

Sounds of Native Cultures in Electroacoustic Music: Latin American Study Cases

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ABSTRACT

The electroacoustic music for tape of Latin American origin shows a rich history and a large, relative unexplored repertoire since its beginnings in the middle of the 20th century. In this paper, I study the inclusion of sounds of native cultures in a group of selected electroacoustic works between 1961-1989. A musical analytical inductive process divided in three stages was used to recognize and interpret this recurring topic. I formulate the notion of *distance* to embrace three types of references to the sounds of native cultures that can be found in this music. These references operate as indexes of a cultural identity that the composers were trying to portray.

I. BACKGROUND

In an article published in 1992 the composer and musicologist Graciela Paraskevaídis (1940-2017) transcribed and analysed the electroacoustic work *Tramos* (1975, 16'53'', 1-ch., Buenos Aires) by Argentinean composer Eduardo Bértola (1939-1996). She saw this work as a dialectical counterpart to some previous electroacoustic music of European origin that should have worked as an early model for the creation of electroacoustic music in Latin America (Paraskevaídis 1992, p. 4). Her postulate implies the recognition and a critical examination of the historical, performative and compositional practices of European academic music that were imported in the Americas since the beginnings of the colonial processes in the 16th century. Bértola's *Tramos* – a work consisting of a montage of radio cuts that produce meaning through their semantical interpretation – is a part of a group of 10 electroacoustic works composed in Latin America between 1970-1980 that Paraskevaídis selected as the basis for her approach and out of which she draws 7 common features that would characterize these musics. The root of her inductive venture was her encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of academic music in Latin America, which indeed prevent her from generalizing as she pointed out the need of a methodological differentiation among works and their individual character in order to compare them one another rightly (Paraskevaídis 1992, p. 4). A similar approach can be found in an article by composer and musicologist Coriún Aharonián, where he uses the same idea of cultural countermodel (Aharonián 2000, p. 3) as a selection criterium to conform a group of (not exclusively electroacoustic) musical works out of which he draws 13 possible trends that would be distinctive for these musics. In this case he focuses on 30 works between 1971-1992.

Although the personal bond among the above-mentioned authors is not to be underestimated if the coincidences in their thinking and methodology are to be mentioned, I will consider nonetheless two common epistemic aspects which are

irrefutable because of their sufficient general nature. First, the necessity of caution while trying to operate inductively with musics of Latin American origin must be observed, since one considers a space with a rich, complex, and regional highly differentiated history, comprising a territory two times bigger than Europe. Any hasty, simplifying approach to its cultural products should therefore be avoided.

Second, I concentrate on a broad question that is partially shared by both authors: How did composers express their origins and culture in their electroacoustic works for tape? To answer it, I incorporated subsequent bibliography concerning individual composers and national approaches to this subject (For reasons of space this entire bibliography cannot be cited within this paper). I also broadened the study subject to include electroacoustic works produced by composers of Latin American origin (but not necessarily in Latin America) according to their historical weight. I built a corpus of 47 musical works from 16 composers in the time-lapse between 1961 to 1989. The selection criteria for the data collection process have their roots on the following methodological aspects.

A. Historical Relevance

1) *First level.* I took the broad notion of Mediamorphose to conceptualize the sociohistorical role of technology as a key aspect of electroacoustic music. Mediamorphosen are the transformations in the production of culture under the influence of historical new communicational technologies (Smudits 2002, p. 16). Cultural products are then defined by both the intrinsic, autonomous dynamics of the implicated communicational technology and by external, political, economic, and ideological conditions (Smudits 2002, p. 43), in other words, the dialectical interaction between technology and society conditions the electroacoustic music that emerges from it. Although this sociohistorical role of technology could be criticized as a technological determinism that obscures the social fundaments that had opened the way for technological innovations (Sterne 2003, p. 8), it is also true that electroacoustic music is a cultural product of a technological moment that was initiated with the invention of electronic analogue signal recording and broadcasting technology, in other words, this music results from the electronic Mediamorphose. Composers did face creative challenges while working with this new medium and these challenges reveal the presence of electronic analogue technology in all dimensions of music (composition, storage, and reproduction) for the first time in history.

