

ORIGINS

# An Approach to Compositional Trends in Latin America

*Coriún Aharonián*

## METHODOLOGICAL HESITATIONS

Is it possible to generalize about the composers of Latin America? It is obvious that any kind of theorizing on creative situations implies taking sides on which compositions and authors are significant. I would like to make it clear that a sepsis is impossible here. I can only determine trends, currents, lines, coincidences, starting from a group of materials that I consider representative of what has been composed in Latin American countries. But my opinion presumes inclusions and exclusions. Every historical moment presents creators that are more or less active, more or less daring, more or less avant-garde, and also creators that are more or less conservative. It does not seem appropriate to determine trends according to the latter criteria; and it is not easy to arrive at solid conclusions about the former.

Although a statistical study would allow for all composers to be included, it would pose other problems concerning the election of subjects, such as the establishment of quantitative thresholds: Are authors of less than so many works to be included in the study? Is it enough to have premiered one piece to be included? Which physical places are valid sites for a first performance to be considered and which are not? Is it necessary to have a piece premiered or is it enough that the piece has been composed?

A non-statistical study is then unavoidably relative and unavoidably prejudiced, since it is supported by the opinions of the scholar on what is most significant and who the most relevant young composers are, and also because of the limited information about what is happening in the arts in our broad and long continent. It is most important to state this clearly in order to avoid eventual hypocrisies and fruitless, Byzantine discussions.

Anyway, it is useful to begin with a global base of information, out of which we can select reference personalities. Such global information is hardly to be imagined in its magnitude: An incomplete list of 300 names, among them a good number of internationally known composers. Acting as a dialectical mirror, international appreciation can be one of the possible measurements.

It is undoubtedly necessary to establish a perspective that is adequately comprehensive: first, at a Latin American level, then on a world scale. To have a good perspective requires keeping a proper distance from the object. Even this is not always enough. International recognition may be misleading, so there must be space left for other considerations, which should also be discussed. This is, then, only one of the measurements.

## THE CONTEXT

We are in a world cultural structure of a colonial nature. Within this structure—which we cannot change just by individual will or from one day to the next, and which we cannot ignore following the ostrich's technique—there are pre-established geopolitical roles and socioculturally conditioned behaviors. In art music, the models are produced by the imperial metropolis—I speak here of metropolis in the sense of an area of centralized political and economic power—which expects that the societies inside the colonial system limit themselves to consuming regularly renewed models, or eventually reproducing them, with an unavoidable delay (a delay that, as we can confirm throughout the Third World, can be not just of weeks or months but of many decades). “It is essential to take into account,” wrote Mariano Etkin in 1972 [1], “that Latin American ‘art’ music—but for few exceptions which confirm the rule—only in this last decade is beginning to stop being a reflection of what is known as the European ‘great tradition.’”

Ergo, the only way of *being* oneself in a society depending on those metropolitan models is to try to live the creative act in such a way that it can generate cultural countermodels (and specifically, in our case, creating countermodels in the field of new art music). That is also why recognition outside a region's borders is not a warranty of real historical value, which can be defended from an adequate perspective in 50 or 100 years.

## AND THEN?

Returning to the methodological question posed at the beginning, I consider it important to clearly state that I will consider as examples composers and compositions (obviously includ-

## ABSTRACT

Any attempt to theorize about Latin American composition will necessarily involve a prejudgment of which composers to consider. In addition the context of a colonial system of cultural transmission should not be ignored. This context makes it important to evaluate a composer's significance in terms of his or her distinctiveness in the light of metropolitan composers and compositions. A number of characteristic trends can be seen in the works of composers who meet these criteria, including a distinctive sense of time; use of nondiscursive, reiterative processes; austerity; violence; the breach of technological and cultural boundaries; and an interest in cultural identity.

Coriún Aharonián (composer, musicologist), Casilla de correo 1328, U-11000 Montevideo, Uruguay. E-mail: <graco@adinet.com.uy>.

