

Incursions in Latin-american music in the XXth century

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Summary: *After great stylistic research, a period of true synthesis appears in the Latin-American music around the half of the XXth century. The national avant-garde features, imbued with personal esthetical approaches, are valued in a superior, anew and well-structured manner. The varied instrumental colours, with folk music echoes, are impressive, thus giving contour to the whole compositional process of national origin.*

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The phenomena that manifests itself with the greatest relevance in the Latin-American art, since the beginning of the XXth century, is the preoccupation (even the haste, one could say) of the largest part of art creators to discover and harness the real national „accent”.

The characteristic features of the beginning of the nationalism from the XIXth century– the Spanish music is the main component– with its propensity to miniature forms, the piano is present in all chambers, picturesque titles of counter-dancing, dancing, songs and with the textual use of the melodic and rhythmical quotes, they all had already made way to a new concept. Coming from the folk music, the dance tunes were *el jarabe* and *el contradanza* in Mexico, *el landú* and *la modinha* in Brazil, *la habanera* and *el danzon* in Cuba, *la sambas* and *las vidalitas* in Argentina, *el vals criollo* in Venezuela. Except that, from the harmonic and structural point of view, the faithfulness was manifested obviously for the romantic European style, even if the works of some personalities had converted into bridges to the romantic musical aesthetics of the years 800 (where they set off), and a new language, where the *nationalness* of the year 900 is reaffirmed.

The defence of a local art on American territory was, no doubt about it, one of the main features of the period. Between 1920 and 1940, the nationalist folk stream spread in the whole America, pretending – not always successfully – to be universal. The most general result was the acquisition of European „isms”, the use of “national” imagery, where it results that the preoccupation of the production of a typical art of each region which, in the main time, should be able to offer itself in the guise of contribution to the universal music.

Two ways mark this current of the XXth century:

- The first one, limited to the inhibition of the local picturesque within the interior of an European tendency;
- The second one, characterised by originality and independence, able to translate its own accent.

At the beginning of the century, a generation of more “technical” composers emerges. In this phase, which López Chirico identifies as *subjective nationalism*, belong composers such as Manuel Ponce (1882 – 1942) in Mexico, considered an authentic pioneer of the national movement of the region, Alexander Levy (1864 – 1948) and Alberto Nepomuceno (1864 – 1920) in Brazil, Alberto Williams (1862 – 1952) in Argentina, Humberto Allende (1885 – 1959) in Chile. One must note the fact that they all had been trained in Europe, especially in Paris and Milan (Williams had been the disciple of César Franck, for example).

With Heitor Villa Lobos, we could say that this process reaches maturity. Villa Lobos, a competent cellist was, like Mussorgski, a self-taught composer as a formation. Between 1905 and 1910 he dedicated himself to wandering the whole Brazil, picking up folk music of various genres. For this era, he admits Wagner and Puccini's influences, and the process of home country music assimilation is at its start. In 1918 he met Darius Milhaud and Arthur Rubinstein in Brazil who lured him into going and living in Paris where he would actually go and settle for a period of six years. Back from Brazil, he becomes undeniably the most influent musician of his country and one of the most important ones in the area. From the creation of Villa Lobos (approx 200 works) it is interesting enough to note *Bachianas Brasileiras* (1930 – 1945), where he performed a similar work to Bartók's, making a wonderful synthesis of Bach's counterpoint and materials from the Brazilian folklore. Villa Lobos's identification with his folklore had occurred to such an extent where he came to say „*El folklore soy yo*”.

One can speak about a period of true synthesis in the Latin – American music, but, at the half of the century, when composers such as the Mexican, Carlos Chavez (1899 - 1978) and his compatriot Silvestre Revueltas (1899 - 1940), the Cubans Amadeo Roldan (1900 - 1939) and Alejandro Rodriguez Caturra (1906 - 1940) and the Brazilian, unquestionable perpetrator of the folk music of his own country, Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887 - 1959).