2) *Second level.* I focused on a regional level and applied the above-mentioned notion of electronic Mediamorphose to select exclusively analogue electroacoustic music for tape

produced by composers of Latin American origin. In order to deal with the vast geocultural region called Latin America I studied primarily composers that were active at the Latin American Center for Higher Musical Studies (CLAEM, 1962–1970) of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires, because of its relevance in the institutional history of academic music in Latin America (e.g., Castañeira de Dios, 2011), and contained an electroacoustic studio that was among the best equipped of its time. Besides, the great majority of composers that were active there had shown remarkable professional paths after their residency in Argentina (Novoa 2011, pp. 28-29).

B. References to the Region

The presence references to the region of origin and to the culture of the composers was the last criterium for the selection of electroacoustic works to be studied. These references allude a spatial location in its geocultural dimension (Said 1994, p. 52). In the case of electroacoustic music, they can be recognized in the work title, dedication, literary or poetic source, musical and style quotations, use of speech, environmental recordings, and in the creative information provided by composers. From the 133 works I had collected following the second socio-historical level, I choose 47 pieces, from which 8 are early examples of electroacoustic music from some composers which do not show any references to the region.

II. AIMS

In this paper, I discuss one type of reference that is common to 10 electroacoustic works within the musical corpus of 47 pieces that I studied: The presence sounds of native cultures. I explore the ways in which these sounds were incorporated, how they were approached and what meaning can be extracted from the music.

III. METHOD

For the analysis of electroacoustic music, I followed and applied the semiological tripartite model of music as symbolic form according to Nattiez (1975). The musical corpus was analysed in three stages. First, an analysis of each work based on pre-established criteria. The segmentation and comparison of the compounding sounds of a piece follows an interpretation of the Gestalt principles applied to the auditory experience as postulated by Roy (2003). Second, I added compositional information to define a poetic level for each work (Nattiez 1975, p. 52)

As a result of the analytical data evaluation many recurring features were recognized among these works; the presence of sounds of native cultures was one of them. The interpretative analysis of this recurring aspect was the last stage. Here I combine the two-level analytical data that I previously obtained with information about the context of creation of this electroacoustic music as a horizon of expectation (Jauß 1970, pp. 173-174) that opens a way for the interpretation of the music.

IV. RESULTS

I postulate the notion of *distance* to conceptualize the ways in which composers operated with the sounds of native cultures. There are three types of distance that correspond to different,

increasing proximity grades: silent references, sounding references, and aesthetical references.

A. Silent Reference

The sounds of native cultures are integrated in some works that paradoxically do not contain them. The title of the electroacoustic piece *huauqui* (1975, 11'03'', 1-ch., Montevideo) by Uruguayan composer Graciela Paraskevaïdis is a word in Quechua (the language of the Inca), which has a double meaning for her. First as a statuette that was sculpted by an Inca according to his own image and likeness, second, as a word representing the idea of fraternity and community. She conceived this piece as the starting point of a personal search for a new, concise composing style, as she began to concentrate herself on the use of few sound materials out of which she constructs her music (Paraskevaïdis, 1996), as can be exemplified in the electronic (e.g., 0''-2'09''), vocal (3'35'' - 4'40'') and instrumental (2'10''-3'34'') sounds in *huauqui* and their static developments. That would partly explain why she refers to this self-portrait character of the *huauqui*. This reference to the Inca world was the first reference to the Latin American region in the titles of her musical works, which date back to 1967 and had shown the presence of Spanish, Italian, and German words mostly deriving from the literary sources she used.

In another context, but operating with the same reference enclosed in the title one finds the electroacoustic work *Canto selvagem* (1967, 2'55'', 2-ch., Rio de Janeiro) by Brazilian composer Jorge Antunes (1942). This short "wild song" consist of two sound layers that build a two-part form and show the character of an accompanied melody: Percussion instruments that are intended to represent primitive cultures (Lintz-Maués 2002, pp. 72-73) and a melody composed with synthetic sounds that should evoke wild screams. The composer does not engage deeply with the native cultures he alludes and remains therefore in the experimental, improvisatorial terrain that characterizes his early electroacoustic music, as exemplified by his previous work *Valsa sideral* (1962, 3'10'', 2-ch., Rio de Janeiro), the first electroacoustic work composed exclusively with synthetic sounds in Brazil, whose melodic features reminds those from *Canto selvagem*.

