

4. Latin American Nationalism Deconstructed

Beyond their difference in opinions and opposing works, [Juan Carlos Paz and Alberto Ginastera] share the feeling of being at the periphery, [since] in this place, in this crossing of the Atlantic ocean . . . , the national and the universal categories were granted a new meaning, sometimes exposed to misunderstanding.

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In the mid-twentieth century, right up indeed until late 1960s and early 1970s, an optimistic and realist view of nations and nationalism prevailed. Whatever their other differences, scholars and theorists of nationalism seemed to agree on the psychological power and sociological reality of nations and nation-states . . . In the late 1980s and 1990s, such optimism seems touchingly naïve.

Anthony D. Smith (1998, 2)

1. Devoid of and Replete with Nationalism

The aim of this chapter is to focus a bright light on the indiscriminate associations commonly drawn between nationalism and works by Latin American composers. More specifically, I will draw comparisons between the way this paradigm is approached in the scholarly sources discussed earlier (Slonimsky, Chase, Béhague), as well as in some lesser known sources from Latin America.

¹As quoted in Corrado 1995, 42-43.

Two early sources, published almost simultaneously in 1945, present a striking difference in their representation modalities. While Gilbert Chase's introductory essay to his *Guide to Latin American Music* contains a lengthy section on what he chooses to characterize as "the emergence of musical nationalism," Slonimsky's *Music of Latin America* downplays the significance of nationalistic sentiments in the creative musical output of twentieth-century Latin America. Perhaps because he ventured into this field with the heart of a connoisseur rather than with scholarly ambitions, Slonimsky was able to make a distinction between nationalistic ideology on the one hand, and the treatment of folk and popular elements as raw material for musical compositions on the other. And because from the start he made a point of acknowledging the complex racial and social configuration of the continent, Slonimsky's text avoids, in most cases, associating twentieth-century Latin American composers with musical styles attributed to their European counterparts as well as with Eurocentric concepts such as nationalism.² In any event, and for whatever reason, one observes Slonimsky circumnavigating commonly accepted terminology such as "nationalist style." He refers to Manuel Ponce, for instance, as the first Mexican composer to write not in a nationalist manner but rather "in a predominantly native style." When terms such as "musical nationalism" appear in his discourse, they are not attributed to the authors' own appreciation or judgment but to that of others. For example, in reference to Ponce's use of distinctly Mexican themes in his piano concerto, one reads "the occasion marked, according to the opinion of Otto Mayer-Serra, the opening phase of musical nationalism in Mexico" (Slonimsky 1945, 244-45). Slonimsky's careful treatment of the terms and attitudes associated with the supposed nationalist sentiment of the times is further displayed in recurring quotations by important Latin American personalities, such as Mario de Andrade's declaration that "Brazilian music is national in its entirety, whatever ethnological basis may underlie it . . . The criterion of Brazilian music should not be dialectic, but social" (Ibid., 65). The book also quotes a statement by Carlos Chávez regarding this issue:

"The music of Indians is Mexican music; and also Mexican is the art of Spanish extraction. It is fit and proper to regard as Mexican even the native operas in the Italian style, or the German-inspired Mexican symphonies. Naturally, the state of

²Even in sections dealing with the region's national anthems, Slonimsky's narrative underscores the ironic fact that most of their creators were European nationals who conceived them, in some instances, while stranded by mistake in Latin America, and in a totally Italo-Germanic style of the nineteenth century (p. 66).

being Mexican does not qualify an art product esthetically. Only when Mexican music attains artistic quality does it become true national art.” (Ibid.)

In sharp contrast, Chase's introductory essay, written in the same year, seems to equate Latin America's creative musical output between 1860 and 1945 solely with a militant nationalist ideology. Tracing the rise of nationalism in the Americas to the influence of similar European movements like that of the "Russian Five," or the doctrines of Spanish composer Felipe Pedrell, his essay assures the reader that composers such as Mexico's Manuel Ponce and Carlos Chávez are greatly responsible for, in the author's words, "formulating the aesthetic basis of musical nationalism" (Chase 1962, 19). However, throughout the entire essay it never becomes clear what this particular aesthetic formula is. In the end, the reader is left feeling that, instead of having been enlightened on the relation between nationalist ideology and aesthetic musical features, he has witnessed the author's struggle with the meaning and appropriateness of the concept:

“The historical function of folkloristic nationalism appears to be that of enabling musically backward or retarded nations to achieve self-confident expression by the assertion of characteristic traits which derive their force from the cumulative action of native tradition. When this self-confidence and self-knowledge have been acquired the tendency is to evolve toward less restricted forms of expression. Moreover, the preoccupation with folkloristic elements, used at first as a means of nationalistic assertion, leads eventually toward the breakdown of musical nationalism.” (Ibid., 20-21)

