

Electroacoustic Music Incorporating Latin American Influences

A consideration of implications, reception and borrowing

by Manuella Blackburn

This paper aims to address the issue of incorporating Latin American influences into electroacoustic music. A questionnaire (Appendix 1) devised to identify sources of influence and methods of incorporation was responded to by a selection of electroacoustic composers (Appendix 2) of Latin American origin. Their responses directed the course of this research and assisted in developing many of the ideas presented in this paper. Works by these composers are used to illuminate implications and ethics surrounding the issue of incorporating Latin American influences, while both composer and listener perspectives are discussed and considered.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to survey the methods by which composers incorporate Latin American influences into their works. Questions probing sources of influence and reasons for their inclusion provided the opportunity for composers to talk about their own works. Further questions on cross-cultural borrowing were included so as to understand composers' thoughts on issues of appropriation and ethics.

The questionnaire was not designed with the intention of obtaining statistical data, but more as a means of examining composers' perspectives and compositional methods through the posing of eight general questions allowing for varying responses.

With regards to selection, composers were approached on the basis of their Latin American origin and whether their electroacoustic musical output was applicable to the issues at hand.

Manuella Blackburn: To what degree do you think your nationality and cultural background influence your work as a composer?

Mario Verandi: I believe that the fact of being born and having grown up in Argentina do have an influence in my work as a composer. In Argentina I listened to musics, read books and watched theatre plays and films that are rooted in the cultural history of the country. I was and still am very interested in Argentinean folk music and to a lesser degree in tango music. While living in Argentina I studied folk music and played with some folk music groups. At the age of 9, I started playing the bombo legüero, a percussion instrument made out of wood and the skin of a goat. I also learnt to dance some styles of folk music. I am also interested in several Argentinean writers and playwrights such as Cortazar, Borger, Bartis and Gambaro to name just a few. Argentina is a big country and influences may be quite different depending on the region where one lives. I could say that my nationality influences my artistic work to some degree but it does so in a spontaneous and rather unconscious way. I am particularly influenced by rhythmic aspects of some Latin American musics. My cultural background to date is quite broad and mixed. I grew up in Argentina within a family of Italian immigrants. In 1986 I moved to Barcelona where I lived there for five years. Later I moved to London

and lived there for almost ten years. At present I am based in Berlin since about six years. I have friends and have had girlfriends from different nationalities. My son was born in Berlin and he speaks Spanish, German and English. So, I guess that my "identity", personality and cultural background is a mix of the many cultural and social experiences I have had to date. And yes, I do believe that all these experiences both personal and artistic have a degree of influence in my work as a composer. Of course, it is difficult to give an exact percentage of this influence. We also know that nothing is static or permanent, and influences are in constant flux and change.

MB: How, if at all, have you incorporated influences/traditional features of Latin American music into your electroacoustic compositions?

MV: There are some compositions of mine that incorporate elements of Latin American musics in a variety of ways. Concerning how I incorporated these elements depends on the piece and the ideas and concepts behind it. I will give you three examples: my piece *Dancescape* uses sounds from a recorded improvisation performed by myself on bongos. Another source material included a recorded vocal improvisation performed by the Argentinean folk musician and singer Leda Valladares. In this piece these two sound materials underwent several computer manipulations. However, it is possible to recognise in the singing voice some characteristic articulations and melodies found in north Argentinean folklore. Another piece of mine called "Evil Fruit" is based on some percussive instruments used in traditional Brazilian music, in particular the berimbau. In this piece I was rather interested in the actual timbre of these sounds. So my approach for using these Brazilian instruments focused on the timbre. It was not my aim to work on any Brazilian musical style. My piece "Spuren und Schatten" uses bandoneon sounds and melodies as a linking element between sections. The rest of the sound material changes from section to section, except for the bandoneon. So, the bandoneon functions as an element that gives a sense of unity to the whole piece. In this work the bandoneon plays both no-tango related sounds and melodies and gestures that can clearly be connected with tango music.

MB: Do any/some/all of your compositions address the issues of personal identity and ethnic cultural experience?

