

Reviews: Books

The Invention of Latin American Music: A Transnational History, by Pablo Palomino. Currents in Latin American and Iberian Music. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xi, 272 pp.

“Latin American music” is such a widely used term that it would seem to be a “no-brainer”: look for it in Google and you will find a ready definition. What it really means, however, presents a challenging issue for (ethno)musicologists like myself who, on a daily basis, work within the limits of such an undetermined field of study. In fact, what is Latin America? Who defined it? Why and when? The problematic nature of these questions emerges clearly when one considers that many universities in the United States have a center or an institute for Latin American Studies, and that these kinds of institutions are strangely absent from most universities located to the south of the Río Bravo (or Rio Grande, as it is known in the North). Was Latin America a conceptual category built by insiders or by outsiders? The work of cultural historians such as Pablo Palomino reveals that it is “in fact the result of the *sedimentation of projects*—diplomatic, aesthetic, political—that ‘invented’ it” (p. 1). Palomino’s book, therefore, explores in depth the role played by music in the history of that invention. His inquiry is thus framed in the history of the conceptual representation of the world as a sum of discrete geocultural regions, a process that began to take shape during the nineteenth century, was consolidated during the twentieth, and seems to be achieving a new life in the twenty-first with the new historiographic trends brought by a so-called global history. Palomino took on the challenge of searching for vestiges of convergent histories of great scope in terms of space and time, and has done so through a careful study of primary sources in five countries: Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, the United States, and Germany.

Palomino begins his quest by exploring in chapter 1 the discourses built in the North and the South during the nineteenth century, and unsurprisingly finds that “Latin America” evolved as a geopolitical term in reaction to the United States’ military expansion into Mexico and Central America. He approaches the issue through the compilation and analysis of numerous sources that reveal the role played by intellectuals of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking America in constructing the idea of a geopolitical area opposed to the United States, who tried to discursively resist the effects of North American imperialism. His narrative also describes the tensions created between “pan-Americanism,” a term promoted by writers from the United States, and the concepts of “Hispanoamérica” and “Iberoamérica”

promoted by Spain and Portugal, as well as that of “latinoamericanismo” promoted by intellectuals from Spanish-speaking countries resident in Paris.

The author’s original focus comes to light in chapter 2, where he begins to display evidence of a hypothesis announced in the introduction of the book: namely that, as a conceptual category, Latin American music precedes other concepts related to the region’s symbolic production, such as Latin American art and Latin American literature. As a cultural category, Latin America emerged in the 1930s in direct relation to music, an issue Palomino elegantly demonstrates through the analysis of four case studies framed mostly between the 1900s and 1920s, which had little or nothing in common with one another. His resourceful historiographical strategy is to search for an absence—to note that Latin American music did not exist then as an all-embracing concept to describe repertoires from such diverse countries as Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. On the contrary, Palomino’s narrative highlights the transnational connections of musical repertoires and practices that did not call themselves Latin American but self-identified as cosmopolitan.

The first case study is the entertainment scene repertoire in use in Manila, in the Philippines, during the early 1920s, in which Spanish-language musics were identified with national origins (Argentine tango, Mexican music). The second case study concerns the career of Isa Kremer, a Russian Jewish singer who migrated to Argentina in the 1930s and was known for her “cosmopolitan/folkloric” repertoires (p. 56). The third describes the evolution of the Sociedad Argentina de Autores, Intérpretes y Compositores de Música and considers its struggles against the government’s attempts to control the lyric content of tangos, its connections with similar foreign associations dedicated to collecting royalties worldwide, and its scant interest in developing a national market or a nationalist discourse. The final case study explores the commercial strategies of the radio station XEW in Mexico, built on a consistent rhetoric relating to the idea of Latin America as a whole, not as a cultural abstraction imagined by intellectuals but as a big market of potential listeners and consumers.

In chapter 3, Palomino presents an interesting argument about the mutual constitution of national discourses and narratives of regional integration. A comparison of national populist rhetoric in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico reveals similar mechanisms through which the selective values of each country’s intellectual elites demarcated what was considered traditional and modern. Specific characteristics of each country’s state apparatus, and the way in which each one managed its policies in relation to music in such areas as the school, the army, and the market, imprinted a particular stamp on the experience of what was defined as national and Latin American in each country.

Chapter 4 sheds fascinating light on the role played by musicologists in Palomino’s main argument, particularly the importance of Francisco Curt Lange’s leadership of the first generation of musicians and musicologists

who wanted to consolidate “*americanismo musical*” in the 1930s (p. 142). Palomino traces the relationships between Lange and intellectuals from various countries, especially in the Southern Cone and Mexico, and explores their combined efforts to publish the five volumes of the *Boletín latinoamericano de música*. Knowledge of these collaborations, and of the tensions between Lange and other European émigrés including Otto Mayer-Serra and Nicolas Slonimsky, is fragmentary and diffuse in the memories of present-day Latin Americanists. With the advent of the Second World War, the cultural policies of the US Department of State appropriated Lange’s original project, such that *americanismo musical* became subsumed in the idea of pan-Americanism promoted by the Music Division at the Pan American Union, as discussed in chapter 5. At the end of the war, changes in geopolitics in the North displaced the cultural policy focused on hemispheric alliances in favor of a global view that resulted in the foundation of UNESCO in 1948. Finally, Palomino’s sixth and last chapter explores the directions taken by Latin American music after the 1950s, opening the field for future research.