This article was previously published in *World New Music Magazine*, No. 4 (Cologne, October 1994) pp. 47–52. It is based on several sources: a paper read at a panel on new techniques in Latin American music creation during the VI Encontro Anual da ANPPOM (Rio de Janeiro, 1993), published in *Pauta*, No. 46, (Mexico City, April–June 1993), and on two previous texts approaching the same subject: a lecture at the I Simpósio Internacional de Compositores, São Bernardo do Campo, Brazil, 1977 (published in *Oesterreichische Musik Zeitschrift* 37, No. 8 [Vienna, February 1982]), and a second lecture at the First Encontro Internacional de Música Nova, Curitiba, Brazil, 1992. Translated by Graciela Paraskevaïdis.

ing only those at a sufficient technical level) that present, under the limited possibilities of our perspective, particular and distinct personal features vis-à-vis composers and compositions of metropolitan countries. That “international recognition” discussed above can be one of the possible measurements, as long as we consider it a dialectical mirror.

If we establish a generous parameter of 60 years to define a trend and cautiously stop our list at the lower threshold of 30, we might perhaps include the following composers and compositions as necessary references:

- *Austeras* (1975/1977) by the Argentinean Oscar Bazán (1936–)
- *La casa sin sosiego* (1991) by the Argentinean Gerardo Gandini (1936–)
- *Creación de la tierra* (1972) or *Omaggio a Catullus* (1974) by the Colombian Jacqueline Nova (1936–1975)
- *Imágenes de una historia en redondo* (1980) or *Evocación profunda y traslaciones de una marimba* (1984) by the Guatemalan Joaquín Orellana (1937–)
- *Tropicos* (1975); *Tamos* (1975); or *La visión de los vencidos* (1978) by the Argentinean-Brazilian Eduardo Bértola (1939–)
- *Todavía no* (1979) or *Sendas* (1992) by the Argentinean-Uruguayan Graciela Paraskevaïdis (1940–)
- *Música ritual* (1971/1974); *Caminos de cornisa* (1983); or *Arenas* (1987) by the Argentinean Mariano Etkin (1943–)
- *Canto del alba* (1979); *Reflejos de la noche* (1984); or *Responsorio in memoriam Rodolfo Halffter* (1988) by the Mexican Mario Lavista (1943–)
- *eua'on* (1981) by the Mexican Julio Estrada (1943–)
- *Música de la calle* (1980) or *Urbanización* (1985) by the Puerto Rican William Ortiz (1947–)
- *Seco, fantasmal y vertiginoso* (1986) by the Chilean Eduardo Cáceres (1955–)
- *La ciudad* (1980); *Tríptica* (1986); or *Cantos de tierra* (1990) by the Bolivian Cergio Prudencio (1955–)
- *La danza inmóvil II* (1988/1991) by the Uruguayan Fernando Condon (1955–)
- *Do lado do dedo* (1986) by the Brazilian Chico Mello (1957–)
- *Prostituta americana* (1983) or *Organismos* (1987) by the Brazilian Tato Taborda Júnior (1960–)
- *Midimambo* (1992) by the Brazilian Tim Rescala (1961–)

- *Tulipanes negros* (1990) by the Argentinean Cecilia Villanueva (1964–).

## POSSIBLE TRENDS

We could say that, among the observable trends, there are some that can be considered characteristic of Latin America, and others that are shared by or shareable with other cultural areas. A comparative study could be useful in the future.

Assuming that the chosen examples are really representative, we can proceed now to point at those observable trends:

1. The Latin American sense of time. It is apparently different from the European one. The statistical observation of pieces composed in past decades in the two continents allows us to conclude as a working hypothesis—as suggested 25 years ago by Gerardo Gandini [2]—that the psychological time of the Latin American composer is shorter and more concentrated than that of his average European colleague.

2. Non-discursive process of music pieces. We can prove that a high percentage of pieces apply an a-discursive or non-discursive syntax, within which the chaining of sound cells in a permanent process of development—a typical feature of the European tradition—is replaced with a structure of expressive zones.

3. Expressive blocks. Within this a-discursive syntactic approach, we observe many examples of structure based precisely on a-discursive non-directional blocks, within which microprocesses occur.