Although these two composers share a strong social committed thinking that can be found in their music -with more or less intensity according to biographical circumstances-, they show very different starting points for their compositions. One shared aspect of their approaches is nonetheless the reference to the sounds of native cultures, which is silent since no engagement with these cultures can be acoustically proved.

B. Sounding Reference

In another level, one finds electroacoustic works that present sounds of native cultures that were electronically processed and mounted. The composers tried to enrich personal, mostly already defined personal styles with the addition of these sounds.

The work *Guararia Repano* (1968, 14'20'', 2-ch., Caracas) by Chilean composer and CLAEM invited teacher José Vicente Asuar (1933-2017) resulted from the materials he collected for a previous multimedia work in which he co-worked. He used two "instrumental songs from the Guajiro Indian" (Asuar 1975, p. 15) and integrated them in key moments in the highly

differentiated form of *Guararia Repano*, the native name for a mountain nearby Caracas (Venezuela). Both sound materials show a melodic character that reveals the composer's creative intention as he constructs an imitative polyphony between the second material and an electronic variation of it at 4'00''. Asuar had no interest in dealing with the geocultural origins of these native sounds since he explored their sound qualities abstractly, alluding partially to traditional techniques while building the form of this musical work, where synthetic sounds and recordings seem to coexist intermingled together.

A recording from a cosmogonic ritual-song of the U'wa natives is the basic material for the work *Creación de la tierra* (1972, 18'19'', 1-ch., Buenos Aires) by Colombian composer Jacqueline Nova (1935-1975). She approached to this native sounds in an abstract way too, showing a strictly musical interest in the sound of this native language and its compounding elements, an interest that dates back to some of her previous music like *Uerjayas* (1967) for voices and traditional instruments, which displays "Birth Songs" of the U'wa. In *Creación de la tierra* one hears an original recording of a song for the "Creation of the Earth" at 16'28''. Before this happens, she processed these vocal sounds to create long reverberant layers and opposed rhythmic structures that derive from the rhythmic and repetitive character of the original recording. She creates a contrast between both types of material, as occurs at the beginning of the work at 2'16'', or symmetrically near the end of it between 14'46''-15'04''. The way she worked with the native sounds reminds the abstract musical principles that rule the sound world of her previous electroacoustic work *Oposición-Fusión* (1968, 10'50'', 2-ch., Buenos Aires), particularly in the tensions between continual and discontinuous sounds.

Uruguayan composer Coriún Aharonián (1940) used exclusively sounds of native and mestizo flutes in his *Homenaje a la flecha clavada en el pecho de Don Juan Díaz de Solís* (1974, 13'25'', 2-ch., Bourges). The approach of Aharonián can be summarized as the use of technology to potentiate native sounds, since he does not modify the instrumental sounds electronically, but isolate them at first, superposing them later creating dense sound layers from 7'17'' onwards. Whilst the title of the work recalls the murder of the Spanish conquistador Juan Díaz de Solís (1470-1516) by an Indian arrow as he was sailing upstream nearby today's Uruguay, the wind instruments used by Aharonián belong indeed to the Altiplano region in west-central South America. The composer denies that there was any programmatic link between the sound world of the piece and its title (Aharonián 1995, pp. 8-9), and that partly explains the abstract character of his approach as he concentrates exclusively on the native sounds as they emanate out of these flutes which he played and recorded himself.

C. Aesthetical references

The use of sounds of native cultures as the basis for the construction of personal aesthetics finds an example in the electroacoustic music of Guatemalan composer Joaquín Orellana (1930) and Argentinean composer Oscar Bazán (1936-2005).

