divided into two groups, with an additional small group of soloists. In the beginning, the small group describes the *ofrenda*. Later, the group of sopranos represent the voice of the child, Gaspar, who is saying, "Ay, Yo lo vi, con el mismo sombrero de ayer, era mi abuelito Don José." (Oh! I saw him with the same little hat that he was wearing yesterday! That was my grandfather, Mr. José.) That dialog continues.

In the middle of the piece, there is a part that was originally written with non-traditional notation. It is very easy and fun to sing and directors can refer to the directions in the score for clarifications about performance. During this part, the voices evoke a mysterious atmosphere, as if the spirit of the grandfather is present somehow. The culmination of this section is a fortissimo that has been one of the favorites of young performers. However, teachers should encourage students to interpret this fortissimo without yelling, practicing healthy vocal production.

In the second part of the work, the choir sings together again. The small group of soloists should be integrated into the soprano group at this time, but if the director finds it more convenient to integrate them into the contraltos, that would work as well.

Composer Biography



Sabina Covarrubias Acosta was born in Mexico City on November 20, 1977 and began studying music when she was only five years old at the Instituto Artene. When she was still very young, she learned to sing and play many instruments including violin, piano and percussion. As an adult, Ms. Covarrubias received a bachelor's degree in music composition from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City and then studied computer music composition at *La Universite de Paris 8* in France. She has won many awards for her music including Mexico's National Choir Composition Competition in 2004.

Ms. Covarrubias has written works for a variety of instruments and voices including symphonic band, organ, wind quintet, electro-acoustics and chorus. In addition to working as a freelance composer for television, she also taught music to elementary-aged students for eight years and collaborated as an editor on music books and scores for children. Her music is inspired by many things such as love, beauty, nature, space pictures, travel and the sounds of Paris. She hopes that her music "could touch people's hearts and that it could help them to free their emotions and help us to be peaceful." Influenced by the culture and musical traditions of her country, Mexico, and the beauty of life, people, and the music of great composers, Sabina Covarrubias tries to create in her songs "a little universe that is coherent, balanced and logical. Each piece must please me and touch my heart."

La Ofrenda

Text/Translation

Entre flores y semillas, xempasúchitl y papel de
China,

Dicen que bajó del cielo en la noche de
los muertos.

Ay, yo lo vi, era mi abuelito, Don José.

Entre místicos a romas de copal y de naranja el
difunto nos visita pa tomarse una copita.

Ay, yo lo vi, con el mismo sombrero de ayer, era mi
abuelito, Don José.

¿En dónde está?

Junto al altar.

¡Ay, que susto!

Vino el difunto.

¿A dónde fue?

Por su café.

¿Y quién lo vio?

Su nieto Gaspar.

¡Ay!, yo lo vi, con el mismo sombrero de ayer,
era mi abuelito, Don José.

Y me sonrió, luego se volvió pa tomar
de su café, a fumar el cigarrito, ese que
yo le dejé.

¡Ay! Qué bien baila!

Baila, baila baila baila Mírenlo:

Ese muerto que baila está más vivo que yo.

Ese muertito que baila está más vivo que yo.

Es más vivo que yo, más vivo que yo,

y está canción ya se terminó.

¡Ya! ¡Olé!

*Between flowers and seeds, xempasuchitl and china
paper*

*It is said that he came from heaven in the dead of
night.*

Oh, I saw him, he was my grandfather, Don José.

*Between mystical smells of copal and orange the dead
visit us to drink a little cup.*

*Oh, I saw him, he had the same little hat as yesterday,
he was my grandfather Don José.*

-Where is he?

-Close to the altar

-Oh! That's scary

-The dead came here.

-Where did he go?

-To get his coffee

-Who saw him?

-His grandchild, Gaspar!

*Oh, I saw him, he had the same little hat as yesterday,
he was my grandfather Don José.*

*And he smiled to me, later he just went to drink a
coffee, to smoke a little cigarette,
The one I offered to him.*

Oh, he was dancing so good!

Dance, dance!

That death who is dancing is more alive than I do.

That little dead who is dancing is more alive than I do.

And this song is over now.

Olé!

—Text and Translation by Sabina Covarrubias

Musical Analysis of La Ofrenda

La Ofrenda has a musical vocabulary firmly rooted in traditional material from the Mexican folk style – melodically (mostly conjunct, melodic minor), harmonically (d minor with the colorful and characteristic subtonic C Major chord), rhythmically (compound duple meter), and through instrumentation (strummed guitar and hand-percussion on a second guitar) with brief yet accessible forays into non-traditional notation and vocal techniques. The composition follows the arc of the story-poem without much musical repetition, but by alternating spoken and unison/antiphonal sections and adding vocal harmonies for the final half, Covarrubias constructs a musically satisfying and unified piece that continually builds in energy and drama to the celebratory end.