4. Reiterative elements. Those microprocesses are often the reiteration of sound cells—that is, a non-mechanical repetition subtly enriched by *ostinato* elements—an idiom common to American Indian cultures as well as Aguisimbian (Black African) ones, both confluent in the ethnic and cultural mestization of the Americas.

5. Austerity. We can talk of austerity (or of a kind of “divestment”) as a constant mark in many of the relevant Latin American compositions of the last decades—a sought-for austerity as far as the language, the expressive resources and the technical media are concerned. And also as far as an aesthetics of the “poor” and/or a technology of the “poor” are concerned, sought for by several composers.

6. Violence and a liking for the “little things.” Violence is often a violence without shouts or yells or with a smothered scream. A liking for the “little things” of-

ten appears as a quality of tenderness, warmth, hypersensibility, delicacy, refinement, as sheer expressive pleasure for sound details.

7. Silence. Silence is one of the most important conquests of the contemporary composer, who has gradually become less afraid of the sound vacuum, who has succeeded in understanding that the expressive process in music is not a moving sound mass that breathes from time to time, but a large space where volumes exist not only by themselves but also because of the space around them, where silence ceases to be a negation to become an affirmation—that is, a sound space loaded with expressiveness. In Latin America this conquest has a particularly important meaning as a cultural symbol.

8. Presence of the “primitive.” The updating in relation to the metropolitan models has made it possible for the Latin American composer to re-pose the question of his cultural truth and of his expressive needs beyond an amiable exoticism where often in the past he had searched for his cultural identity. The “primitive” is no longer a decorative rhapsodism with an ethnocentric vision (popular melody harmonized with chords and accompanied by piano or orchestra or—later on—Indian recording accompanied by electronic “blips”), but serious conceptual research, ways of action and reaction, semantic behaviors, freedom in temperament and—in short—non-European approaches. (We can also refer here to the convergences the composer will find in the Aguisimbian and American Indian contributions.)

9. An attempt to make new technologies one’s own. The expressive search will lead several composers to different ways of feedback between the technological tour and the interest in the Indian and Aguisimbian, be it in the use of experiences related to acoustical behaviors or to non-European instrumental techniques or in the re-invention of musical instruments. “If an electronic synthesizer does not have a nationality, the person who handles it does,” says Mario Lavista [3].

10. Breaking through the borders. The search for such a re-statement of music language is leading to a gradual breach of the dichotomy between “art” music and “popular” music or meso-music (following Carlos Vega’s terminology), a dichotomy peculiar to the European culture. The communication concerns of the composer of art music

leads him to attempt a “direct” language, and the concerns of the composer of popular music to break through the commercial circle lead him to formal findings which are very close to those of his art music colleagues. In fact, several of the trends enumerated here are common to both areas, the “art” one and the “popular” (or mesomusical) one. We could also add to this point: while the young generation of 2 decades ago had not yet succeeded in simultaneously using both the “art” and “popular” languages (although several of its members were also interested in the “other” field, or studied it, or collaborated with it, or just walked between one and the other), several members of the young generation of 1994—not very many yet—have been able to develop a simultaneous creative work in and with both languages.

11. Ideological awareness. An apparently deeper ideological awareness is apparent in the young Latin American composers of the past 2 decades, a deeper one than in their metropolitan contemporary colleagues. For instance, minimalism is in the north mainly a mechanically repetitive movement, a regressive, neo-reactionary and, even, often a fascist one. Whereas in the south, the works that could qualify as minimalist show a profile that fights against the listener’s passivity through an economy of means, that multiplies the expressive potential of sound resources, of a reiterative (non-mechanical) structuring, of a concern for the timbral and the textural. Disquieting music rather than sleep-inducing music.

12. Magic. The Latin American composer seems to be particularly interested in exploring the magic inherent in the music event. In the words of Mariano Etkin reflecting discussions during the First Latin American Course for Contemporary Music [4], this refers to “going deeper and rediscovering the lost visceral and magic function of music.”

