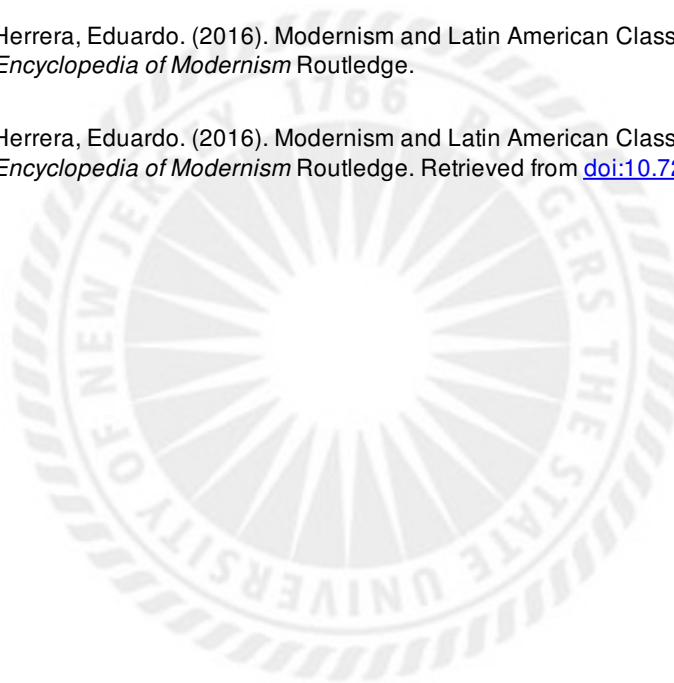


Modernism and Latin American Classical Music

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Modernism and Latin American Classical Music

By Eduardo Herrera

The idea of musical modernism in the Latin American classical music world was a particular aesthetically-oriented instance of a broader discourse that has been described as “modernist capitalist-cosmopolitan.” The general modernist discourse was centered on the binary opposition modern/traditional that naturalizes a particular notion of temporal condition with a value judgment—that which is ‘modern’ is new, recent, and more efficient, against that which is ‘traditional’ which is old, has been passed on, and is less efficient. By 1918, at the end of the Great War, the prevalent ideology of ‘progress’ that was naturalized throughout industrialization in the 19th century had suffered its first major drawback. If society was progressing, how was it that Europe ended in such a wide and costly war? What was the place for artists in such conditions? Composers as diverse as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Skryabin, and Busoni became associated with the notion of modernism. Self-proclaimed futurist artists in Italy during the 1910s like Luigi Russolo and Francesco Balilla Pratella, advocated for a music that incorporated the sounds of the industries and the ‘modern’ city. By localizing artistic production in the urban setting against the rural soundscapes, the concept of the ‘modern’ captured also space, making the rural to be associated with the idea of ‘traditional.’ A final key aspect of this discursive construction of the ‘modern’ was the way in which it represented a paradigmatic shift from 19th century discourses that divided the world into ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive’ practices. Slowly, activities, situations, soundscapes, and habits that used to be categorized as ‘civilized’ became relabeled as ‘modern.’ An aspect that became emphasized over and over as the discourse of modernity took hold of the arts, was the idea of innovation. The composer was an inventor of new things, a maverick breaking ground that others, attached to ‘tradition’ could not break. Who did what first became a matter of prestige in the field. Who wrote the first solo percussion piece? Was it Edgard Varèse (France 1883-1965) with his *Ionisation* from 1929-31, or was it the Cuban Amadeo Roldán (1900-1939) with his *Rítmicas V* and *VI* (1930)? Was Juan Carlos Paz (Argentina, 1901-1972) the first Latin American composer to apply the 12-tone theories of Schoenberg? The anxiety of many composers to appear ‘more modern’ early on in their careers, as has been shown for example of Henry Cowell and Charles Ives, was associated with the idea of being there first, a notion that would grow stronger and stronger as the century advanced, and became epitomized in the larger socio-political climate in the race between the United States and the USSR to reach the moon.

A crucial part of the spread and adoption of musical modernist discourse and practices was the formation of professional organization that would promote so-called modern music. Among these were the International Composers Guild, which included composers like Acario Cotapos (1889-1969), a Chilean modernist, and the League of Composers, which featured in its concerts the music of Mexican composers Carlos Chavez (1899-1978) and Julian Carrillo (1875-1965). Most important was the short-lived Pan-American Association of Composers (1928-1934), founded by Varèse, and which included several composers from the U.S. like Ruggles, Cowell, Crawford, Harris and Ives and also Latin Americans like Cotapos, Eduardo Fabini (Uruguay, 1882-1950), Silvestre Revueltas

(México, 1899-1940), and Amadeo Roldán. In each of their countries these Latin American composers were bearers of the modernist torch.

