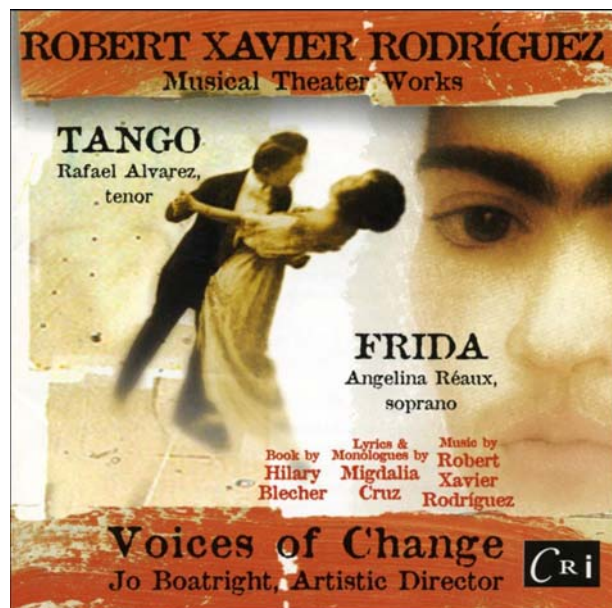


# Robert Xavier Rodríguez

## Musical Theater Works: Frida, Tango



1. Concert Suite from *Frida* (1998) ..... (32:21)  
from the opera *Frida, The Story of Frida Kahlo*;  
Book by Hilary Blecher. Lyrics and Monologues by  
Migdalia Cruz; Music by Robert Xavier Rodríguez.  
*Prelude*  
*Frida, the tomboy*  
*The accident*  
*Frida begins to paint*  
*Frida marries Diego Rivera*  
*Frida and Diego visit the USA*
- Frida suffers a miscarriage*  
*Frida observes Diego's affairs with other women*  
*Frida seeks comfort with other men and women*  
*Frida and Diego divorce*  
*Frida and Diego remarry*  
*Frida's apotheosis and death*  
Angelina Réaux, soprano; Voices of Change: Jo  
Boatright, piano; Mary Medrick, accordion, Ross  
Powell, clarinet; John Holt, trumpet (flugelhorn);  
Ron Wilson, trombone; Deborah Mashburn,  
percussion; Enric Madriguera, guitar; Dwight  
Shambley, double bass; Maria Schleuning, violin;  
Barbara Hustis, viola; Peter Steffens, cello;  
Robert X. Rodríguez, conductor
- Tango*, Chamber Opera in One Act (1986) ..... (24:28)  
English text compiled by the composer from news  
clippings (1913–14); Spanish translation by  
Josefina Barrera de García.
2. I News clippings, 1913–14 ..... (8:01)
  3. II Letters and sermons of clerics in Italy  
and the U.S., 1913–14 ..... (9:29)
  4. III News clippings, 1914 ..... (6:58)  
Rafael Alvarez, tenor; Voices of Change: Jo  
Boatright, piano, Mary Medrick, accordion,  
Harvey Boatright, flute, Ross Powell,  
clarinet, Deborah Mashburn, percussion,  
Maria Schleuning, violin, Peter Steffens,  
cello, Robert X. Rodríguez, conductor
- Total Playing Time: 56:49  
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## Notes

Founded in 1974, **Voices of Change** is one of the best known and well-established new music ensembles in the United States. The group has championed twentieth-century classics as well as works by living composers, including more than forty world premieres, of which more than half have been Voices of Change commissions. A half dozen of those premieres and commissions have been compositions by Robert Xavier Rodríguez, including *Tango*, which is recorded here for the first time. Rodríguez has worked closely with Voices of Change since 1975, when he joined the faculty at University of Texas at Dallas. The collaboration has been fruitful. During its first quarter century, Voices of Change performed nearly two dozen Rodríguez works and recorded five of his pieces prior to the present recording. Voices of Change's most recent CD on CRI, *Voces Americanas*, leads with Rodríguez's *Les Niais Amoureux* for violin, clarinet, cello and piano. The recording, which features works by four other Hispanic composers, received a Grammy nomination in 1999 for best performance by a small ensemble.