MV: Most of my compositions incorporate sounds and/or conceptual ideas related to experiences both cultural and personal. But my main aim is first of all to work on the musical potential of these sounds and/or concepts. Besides, many times the relation to personal and cultural experiences is metaphorical. I am not sure if I can say that some of my compositions deal with issues of personal identity or ethnic cultural experience, at least not in a "sociological" manner. I would rather say that my music can be influenced by these issues. In addition, these issues are part of me as a person and appear, or not, in some of my works as a natural expression of myself. Of course, these issues may, in a piece, be apparent or more hidden. For example, my piece "Theatrum Sonorum" is a very personal work. It incorporates sounds strongly related to my childhood and my family. But my aim was to structure the sound material within a musical narrative that the listener could grasp. The piece does have an underlying conceptual and emotional content

that may very likely be understood only by me. But I guess that happens with every work of art. On the one hand, the artist has always a much closer emotional and intellectual understanding of his/her own work. On the other, the listener has potentially the freedom to perceive the work in different ways and hopefully to metaphorically relate elements of the work to his/her own experiences.

MB: Why have you chosen/not chosen to incorporate traditional aspects of Latin American music into your compositions?

MV: When I have chosen to incorporate elements of Latin American music into my compositions the main reason was that I found musical potential in these elements. This musical potential could be related to timbre or to gestures or to musical structures, or to all of them. As I said before, the use of these elements in a composition may be evident or rather cryptic. Another reason for the incorporation of these aspects of Latin American music in my work is an intellectual and emotional affinity to the sounds I am dealing with.

MB: If so, how do you feel these sound materials function within the music? E.g. political statement or expression of ethnic identity.

MV: To me the sound materials are put together in order to develop a musical narrative. By this I mean, a combination of rhythms, timbres and gestures that articulate a musical form during a specific timespan. So far I have not composed pieces in which the sounds function as political statement or in which the sounds have an exclusively conceptual function. I usually think of sounds and of the combination of sounds as a sensory and sensual experience. My works are an expression of my identity, emotions and research interests at a particular moment.

MB: Do you think your compositions that incorporate Latin American influences are received differently depending on listener nationality? If so, how?

MV: I would tend to think that when a piece uses lets say tango sounds and the listener has grown up in Argentina, the reception of and emotional connection with the piece is different to the perception a person of a different country might have. Again that also depends whether the Latin American elements are apparent or not. Having said that, I do believe that a person with a different background can also become emotionally connected with Latin American musical elements through a different and valid path.

MB: How do you feel about composers of other nationalities borrowing aspects of traditional Latin American music?

MV: Well, in first place I feel ok and have no preconceptions at all. Whether the use of Latin American aspects is successful or not is another story. I would like to make a remark: we should bear in mind that when we use the word Latin America, we are referring to a group of many countries. These countries share some cultural aspects but do also have several distinct characteristics. I would find it very difficult to incorporate

stylistic elements of lets say salsa music into my compositions because salsa music is not part of my musical experience. So, in that respect I consider myself sort of a foreigner to salsa music. That is why when I used Brazilian percussion sounds in my piece Evil Fruit, I was concerned only with the spectral or timbric components of these sounds. I did not deal with any Brazilian musical style or form. The point is whether these borrowed aspects are used as a point of departure to develop something different or used to deal with stylistic aspects of a particular music. In the last case, I would tend to think that you must have a very good in-depth knowledge of the music you are dealing with.

MB: Do you feel these sounds are too strongly associated with nationality and ethnic identity to be treated as found sounds?

MV: In my piece "Figuras Flamencas" I made use of flamenco musical extracts and sounds. In this piece flamenco music is used as a sound object or what I prefer to call a cultural sound object. In that respect there is not much difference than using a city soundscape. Both are sound objects to me. By cultural sound object I refer to sounds, although originated in a particular location, which belong to mankind culture and history. It was not my aim in that piece to develop a new form of flamenco music or to deal with flamenco form and styles. My intention was rather to "play" with this cultural sound object by superimposing and juxtaposing "foreign" electronic sound material. Flamenco sounds indeed have an ethnic identity and that's not a problem to me. But again, I approach these sounds as a sound object created by a particular culture in a specific geographic location. I could probably have made something similar with lets say Mongolian music in the sense that I would have employed this music as a cultural sound object. The reason why I worked with flamenco music and not with Mongolian music is because of my personal experience of having lived in Spain for five years. The term found sounds is a bit broad and ambiguous. If it means to come across sounds, then one could come across a CD of Pakistani music and treat it as a found sound. In my case, sometimes I find sounds and many times I look for sounds.

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