

1. Identity Identified

Is identity like a kaleidoscope where the patterns are continuously changing, or is it, rather, like the overlapping fibres of a rope? . . . It is clear that identity is not something we find, or have once and for all. Identity is a process, and that is why it is difficult to grasp it.

Madan Sarup

I don't like the word *identity*, much less the expression "the search for identity," which is so much in vogue these days. What we refer to as identity—which used to be more appropriately called "character" or "soul"—is something that one cannot possess, lose, or recover. Neither is it an essence. Latin America is neither an entity nor an idea. It's a history, a process, a reality in perpetual motion and constant change.

Octavio Paz

1. *The Total Absence of Identity?*

At the very end of the twentieth century, identifying what constitutes Latin America's identity presents a tremendous dilemma—for outsiders and insiders alike, and in practically all disciplines. While the deciphering of Latin America's cultural characteristics has been reduced almost exclusively to the question of identity, it has now become more apparent than ever that the answer to this question might be an unfinished project deferred to some future time. As George Yúdice would say, the one common feature in the many Latin American projects for cultural hegemony is "its yet-unattained status" (Chanady 1994, 234).

Still, within some disciplines, for example literary theory and ethnomusicology, efforts in this direction are active and the results have borne some fruit. A recent collection of essays edited by Amaryll Chanady, entitled *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference*, represents an assertive step toward unwinding this difficult issue. Similarly, the Sixth Colloquium of the International Council for Traditional Music, held in Lisbon in 1986, produced some insightful essays pertaining to the identity of certain popular and folk-music genres from Latin America. These essays can be found in the exhaustive volume entitled *Portugal and the World: The Encounter of Cultures in Music*, edited by Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco (1997).

However, the disciplines associated with art music, such as musicology, hermeneutics of music, and music theory, have not participated in the quest to define that which is commonly categorized as "Latin American music." I believe this is not due to gridlock but to the fact that nowadays the effort to pin down an identity for the music by composers from Latin America poses a great paradox. On the one hand it could be considered an outdated effort, one that Blanca de Arancibia describes as a "belated modernist nostalgia or an invitation to exclusion and closure" (Chanady 1994, 70). Yet on the other hand, and as she also states, it has become inevitable to attempt rescuing the particular verve of those nations that today seem invisible in an increasingly international and pluralistic world.

While it is true that, by and large, composers from Latin America are virtually invisible inside the international art-music arena, it is also true that any attempt to "rescue" or exalt their particular identity stumbles over one stark realization. Unlike in ethnomusicology, the identity issue in the field of musicology has been all but abandoned because it is assumed that, regardless of its nationality, regardless of its "absolute" or "representational" status, a work of art music has one—and only one—authentic identity. Plainly speaking, art music's identity is European in essence. This assumed identity has been defined and thoroughly explored a long time ago and remains frozen within Europe's classical and romantic models, that is, within the aesthetics of the museum tradition—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy, Boulez, and so on—a lineage that Peter Burkholder describes as the historicist mainstream of the 20th century (Burkholder 1983).

Nevertheless, there have been sporadic attempts at framing an identity particular only to the art music created in Latin America that challenge this Eurocentric notion. The outcome of these attempts, however, has not been without problems. A case in point was the forum entitled "Musical Creation and Cultural Identity in Latin America," held on 2 October 1987 at the Santiago de Chile Goethe Institute.¹ The forum covered a wide range of issues and approaches, from philosophical explorations into the relationship between the concept of identity and tradition to sharp criticisms of the isolationist attitude that is typical among South American composers. Paraguayan Luis Szarán, for example, did not see the need even to address the issue of identity on the grounds that the isolation of

¹This landmark occasion was recorded by Rodrigo Torres in a report published a year later in the *Revista musical chilena*. In his article, Torres described the profound nature of the thoughts brought forth by a distinguished panel of prominent composers from Latin America. Uruguay's Coriún Aharonian, Gerardo Gandini and Alicia Terzian from Argentina, Chileans Juan Orrego-Salas and Cirilo Vila, and Paraguay's Luis Szarán delivered illuminating papers on the thorny problem of reaching a consensus with regard to the identity of Latin America's art music.

Paraguay does not allow its citizens to consider it a dilemma. Instead, Uruguay's Coriún Aharonian underscored the pressing need to consider the effects of neocolonialism in discussions about Latin America's identity (Torres 1988).