Silvestre Revueltas, perhaps the most interesting of all Mexican composers of the time, assumes a national avant-garde posture imbued with a personal aesthetics that he emphasised in a superior, anew and well-structured creation. Unlike Chávez, Revueltas is in search of the contemporary influence of Mexico, of a Mexico that expresses itself in „*the tumult of markets*”, „*in vivid and bright colours*”, eventually the people of that Mexico of the 30s. Between 1937 and 1938 Revueltas wrote the symphonic poem *Sensemaya*, his most important work perhaps. He uses the poem with the same name of the Cuban Nicolás Guillén in this work (the subtitle of the poem is, „*Canto para matar una culebra*”¹) build around a chorus with poignant phonetic features: „*Mayombe-Bombe-Mayombé*”, from where Revueltas derived his rhythmical conception of his work, getting to a rich layers and instrumental colouring.

In Argentina, the nationalist movement is represented by Juan José Castro and Alberto Ginastera. Ginastera studied piano and his composition at the National Music Conservatory in Buenos Aires. In 1942 he was awarded a Guggenheim scholarship that allowed him to study in Tanglewood with Aaron Copland. Back in Argentina, he founded, at the beginning of the 60s, *el Centro de altos Estudios Musicales of the Torcuato di Tella Institute*, that had a great influence over the next generation of composers. In Ginastera (who was an active composition professor), as in Castro, one can feel the equivocal transit between the nationalist poses until the closest positions of the so-called contemporary music (especially the one that starts from musical principles of the second Vienna school. Most certainly, there is a great difference of language between *Doce Preludios Americanos* of 1944 and *Cantata Para Una América Mágica* of 1960, both belonging to Ginastera. This distance only places us face to face with the fact that the musical nationalism in Latin America had reached its decline, after having reached its peak of splendour. The reason is obvious; the nationalist thesis had reached in the area at a time when one of the most radical revolutions were taking place in the western musical language: the suspension of the concept of tonality and amplification of the sound universe considered able to be a replacement as composition matter. John Cage had already experimented with „*the prepared piano*” in *Amores* in 1943 and had used I Ching as generator of random values in *Music of changes* for the piano, since 1951; and this only to give an single example.

¹ Song to kill a viper

Other composers, with the same orientation of the many that we may count here, are: Amadeo Roldán – Cuban (1900-1939), Juan Orrego-Salas, Chilean (1919) who followed a similar process to Ginastera, Eduardo Fabini, Uruguayan (1882-1950), Antonio Estévez, Venezuelan (1916-1988), Andrés Sas, Peruan (1900-1967), Guillermo Uribe Holguín, Columbian (1880-1971).

In Mexico, texts with various origins and themes, written to make famous one of the most important aesthetical currents for the sound history of art in the area – the nationalism – are reunited in the book *En la más honda música de selva*, published in *Lecturas mexicanas* collection. *Cuarta Serie, de la Dirección General de Publicaciones de Conaculta*. The book analyses the characteristic features of the musical works of the composers Carlos Chávez, Silvestre Revueltas, Candelario Huízar, Luis Sandi, Miguel Bernal Jiménez and José Rolón. Here it is specified the fact that the national Mexican music had made its presence felt beginning with 1928, together with the apparition of the National Symphonic Orchestra and closed three decades later, with José Pablo Moncayo's death.

After the splendour reached by the national orientation and the one that strove in its formal ascetics of neoclassicism, music permeated, in the second half of the XXth century – in Latin America as well – in the large field of experiments and had been subjected to all sorts of criteria of major cosmopolitanism. According to Alejo Carpentier: „... *no debe aceptarse como dogma que el músico latinoamericano haya de desenvolverse forzosamente dentro de una órbita nacionalista.*”²(1977).

Once tonality is unravelled, and the way set by dodecaphonism and serialism is set forth and followed, the line that the Latin-American creation is pursued, after the 60s, belongs to the so-called avant-garde techniques: postserialism, randomism, stochastic and the new techniques in concrete and electronic music that soon shall lead to the electro-acoustic music.

Hispanic echoes are heard, but they get weaker and sparse in „*the choir*” of the younger generations of composers.

The creation of the Argentinean Alberto Ginastera is a clear example of what the folklore had begun to be in the second half of the XXth century for Latin America, as much as the composers generation of the 50s in Peru represents, for what it had left behind, a synthesis of the whole compositional process of national origin. Edgar Valcárcel, Enrique Iturriaga, Enrique Pinilla are three representatives of this generation which brought Peru on the international stage and who, in search of a new musical language, had found in the original folklore texture a privileged stream of creativity and expression.

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² [„... it cannot be accepted as a dogma that Latin-American music must develop forcefully within a nationalist orbit.”