

The First Retrospective of Mexican Electroacoustic Music

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Abstract

The first retrospective of Mexican electroacoustic music was held in March 2003. I undertook the organization of this event, as well as an important research work that hadn't been done before. I rescued old works that were lost, and reconstructed the difficult beginning of the history of this field in Mexico. This paper goes through the origins and development of music related to technology in my country, trying to make a global recount for the first time, and making use of a critical analysis in order to make up with the past, understand our present and foreseen the future.

1. Introduction

In 2002 the director of the contemporary music festival *Radar* in Mexico asked me if I would do a retrospective of Mexican electroacoustic music for his venue in 2003. This idea seemed to me very valuable because such an event had never been organized in my country. I started then to do a research and to take it further away, trying to gather more information in order to search for a continuity in the history of Mexican electroacoustic music. Also, I aimed to provide a critical personal view of what happened here on the foundation days of this domain

and explain the problems and difficulties of its development.

This research resulted quite difficult because there was little bibliography and allot of fieldwork needed to be done. It was specially hard to find information about the works produced in the 60's and 70's, because there wasn't a center for the experimentation, production, diffusion and conservation of electronic works, functioning in an appropriate and continuous way through the four and a half decades of history of this music specialty in our nation.

2 The origins

Carlos Chavez is perhaps the first Mexican composer that became interested in the possibilities of technology in relation to music. In 1932 he travels to the *RCA Victor* and the *Bell Telephone* studios in the USA, and writes two articles that will become part of the book "Toward a new music; music and electricity" published later in 1937. Here, Chavez foresees the institutional obstacles that composers and artists interested in the new audio media¹ confront everyday. He considered that the day when these artists would be able to get involved with these media without the help of technical intermediaries, a new path would be open for

¹ These new media were for Chavez: electric photography, sound photography, and electric instruments that hadn't been invented yet.

the creation of new forms of art. However, Chavez did not maintain this early interest and left the good intentions to the new generations.

It wasn't until the decade of the 60's that there was a significant development of contemporary music in Mexico, owing to the creation of the "Taller de composición" directed by this same composer. From this workshop, composers like Mario Lavista, Francisco Nuñez, Héctor Quintanar and Julio Estrada emerged, who assimilated the newest serial techniques imported from Europe, the aleatory music techniques, and who acquired increasing interest to the new sonorous languages emerging from technical development (Moreno, 1994).

Some of them, and elder generations of composers like Carlos Jiménez Mabarak, Manuel Enríquez, Manuel de Elías and Alicia Urreta, tried their hands on the electronic and concrete music fields, thanks to their contact in and out of Mexico with some of the pioneers of this genre (Europeans and North Americans)². Yet, it was until the end of the sixties when the engineer Raúl Pavón (b. 1927)³ together with the composer Héctor Quintanar (b. 1936) created the first

laboratory of electronic music in Mexico, at the grounds of the *National Conservatory* of Mexico City (and with the support of Carlos Chávez). Moreover, this project did not experience a fruitful life.

New musical technologies (like synthesizers and the tape machine) and their possibilities to create music through new ideas and ways to work with sounds, attracted the generation of Mabarak⁴, Enríquez and Urreta, as well as younger composers like Mario Lavista (b. 1942) who later wrote various articles about how the composer could work directly with sound matter, and about the necessity to create new types of musical representation for electronic music, (Lavista, 1974) and to regard new conceptions starting from the sound-noise paradigm⁵ (Lavista, 1984).

3 Development of the first epoch

The seventies saw the emergence of the experimental group Quanta⁶, which incorporated in some of their music live electroacoustic manipulations. Furthermore, Héctor Quintanar was interested in composing by way of performing and

² Particularly with Jean Etienne Marie in Paris, and with the composers members of the electronic music studio at Columbia-Princeton University (Milton Babbitt and Vladimir Ussachevsky).

³ An electronic engineer passionate for music and technology since 1958, inventor of various synthesizers and writer of a book on electronic music and multimedia in 1980.

⁴ Composer from an elder generation (1916-1994) who wrote the first electroacoustic piece in Mexico ("Paradise of the drowned", for tape and ballet, 1957), and also creator of the first concrete music concert in our country that same year. Seems paradoxical that this composer and pioneer, who produced concerts regarding this musical language, only wrote 2 pieces for tape.