Surprisingly, however, during the course of the forum none of the speakers alluded to a curious paradox intrinsic to this meeting and very relevant to the issue of identity: the fact that this soul-searching enterprise, pertaining to things Latin American, took place on the premises of the German-funded Goethe Institute. Is it possible that the incongruity of this arrangement, however subtle its negative symbolic implication might have been, did not raise any concerns? I find this oversight to be especially surprising because this paradox is precisely the thread that could lead the way toward untangling the complicated web that makes up the identity of Latin America's art music. What is the significance of this paradox? Did it affect the importance of the content and final outcome of the forum?²

While this oversight certainly underscores the sardonic aura that often taints discussions about authenticity with respect to Latin America's art music, at the same time it also corroborates the case made by one of the participants. As Coriún Aharonián explained, cultural expressions from Latin America are indisputably bound to its neocolonial condition and to its socially and racially heterogeneous configuration. Such reality not only allows but necessarily breeds (what may seem like) incongruities. The fact that a forum about cultural identity in Latin America was held at Santiago de Chile's Goethe Institute is the most authentic manifestation of an identity in the making. It is testimony of the continent's greatest predicament: the bewildering ambivalence, sprinkled with outright irony, innate to the act of identifying that which is—or which is not—truly Latin American.

The tenor of the concerns voiced by the forum's participants clearly exposed this predicament. One question, raised perhaps innocently by a musicologist who sat in the audience, captured best the degree of contradiction and incongruity implicit in such a quest. The question was "can the Chilean identity be defined as the total absence of identity?" This question merits lengthy reflection, not to attempt a response but rather to understand the reason behind such apparently puzzling concern.

²The significance of involving the Goethe Institute in such a Latin Americanist affair could be dismissed as a mere result of the practical need on the part of the forum organizers to find available space with suitable facilities. A critical interpretation, however, could lead one to consider this paradox a symbolic endorsement—perhaps unconscious?—of Germany's hegemonic role in the realm of art music. One wonders if such a forum could as easily have taken place in, say, the Rotary Club, or any other US- or UK-funded institution, without raising criticism or opposition. In any event, what I find most significant about this circumstance is that, although its implied symbolism went unheeded, the integrity of the event was never jeopardized.

Elucidating the reason will necessarily lead us to formulate other questions that will not be contradictory in themselves but instead will face contradiction and incongruity head on, allowing us better to appreciate the Latin American predicament.

First and foremost, we should try to understand what the word "identity" means. How can identity be identified? What constitutes a musical identity? How is it constructed? Is the identity of a composer and the identity of his/her music one and the same? Can one possess an identity in the same way one possesses a family name, a nationality, or even a career? Are adjectives such as "Chilean" or "Latin American" sufficient to identify a subject properly? I find it absolutely necessary to tackle these fundamental questions before diving into more complex, philosophically obscure, and localized issues like the ones addressed at the Santiago de Chile forum. Therefore, in the spirit of Wittgenstein, who once proclaimed that philosophy is only a by-product of misunderstanding language, this chapter focuses exclusively on unraveling the meaning of identity, especially as it applies to art music. This will allow us to understand, in the following chapters, how the art music created by Latin American composers is identified—and by whom—and how this given identity has affected its dissemination and interpretation.

2. Identity and the Musical "Language of Nostalgia"

The first epigraph at the opening of this chapter is taken from Madan Sarup's *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*. This book is perhaps one of the most thorough investigations into the many dimensions of the term "identity." Consideration of its multidimensionality is precisely what discussions about musical identity often lack. Therefore, using Sarup's work as the core of my discourse, and expanding upon it with the aid of other literature and specific empirical evidence relevant to Latin America, I want to deconstruct and expand upon the concept of identity as it applies to music.

To begin with, scholars recognize that, over time, identity has come to be understood under a different light. Whereas before the fact that a person had a given identity was taken for granted, now it is assumed that identity is not an inherent quality but that it arises in interaction with others. Today, debates about identity focus on the process by which a person's identity is constructed, both from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. The implications of this process aptly translate into the topic of our concern since music does not really provide an identity of its own. Instead, as Martin Stokes tells us, music only "provides a means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which

separate them." According to Stokes, the acts of listening and writing about music become forums in which identities are constructed, challenged, and mobilized (Stokes 1994, 5).

I would argue that even for people who claim to establish a personal identification with the raw sonic material (timbre, texture, rhythm, harmony, etc.), the full musical experience is achieved only when they identify with certain conventions, systematizations, and traditions associated with music.³ Identity, musical or otherwise, presupposes identification. "It is by means of a series of identifications that identity is constituted," writes Sarup (Sarup 1993, 30). This explains why, for Freud, identification entails more than simple imitation. Identification is synonymous with assimilation.

