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Music and social change in Argentina and Chile 1950-1980 and beyond

RODOLFO PINO-ROBLES*

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Abstract. *Music has long been a social activity for change in all of the Americas. However, this work focuses on two cases as examples of the enormous contribution of Canto Popular to the development of a critical thinking able to catalyze social change. The two examples are Argentina and Chile which offer compelling musical corpora. This work attempts to briefly illustrate the important role of music as a mass communicator for social change and social development in both countries. The cantautor assumes the voice of the voiceless; the composer, singer, or singers assume a highly moral stance to denounce and mobilize. Even within this restriction it is impossible to do justice to all the musicians, composers, interpreters, troubadours, themes and styles developed in those two countries; therefore this paper deals only with a selection of those composers, musicians, singers and poets committed to have a social dream, a vision for humanity and their particular realities.*

Key words: *social change, "canto popular", social dream.*

To speak of music and social change in the same breath is to speak of the commitment of the creators of that music to a social cause, and their music-making as serving this cause.

I. Music As Vital Human Expression

The origins of music, as a human activity, might be found in the need to communicate to others in this unfinished travel in time and space that is human existence. To state the obvious, music might be considered, along with painting, as the earliest form of human creativity. Imitating nature and its sounds at first humans discovered their own capacity

to create music and musical instruments to be used privately, and for religious and secular ceremonies as well as social gatherings. According to Simon Frith, music, as created by humans, "cannot but be a manifestation of human experience —of the problems and despair, the triumphs and joys which are an integral part of living together in particular social contexts" (Frith, 1989: VIII).

It is in this context that one could suggest that musical expressions, as well as philosophical, political, sociological (and therefore historical) aspects of human expressions are inseparable. Music has been an intrinsic facet of human activity. As Frith wrote,

We [humans] are concerned simultaneously with the external manifestations of music as revealed, historically and anthropologically, in rituals and in religious, civic, military, and festive activities, in work and play; and also with the social, psychological and philosophical undercurrents inherent in music's being made by human creatures (*ibid.*).

In short, as a human creation, music expresses eye-witness participation in events that are reconstructed so as to maintain a collective memory. In this sense, music has played an essential social role, before and after European contact, in the history of what today we call Latin America (a name which is of Euro-North American origin) (Bastos, 1977).

II. Music and Social Change

There is little doubt that music as a catalyst for social change is a global phenomenon, and certainly found throughout the Americas. However, this paper will concentrate on only

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two cases as examples of the enormous contribution of *Canto Popular* to the elevation of critical thinking and social change. In this sub-continent, Argentina and Chile have provided compelling musical corpora especially in the second half of the twentieth century. This work attempts to briefly illustrate the important role of music as a mass communicator for social change and social development in both countries. The *cantautor* assumes the voice of the voiceless, of those suffering the ignominy of poverty and deprivation, of those who suffer injustice; in short the composer and performers assume a highly moral stance to denounce and mobilize. At times musicians have taken the role of partisan propagandists for political parties; these examples are not included in this paper.

Even within the restrictions stated (music as agent of social change, apart from expressly propagandist music) it is impossible to do justice to all the musicians, composers, interpreters, troubadours, themes and styles developed in Chile and Argentina within the confines of this paper. Therefore we necessarily have to select and in so doing, be both arbitrary and vulnerable to criticism. The commitment of a rather large number of composers, musicians, singers and poets—each of them a non-renewable national resource, though they were frequently treated as dispensable—to have a social dream, a vision for humanity and their particular realities, has been clear throughout the existence of those two nations. Many of these creators may have been poor in terms of lack of access to technology and materials, but all of them share a will for political activism in search for improvement of the lives of their own peoples. Within their activism we recognize two streams: a) pure denunciation of social injustices and b) incitement to a more revolutionary stance before those injustices. In summary, political action. Argentinean folk composer and guitarist Eduardo Falú sums it up nicely: “El día que los pueblos sean libres/la política será una canción” (Falú, n.d.).