The present recording brings together two theatrically-based chamber works by Rodríguez, who has a strong interest in opera. Opera may not initially seem like the logical forum for a chamber ensemble. Opera can be an intimate musical genre,

however, and that is the premise on which Voices of Change has based its occasional forays into the world of musical drama. These have comprised staged performances of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and Miss *Donnithorne's Maggot*, both mono-dramas for voice and chamber ensemble that were conceived as song cycles, but lent themselves to full dramatization as quasi-chamber operas.

Indeed, chamber opera is a viable sub-genre that, as its name implies, relies on modest performing forces. The tradition has precedent in the eighteenth-century Italian composer Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1733). Chamber opera became firmly established in our century through such works as Hindemith's *Cardillac* and Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. These operas construct their tale with a minimum of characters, generally dispensing with chorus and using a chamber orchestra. Some chamber operas feature just one or two singers to carry the entire drama. Examples are Judith Weir's *King Harald's Saga* ("Grand Opera in 3 Acts for Solo Soprano") which Voices of Change has performed, and Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Telephone*, which has just two characters.

It is this compact tradition that Robert Xavier Rodríguez has embraced with the two works recorded here. In each case, one singer delivers the entire sung and spoken text, supported by

an instrumental chamber ensemble. The first, *Concert Suite from Frida*, is derived from Rodríguez's opera based on the life of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Rodríguez completed the Concert Suite in June, 1993, when he accompanied Angelina Réaux at the piano for the premiere performance in Dallas. Voices of Change presented the world premiere of the suite with instrumental ensemble in February, 1999.

The balance of this recording is devoted to *Tango*, a one-act opera that Voices of Change commissioned with the assistance of the National Endowment for the Arts in a consortium project with the Chicago Ensemble and the Twentieth Century Consort of Washington, D.C. Voices of Change presented the premiere, in English, in January, 1986, with Paul Sperry, tenor. This recording introduces the Spanish version.

During the past twenty years, the art and career of Frida Kahlo have undergone a reevaluation. Whereas during most of her life she was relegated to a subsidiary role as the wife of Diego Rivera, today she is recognized as one of the great painters of her day. In addition, Kahlo has become something of a cult figure, not only because of the vivid, sometimes horrifying images in her art, but also because of the unremitting tragedy of her life.

Born in Mexico in 1907, Kahlo had Mexican Indian blood on her mother's side; her father was Hungarian Jewish. Two tragic events punctuated her childhood: a bout with polio at age six and a near-fatal accident in her teens when a bus collided with a streetcar. Kahlo was impaled in the collision, which killed several other persons. She was not expected to survive because of the extent of her injuries. The catastrophe left her permanently disabled and doomed to a lifetime of pain. She ultimately underwent some thirty operations before her body simply gave out when she was forty-seven. Kahlo began painting shortly after her accident to stave off boredom during her lengthy convalescence. She met the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in 1928 and married him the following year. They shared philosophical bonds in communism and a sense of Mexico's indigenous culture. Nevertheless, the relationship was turbulent. Rivera encouraged his wife's artistic pursuits; however, she achieved little of the recognition that came to him. Further, he was chronically unfaithful, which drove Kahlo alternately to desperation and to her own affairs with both men and women. Kahlo's art is richly autobiographical, tied up both with her lifelong endurance of physical pain and the emotional torment of her love/hate relationship with Rivera.