⁵ Lavista presented this paper in a symposium called "The identity of Latin American music" in *Casa de las Americas* Havana Cuba in 1977.

⁶ Created by Mario Lavista and integrated by Antero Chávez, Víctor Medeles, Juan Cuahutemoc Herrejón and Fernando Nicolás Echeverría.

manipulating synthesizers alive (Pulido, 1971). He also organized a seminar centered in electronic music with the participation of national and international composers at the University of Mexico (UNAM) in 1974. That same year, composer Julio Estrada (b. 1942) in collaboration with the mathematician Jorge Gil researched around computer assisted compositions⁷. At the same time, Raúl Pavón imparts the class of electronic music at the National Conservatory of Mexico City, and thanks to this, new composers like Juan Cuahutemoc Herrejón start experimenting in this area. Also, the young composer and electrical engineer Antonio Russek (b. 1955) creates the first private Laboratory for the production and broadcasting of electronic music at his home (1975). Nevertheless, regardless of these positive factors that contributed to the development of electronic music, the fact is that there was little continuity, a lack of research, forums, concerts and conferences. Also, there were hardly forty pieces of electroacoustic music created through the first two decades of production in our country (many of them that have been lost or not recovered). We will have to wait until the beginning of the 80's when a new generation of composers,

bearers of mayor passion for this language will emerge.

I think that besides the bureaucratic problems that made difficult the lack of development of the electroacoustic field in Mexico⁸, the main problem was the little interest that those generations showed for this genre. The reason is that many of them thought synthesizers were simply new instruments with fresh sound colors that became supplementary to the ones already existing in the orchestra. This is why these composers were unable to go deeper into the technical-esthetical specificity's of this new language. On the other side, the creation of electroacoustic music demanded a through full study of the acoustic sciences, and this factor prevented many composers from investing the time and effort involved in having successful results⁹. Finally, there was also an obstacle created from traditional academia that was not interested in the specialization of electronic music in the music schools, and in fact this is still up to this date a problem we have in our country. We should try to analyze why in a Latin American country analogous to Mexico like Argentina there was an electronic music laboratory since 1958¹⁰, which is still working up to this date, while in Mexico this situation never became possible.

⁷ Julio Estrada is the pioneer in Mexico in using a computer and producing information set-aside for the creation of an instrumental composition.

⁸ Due to the lack of support from the cultural public institutions in Mexico to renovate the equipment of the laboratory and keep it working.

⁹ At those times only the engineer Raúl Pavón understood the true possibilities of this new musical language. Its too bad that he was never considered by his colleges as a "serious" composer (he doesn't appear in any of the dictionaries of Mexican composers, although Julio Estrada speaks of him benevolently in the book "La música en México"). Pavón developed an important research and composed multi media electroacoustic works in the early eighties and then he suddenly disappeared from our country in the early nineties. On the other hand, from these generations only Manuel Enriquez and Francisco Nuñez maintained an interest in electroacoustic music and created new forums and spaces for its production and diffusion.

¹⁰ Founded by Francisco Kröpfl. This laboratory is located now in the "Centro Cultural Recoleta" in Buenos Aires.

4 The true pioneers

My personal view is that the real origin of electroacoustic music in Mexico happens in the eighties, particularly outside the cultural institutions of the government, and thanks to composers like Antonio Russek, Vicente Rojo (b. 1960), Arturo Marquez (b. 1960) and Roberto Morales (b. 1955), who gave it an important impulse through the creation of works and interdisciplinary concerts¹¹. Also, Russek created the *Independent center of musical research and multimedia (CIIM)*, studio in which there were courses and where composers like Eduardo Soto Millan, Semir Menaceri, etc, produced various compositions. Nevertheless, we cant deny that the interest of the elder composer Manuel Enriquez (1926-1994) for electroacoustic music as well as the creation of a new festival of contemporary music by him - *Foro de Música Nueva*, a festival supported by the INBA government institute that lasted from 1979 until 1994 - were also important factors for the diffusion of this music at those times.