Measure Numbers	Description	Texture	Timbre
m.1-4	Introduction	continuously antiphonal (“random chatter”) Alto adds unpitched but sustained “oh” m.3-4	spoken No percussion, no guitar m.3 + sustained “oh” m.4 + ascending slide “oh”
m.5-19	Small Group/Gaspar Dialogue 1	unison/antiphonal	guitar, pitched singing
m.20-22	Transition	reprise of m.4 Alto ascent	percussion, guitar, vocal slide
m.23-38	Small Group/Gaspar Dialogue 2	unison/antiphonal	guitar and pitched singing
m.39-47	Question/Answer	unison/antiphonal	guitar and pitched singing
m.48-62	Interlude	instruments only - 4 bars random chatter - 4 bars spoken greetings/ghost sounds crescendo - 1 bar extended reprise of m.3-4 with added percussion for instruments and singers	guitar plays single Dm chord on downbeat for 3 bars; percussion enters <i>forte</i> then dynamically and rhythmically diminishes 8 bars overlapping spoken 4 bars m.51-54; m.55 layers variably pitched spoken greetings and high-pitched ooh/aah sounds that follow approximate pitch drawing; m.56 percussion builds rhythmically and dynamically with spoken/sustained sounds of the intro and chorus adds flourish of body percussion
m.63-71	Chorus Reprise of Gaspar’s Dialogue	sopranos repeat Dialogue 2 altos reprise text of Dialogue 1 but with a new, rhythmically independent melody	percussion guitar two-part pitched singing
m.72-87	Chorus Bridge	parallel harmonies, simultaneous text declamation	percussion, guitar, two-part pitched singing, last six bars are a repeat of the first six
m.88-108	Chorus Coda	playful dynamic and rhythmic contrasts building in intensity	percussion, guitar, two-part pitched singing
m.109	¡Olé!	spoken in unison	percussion, guitar, spoken

Reading in the Content Area: Day of the Dead

Overview

It is impossible to understand *La Ofrenda* without understanding the Day of the Dead traditions. Two reading handouts (on pages 11-13) will help your students encounter this tradition with both factual information and a short story that captures the mystery and central role of family in Mexican culture. The composer strongly recommends sharing these stories with singers before they encounter the music and text of *La Ofrenda*.

Objectives

Students will:

- Read fiction and non-fiction material about Day of the Dead traditions in Mexico.
- Utilize knowledge from reading in written, verbal and/or musical interpretation
- Awareness of Mexico's Day of the Dead cultural traditions
- Process information by making personal connections in written or verbal form
- Apply knowledge to the text, mood and performance of *La Ofrenda*

Activities:

1. Using the following handout on page 11, "The Day of the Dead," ask students to read aloud or individually about the cultural context of this traditional festival before encountering the music in rehearsal.
 - a. Share video, slideshow or additional information from the UNESCO website (see "Internet Resources," page 14).
 - b. Compare and contrast attitudes, rituals and meaning of Halloween and Day of the Dead.
2. Distribute and read together the second handout, "The Little Balthazar and his Dear Grandpa," (pages 12-13) a short story written by the composer to provide a more personable and emotional way for singers to encounter the Day of the Dead traditions and the story of the song itself.
 - a. Ask students to respond to the story by writing or verbally sharing reactions to the story.
 - b. Allow students to bring the handout home, share the story with their family and collaborate with their siblings, parents, guardians or extended family to bring back a story of a deceased family member and possibly an item that represents that person for an *ofrenda*.



In Mexican folk culture, the Catrina is the skeleton of a high society woman and one of the most popular figures of the Day of the Dead celebrations.

La Ofrenda Rules!

[ehn-trey flo-řehs ee seh-mee-yahs zehm-pah-su-sheel ee pah-pehl dey chee-nah]
Entre flores y semillas, xempasúchitl y papel de China,
 (between flowers and seeds, marigolds* and paper of china)

[dee-sehn kay bah-hoh dehl syeh-loh eyn lah noh-chey dey lohs mwehř-tohs]
dicen que bajó del cielo en la noche de los muertos.
 (it is said that he came from heaven in the night of the dead.)

[ai yoh loh vee ehřah mee ah-bwey-lee-toh dohn hoh-say]
Ay, yo lo vi, era mi abuelito, Don José.
 (Oh, I saw him, he was my grandfather, Mr. José.)