Rodríguez responded to the undeniable drama of Frida Kahlo's life in his opera, *Frida*. In its original version, *Frida* is a two-act opera with a libretto by Hilary Blecher and Migdalia Cruz. Rodríguez completed the score in 1991 and revised it in 1993. *Frida* was commissioned by the American Music Theater Festival. Following its premiere in Philadelphia, John Rockwell in the *New York Times* named it "The best opera/musical theater of 1991." Subsequent performances followed in Boston (American Repertory Theater), Burlington (Vt.), New York (Next Wave Festival), San Francisco and the Houston Grand Opera. The Concert Suite is a digest of the full opera, condensed to a monodrama for Frida that zeroes in on events that shaped her destiny. The composer has written:

The *Suite* is a series of excerpts from the opera, arranged in chronological order, following Frida's life: as a young tomboy; her accident; as a young artist; her tempestuous marriage to Diego; her relationships with other men and women; her final illness, death and apotheosis.

Rodríguez is responsive to the nuances of Mexican culture that were so important to his heroine. He succeeds in bringing her to life through rich musical characterization that shows her genius and her mania, her tenderness and her fury, her

passion for life and for Diego, and her ultimate redemption and deliverance through death.

Tangos have become omnipresent in our culture. We take this dramatic, sexy dance so much for granted that we may not grasp how controversial it was when first introduced. The tango is believed to have evolved in late nineteenth-century Buenos Aires from the *milonga*, a dance native to Argentina, and from the Cuban *habanera*. By the outbreak of World War I, tangos were wildly popular in both Europe and North America, and considered very *risqué*. In a world where women's skirts customarily still covered the anklebones and chivalry was not a dead concept, the idea of couples embracing tightly on the dance floor as they moved about with abrupt, even violent gestures, was quite shocking. The tango catalyzed so much outrage that, in 1914, Pope Pius X issued an edict declaring it to be sinful.

Ridiculous? Perhaps, though probably not at the time.

Robert Xavier Rodríguez's *Tango*, unlike *Frida*, features one singer/speaker who performs three roles: a tango dancer, a radio newscaster, and the Cardinal Vicar of Rome. In fact, the Papal pronouncement, as read by the Cardinal, became part of the libretto (set to tango music, of course!) and was the seed for the balance of the opera. Because the tenor functions as dancer, narrator, and singer, his senses of drama and absurdity are equally important to successful delivery of the opera.

Tango traces the history of the controversy surrounding the dance, quoting from news reports from 1913 and 1914 in London, Berlin, Paris, Cairo, Rome, Boston and—well, you get the idea. For emphasis during "newscasts," Rodríguez employs the flutist on a second instrument: an old manual typewriter that adds authenticity and a sense of the ridiculous. So, if you find yourself on the verge of an outright laugh: it's OK. This music is meant to be funny. It laughs at itself just as much as it laughs at the pompous Vatican and other governmental organizations that professed to be scandalized by the "immoral" tango.

Rodríguez intermingles tango music with modern sonorities and quotations from great musical works of the past, beginning with the *minore* section from the Rondo-Finale of Beethoven's First Piano Concerto, absurdly injected amid tango rhythms. He quotes a medieval Mass when the Cardinal declaims the published text of the Papal condemnation. This is the first time the tenor sings rather than speaks. The shift in performance technique thus coincides with a shift in characters.

Answering the Cardinal's scathing epithet "orgies of paganism," a snippet borrowed from the mournful C-minor slow movement of Schubert's Piano Trio in E-flat, Op. 100 introduces the next "aria." Rodríguez cleverly retains Schubert's glorious cello solo, transforming its accompaniment into—what else?—a tango beat. Before the Cardinal is through, we hear excerpts from a Bach cantata and the first movement of Brahms's Fourth Symphony. The minuet from the first act of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* accompanies the sanitized "Paragon" that is supposed to replace the decadent tango. Of course, the insidious virus of the Argentinean dance spreads through the elegant music, replacing its dignified strains with sensuous 'hops, lunges, wiggles, shakes, and flounces.' Tango rules!

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**Robert Xavier Rodríguez** (b 1946, San Antonio) first gained international recognition in 1971 when he was awarded the Prix de Composition Musicale Prince Pierre de Monaco by Prince Rainier and Princess Grace at the Palais Princier in Monte Carlo. Other honors include the Prix Lili Boulanger, a Guggenheim Fellowship, five NEA grants, the Goddard Lieberman Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a 1999 Grammy nomination.