The excerpt above is studded with assumptions that are commonly found in nationalist discourses. They are troubling since, for one, they presuppose that the different musical expressions of the world can be measured using a linear and evolutionary yardstick. Such an approach allows musicologists to declare certain nations as musically up-to-date and others as retarded. Another problematic assumption is that erudite musical expressions that concern themselves with the treatment of native music are more restricted than others that do not. In a move perhaps to correct these assumptions, the author makes a 180° turn that, paradoxically, ends up proving the term nationalism virtually useless:

“Nevertheless we do not wish to limit the concept of musical nationalism to an exclusive preoccupation with folk and popular idioms. Rather will we extend its application to include all artistic creation produced with a definite consciousness of relation to a specific environment. The creative musician who feels himself spiritually rooted to the land in which he lives will produce work that is of national significance regardless of its subject matter or specific idiomatic content. . . . In this broadest interpretation, musical nationalism means simply the definite awareness of the full musical potentialities of a given country, and a deliberate effort to realize those potentialities in every sphere of musical activity.” (Ibid., 22)

According to this exceedingly broad definition, all types of music from practically all periods and areas of the world could fall within the category of musical nationalism.

2. Béhague and the Consolidation of Nationalism

Does it serve a purpose to compare two representation modalities that are more than 50 years old, long out of print, and probably already forgotten among scholars in the field and apparently too outdated to exercise any influence on current approaches to representing Latin America's art music?

The answer is yes--and in a big way. The half-century-old texts by Slonimsky and Chase help us to put into perspective the only textbook currently in print on Latin American art music, one that is widely used today and considered by many as "the" reference source on the subject. Gerard Béhague's 1979 *Music in Latin America: An Introduction (MLAI)* was published 34 years after the two previous sources, yet great affinities between the three exist, both of similarity and contrast. On the one hand, Chase's text constitutes a precedent for the younger author's paradigmatic interpretation of the musical developments in Latin America. On the other hand, Slonimsky's represents evidence for an alternative paradigm which, unfortunately, no one has cared to pursue further. Thus, while there is a clear continuity between Chase's and Béhague's discourse, Slonimsky's interpretation makes it urgent to question the validity of this continuum, study its consequences, and explore other possible points of view.

Gerard Béhague's source is in more than one way an offspring of Chase's early *Guide to Latin American Music*. First, Belgian-born Béhague was himself a pupil and protégé of Gilbert Chase. Secondly, even though Béhague's 1979 musicological textbook is far from being a mere catalog, its historical interpretations with respect to composers' preoccupations with native idioms seem to be in accordance with the premises laid out by Chase in 1945. In *MLAI*'s overview, for instance, one encounters an almost identical discourse adopted by Chase 34 years earlier. Although Béhague recognizes that the writing of an introductory text such as *MLAI* "may seem premature or presumptuous," his discourse goes on to consolidate the earlier diagnosis, which regards musical nationalism as the predominant stylistic pattern in twentieth-century Latin America. Not surprisingly, *MLAI* presents the history of Latin American art music as a trilogy that has at its center what the author considers to be a nationalist movement. Indeed, one-third of Béhague's 369-page book is devoted to "The Rise of Nationalism." The other two-thirds are devoted to colonial music and what the author calls "counter currents" (Béhague 1979, ix).

This paradigmatic view, common also to Chase's *Guide to Latin American Music*, portrays music in this region from a decidedly Eurocentric perspective, one that relies on a hierarchical and reductionist model. The difference is that, instead of locating nationalism in the periphery of a dominant, cosmopolitan majority, as in the case of paradigmatic representations of European music, it does exactly the opposite: it places musical nationalism in Latin America's "mainstream." Every other type of artistic expression is accorded a marginal role in the musical development of the region. According to *MLAI*, "musical nationalism dominated the art-music scene in Latin America during the first half of the 20th century." In addition, there were "currents opposed to it." These "counter currents," at first, "arose from an emulation of late nineteenth-century European Romantic music that bespoke an attitude of indifference to nationalism." Later, however, explains the author, "several composers in the various countries began to voice their frank *opposition*³ to nationalism by adhering to the most advanced techniques and esthetic of their period." Béhague speculates on the reason behind what he calls the "frank opposition to nationalism" of some Latin American composers, saying that it was a deliberate endeavor on their part "to gain recognition through the intrinsic quality of their works rather than through external means." *MLAI* categorizes the main non-nationalistic trends in Latin America as "post-Romantic, neo-Romantic, Impressionist, neo-Classic, Expressionist, Serialist, and heterogeneously

³Italics by Béhague.

experimental," and adds that there were composers who "cultivated varying styles in works which combined national and non-national stylistic elements" (ibid., 224-25).