[ehn-trey mee-stee-cohs ah roh-mahs dey coh-pahl ee dey nah-rah-n-ha]
Entre místicos a romas de copal y de naranja
 (Between mystical smells of incense* and the orange)

[ehl dee-foon-toh nohs vee-see-tah pah toh-mahř-sey oo-nah coh-pee-tah]
el difunto nos visita pa tomarse una copita.
 (the dead us visit to drink a little cup.)

[ai yoh loh vee kohn ehl meez-moh sohm-breh-ree-toh dey ah-yehr]
Ay, yo lo vi, con el mismo sombrero de ayer,
 (Oh, I saw him, with the same little hat as yesterday,)

[eh-řah mee ah-bwey-lee-toh dohn hoh-say]
era mi abuelito, Don José.
 (He was my grandfather, Mr. José.)

[ehn dohn-dey ehs-tah hoon-toh ahl ahl-tahr ai kay soo-stoh vee-noh ehl dee-foon-toh]
¿En dónde está? Junto al altar. ¡Ay, que susto! Vino el difunto.
 (Where is he? Close to the altar. Oh, that's scary! Here came the dead.)

[ah dohn-dey fwey pohř soo cah-fey ee kyehn loh vyoh soo nyey-toh gahs-pahr]
¿A dónde fue? Por su café. ¿Y quién lo vio? Su nieto Gaspar.
 (Where did he go? To get his coffee. And who saw him? His grandchild, Gaspar.)

[ai yoh loh vee kohn ehl meez-moh sohm-breh-ree-toh dey ah-yehr]
Ay, yo lo vi, con el mismo sombrero de ayer,
 (Oh, I saw him, with the same little hat as yesterday,)

[eh-řah mee ah-bwey-lee-toh dohn hoh-say]
era mi abuelito, Don José.
 (He was my grandfather, Mr. José.)

[ee may sohn-řree-oh lwey-goh say vohl-vyoh pah toh-mahr day soo cah-fey]
Y me sonrió, luego se volvió pa tomar de su café,
 (And to me he smiled, later he went to drink of his coffee,)

[ah foo-mahř ehl see-gah-řree-toh eh-say kay yoh lay day-hey]
a fumar el cigarrito, ese que yo le dejé.
 (to smoke a little cigarette, the one that I to him offered.)

[ai kay byehn bai-lah bai-lah mee-rehn-loh]
¡Ay! Qué bien baila! Baila, Mírenlo:
 (Oh! He was good dancing! Dance, Let's watch:

[eh-say mwehř-toh kay bai-lah ehs-tah mahs vee-voh kay yoh]
Ese muerto que baila está más vivo que yo.
 (That death who is dancing is more alive than I.)

[eh-say mwehř-tee-toh kay bai-lah ehs-tah mahs vee-voh kay yoh]
Ese muertito que baila está más vivo que yo.
 (That little dead who is dancing is more alive than I.)

[ehs mahs vee-voh kay yoh ee ehs-tah cahn-syohn yah say tehř-mee-noh yah oh-lay]
Es más vivo que yo, y está canción ya se terminó. ¡Ya! ¡Olé!
 (Is more alive than I, and this song now is over. Ya! Olé!)

*Xempasúchitl (marigolds), an orange flower associated with the dead, is a very important element in grave and altar decorations in Mexico. Petals are scattered on graveyard paths during "Day of the Dead" festivities to direct the spirits because it is a legendary belief that the dead can see orange better than other colors.

*Copal (incense), plant sap that has hardened into resin, can be yellow or white and is burned in ceremonies, giving off a very strong smell. Traditionally this plant sap was harvested from trees by the young boys in the village and burned as an offering to the gods since it was the "blood" of the trees.

Spanish Rules!

Vowels

a – [ah] father
 e – [eh] or [ey*] egg or they
 *[ay] is also used for the same
 sound imitating common
 English words (kay, day, say)
 i – [ee] machine
 o – [oh] open
 u – [oo] rule
 y – [ee] heavy

Vowel Combinations

ai, ay – [ai] side
 au – [au] found
 ei, ey – [ēi] they
 eu – [ēu] may-you
 ie- [yeh] yes
 oi, oy – [oy] boy
 ua – [wa] water
 ue – [wē] wait

Consonants

c – [k] before consonant, a, o or u or [s]
 before e or i
 ch – [ch] chill
 g – [g] get
 j – [h] hot
 ll – [y] yarn
 q – [k] (u that follows is always silent!)
 cadence
 r – [ř] flipped with tip of tongue
 rr – [řř] rolled/trilled with tip of tongue
 s – [z] before consonants b, d, g, l,
 m, n, otherwise [s]

La Ofrenda: Create Your Own Altar

Overview

The Day of the Dead is an important Mexican tradition occurring in the beginning of November and is the central theme of Sabina Covarrubias's piece, *La Ofrenda*. In this lesson, students will examine the tradition of the Day of the Dead; discuss what they would include in their own altar, or ofrenda; and create *papel picado*, a common decoration used on Mexican ofrendas.