Rodríguez's music is regularly performed in American, Latin American, and European musical centers, with over 2000 professional operatic and orchestral performances in recent seasons. Rodríguez has served as composer-in-residence with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. He currently is a professor at the University of Texas at Dallas, composer-in-residence with the San Antonio Symphony and active as a guest lecturer and conductor. His music is published by G. Schirmer and is recorded on the Crystal, Orion, Newport, Delos and CRI labels.

**Angelina Réaux**, soprano, was born in Houston, Texas and has trained both as an actress and a classical singer. Ms. Réaux has forged her own unique path and fits no conventional mold, commanding a repertoire from Handel to Henze. She has performed with Leonard Bernstein, Kurt Masur, Ned Rorem, the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Boston Pops, BBC Symphony, Moscow Radio and Television Orchestra, Santa Fe Opera, Houston Opera, Washington Opera and Boston Lyric Opera. She recently made her debut at both Vienna's Konzerthaus and Musikverein singing Kurt Weill's *Die Sieben Todsünden* and Leonard Bernstein's *Jeremiah* Symphony. Ms. Réaux's discography includes Mimi in the Grammy-nominated *La Bohème* conducted by Leonard Bernstein on Deutsche Grammophon, Rose Maurrant in Weill's *Street Scene*, Alexandra in Blitzstein's *Regina*, and Berg's *Lulu Suite*. She has also recorded for Teldec and Koch Classics International. This is her debut recording for CRI.

**Rafael Alvarez**, tenor, was born in Mexico and began his vocal studies at the age of fifteen. After graduating from the National Conservatory of Music in Mexico, he studied theater in Vienna. His teachers have included James Demster and Ramón Vargas. His performances in Mexico include the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and opera houses in Monterrey, Sinaloa, and Morelia. Mr. Alvarez has appeared at the Altesrathaus and the Schönbrunn Castle Theater in Vienna and Baden, Austria. He was the first Mexican singer invited to the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan. He has sung leading roles in *Tosca*, *Aida*, *La traviata*, and *L'elisir d'amore*. Mr. Alvarez has also served as a conductor of youth choirs including the Children's Choir of the National Conservatory of Music. Mr. Alvarez made his United States debut with Voices of Change and this is his debut recording.

The Dallas-based ensemble **Voices of Change** is the Southwest's oldest professional chamber music organization dedicated to the performance of twentieth-century music. Now celebrating its twenty-fifth Anniversary season, Voices has played to enthusiastic audiences in many of the greatest music halls in the United States, Europe and Latin America, including New York's Merkin Hall and Miller Theater, Washington's Kennedy Center, Berlin's Staatsbibliothek, London's Wigmore Hall, Caracas's Sala Felix Rivas and Dallas's own Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center.

Voices of Change and artistic director Jo Boatright have been honored five times with the ASCAP Award for Adventure-some Programming.

A major facet of Voices of Change's mission is to bring composers to Dallas to take part in the performance of their compositions. More than fifty composers have participated in performances, workshops and seminars.

For its excellent roster of member artists, Voices of Change draws on the superior musical resources of Greater Dallas/Fort Worth. These include the principals of both the Dallas and Fort Worth Symphony Orchestras, faculty from Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts and the University of North Texas College of Music, and nationally

renowned freelance musicians.

Voices of Change was founded in 1974 by Jo Boatright and Ross Powell and is ensemble-in-residence at Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts.

## **Tango**

### **2 I. News Clippings, 1913-14**

*The tenor enters as a tango dancer, then changes costume and becomes a newscaster.*

LONDON, October 5, 1913. The tango dancing craze promises to be the most conspicuous feature of London's winter season. Tango teas and classes have now developed into tango clubs, which have multiplied to an extraordinary degree. Several of the tea shops in Piccadilly also offer dancing, for digestive or other purposes.