III. The “Good Old Days”

Undeniably the modern (post WWII) history of Latin America has been inextricably interwoven with the Cold War and affected by its geographical placement within the United States’ sphere of influence. Argentina, one of the biggest countries in Latin America, has according to John Gerassi, “a long history of ‘independence’ from the United States” (Gerassi, 1963: 51). This sentiment of independence was clearly expressed in the early 1950’s by the nationalist leader Juan Domingo Perón who was ousted in 1955 by an unpopular military movement called *Los Gorilas*. Any one

suspected of *Peronista* sympathies was persecuted, particularly blue-collar workers, trade union leaders and artists. Among those artists Atahualpa Yupanqui (1908-1992) was obliged to go into exile. His epic work, *El Payador Perseguido* became a strong denunciation of the *gorilas* as well as a denunciation of the conditions of the poor people in the “interior” of Argentina.

Yo no canto a los tiranos/ni por orden del patrón; ... Por la fuerza de mi canto/conozco celda y penal; con fiereza sin igual,/vayan a ver, fui golpiao/al calabozo tirao/ como tarro al basural. ... Tal vez otro habrá rodau/tanto como habré rodau yo,/y le juro créamelo,/que he visto tanta pobreza/que yo pensé con tristeza:/Dios por aquí no pasó... Que vida más desapareja,/todo es ruindad y patrañas,/pelar caña es hazaña/del que nació pa’l rigor./ Allá había un solo dulzor/y estaba adentro e’ la caña (Yupanqui, 1965).

At the same time Yupanqui takes a clear stand with regard to the debate about the purpose of music itself (i.e., whether music should be pure entertainment or take part in the social reality of its makers) and the social class division which marks that controversy:

Si uno pulsa una guitarra/pa cantar cosas de amor,/de potros, de domador,/de la sierra y las estrellas,/dicen: qué cosa más bella,/si canta que es un primor. Pero si uno como Fierro/por ahí se larga opinando,/el pobre se va acercando/con las orejas alertas/y el rico vicha la puerta/y se aleja reculando... Si alguna vez he cantado/ ante panzudos patronos,/he picaniao las razones/profundas del poverío,/yo no traiciono a los míos/por palmas ni patacones (*ibid.*).

Obviously the author makes a clear reference to the existing class struggle which has been so vehemently denied by the dictators of the “dirty war” of the seventies and eighties, for example. The immediate realization is that poetry and folk music becomes a form of *popular memory* in a process which can be characterized as doing politics, writing history, developing all kinds of ways in which a sense of the past is reconstructed in society questioning and calling attention to the misfortune of those at the bottom of the social ladder. Beyond the class struggle itself there has been another struggle brewing since colonization: the struggle against Indigenous peoples who have been denied their very existence by the oligarchies which took power at the time of independence in Latin America. Atahualpa Yupanqui was one of the few artists who recognized the dignity of Indigenous peoples in the early fifties. Against the prevailing social current, in 1954 Yupanqui sang to that dignity:

Lírico aymarará o aguerrido quechua,/ya con flechas o con lanzas,/ya con queñas o tarkas,/fuiste Señor de Puna y Cordillera./Luego la noche desangró tus venas/en los cañaverales,/las minas, los cocales,/y solo el Ande comprendió tu pena.../Por siglos te emponcharon los silencios./Filosofal amauta;/fatigado curaca;/peón por afuera, príncipe por dentro (Yupanqui, 1954).

This approach is quite radical since, we must recall, the social conscience of Latin American nations has been informed primarily by a conception which did not consider Indigenous peoples as an integral part of the social fabric of the country. Indigenous peoples have been considered rather an obstacle to the very progress of a nation. One of the first compositions of Yupanqui, when he was only twenty years old, assumed this social “responsibility” from the outset:

Caminito del indio,/sendero sembrao de piedras,/caminito del indio,/que junta el valle con las estrellas.../Cantando en el cerro/llorando en el río,/se agranda en la noche/la pena del indio./Se levanta en el cerro/la voz doliente de la baguala,/y el camino lamenta/ser el culpable de la distancia... (*ibid.*).

The main achievement of Yupanqui, and others after him, is that they began a tradition. We understand tradition not just as a testimony of the past, but a living force which informs the present. The great Alejandro Carpentier describes best that tradition in music:

...esa música, salida a veces de aldeas lejanas traída a las ciudades, instalada en los suburbios de capitales, metida en los bailes, música viva, inventiva, cada día renovada, se estaba corporizando, integrando, dibujando sus propios perfiles, ascendiendo, subiendo, invadiendo, conquistando públicos, para gran despecho de quienes se creían muy superiores a lo que sólo veían como bullangueras trivialidades (Carpentier, 1977: 13).