Papel picado is colorful, perforated, tissue paper that is often draped on or hung like flags over *ofrendas*. Some families make their own cut-paper decorations while others buy the paper from street vendors. Papermaking was an important craft in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and the tradition has continued into current festivals. Decorative paper arts are not unique to Mexico; making cut paper designs is popular in many countries around the world. *Papel picado* is referred to in *La Ofrenda* as china paper.

Objectives

Students will:

- Describe an *ofrenda* and identify key concepts behind the Day of the Dead.
- Select objects to include as part of their own ofrendas.
- Create *papel picado*, a traditional decoration on the Day of the Dead altars.

Materials/Equipment

- Singer Handout: The Day of the Dead (page 11)
- Tissue paper (2 pieces per student)
- Scissors for each student
- Shoebox for each student
- Found objects, mementos, flowers

Activity

FIRST: Introduce students to the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead. Ask students if they have ever had a pet or family member die and how they remember or honor that animal or person. Read through the Singer Handout about the Day of the Dead and if possible, supplement the worksheet with more photos and video found at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00011&RL=00054>. Explain the importance of la ofrenda, the central image of Covarrubias's piece.

NEXT: Think-Pair-Share: Have students contemplate what items they would want in their own *ofrenda*. What favorite toys and foods would they include? What other items are included on traditional Mexican *ofrendas*? Then divide students into pairs to discuss their altars and ask for volunteers to share ideas with the class.

THEN: Students will create their own *papel picado*. Demonstrate for students how to fold and cut the tissue paper. First lay the paper on a table horizontally and fold it accordion style making 3-4 folds. Cut a series of shapes along the folds of the paper. If you would like to display the paper, leave about one inch at the top of the paper. Then lay the string horizontally across the top and fold in half creating a one inch flap. Glue the flap with the string under the fold.

Extension Activity

Have students create their own portable *ofrendas* for a lost friend or family member in a shoebox. Allow students time to collect items from home to display on their own ofrenda. Encourage them to print pictures of food, flowers or other objects that their friend or family member loved but that they may not have at home. Drape the *papel picado* creations over the edge of the box and encourage other exterior and interior brightly-colored decorations to adorn the *ofrenda*. Students can then present their *ofrenda* to the class and briefly explain why they included certain items.

The Day of the Dead

The Day of the Dead is called *Día de los Muertos* in Spanish [pronounced DEEah day lohs MWEHR-tohs]. It is a very special tradition that takes place in the beginning of November of each year. Even though the Day of the Dead occurs around the same time as Halloween, they are very different holidays. The Day of the Dead is a joyous festival that celebrates the return of dead friends and relatives with peace and happiness. In this tradition, death isn't something to be afraid of or sad about. Instead, once a year, families joyfully remember the dead through music, stories and food, often singing in cemeteries late into the night.

There are many traditions surrounding the Day of the Dead. One of the most important is the preparation of *la ofrenda*, the altar. Families prepare a colorful and joyous altar in honor of the dead relative. Altars are typically covered in marigolds, the flower of the dead; *papel picado*, handmade paper cuts similar to doilies; and some of the dead family member's favorite items. There are incense and candles for each soul and a photograph of the dead relative. Traditional Mexican dishes such as tamales, cakes, mole, rice, sugar cane and bread often cover the table in addition to cigars and colorful sugar skulls.

In addition to *la ofrenda*, masks that look like skulls are very popular and children often wear clothing painted with bones. Paper mache skeletons, *papel picado* and skeleton toys are sold at markets and there are fancy parades in the streets.

Can you find the following items in the picture?
Draw an arrow from the Spanish word to each item.

Calavera – A skull

La Catrina – A popular figure associated with the Day of the Dead created by José Guadalupe Posada

La Ofrenda – The altar

Papel picado – Also called china paper (papel de china) is a fine paper with a decorative design cut into it which is placed or hung on the altar, much like paper doilies

Xempasúchitl – Marigolds, known as the flower of the dead



The Little Balthazar and His Dear Grandpa

A story by the composer, Sabina Covarrubias

One night on the first day of November, little Gaspar was helping his family to make an altar, *la ofrenda*, for his grandpa, Don José [pronounced dohn hoh-SAY].