BERLIN, October 18. One of Berlin's great department stores, recognizing the all-devouring craze for the tango, has just introduced tango teas as a special drawing card for shoppers. Judging by the throngs which attended the opening tea this week, the innovation will prove a bigger attraction than bargain sales; although, after dancing, it remains to be seen how much interest or strength the women will have left for purchase making.

PARIS, November 1. Monsieur Martin, the new chief of protocol at the Elysée Palace, announced today that the tango WILL be permitted at the state balls at the palace. M. Martin will, however, issue severe edicts regarding the gowns which ladies may wear.

PARIS, December 5. Tango baths have been introduced by a Parisian hostess. So exhausting is the new dance that the hostess began engaging a masseur for the evenings of her new parties. Tired tango dancers can now spend half an hour in the middle of a tiring evening in the refreshing relaxation of a bath and massage.

CAIRO, December 5. As was perhaps to be expected, the tango fever has spread to Cairo; however, those responsible for entertaining have announced the distinct disapproval of the tango as danced by the less refined members of society, and none but the most proper forms will be countenanced at the hotels during the season.

ROME, December 26. The strenuous efforts at the Vatican to suppress the tango in Italy have proved almost a failure. Following the example of Rome, there has been issued throughout the country a circular giving instructions to the clergy. The anti-clericals received the pronouncement by the Vatican with derision and will immediately initiate propaganda to popularize the tango.

FLORENCE, December 27. The tango is making a complete conquest of Florence. Crowds of society people and tourists are seeing the dance at tea in the winter garden of the Grand Hotel. There will be a tango supper on New Year's Eve. Tango teas have been given in many private homes, but bridge is still a formidable competitor.

PARIS, January 7, 1914. The latest addition to the list of French Bishops who have expressed their condemnation of the tango is the Bishop of Poitiers. He asked the clergy to "discountenance the unwholesome attractions of the tango and to exhort their flocks to remain faithful to the dictates of honor and good taste."

BOSTON, January 17. The State of Massachusetts today took its first official recognition of the much-maligned tango when Representative Lewis R. Sullivan introduced into the Legislature a bill which not only forbids the Tango but makes it a criminal offense punishable by fine or imprisonment.

ROME, January 15. The condemnation of the tango by many prelates individually has now been followed by its church-

wide denunciation in a letter by the Cardinal-Vicar of Rome. The letter was approved by Pope Pious X and printed in the *Osservatore Romano*, the organ of the Vatican. The Cardinal's letter is the most energetic of all those so far published with reference to the tango. It is understood that the Pope edited the letter, which was originally drafted in even more vehement language. All the Bishops of Italy have now forbidden the dancing of the tango. They are establishing severe penances for Catholics not complying with the order.

### 3 II - Letters and sermons of clerics in Italy and the U.S., 1913-14

We are now deeply grieved to learn that an attempt is being made to introduce a certain dance from over the seas which gravely outrages modesty and which has already been condemned by many illustrious Bishops and has been prohibited even in Protestant countries. This infamous dance, which now threatens to overwhelm the faithful, is an immodest and suggestive exercise tending to lewdness and lasciviousness, obscenity and immorality. We need to be neither prude nor puritan to see that this dance is but one symptom of a widespread wave of sensualism sweeping over the land today. On its crest it has carried with it the suggestive fashions and nauseating revels of the brothel. Not only does clean dancing seem to have passed, but even decent walking is much too rare. Little by little the bars have lowered, breaking down the reserve and the barriers erected between the sexes, and letting in a very flood of folly, of insatiate greed for amusement, and returning to the decadent and degenerate orgies of PAGANISM! Music as we know it has nothing to do with movement, bodily movement. Music demands life, but life is more than bodily movement. Life surely tends toward self control. The higher the music, the less it is visibly expressive. To submit a spiritual art to a bodily tyranny, an erotic prowl set to rhythmic rhapsodies of barbaric propulsion, is thus to deny our higher faculties and to defy our nobler traditions. No sane man would belittle the joys of life or cloud the brightness of life's sweet and wholesome pleasures; but this animal dance, this animal dance of irresponsible languor and high-breathing passion, is not joy or gladness if, in the guise of modern dancing, it can be had only at the cost of moral suicide!