IV. Canto Popular and Social Movement

That is the music and manner in which Chilean artist and composer Violeta Parra conquered, after a long struggle, the public of Chile, Latin America and even France. Parra's goal was to weave her work from direct contact with the people who heard, saw and informed her. Violeta herself acknowledges that performers like her are somewhat useless without the input of the very people who surround life. She said: “Cuándo me iba a imaginar yo que al salir a recoger mi primera canción... iba a aprender que Chile es el mejor libro de folklore que se haya escrito” (Parra, 1985: 10). In total congruence with this belief, Violeta stated in one of her last songs before she committed suicide, “Gra-

cias a la Vida”, that the people's singing is her own. And her singing was one of denunciation as well, in “Arriba Quemando el Sol” she charges: “Cuando vide los mineros/dentro de su habitación/me dije: mejor habita/en su concha el caracol,/o a la sombra de las leyes/el refinado ladrón” (*ibid.*: 17). This refined thief was the one who held power in Parra's experience. Thus, she described the tensions and the violence of the class struggle. “La Carta” was one of her first social songs: “...me viene a decir la carta/que en mi patria no hay justicia,/los hambrientos piden pan,/plomo les da la milicia; sí.” Then, Violeta denounced why those in power simply shot dissidents in that Chile of the 1950's: “De esta manera pomposa/quieren conservar su asiento/los de abanico y de frac/sin tener merecimiento”. From the denunciation she asked for action: “La carta que mandaron/me pide contestación/yo pido que se propale/por toda la población” (Parra, 1975).

Violeta Parra and Atahualpa Yupanqui have been the major pioneers of a musical expression commonly called folklore which passed far beyond the description of landscapes where happy peasants and Indians went to work. These two artists became the role model, the daring ones. Many more composers and performers would follow their example beyond borders. The themes will be similar: denunciation after denunciation of the social conditions, for example Cesar Isella and Anibal Sampayo's “Patrón,/esa sombra que tiritita tras sus reses,/huella y harapos, comiendo a veces,/patrón, por sus intereses,/ahí va su peón” Isella and Sampayo, 1998). Or Eduardo Falú's denunciation of the suffering that results from poverty:

Mama Angustia en la puerta/llora y da de mamar,/llora porque su hombre en la taberna/se está bebiendo el jornal./...Yo iré si tú lo quieres/a buscar a tu Juan.../Pero que nunca llores en la puerta/cuando das de mamar:/nunca las dulces lunas de tu pecho/se vuelvan lunas de sal (Falú, n.d.).

Atahualpa Yupanqui and Violeta Parra influenced a large mass of musicians and folk-singers throughout Latin America for decades to come. A good number of folk groups “discovered” Indigenous instruments, names and musical forms of the Andes region. Thus, audiences learned about “charangos, queñas, antaras (zampoñas), quenachos, pinkullos, etc. We could not but recall “Los Calchaquís” from Argentina, “Quilapayún” from Chile (incidentally, *quilapayun* is a Mapuche word meaning “three beards”). “Inti-Illimani” and “Illapu” from Chile, both groups borrowing from the Quechua or Aymara language and deities to name themselves. Nevertheless, none of these groups had any Indigenous member in their ranks. The Indigenous appro-

priation became the “cool thing” to do in the sixties and seventies to protest existing social conditions. However, no Indigenous issue or recognition was ever introduced unless it was circumscribed within the Marxist rhetoric of the class struggle. Indigenous peoples of Argentina and Chile also had been (and still are in most cases) equated with the generic economic and political concept of *campesino* (peasant). In any event, a large public became familiar with musical forms such as “Yaravies”, “Carnavalitos”, “Morenadas”, “Huayños”, “Bailecitos”, all Indigenous Andean music hitherto virtually unknown except to the peoples of the highlands of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and to certain extent northern Chile.

V. Political Realities and Canto Popular

Since the mid 1950's the U. S. influence in Latin America has augmented dramatically. With few exceptions all political governing bodies became characterized by an increased dependency on the United States and an intensive repression against trade unions, students, left political organizations and Indigenous peoples. The repression was selective at first and massive later. Beginning in the 1960's and throughout the 1970's the political struggle in both Argentina and Chile became intense. In Argentina the labour and *Peronista* movement obliged the resignation of presidents Frondizi (1959-1962) and Illia (1962-1966). In June 1966, the regime implanted a more direct dictatorship under general Onganía which confronted unrest and rebellion, the largest and strongest insurrection occurring in the important industrial city of Córdoba in 1969. The entire city of near one million people went on strike protesting the dictatorship; this was known as *El Cordobazo*.