It should be noted that books that, like Palomino’s, successfully trace comprehensive histories of the role of music through large-scale connections between the countries to the south of the Mexican-American border are far from common. Many edited volumes with a transnational scope that focus on the history of musical practices in Latin America are compilations of articles written by a number of different scholars who investigate the development of specific musical practices within local or national frameworks.¹ Examples of works by a single author who investigates, from a critical standpoint, the historical confluences between cultural projects undertaken by various Latin American elites are still rare—Juliana Pérez’s study of music history books in Hispanic America is an exception.² While we know that the original cultural bonds with the Iberian Peninsula’s imperial projects were not completely broken after the wars of independence, the merit of Palomino’s book is that he does not take those connections for granted; he instead looks for and finds concrete evidence of how the fiction of a cultural unity was “invented,” or rather, how the notion of a cultural unity was reworked through discourses on Latin American music between the 1920s and 1960s.

In addition to the meticulous archival work that yielded rich primary sources, one of the most admirable aspects of Palomino’s monograph is the richness and variety of the secondary sources he draws on. His book contains

1. See, for example, Geoffrey Baker and Tess Knighton, eds., *Music and Urban Society in Colonial Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila, eds., *Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

2. Juliana Pérez González, *Las historias de la música en Hispanoamérica (1876–2000)* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, 2010).

an extensive and impressive bibliographic review that offers readers a broad view of recent intellectual contributions to the cultural study of music in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. It is the relative abundance of these secondary sources, focused on specific case studies, that feeds Palomino's ability to delineate broad traces of musical circuits in Latin America. More than just a testament to the author's capacity to handle large volumes of scholarly information in various languages, the work is, I would contend, an exercise in epistemic justice. In this time of fierce criticism of the embeddedness of white supremacy within musicological discourses produced in the American academy, Palomino does not hide behind the usual dynamics of asymmetric ignorance. Moreover, he takes seriously the task of establishing fruitful dialogues with the work of non-English-speaking authors.

As a cultural historian rather than a musician or musicologist, Palomino has a unique vantage point since he is not distracted by somewhat sterile discussions about the technical characteristics that supposedly define "Latin American music." Certainly, he is not the first to mistrust ontological assumptions that trace remote origins or ethnic lineages supposedly hidden in the musical sounds. Yet his work offers interesting clues that unravel the multiple mechanisms through which taxonomies and categories have been established in Latin America for certain musical practices, both popular and traditional. The categorization practices of Mexican record labels and radio stations in the 1930s, discussed in chapter 2, provide a good example of the way in which terms could be generated by the dynamics of the market. Later on, some of those empty terms were invested with content and ended up crystallizing as musical genres. That insight might be a clue for analyzing other cases of musical practices located in the fringes of the recording industry and oral tradition. Take the genre of *cumbia*, for example: it appeared as a market category in Colombia during the 1940s, and the first ontologizing discourses about it came out some years later, Delia Zapata describing it as the "synthesis of the Colombian nation"; and just a few years ago, the undetermined nature of its many local variants became the object of musicological description and critique.³ While it may seem obvious that, in this case, the crystallization and the invention of a musical genre are but two sides of the same coin, we still encounter aficionados who try to trace the origins of the sounds of *cumbia* to an immemorial ethnic past, and scholars who find in *cumbia* the meta-narrative of a truly Latin American identity.⁴

By exploring Latin American music as an invention, Palomino not only teaches us that it is possible to dispense with ontologizing discourses on

3. Delia Zapata Olivella, "La cumbia: síntesis musical de la nación colombiana: reseña histórica y coreográfica," *Revista colombiana de folclor* 3, no. 7 (1962): 187–204; Juan Sebastián Ochoa, Carlos Javier Pérez, and Federico Ochoa, *El libro de las cumbias colombianas* (Medellín: Fundación Cultural Latin Grammy and Universidad de Antioquia, 2017).

4. For example, Darío Blanco Arboleda, *La cumbia como matriz sonora de Latinoamérica: Identidad y cultura continental* (Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia, 2018).

complicated topics from the outset; he also offers a historical method by which to trace a discursive absence and recognize the crystallization of a category. If readers still want to know what Latin American music is they must look to Palomino's own words: "Latin American music is the history of a musical conversation about Latin America" (p. 12). Consequently, to be a Latin American music scholar is not a self-identifying label; it is in fact a very conscious strategic position.

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Dancing Revolution: Bodies, Space and Sound in American Cultural History, by Christopher J. Smith. Music in American Life. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019. xii, 255 pp.

Christopher J. Smith's *Dancing Revolution: Bodies, Space and Sound in American Cultural History* examines the historical and political dimensions of publicly performed dance. Across the book's nine chapters, a range of historical moments and dance practices take center stage. Popular musical forms have been more widely engaged by cultural theorists and scholars of expressive culture, Smith contends, while popular dance has yet to receive equivalent critical attention. He writes, "Less commonly remarked or explored has been the role of vernacular dance. Yet from the colonial period onward, participatory ways of moving the body in relation to musical sound have often been experienced as confrontational, subversive, immoral, or even revolutionary" (p. 1).

The capacity of dance to be critical, if not insurgent and transformational, is *Dancing Revolution's* guiding thesis. Using a case study approach, the author considers moments of resistive dance in histories of American public life in order to explore "the ways bodies moving in public space were intended or perceived to contest social and political hierarchies" (p. 47). The book's subjects and sites include street dancing, marches, open-air revival meetings, theaters, dance halls, and nightclubs. Rather than focus on the politics of one single community, historical moment, or dance context, Smith draws on a number of different examples to argue that public dance has been revolutionary—a means through which marginalized communities resist normative ideological control and articulate their own ways of seeing and being. Throughout the book, attention is also given to the ways in which subaltern movement practices have elicited both anxiety and a desire to appropriate (often through parody) by colonizing, white, and/or hegemonic groups.

A trained historian and multifaceted musician, Smith relies on a vast methodological toolkit that includes, but is not limited to, ethnomusicology, cultural geography, iconography, historical performance practice, and what the author describes as "kinesics and the psychology of group performance" (p. 8) in order