Orellana's electroacoustic work *Humanofonía* (1971, 11'13'', 1-ch., Guatemala City) can be considered as a speech-composition because of the musical and aesthetical relevance

of the human voices it contains, which operate both as sounding and aesthetical references. I will focus on the latter. A Mayan language spoken by a male voice can be heard at 1'01''-1'14'' and 10'07''-11'13''. These two extracts are inserted symmetrically at begin and at the end of the work, while in the middle of it one hears a poem in Spanish recited by the composer at 4'58''-6'15''. All this, combined with a solid control of the durations of the formal units, speaks of the relevance the composer gives to this voice. He coined the term *humanofonal* (humanphonal) to describe the human presence within a sound landscape, which he discovered while experimenting with environmental recordings in Guatemala since 1968. This human presence in the native languages contains for him a historical and anthropological dimension that he tries to portrait in his *música ideológica* [ideological music]. He hears in these languages an old suffering that dates back to the colonial processes in the Americas and the annihilation of native cultures (Vázquez 2015, p. 203.) The composer's approach to the language focus on its musical character and not on its meaning (Gamazo 2016) and that can be related to the work of Jacqueline Nova, although the ideological concerns and an implicit social critique are stronger in the case of Orellana. He used a Mayan language again in his work *Rupestre en el Futuro* (1979, 22'41'', 1-ch., Guatemala City), which has its precedent in a short piece called *Iterotzul* (1973, 3'13'', 1-ch., Guatemala City) where the presence of Mayan language is predominant. This same language and voice are a recurring element in *Rupestre*, whose title portrays ironically the difficulties of composing electroacoustic music without appropriate equipment. It is no coincidence that at 22'01'' and until the end of the piece one hears the Mayan language in the same symmetrical position and with the same relevance as in the previous *Humanofonía*.

Oscar Bazán composed an electroacoustic trilogy that was based in his experiences with the music of the Selk'nam natives. These three works are *Episodios* (1973, 4'47''), *Austera* (1973, 12'28''), and *Parca* (1974, 8'43''), all of them stereophonic pieces composed in Buenos Aires. The native sounds were the starting point for a personal search that led him to the notion of *música austera* [austere music], a music where repetitions and an overall simplicity prevails (it cannot be considered *minimal music* because of the geocultural sources out of which Bazán conceived the idea.) The three above-mentioned works are connected through shared features, for instance, the use of major seconds in *Austera* (2'01''-4'27'') and *Parca* (2'35''-5'01''), the stereophonic spacialization of the sounds in *Parca* (0''-2'34'') and *Episodios* (0''-30''), or the presence of intentional out-of-tune minor-scale intervals in *Austera* (4'28''-6'18'') and *Parca* (2'35''-5'01''). In *Episodios* (0''-30'') and *Austera* (2'01''-4'27'') the composer emulates a native drum and a flute with the synthesizer, although these are exceptional moments that reveal the origins of his conception of austere music. The overall sound world of the pieces remains of electronic nature.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The composition of academic music with references to native cultures shows classical, extensively studied examples in the vocal-instrumental repertoire of Latin American origin, for instance the *Sinfonía india* (1936) by Mexican composer Carlos Chávez (1899-1978.) I concentrate my study on the

specificities of the electroacoustic music repertoire, which is a relatively unexplored musicological subject. The notion of distance that I postulate and its three subcategories seems appropriate to systematically describe the varying ways in which composers approach these sound worlds.

This distance can be found in other references to the region that are found within this musical corpus I study. For instance, some silent political references to the region can be found in the title of some pure electronic pieces like *¡Volveremos a las montañas!* (1968, 12'20'', 2-ch., Buenos Aires) by Chilean composer Gabriel Brnčić (1942), or as sounding references in works where the voice of politicians can actually be heard, as in *Trópicos* (1973, 19'44'', 2-ch., New York) by Venezuelan composer Alfredo del Mónaco (1938-2015.) This is nonetheless a subject for future research.

I must finally remark that although the composers I mentioned shown different approaches to the sounds of native cultures, one can recognize nonetheless a common feature: All of them were trying to represent their region using sound materials that worked as indexes of a cultural identity. They were trying to differentiate his electroacoustic music from other electroacoustic musics. While doing so they approached to their cultures of origin in various ways, under which the use of recorded sounds related to the region appears to be the specific aspect of their electroacoustic music.

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