The whole family was together in the house where everyone cooked and helped make the *ofrenda*. His aunts made tamales with dark sauce. Other aunts, along with Gaspar's mother, were making the tissue paper cut-outs. The striking colors and the delicateness of the *papel picado* made quite an impression on Gaspar, who sat amazed for hours thinking about the artistry. Some of the tissue paper had figurines that were skeletons on bicycles; others were catrinas, dressed up skeletons smiling happily.

More of Gaspar's relatives arrived from the market with enormous bouquets of marigolds that they placed on the altar. The orange color contrasted greatly with the pink color of the china paper. The smell of the flowers combined with the smell of copal, that mysterious stone that burned within some small pots of clay and gave off an exotic fragrance and delicate smoke. All of these sights, smells, and sounds created a mysterious but relaxing atmosphere in the house.

Each person worked on putting together the *ofrenda*, even the children, who placed sugar and chocolate skulls on the table. Gaspar's parents placed dishes of rice with sauce and a small box of cigars—these were the things that his granddad liked to eat. There were also pumpkins and bitter chocolate; everything was there on the table. Gaspar remembered that his granddad Don José also liked to drink tequila, and so he quickly put a bottle of it on the table. His cousins brought a big, old, framed photo

of his granddad in which he was smiling; it was placed in the center of the *ofrenda*, and at that moment, Gaspar's grandmother Maria said:

"Now, this is the *ofrenda* of Don Jose; may he rest in peace."

The *ofrenda* was finished! Happy colors were illuminated by the candles and a mixture of aromas surged from the mystic altar.

There were many musicians in the family, and soon they began to sing. The uncles got out their guitars, and the family raised a chorus in honor of Don José. While the others ate and laughed and sang, Gaspar looked intently at the altar. Seeing him there, Grandma Maria came close to him and asked:

"My little grandson, what are you doing here? Come eat a tamale."

"Grandma," answered Gaspar, "is it true that the dead come to eat all this food?"

"Well, yes, in a way, they come," she said.

"But grandma, how are they going to eat all of this chocolate if they're already so thin?"

"My child," answered Grandma Maria, "there are many things that don't have explanations. But why do you ask me this when I know that it is you who would like to eat the chocolate, right?"

"No, Grandma," laughed Gaspar, "don't think that."

It was two o'clock in the morning. There were still tamales and many songs to sing. All

could feel the chill of the dawn so they covered themselves with blankets and warm scarves and everyone was beginning to fall asleep in their chairs. Then, without warning, the chocolate fell off of the *ofrenda* and one of the candles went out.

“Naughty boy!” said Aunt Mercedes. “Leave that chocolate there. It is for the dead!”

“Leave him alone! It wasn’t him!” said the grandma. “Don’t you see that Gaspar is on the other side of the room?”

The party became silent for a moment. No one knew if the deceased had come down from the heavens in order to drop the chocolate, or if Gaspar had tried to take it.

Gaspar didn’t say anything. He went over to his mother and hugged her and then looked at his grandma who had eyes filled with amazement. It seemed that she’d seen a ghost. All of the family looked at Grandma.

“There are things that have no explanation,” she said. The fiesta continued, and the chocolate stayed where it had landed.



Boy in costume for Day of the Dead (Dias de los Muertos) celebration

Discussion Questions

1. Is this a scary story? Why? Why not?
2. What traditional *ofrenda* decoration makes Gaspar assume all the dead are so thin they can’t eat all the chocolate?
3. Has your family ever gathered to remember someone who has died? What did you do when you gathered together: eat, sing, pray, share memories?
4. Why did the composer write this story? How does it help you understand the words of *La Ofrenda*?

Children's Books

Day of the Dead

By Tony Johnston

This picture book introduces the traditions of the Day of the Dead through the eyes of two boys and includes various Spanish words and phrases.

Pablo Remembers

By George Ancona

This book includes full-color photographs and follows the story of Pablo, a young boy living in Mexico, as he helps his family prepare for the Day of the Dead.

Internet Resources

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00011&RL=00054#video>

This excellent website provides a brief description of the Day of the Dead in addition to a slideshow and informative video.

The Day of the Dead in Mexico

<http://www.dayofthedeadd.com/>

This resource provides more detailed descriptions about the traditions surrounding the Day of the Dead including pictures and information on sugar skulls, flowers, altars and food.

Answer Key for Page 11

Can you find the following items in the picture?
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Xempasúchiti – Marigolds, known as the flower of the dead