As Latin American composers became more immersed in the practices of modernism, two terms became frequently used in opposition: nationalism—which in its larger socio-political connotations was deeply rooted in the discourse of modernity—and universalism—usually associated with cosmopolitan desires for transnational parity. Within the rhetoric of modernism, nationalism was associated with conservative positions as it referenced ‘traditional’ music, while universalism was frequently seen as adherent to ‘modern’ musical practices. Ultimately, both musical nationalism and universalism reflected expectations, concerns, and desires emerging from the same broader modernist discourse, and they both shared similarities in terms of aesthetical choices, to the point that composers found themselves fluctuating between them, even if large part of the historiography of Latin American music for the 20th century has attempted to mark them as opposite aesthetic factions.

The search for identity in Latin American classical music was often related to nationalistic projects. The general discourse of nationalism in the region went through significant changes during the early years of the 20th century. During the 19th century, nationalist discourse had almost completely excluded the masses and focused on a select elite and on the economically active oligarchies that identified primarily with their European heritage. The objective of this first nationalism was to create a viable nation both economically and militarily after the years of independence. Latin American peasants, the indigenous population, black population, and the lower classes in general and their cultural practices in particular, were mostly ostracized and marginalized by those interested in nation-building. However, by the turn of the 20th century, the need to expand the internal markets of consumption and augment the investment in the idea of nationhood by the peasants and working class led to a renewed political interest in significant portions of the population that had previously been ignored. Musical nationalism manifested itself in different ways across a wealth of traditions, including the classical art world. Initially, it meant the recognition of that which was not part of the European heritage in the Latin American context and a search for a usable past to construct a shared national identity. With more or less degrees of success, composers started using music from those social groups that had been neglected in the past. Practices that they labeled and imagined as folkloric, popular, or traditional became inspiration and direct source of musical materials to be referenced in compositions, creating a bridge to an imagined soundscape of the indigenous, the rural, and the traditions brought through slavery from multiple regions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Adopting nationalism within an art music composition in Latin America, almost by definition involved the inclusion of vernacular references of some sort within it. The way this was approached varied tremendously, from those who studied thoroughly the musical practices that they were referencing, without pretensions, and with awareness of the ethical connotations of their acts to those who used these sources indiscriminately, creating musical postcards from exotic places. As composers believed in the ideas promulgated by nationalism, they saw the music being made in their geographical

proximity as theirs, ignoring the disparity in power between them and those being referenced, and effectively ignoring the evident difference between the marginalized and those representing them.

At least since the 1930s, several intellectuals and artists started to problematize musical nationalism within art music, especially as it became increasingly associated with the broader socio-historical context of nationalist-populist movements connected to fascism. The flag of universalism was frequently waived in opposition to nationalism—albeit their shared modernist anxieties, and despite having multiple composers that would participate of both. Artists that looked to be ‘universal’ in their music, were frequently aware of the latest tendencies of musical creation at a transnational level, adhered to recent and novel developments in compositional procedures, and often, but not always, avoided references to musical traditions outside the classical music world. There was an interest in participating in a dialogue with the musical languages emanating from Paris, Vienna, New York, Buenos Aires, or any other cultural center of the thoroughly cosmopolitan world of classical music, in order to achieve parity with those centers, usually under the banner of musical modernism. In essence what was being shared with those metropolitan centers was technology: the techniques of making art, technology for artistic creation, be it serialism, spectral techniques or machines that enabled electroacoustic music composition. Just like with nationalism, the way in which composers participated from transnational musical practices varied significantly. For some, the belief in the neutrality of certain compositional procedures—12-tone composition, serialism, electroacoustic techniques—blinded them to their ideological charge, and the Euro-centric aesthetic values that they carry. For others, these same procedures under a critical view allowed for a subversive and conscientious appropriation of musical elements.