An obvious strong influence on the revolutionary spirit of the country, and the continent, was the figure of the Argentinean born Ernesto “Che” Guevara who was killed in Las Higuera, Bolivia in 1967. There was an outpouring of compositions celebrating Guevara as a major symbol for change. Yupanqui wrote: “Tuve un amigo querido/que murió en Ñacahuazú/su tumba no la encontraron/po que no le han puesto cruz.../No importa que no la tenga/lo mismo la hemos de hallar/multiplicada en el aire donde está la libertad” (Yupanqui, 1968).

The military were finally compelled to negotiate with Peron who returned to Argentina in 1973. However, since the early 1960's, two strong and mostly urban guerrilla groups became prominent: the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) and the *Peronista Montoneros*. Although there existed severe ideological differences between these groups, both proclaimed the need for “revolution”:

Hermano dame tu mano,/Vamos juntos a buscar/una cosa muy preciosa/que se llama libertad./Esta es la hora primera,/este es el justo lugar./Abre la puerta que afuera/la tierra no aguanta más.../Métale a la marcha, métale al tambor/métale que traigo un pueblo en mi voz./Métale a la marcha, métale al tambor,/métale que viene la revolución (B. Palomo and Canto Claro, 1975).

In Chile also the so-called protest music, or *Canto Popular*, was taking a stand towards a final struggle between the forces of “the people” against the local oligarchy:

Levántate y mira la montaña/De dónde viene el viento, el sol y el agua/Tú que manejas el curso de los ríos/Tú que sembraste el vuelo de tu alma.../Líbranos de aquel que nos domina/En la miseria/Tráenos tu reino de justicia/E igualdad/Sopla como el viento la flor/De la quebrada/Limpia como el fuego el cañón/De mi fusil (Jara, 1968).

By the end of the sixties social mobilization was widespread. Those of us who lived in those years could testify that as a political movement, the students felt that they were in control. Students behaved as if they “had the key” to solve all problems of a country.

This sense of victory, achievement and control was exacerbated by a feeling, or belief, that the existing powers were crumbling under the path of progressive forces. We must recall the US difficulties in their war against Vietnam, the Soviet problems and invasion in Czechoslovakia, the huge and still unsolved massacre in Tlatelolco, Mexico and the enormous pressure people all over the world were putting on governments.

VI. The Early Seventies: The Hope

The early 1970's saw a break in both Argentina and Chile. In the former, Juan Perón was elected president and the country moved into an uneasy democracy: the army appeared still in control of government despite the apparent democracy and confrontations between militant factions of the political left and right wing grew exponentially: on the right was the underground terrorist group “Alianza Anti-Comunista Argentina” known to be formed by members of the armed forces and thus, acting with total impunity; on the left were the Montoneros and the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP). In Chile, Salvador Allende, a Socialist representing a large leftist coalition, won the national elections and the “Peaceful Road to Socialism” experiment began. Protest music and musical groups assumed the tasks of “building a new homeland”. Angel Parra, Violeta's son and prominent composer then in his own right, wrote: “Igual que el sol deslumbrara/esta Patria que comienza/hay que sembrar y

cosechar/y hacer de trigo un caudal” (Parra, 1971). And this building something new became both an encouraging motto and the goal toward which to strive. The very anthem of the Popular Unity sings of this sense of hope instilled in the entire left for a short while:

Desde el hondo crisol de la Patria/se levanta el clamor popular/ya se anuncia la nueva alborada/todo Chile comienza a cantar.../Venceremos, venceremos,/mil cadenas habrá que romper.../Venceremos, venceremos/la miseria sabremos vencer (Ortega and Iturra, 1969).

Shortly after Allende’s election the polarization of society became stronger and music served to show the divisions. The group Quilapayún adapted a Cuban melody and song and created what can be considered a political pamphlet, “La Batea”: “...El Gobierno va marchando,/¡qué felicidad!./la derecha conspirando;/qué barbaridad!/Va marchando, conspirando,/pero el pueblo ya conoce la verdad” (Quilapayún, 1972).