Rather than a conclusion arrived at after careful and unbiased research, the consolidation of musical nationalism that according to *MLAI* took place in twentieth-century Latin America appears to be more the result of two related circumstances: first, the need to create a text that agrees with the editor's claim that the continent's musical cultures should be "viewed historically as independent developments within the larger Western tradition," and secondly, the lack of original musical terminology that would more appropriately represent the significant aesthetic peculiarities of these developments. Thus, *MLAI*'s discourse relies on a rhetoric that instead of describing the music, ends up perpetuating the inappropriate terminology itself. The result is a text full of bewildering passages embedded with all sorts of expressions derived from the term "nationalism," such as "national elements," "national character," "rhythmic-nationalistic elements," "national effect."⁴ However, a definition of nationalism, much less a discussion of the term itself and its ideological/aesthetical implications, is never provided.

As with most conventional literature on musical nationalism, the main problem in *MLAI*'s discourse is the fact that it takes for granted the reader's automatic identification with a term so inherently vague and multifarious as "nationalism." Its grayness and controversial nature is never acknowledged, much less discussed. Instead, the reader is simply left to guess. At the beginning, one would think that musical nationalism encompasses any work that incorporates elements of autochthonous music, no matter to what extent, within whatever stylistic context or type of technical procedures. But, as we saw earlier, *MLAI* lists several styles of music, for instance Impressionism, neo-Classic, Expressionism, etc., as though they were to be excluded from the nationalistic enterprise. But in this equation, where do we fit composers who adhered to expressionistic techniques of composing –like dodecaphony, for example— while still utilizing rhythmic gestures and melodic inflections clearly derived from folk or popular music? (Wonderful examples of this are the mature works of Panamanian Roque Cordero, such as his second symphony from 1956 or his 1962 violin concerto.)

Furthermore, *MLAI*'s section on opposing trends to musical nationalism leads the reader to infer that the works that fall under the nationalist umbrella are ultimately, and without

⁴Discussing works that use the very common 3 against 2 cross-rhythms, Behague goes as far as to say that this device "reveals the composer's awareness of the 'national' quality of hemiola" (p. 101). Thinking of Johannes Brahms, should one also consider the 3 against 2 metric dissonance so common in his works an indication of the "national" quality of the hemiola? What is the nationality of the hemiola, Venezuelan or German?

question, propagandistic and ideological rather than aesthetic or formalistic in nature. This is inferred in the argument that music incorporating popular elements achieves significance solely through "external means" and not through its intrinsic qualities. However, in contradiction to Béhague's claim, one finds that many composers consciously rely on external means for inspiration, a poem for example, without ever neglecting the final intrinsic qualities of the work. External means and intrinsic qualities go hand in hand, they are not mutually exclusive. A famous example is Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, which uses a text by Mallarmé as programmatic basis for the work and at the same time relies on a fascinating compositional procedure that could be appreciated for its formalistic attributes in and of themselves. The same is true of many, if not most, Latin American works that involve the manipulation or incorporation of some type of folk or popular music. But in *MLAI*, unfortunately, they are characterized as nationalistic on the basis of their supposed dependence upon external means.

Moreover, *MLAI* never acknowledges that certain works might fall at the crossroad of different procedures, techniques, or styles, which would make it inappropriate, even misleading, to force them into one specific category, such as nationalism. This rigid position leads to analyses that are very tenuous, or confusing at best, even of some of the most significant and better known works of the Latin American repertoire. A case in point is the author's brief stylistic analysis of Villa-Lobos's *Bachiana No. 1*:

“Some have interpreted the *Bachianas* as representing a neo-Classic trend rather than strict nationalism, but this interpretation is only a matter of selective emphasis. Neo-Classic elements are most evident in the texture . . . the use of fugue or fugato sections as a formal principle might be construed as a neo-Classic device, but imitation is also characteristic of several popular Brazilian music genres, as are frequent ostinato figures and long pedal tones, both of which appear in the *Bachianas*. There are, nevertheless, instances in which both texture and form seem to overshadow the more purely rhythmic-nationalistic elements. The Fugue ("Conversa") of *Bachianas No. 1* is a case in point: the subject, in repeated notes and syncopations, has a clear local flavor-- according to the composer, it is in the manner of the *chorão* . . .--but its nationalistic effect is minimized by the polyphonic texture. Neo-Classicism presupposes abstract music, but Villa-Lobos could not abandon a programmatic concept. Even in the "fugue" just mentioned, he had in mind, as the title indicates, a conversation between four *chorões* competing for the thematic advantage in successive questions and answers.

