

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Vilcek Foundation awards \$50,000 prize to Mexican American composer Juan Pablo Contreras

*The Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Music celebrates immigrant musicians' contributions to the arts, culture, and society.*

**NEW YORK, April 6, 2023**—[Juan Pablo Contreras](#) receives the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Music for his work as a composer and conductor of orchestral music that draws on his Mexican heritage, and for his leadership in founding the Orquesta Latino Mexicana.

The Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise is a \$50,000 prize awarded by the Vilcek Foundation as part of the Vilcek Foundation Prizes Program. The Vilcek Foundation prizes are awarded annually to immigrant artists and scientists whose work has had a profound impact on U.S. culture and society. The Vilcek Prizes for Creative Promise in Music acknowledge artists at a pivotal point in their careers, and celebrate artists whose work demonstrates a unique insight or contribution to their genre.

“Juan Pablo Contreras’s music simultaneously draws upon tradition and defies the conventions of those traditions,” says Vilcek Foundation President Rick Kinsel. “His compositions incorporate aspects of Mexican culture and folk music to enrich the classical genre and propel it beyond its historically Eurocentric focus,” he says. “Contreras’s artistry is equally matched by his commitment to mentoring others: His leadership empowers the next generation of Latino artists to pursue and excel in composition and performance.”

In recognition of Contreras’s achievements, the Vilcek Foundation has developed and shares a video profile with the composer, titled [Juan Pablo Contreras composes classical music with the sounds of Mexico](#).

Born in Guadalajara, Mexico, Contreras first moved to the United States at the age of 19 to study composition at the California Institute of the Arts. After earning his BFA, he moved to New York to pursue his master’s at the Manhattan School of Music. As Contreras began to delve into the classical canon for inspiration for his own compositions, he was drawn to the music of American composer Aaron Copland, Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, and Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos. “The way they blended classical passages with sounds from their native countries really spoke to me,” he recalls. “I started to write works that were influenced by the sounds of my homeland and that told stories about modern Mexico.”

A dedicated teacher and mentor, Contreras advocates for equity and inclusion in orchestral commissions and programming. Making classical music more accessible to the Latino community in Los Angeles, and to broader audiences, is deeply important. When the COVID-19 health emergency struck and people were ordered to stay at home to protect public health, Contreras found purpose in bringing people together online. He developed an online orchestration course, training and mentoring 120 Latin American composers over the course of four months, and offering need-based scholarships.

In the summer of 2021, Contreras founded the Orquesta Latino Mexicana in Guadalajara, an orchestra of 45 people, centering focus on young musicians from Latin American and Hispanic countries. Breaking

from Mexico's government-funded model of orchestra, the purpose of the Orquesta is to celebrate and promote the work of young, living Latino composers and musicians.

Contreras's work is a celebration of modern immigration and cultural exchange. Each piece reflects his experiences and the context in which it was created. His music is allegorical, telling stories as a way to link the past, present, and future, and to find common ground with audiences through narrative. They include *Lucha Libre*—an orchestral composition that tells the story of six instrumentalist *luchadores* battling with bravado and flair—and *Mariachitlán*, a piece that evokes the sounds of Mariachi Plaza in Guadalajara.

**Read more at the Vilcek Foundation:** [\*Juan Pablo Contreras composes classical music with the sounds of Mexico\*](#)

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### **The Vilcek Foundation**

The Vilcek Foundation raises awareness of immigrant contributions in the United States and fosters appreciation for the arts and sciences. The foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the foundation was inspired by the couple's respective careers in biomedical science and art history. Since 2000, the foundation has awarded over \$7million in prizes to foreign-born individuals and has supported organizations with over \$6 million in grants.

The Vilcek Foundation is a private operating foundation, a federally tax-exempt nonprofit organization under IRS Section 501(c)(3). To learn more, please visit [vilcek.org](http://vilcek.org).