VI. El Canto and the era of Military Dictatorship

We all know the route the class struggle took in Chile. The imposition of the Pinochet dictatorship contributed to the creation of a large repertoire denouncing abuses and assassinations, denouncing the situation of political prisoners, especially those who became the *desaparecidos*, the disappeared ones. New songs of resistance flourished all over the world because wherever Chilean exiles went, they created musical groups as one of the many ways to expose Pinochet:

Ya lo sé/ahora no hay descanso compañero./Distancias me separan, pasajeras./De momento sólo tengo mi alma llena/de palabras, inquietudes exiliadas/la esperanza se mantiene aquí ligada./Es mañana que regreso enfurecida,/ a vengar muerto por muerto de mi pueblo (Durán, n.d.).

In Argentina the plight of the *desaparecidos* was kept in the public eye by the grandmothers of *Plaza de Mayo*. Women who did not give up seeking their missing relatives began marching every Wednesday in front of the government palace. Few musicians inside the country accompanied them; most of the support came from the diaspora. However, there were important voices which came from within, as a wake-up call to humanity for what people were experiencing not only in Argentina, but in Latin America:

Sólo le pido a Dios/que el dolor no me sea indiferente/que la reseca muerte no me encuentre/vacío y solo sin haber hecho lo suficiente.../Sólo le pido a Dios/que el engaño no me sea indiferente,/si un traidor puede mas que unos cuantos, que esos cuantos no lo olviden fácilmente (Gieco, 1994).

But even earlier there were voices that used music to expose what the entire military industry was all about. Piero, composer and interpreter wrote:

Libertad era un asunto mal manejado por tres./Libertad era Almirante, General o Brigadier./Para el pueblo lo que es del pueblo/porque el pueblo se lo ganó./Para el pueblo lo que es del pueblo;/Para el pueblo liberación./Comer bien era muy raro; comer poco era normal./Comer era subversivo para el señor militar./Eran actos de violencia, la alegría popular;/“El pueblo tiene paciencia” dijo un señor General./Estudiar era pecado; clandestino era saber,/Porque cuando el pueblo sabe, no le engaña un Brigadier./Prohibiremos la esperanza y prohibido está nacer./“¿No será mucho, Almirante?” “Faltaba más, Coronel.”/Y al país remataron, y lo remataron mal./Lo partieron en pedazos, ahora hay que volverlo a armar./Y ahora el pueblo está en la calle a cuidar y a defender./Esta patria que ganamos liberada debe ser./Liberación, Liberación, Liberación (Piero, 1973).

Argentineans rid themselves of the dictatorship after the defeat in the Malvinas in 1982. Within a few years the Pinochet dictatorship had also become unviable and Chile also returned to some sort of democracy when Pinochet was defeated in the general elections of 1990.

As mentioned, while it is impossible to do justice to all the musicians, styles and broad genre of compositions in these two countries, in the limited space of this presentation, suffice it to say that music has played and still plays a key role in the social and political life of these countries because, as Argentinean troubadour Horacio Guarani declared, “Si se calla el cantor, calla la vida”. That is to say, life will have no voice if the singer is not there, the ignominy of poverty and deprivation will have nobody to denounce them if the singer is not there, those who suffer injustice will have nobody to sing for them to assume the moral stance to stand up for those who are la vida.

Conclusions

In conclusion we could say that music and social movements have been inseparable in the Latin American context. Similarly to the troubadours and historians of the many Indigenous peoples and the musicians of old Europe, a certain contingent of Argentine and Chilean musicians played the role of instant reporters, historians, analysts and archivists of the life of the people, their joys and disappointments, their triumphs and defeats, their sorrows and desires. Music has played a major role as an agent of social change and even as its catalyst. Through music and its different expressions these peoples, together with so many others, learned how to reveal themselves

so that others can know them, and to share their hopes and desires with other groups of human beings disposed to lend a receptive ear, so that finally music, as a human creation, could serve expressly to improve and dignify the human condition. What better illustration than Victor Heredia's theme which says, "Todavía cantamos,/Todavía pedimos,.../A pesar de los golpes/que asestó a nuestras vidas.../Todavía soñamos,/todavía esperamos.../Por un día distinto,/sin apremios ni ayunos (Heredia, 1983). Nothing remains to be said but to echo Guarani; indeed, "Si se calla el cantor, calla la vida". 🎵



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