5 The first composers with specialization degrees.

Other composers that decided to escape the academic stasis in Mexico by way of undertaking electroacoustic music studies in foreign countries soon joined the indisputable pioneers of electroacoustic music in Mexico. This is the case of Javier Alvarez (b. 1955)¹², and a couple years later Manuel Rocha Iturbide (b. 1963), Antonio Fernandez Ros (b. 1961), Guillermo Galindo (b. 1960) and others that are part of the first generations that received an academic education in the field of computer music¹³.

Notwithstanding the efforts made by the composers brought up at this stage in order to generate new spaces and to teach and spread this music, at present times we still don't have a bachelor or specialization course of electroacoustic music in our country, making difficult then a further development. It is then understandable that the new generations of composers born in the seventies and eighties are still immigrating to foreign countries in order to develop better in this area¹⁴. Nevertheless, some of them have been able to evolve in our country thanks to the isolated courses taught by some

¹¹ In the eighties there were various interdisciplinary collectives that presented electroacoustic works such as *Atentamente a la dirección, Música de Cámara, La Sonora Industrial, El Alacrán del Cántaro*, etc.

¹² Who since 1982 starts his studies on electroacoustic music in England, and by the middle eighties wins international prizes and awards for his works.

¹³ Like the realization of masters and doctors in computer music, although there were also other composers that undertook less specialized studies in foreign countries like Salvador Torre (in the middle eighties) and Gonzalo Macías (in the early nineties) both who studied electroacoustic music in the conservatory of Boulogne in Paris for example.

¹⁴ This is the case of Rodrigo Sigal and Pablo García Valenzuela that undertook doctoral studies in computer music in *City University* in London England, or the case of Rogelio Sosa that studied a year at IRCAM and who is currently doing his doctor in the University of Paris VIII in France.

composers. Roberto Morales tried to found a computer music bachelor in the University of Guanajuato, and during five years or more, he collaborated to bring a new generation of young composers¹⁵. Unhappily, the conservative and bureaucratic character of this institution has prevented the creation of this program. On the other hand, Javier Alvarez (A Mexican composer living in England) has come to Mexico almost every year to teach courses of electroacoustic music at the National Center for the Arts in Mexico City, and from these courses new composers have come up front in the Mexican scene. Finally, I undertook a few years ago a young group of composers and created a workshop that is working up to this date¹⁶.

6 New generations, spaces and forums.

There are today in Mexico many composers interested in the electroacoustic music field, and even though many of them haven't still specialized in this discipline, they have yet produced some interesting works¹⁷. On the other side, in the last decade new forums and spaces have appeared and have

helped the difficult development of this music. Also, this last decade has seen the appearance of numerous spaces and forums that support the expression and diffusion of this music, thanks to festivals like "The international Radio Biennial"¹⁸, "Festival del callejón del ruido"¹⁹, "The International Sound Art Festival"²⁰ and recently "Radar". Other factors that have helped increase the interest for this music in Mexico are the technological developments of computer programming in recent years.

Through the nineties, the emerging cultural institutions played an important role in the promotion of electronic art like the *Multimedia center*, the *Centro de la Imagen*, the *Ex-Teresa Arte Actual museum*, the *Laboratorio arte alameda museum*, and so on. Nevertheless it's a pity that as for today we can't count on a computer music center, a project similar to the *Multimedia Center* where advanced courses on music and technology can be imparted, as well as postgraduate studies. Unfortunately, the academic musical scene remains in a halt. As for now, we have been unable to launch postgraduate musical studies in Mexico, except for the University of Jalapa Veracruz,

¹⁵ From these young composers, Victor Manuel Dávalos and Mauricio Valdez stand out.

¹⁶ This workshop generated the collective *Machintosco* integrated by Miguel Hernandez Montero, Guillermo Acevedo, Victor Romero, Jose Manuel Mondragón and Salvador Rodriguez. They received the first prize in the Bourges festival in France in the category of electroacoustic music with video in 2001.

¹⁷ This is the case of composers like Ignacio Baca Lobera, Carlos Sandoval, Gabriela Ortiz, etc.

¹⁸ Biennial organized by Radio Educación whose first edition was in 1996. Thanks to the enterprise of the director of this institution (Lidia Camacho), in this forum they have encouraged the development of the *Radio Art* genre that belongs to the electroacoustic art field.

¹⁹ Founded by Roberto Morales Manzanares in 1994 in Guanajuato.