But, in the realm of music, what is it that humans identify with and/or assimilate? Can we as humans truly identify with the pure sonic phenomenon itself? Perhaps when it comprises the human voice, or sounds which our body can produce. But when people listen to the opening of Mozart's famous G minor Symphony, do they identify with it because they have assimilated its sound events as they unfold in time, or rather because they have assimilated the context or images which these sound events trigger? For instance, the buoyancy and deceitful elegance of eighteenth-century Vienna in which great geniuses can be left to die in abandonment--to use a dramatic image from the movie *Amadeus*.⁴

As for the listeners, the strongest assimilation probably occurs with the images triggered by the music. And from what they say and write about music, one could assume this holds true also for performers. To cite a recent example, I would like to take the liner notes entitled "Tango Passion" written by an extraordinary violinist from Latvia, Gidon Kremer, for a CD (Nonesuch, 1997) in which he performs chamber music by the late Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla—at present, the composer from Latin America most widely performed in concert halls around the world. If there are indeed people who have the ability of identifying with the pure sonic phenomenon, it certainly would be a performing artist of the stature of Gidon Kremer, who has performed a wide spectrum of works for the violin from the Western repertoire. Nevertheless, Kremer's text is a formidable example of how the identity of the

³Lucy Green's *Music on Deaf Ears* points out the important difference between what she calls the "inherent" and "delineated" meanings of music. While the former is the source of the musical experience, the pure physical phenomenon itself, humans rely more heavily on the latter because it enables them to make associations with cultural and social idiosyncrasies.

⁴For a marvelous insight into the answer to this question see Peter Kivy, *Music Alone*, and Kendall Walton, "Listening with Imagination: Is Music Representational?"

music of Piazzolla has been constructed not on the basis of its intrinsic sonic merit, but around the aura of nostalgia and passion which tango music is believed to evoke. Kremer writes:

When we speak of beauty, the beauty of architecture, of art, of people, and of love we must also invoke Astor Piazzolla's music. I believe in it because it evokes a better world through the language of nostalgia. All of that--in one single tango. (Kremer 1997)

This "language of nostalgia," as he calls it, enables Kremer to establish a farflung link between the South American tango and his northern Latvian heritage. Whether through tales about his father playing in a pre-World War II band, whose repertoire included tangos, or through reminiscing about his first close encounter with the tango itself (back in 1977 while performing in Russia, of all things, Alfred Schnittke's *Concerto Grosso* No. 1), Kremer's text squeezes the nostalgic nerve in the reader as a way of providing a stamp of authenticity for his renditions of Piazzolla's music. He digs deeper into the sensibility of his audience by connecting the fact that tango was originally a dance form with a remark about people often saying that he moves like a dancer when performing on stage. Kremer's self-authentication climaxes when he enters, perhaps metaphorically, into the field of genealogy: "the world is round, and the tango is everywhere--generating passion, as it were. Perhaps I carry some of it in my genes after all" (ibid.).

It is of crucial importance to notice that, even though the text makes us believe that we are entering into the world of Piazzolla's identity, in reality we are actually entering into the world of Kremer himself. We are being taken in by his own introjection--a process which is the opposite of projection and is closely tied to identification. Introjection occurs when the subject (in this case Kremer) transposes objects and their inherent qualities from the outside to the inside of her/himself (Sarup 1993). The question then becomes, is Kremer really transposing to the inside of himself the sonic identity of Piazzolla's music, or, instead, the emotional identity inherent in longing for remote places and past times--which tango is typically associated with? Although this question can only be answered by Gidon Kremer himself, the text of his liner notes confirms that, going back to Martin Stokes's point, music becomes a stage on which people's identities are constructed and mobilized.

By no means, however, would I like to give the impression that Piazzolla's music is not appreciated for its intrinsic sonic identity. I take this for granted; Piazzolla's music stands on its own merit. But if one takes a closer look at those world-renowned performing artists who are currently

endorsing Piazzolla's music through performances in concert halls and recordings, like the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the pianist Daniel Barenboim, as well as Gidon Kremer, one cannot help speculating that there may be a common thread, let's say a hidden motivation. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this motivation could go beyond the music itself and enter into the sphere of shared social experiences, bonding these artists together. This is to say that, in one way or another, the performing artists mentioned above seem to feel at home—or make their home—being away from home. Kremer, Ma, and Barenboim are contemporary music nomads, postmodern gypsies.