13. Identity. The young generation of the 1970s adds to the updating of the metropolis (and this is related to point 8 above) an interest on marking—in an intelligent way—factors of cultural iden-

tity. “One has to be always aware . . . of the imperialistic penetration,” proclaims Mario Lavista [5]. The composer, writes Joaquín Orellana [6], “will thus start noticing that what is really singing are the infinite environmental voices,” and he specifies moreover, “sound-social situation conditions, the environmental sound, sound-psychological state and characteristic timbres.” “Music is a result of its environment, [it] is experience which has become sound,” writes William Ortiz [7]. “The materialisation of the experience varies according to the composer’s environment and socio-economic awareness.” In general, this attitude is sustained, though in different ways by different composers, by the young people of the 1980s and the 1990s. The continent’s rich popular music will be another ingredient of the utmost importance in this search.

### POSSIBLE GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The above recognized trends have been found in general terms and in the last 2 decades among Latin American composers who are today 30 to 60 years old. Only one generational salient difference should perhaps be pointed out in relation to fighting spirit: the young composers of 1974 were on a war footing, whereas the young composers of 1994 do not seem to be particularly interested in fighting for their positions and seem to avoid any kind of parricide, complying with a pacifist co-existence (of styles, languages, proposals) with those who were young in 1974.

It is often said that the creative drive gave way in the 1980s in the art music field as well as, perhaps, in popular music [8]. “The absence of risk in the works is even more worrying in the case of the young generation,” observes Mariano Etkin [9], who points at “the lack of interest in exploring the limits, not to speak of the absence of compositions that work with the limits themselves.” If this were true, wouldn’t it be very serious? And if this were really true, why did it happen?

### References and Notes

1. Mariano Etkin, “Reflexiones sobre la música de vanguardia en América Latina,” *La Opinión* (Buenos Aires, 16 January 1972).
2. In his lessons at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales, Instituto T. Di Tella, Buenos Aires.
3. Mario Lavista, “En el ambiente de la renovación creadora de los lenguajes artísticos,” *Boletín de Música de Casa de las Américas*, No. 66 (La Habana, September–October 1977).
4. See Etkin [1].
5. See Lavista [3].
6. Joaquín Orellana, “Hacia un lenguaje propio de Latinoamérica en música actual,” *Alero*, Third period, No. 24 (Guatemala City, May–June 1977).
7. William Ortiz, “Du-wop and Dialectic,” *Perspectives of New Music* 26, No. 1 (New York, 1988).
8. “To what revolution does Silvio Rodríguez belong, if we consider him from the harmonic point of view?” Jorge Lazaroff asks bitterly (*Asamblea* [Montevideo], 6 December 1984): “to the Cuban Revolution or to the French Revolution?” And, in a later article (“Pensando mientras Silvio,” *Brecha* [Montevideo], 18 December 1987), he writes: “Till some years ago, the artists that became an attraction of the multitudes (I refer only to those who have left an artistic and social alternative proposal, a counterproposal), had some infallible and necessary features: in general, they belonged to the artistic avant-garde, were on the top of the wave; their product became a breaking point, went against the established models, broke through forbidden barriers, and continuously proposed, invented and again proposed new forms; each recording, each recital, each lyric meant new sensations, meetings, findings: the main ‘thing’ was precisely that of the findings. . . . Is it perhaps that in the last fifty years too many things have already been ‘discovered’ and now the moment has come to chew them, to re-situate them, to settle them down? Or is it that the musical 20th century has resigned its revolutionary character in the face of superior forces? Or is there any other reason for it?”
9. Mariano Etkin, “Aquí y ahora,” paper read at the Symposium de Compositores Argentinos during the Segundas Jornadas de Música del Siglo XX, Córdoba, Argentina, 27–31 August 1984.

---

*Coriún Aharonián is an Uruguayan composer and musicologist born in 1940. In 1966, with Ariel Martínez and Conrado Silva, he founded Nucleo Música Nueva. He was a co-founder in 1971 of Cursos Latinoamericanos de Música Contemporánea and served as its executive secretary for 17 years. Aharonián has written and lectured extensively on contemporary music in Latin America.*