²⁰ Founded by Guillermo Santamarina and Manuel Rocha Iturbide in 1999. This festival has contributed with the expansion of sound art in Mexico, under its wing an important number of Mexican sound artists have emerged. Apart from staging countless electroacoustic music concerts for tape, live electronics and with instruments, it has also opened a space for experimental electronic music.

where they impart the only masters on musicology and instrumental composition in the country. However, the University of Mexico will start soon a series of master degrees in music (after ten years of a stagnant bureaucratic hold), one of them related with music and technology.

In spite of the academic delay our country is undergoing, it has profited from the incredible development of Pop electronic music, which is danceable all around the globe. This boom has helped the popularity of DJ's and collectives of experimental groups²¹, as well as sound artists that are producing alternative music, without necessarily owing it to an academic musical background²².

7 Conclusions.

Electroacoustic music is a language as serious and sophisticated as contemporary instrumental music. I believe that this retrospective has emphasized the fact that Mexico today has a vast spectrum of composers, those with relevant trajectories in the field, younger composers who have already made a name for themselves, and newer talented rising generations with needs of development.

Finally, it was impossible to reflect objectively the most relevant aspects of the history of electroacoustic music in Mexico in only two concerts, so I felt obliged to implement four hearing posts that presented

the composers by decades²³. On the other hand, it was difficult to include all of the composers who have done something relevant in the field, because some of their pieces (mostly the ones who have already died) have been lost or not recovered, and the effort to trace them with their descendants will need a lot of work. It is important to mention that not all of the composers that I contacted sent me their pieces, even though the most prolific did.

This investigation came into being thanks to the original idea of José Wolfer, to the enormous interest of all the composers of the trade who kindly sent me their works, and to the valuable help of the *CENIDIM* musical research center in regard to the discoveries of pioneer works (as *Tlalocan* of Jiménez Mabarak, *Prehistoric Mass* by Enríquez, and the *Electronic Studies* by Juan Cuahutemoc Herrejón). Essential was the support received from the composer Antonio Russek, because he zealously saved and recovered many pieces of the sixties that we had thought lost (like *Contrapunto* by Mario Lavista, and *Non Nova Sed Novo* by Manuel de Elías). Antonio helped me to reconstruct the primordial facts of the early history of electroacoustic music in our country. I am also obliged to Alejandra Odgers for having executed an extensive documentation of electroacoustic Mexican works for her bachelor degree thesis (Odgers, 2000). This register helped me set

²¹ Its obvious that the most part of POP electronic music in Mexico is commercial and is centered in repetitive beats that evolve into styles like the "Drum and Base", "Trance", "House", etc. But Alvaro Ruiz, DJ Linga and some other young composers like Mario de Vega, have been exploring other areas of experimental electronic music. On the other hand, we have collectives like *Nortec* in Tijuana, and *Nopal Beat* in Guadalajara that have done interesting proposals that kind of move away from the commercial scene.

²² An example is the artist from Monterrey Daniel Lara, or the sound artist Luz María Sánchez from Guadalajara.

²³ Composers born in the 10's, 20's, 30's y 40's, the ones born on the 50's, the ones born on the 60's and the ones born on the 70's.

the basis to carry out my inquiry²⁴, and to Gonzalo Macías for his interest in the retrospective, since he is currently investigating the development of the Mexican electroacoustic music with instruments for his PhD thesis in France.

If the creation of a new laboratory of computer music is not possible, where pieces could be produced and advanced workshops and programs be imparted (at graduate and postgraduate levels), it would be at least desirable the existence of a small Media Center whose tasks would include the accumulation of information and the harboring of electroacoustic pieces produced in Mexico. This place could also host the quarters of a Mexican electroacoustic music association in charge of the dissemination of our music nationally and internationally²⁵. As for now, the efforts have been individual and many times have remained diluted. I hope that the interested composers of the musical trade become receptive to these ideas in order to carry out this task.

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²⁴ I hope Alejandra will review this valuable work, so she can include the composers born in the seventies, many of them who have already shined out internationally. On the other hand it would be useful if she indicates which pieces have been awarded, and in which studios they were carried out in order to understand what are the more relevant works in our history.

²⁵ As well as publishing records of Mexican Electroacoustic music (like CD's and books) with the support of government institutions, because this area hasn't been exposed.

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