Marta Savigliano's *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* offers a compelling explanation of the recent uproar generated by the tango and by Piazzolla's music. One of Savigliano's points is that today most citizens of the world carry the burden of exile and uprootedness and, through the tango, the condition of exile may be sublimated. In this process, another important characteristic of identity is played out. This is the fact that, in the words of Madan Sarup, "we apprehend identity not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time...an observer is always bound to create something out of what s/he [hears]." In this way, "the subject becomes part of the object" (ibid., 15). Tango music, with its power to evoke melancholy, becomes the means for Yo-Yo Ma, Barenboim, and Kremer to identify with, and express passion for, their places of longing, whether it is China or Argentina, Israel, France, or Latvia. It is no coincidence that this existentialist strategy is closely associated with postmodernism. Indeed, in the multicultural, fragmented, and globalized world we live in today, nostalgia and longing make up the core of the postmodern ideology. Piazzolla's music has become the perfect vehicle for these artists to express and work out their own postmodern condition.

To summarize, listeners and performers alike construct their own identity by identifying, not necessarily with the sound phenomenon, but more likely with the contexts and feelings associated with the music they engage in. This transient, surrogate self-identity, if you will, is then projected back into the abstract elements of the music, providing the music with an apparent, but often false identity of its own.⁵

⁵Evidence of this process is Gidon Kremer's crediting his better understanding of the tango to a trip he made to Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost corner of Argentina. In reality, Argentinian tango has nothing to do with the rural areas of the country. It is a product of the capital city of Buenos Aires. Piazzolla was always emphatic about this fact. Writing to his friend Natalio Gorín, the composer celebrates the acceptance of the tango by the Europeans, saying that "the French want our music. We have succeeded in erasing the image *alla* Rodolfo Valentino that the Europeans have of our music...they have discovered that there is a music from Buenos Aires they can listen to" (Piazzolla 1990, 153).

3. *Identity and Music History*

But why care which identity is being constructed in these cases, whether the composer's, the music's, the performer's, or even the listener's? After all, the important result is that through these world-renowned performers Piazzolla's music is being made available to many people and in many places around the globe. Shouldn't we let time, and consequently history, take care of defining the identity of his music?

I argue that the answer to this question is 'no'. As we will see in the following pages, the seemingly unresolvable predicament faced by the composer in Latin America is due, in part, precisely to the illusion that great music can and should survive on the merits of its own inherent identity, no matter the world around it, much less what is written and who writes about it. Contrary to this assumption, time alone does not take care of defining the identity of a composer and his/her music. As a matter of fact, it could be stated almost in the opposite way. This is to say that only very self-conscious composers, performers, or music scholars who have carved a niche for themselves, a niche that caters to the interests of other individuals or entire communities, will define history's identity.⁶ These are the roots of music history. History and the process of identity construction have always been very closely tied. Let us take a moment to discern, in more depth, how these two are intimately dependent on each other.

Madan Sarup makes us aware of a simple yet immensely important fact, which is that when people are asked about their identity, they usually respond by telling a story, a story about their lives. The opposite is true as well: when people tell a story, their identities slowly appear before us. We saw how Kremer's liner notes are a perfect example of this.

When we talk about our identity and our life-story, we include something and exclude others, we stress something and subordinate others. This process of exclusion, stress and subordination is carried out in the interests of constructing a story of a particular kind. (Sarup 1993, 16)

⁶In *Cultural Selection: Why Some Achievements Survive the Test of Time--and Others Don't*, Gary Taylor argues that culture is not what was done but what is remembered, and the social competition among different memories is as dynamically complicated as the struggle for biological survival.

The process described by Madan Sarup is what constitutes a narrative. Narratives could be understood as effective identity-construction mechanisms. In narratives we find the essence of history:

Each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*) and a discourse. The story is the content, or chain of events. The story is the "what" in a narrative, the discourse is the "how." The discourse is rather like a plot, how the reader becomes aware of what happened, the order of the appearance of the events. (*ibid.*).