We, therefore, concur with the Bishops who have already spoken out and condemn the dance imported from abroad under the name of tango, which by its nature is incitant to corruption, and in which all who recognize the authority of the Pope may no longer in conscience take part. Whoever persists in dancing the tango commits a sin!

All those who have in their duty the care of souls must now rise up and warn the faithful of this grave offense, that we may preserve our tenderest sanctities and deliver ourselves from the shame of our days. It will, therefore, be the duty of Confessors to take notice of this offense when performing the sacrament of penance.

Con questa fiducia imploriamo sopra di voi e su tutti sacerdoti, religiosi e laici, con la voce con gli scritti e con l'esempio vi aiuterranno nella santa opera, le piu copiose benedivioni del Signore.

—Il Vicario de Roma

*(With this faith we invoke upon you and all the priests, religious and lay, who with voice, word and example help you in this holy work, the most copious benedictions of the Lord.)*

—The Vicar of Rome

### III - News clippings, 1914

BOSTON, January 23. The first death attributed to dancing the tango was reported today. A charge of manslaughter was brought against Daniel Spencer for having caused the death of William H. Brown; however, Miss Ollie Thompson testified that Brown was "tangoing" with her when he struck his head against a door, knocking a panel out. She showed the court how they danced and Spencer was acquitted.

PARIS, January 17. The French Academy of Dancing Masters has been aroused...by the negative publicity now surrounding the tango, and has called an international congress of dancing teachers for Easter Sunday and Monday to modify the tango and to consider the best means of removing the stigma wherewith the dance is currently marked. It is not yet certain what will be the effect of the tango ban on Parisian entertaining, but it is noticed that in invitations the word "tango" is now carefully avoided, the formula "the dansant" being used instead.

CLEVELAND, June 12. The American Association of Dancing Masters today decided, after considerable discussion, to approve ten sublimated and expurgated tango steps as demonstrated by Mr. J.E. Miles, of the Castle Dancing School of New York. The dancing masters previously had agreed that the tango must be abandoned altogether, but the steps demonstrated were considered sufficiently tamed to suit the majority.

NEW YORK, no date. Today at Public School No. 41 the New York Board of Education witnessed a demonstration of dancing billed as "carrying the gospel of refinement in the dance." The exhibition consisted of the tango in a newly revised version described as "properly danced" and rechristened "the paragon." At the close of the exhibition Dr. Edward Stite of the Board of Education said he was sure that the Board could approve the dance in its revised form. Other members of the Board expressed their pleasure in witnessing the paragon, the rule of which are as follows:

- Do not hop.
- Do not lunge.
- Do not wiggle the shoulders.
- Do not shake the hips.
- Do not flounce the elbows.
- Do not pump the aims.
- Avoid low, fantastic acrobatic dips.
- Do not twist the body.
- Stand far enough away from each other to allow free movement of the body.
- If the partners' bodies must touch, the gentleman should rest his hand lightly against the lady's back, touching only with the finger tips.

*The tenor begins dancing the stilted "paragon," but he cannot resist returning to the tango. He stops and pauses before the cardinal's robe and the newscaster's microphone. He then changes back into his tango dancer's costume and exits dancing.*

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## Production Notes

Produced, engineered and edited by Alan Bise, Acoustic Digital, Dallas.

Executive Producer: Joseph Ridings Dalton

Recorded at Caruth Auditorium, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, February, 1999.

Publishing: All works published by G. Schirmer (ASCAP).

Backcover photo: Angelina Réaux as Frida. Courtesy of Jim Caldwell and the Houston Grand Opera Archives.

Cover/Interior Design: Relja Penezic CRI Production Manager: Allison Wolf

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This compact disc has been made possible through the generous support of the Aaron Copland Fund for Music.