Contrasting with the very specific use of the term modernism in literature, visual arts, or even film music, the general use of the word modernism in classical music seems to imply the vast majority of the 20th century and to cover a broad array of musical styles. Although there is a peak in the interest on modernism during the 1910s and 1920s, and then during the decades following World War II, the values of modernism shaped an important segment of artistic production in Latin America during the whole century. With nationalism and universalism at the center of the narratives on musical modernism, and especially with the way in which it has been described in the majority of historiography of Latin American classical music, these appear to be irreconcilable aesthetic positions. But, as suggested earlier, this in practice was simply not true, as composers fluctuated frequently, sometimes even within one piece, from emphasizing nationalist and universalist values. In the end, what was being constructed and reflected by the embrace of musical modernism in Latin America, were the anxieties and concerns of people fully embracing the very cosmopolitan discourse of modernity in a very localized manner.

See also (by country):

Argentina

Agrupación Nueva Música

Arias, Luis
Bazán, Oscar
Castro, Juan José
Davidovsky, Mario
Di Tella, Institute
Dianda, Hilda
Etkin, Mariano
Gandini, Gerardo
García Morillo, Roberto
Ginastera, Alberto
Grupo Renovación
Kreiger, Armando
Kröpfl, Francisco
Kusnir, Eduardo
Osvaldo Budón
Paz, Juan Carlos
Serra, Luis María
Tauriello, Antonio
Valverde, Gabriel
Villanueva, Maria Cecilia
Zubillaga, Luis
Kagel, Mauricio
Bértola, Eduardo
lanza, alcides
Roqué Alsina, Carlos
Graetzer, Guillermo
Paraskevaídis, Graciela

Bolivia

Prudencio, Cergio
Villalpando, Alberto

Brazil

1922 Modern Art Week (São Paulo)
Antunes, Jorge
Cardoso, Lindembergue
Cerqueira, Fernando
Corrêa de Oliveira, Willy
Duprat, Rogério
Grupo de compositores da Bahia
Grupo Música Nova
Grupo Música Viva
Guerra Peixe, César
Katunda, Eunice
Krieger, Edino
Koellreutter, Hans-Joachim

Mello, Chico
Mendes, Gilberto
Nobre, Marlos
Rescala, Tim
Santoro, Claudio
Scliar, Esther
Taborda, Tato
Villa-Lobos, Heitor
Widmer, Ernst

Chile

Aguilar, Miguel
Amenábar, Juan
Asuar, José Vicente
Cáceres, Eduardo
Cotapos, Acario
García, Fernando
Isamitt, Carlos
Orrego-Salas, Juan
Santacruz, Domingo
Becerra-Schmidt, Gustavo

Colombia

Atehortúa, Blas Emilio
González Zuleta, Fabio
Nova, Jacqueline
Pineda-Duque, Roberto
Pinzón Urrea, Jesús
Posada, Andrés
Rendón, Guillermo
Uribe Holguín, Guillermo
Valencia, Antonio María
Zumaqué, Francisco

Costa Rica

Cardona, Alejandro
Flores, Bernal
Gutierrez, Benjamín
Mora, Eddie

Cuba

Afrocubanismo
Amadeo Roldán
Brouwer, Leo
García-Caturla, Alejandro

Gramatges, Harold
Grupo de Renovación Musical
Blanco, Juan

Ecuador

Luzuriaga, Diego
Manguashca, Mesias

Guatemala

Gandarias, Igor
Orellana, Joaquín
Sarmientos, Jorge

Mexico

Carrillo, Julián
Chávez, Carlos
Enriquez, Manuel
Estrada, Julio
Ibarra Groth, Federico
Lavista, Mario
Ortiz, Gabriela
Quintanar, Héctor
Revueltas, Silvestre
Grupo de los Cuatro
Kuri-Aldana, Mario
Ponce, Manuel María

Panama

Cordero, Roque

Paraguay

Barrios, Agustin [a.k.a. Nitsuga Mangoré]
Szarán, Luis

Peru

Garrido-Lecca, Celso
Valcárcel, Edgar
Bolaños, Cesar
Iturriaga, Enrique
Sas, Andrés
Tello, Aurelio

Puerto Rico

Ortiz, William
Sierra, Roberto

Uruguay

Aharonián, Coriún
Barradas, Carmen
Biriotti, León
Condon, Fernando
Fabini, Eduardo
Legrand, Diego
Mastrogiovanni, Antonio
Tosar, Héctor

Venezuela

Arismendi, Diana
Del Mónaco, Alfredo
Estévez, Antonio
Izarra, Adina
Plaza, Juan Bautista
Rugeles, Alfredo
Sojo, Vicente Emilio

Others:

Film Music and Modernism in Latin America
Nationalism
Pan-Americanism
Universalism (Latin America)

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