The discourse —the "how"— will have a powerful influence upon the interpretations of the story, that is, the "what." Any chain of events is, therefore, always filtered and manipulated according to the interest of the discourses. The events in themselves do not have an identity. They gain an identity when they are incorporated into a narrative. The storyteller gives them an identity through the choice of discourse. The discourse, therefore, could be imagined to be a mirror image of the discourses' own identity. Hence, if one digs into the sources of historical accounts, one will necessarily encounter fingerprints of historians' identities, whether cultural, ideological, or political. This is the reason why narratives, when they become public, are sites of cultural and political contest. And this is why Madan Sarup urges us to ask who is orchestrating those narratives in order to understand the underlying problem of representation and power.

It is important to be aware of how issues of representation and power are very much present in the history of Western art music. The narrative that conventional musicology has constructed is indeed a stage where cultural and political interests have been contested. Martin Stokes reminds us that "music is one of the less innocent ways in which dominant categories are forced and resisted" (Stokes 1994, 8). It is not by chance that the discourse employed to recount the events that led up to the state of European music at the turn of the 20th century endorses an exclusively Christian identity. In fact, the enormous contribution of the Arab and Jewish cultures to the origins of what we have come to know as Western music is systematically left out of conventional musicological literature. When mentioned, it is always under the light of exoticism, as in the case of the infamous *Türkenoper*. "Turkish opera" came to be synonymous with any attempt by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composers to represent, in naive ways, any non-European subject, no matter whether it was Turkish, Arab, Persian, Tartar, Indian, or Chinese (Bellman 1998). Exoticizing these cultures served the purpose of excluding them altogether

from the fabric of Western music, making them appear as anomalous curiosities which in no way disturbed the apparently homogeneous cultural identity of Europe.

Fortunately, in the battlefield where identities are constructed, narratives are challenged by counter-narratives, or re-narrativizations. This is the case with Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, which brings to the surface the neglected hypothesis, however controversial, that the Greeks were merely pupils of the Egyptians. According to Bernal, dominant history, "the Aryan model," presents Greek civilization as the pure and uncontaminated origin of European civilization. Bernal reexamines this model and suggests that it is a recent movement of hostility against the effects of the French Revolution. This movement emerged mainly in Germany and Britain during the mid-19th century. With the spread of European imperialism and the rise of racism, the ancient notion that Greece was a mixed culture that had been civilized by Africans was thought of as almost grotesque.

This prejudice attitude spills over into the narrative devised around the music of Latin America, further obscuring meaningful discussions about its identity. Contrary to common historical accounts, the Spain that came to the New World after 1492 was not only Christian but also Jewish, Greek, Roman, Gypsy, and very much Arab. But, as in the case of the erasure of Egyptian culture from Greece's past hypothesized by Bernal, the Arab domination, with its vast influence over the Iberian territory for more the 700 years (from 711 right up the year when Columbus sailed West for the first time), is not taken in consideration in traditional descriptions of the early cultural encounter that occurred in the New World. Evidence shows that during Muslim Spain, algebra, along with the concept of "0," was invented, the Arabic numerals replaced the Roman system, and products like paper, cotton, rice, and sugar cane were introduced (Fuentes 1992). And yet this enormous contribution does not seem to make it into the construction of the New World's identity. Hence, the extremely broad and vague categories used to divide the configuration of Latin America in three compact, seemingly homogeneous cultures—the Spanish, the African, and the Native American—only dim the heterogeneous identity of the Spanish ingredient, with its strong Arabic component. Similarly, and as a result of this misrepresentation, in discussions about Latin American colonial music, whether sacred or secular, the Spanish heritage is understood almost strictly as the one endorsed by the Catholic reign of Fernando and Isabel of Castile.

Counter-narratives, however, exist on this topic and they tell a different, if not more realistic, story. Researchers such as Israel Katz, Rodrigo de Zayas, and Alejandro Planchart, for instance, have gathered important documentation that shows how the musical influences among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian cultures in the Iberian Peninsula were reciprocal (Robertson 1992). They also have shown the

great extent to which the multicultural results of this reciprocal influence made their way into, and profoundly influenced, music in the New World. Whether through the similarities between the *romancero* and the Moorish lyrical form known as *muwashshah*, or through the earliest interpretations of ancient Greek musical theories by Iberian Jews who were fluent in Arabic (the earliest example dates back to around the year 900), or through the unique colors of the sacred works by Aragonese chapel composer and contemporary of Du Fay, Johannes Cornago, these counter-narratives show that the music of fifteenth-century Spain resulted from what Planchart characterizes as "an immensely complex combination of aesthetic, intellectual, and sociological factors that have yet to be isolated and defined clearly but that we, for lack of a better description, call the soul of a nation" (Robertson 1992, 57).