Thus, ultimately, a national character, however subtle, predominates in the *Bachianas Brasileiras*.” (Ibid., 201)

Despite the insistence upon categorizing the *Bachianas No. 1* as nationalistic, this fragment of *MLAI* suggests that there is equal amount of evidence pointing toward categorizing this work also as neo-Classical. Indeed, one can as easily argue against the former under the premise that, in Béhague's own words, "this interpretation is only a matter of selective emphasis." Not accepting the possibility that this work could be neo-Classical because of a supposed program that Villa-Lobos followed is very weak: titling a fugue "conversation" hardly qualifies it as programmatic music. As a matter of fact, in conventional Western musicology, a fugue is often referred to as a conversation between two main protagonists, namely the subject and its counter-subject. The fact that Villa-Lobos relates the fugue of his *Bachiana No. 1* to a competition between four *Chorões* is no reason to draw associations with nationalism. Instead, this relationship is better characterized as a pedagogical device, a means for the composer to teach the procedures of a fugue using a local musical genre as example. The truth is that there is nothing in this music suggesting that political ideology takes precedence over formalistic considerations.

3. *Nationalism vs. Modernism*

To show the extent to which *MLAI* frames the art music of Latin America under the umbrella of a nationalist dogma, I will provide excerpts demonstrating the author's interpretations of several composers' styles. For the purpose of comparison, I set Slonimsky's 1945 interpretations of the same composers next to them (see the appendix to this chapter). It is not necessary to discuss the differences at great length: the contrast in the choice of terminology and emphasis speaks for itself. Suffice it to point out how pervasive the use of the term nationalism and its derivatives is in Béhague's text and how well Slonimsky manages without it. Moreover, it becomes quite apparent in these excerpts that Slonimsky does not resort to works by European composers as stylistic models by which to illustrate and compare the works of their Latin American counterparts. *MLAI*, on the contrary, seems unable to dispense with them. As a consequence, this text presents us with a distinct paradox, the result of what psychologists call a cognitive dissonance.⁵ On the one hand, it advocates approaching the developments of art music

⁵Cognitive dissonance is defined as an intellectual conflict resulting from incongruous beliefs or attitudes held simultaneously.

in Latin America as historically independent from Europe, claiming that while European art music spread in multiple directions during the nineteenth and twentieth century, Latin America reached a consensus of purpose (represented by the different strands of the nationalist ideology) that became the *lingua franca* for most composers of the continent, even beyond the middle of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the author is unable to refer to these composers without contrasting their works with the styles and standards of their European counterparts. This is how, Béhague's professed good intentions notwithstanding, some of the more original and unique voices from Latin America end up appearing as though they were mere emulations or, at best, satellites of styles and techniques originating in Europe. For example, according to *MLAI*, Revueltas' *Sensemaya* is reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; the early works of Cuba's Alejandro García Caturla are influenced by Satie, Milhaud, and Stravinsky; Argentinian Juan Carlos Paz's concept of twelve-tone technique is more akin to Alban Berg's than to Schoenberg's, so on and so forth.

But perhaps the most revealing aspect of this comparison is the fact that for Béhague these composers are unquestionably nationalists while for Slonimsky they are, instead, better characterized as modernists. Regardless of how much these two terms are historically intertwined, this difference is of considerable significance. The choice of one category over the other suggests each author's emphasis of different goals, one politically motivated and the other founded upon aesthetic concerns; one ideological, the other formalistic. These different emphases, in turn, greatly affect the way this music is perceived.

The implications of this discrepancy in categorization open up a whole new topic, which is discussed at length in the concluding chapter. However, I should clarify that this difference in mode of representation is not due to the time gap, namely 37 years, that exists between the two publications. In other words, it would be too suspiciously easy to regard Béhague's 1979 interpretations more up-dated, and, thus, more valuable from the historiographic point of view because he approaches this period in retrospect, from the vantage point of four decades of historical developments. Likewise, it is too simplistic to regard Slonimsky's 1945 assessment as too embedded in the notion of the times as to possess real musicological value more than fifty years later. It is more complex than this. We should not forget that, as we have seen in this chapter, by the time Slonimsky published his *Music of Latin America* Gilbert Chase was already advocating the nationalist dogma as the principle by which to interpret the core of Latin America's musical arts. In addition, several years earlier, in 1941, Otto Mayer-Serra had

published his *Panorama de la música mexicana*,⁶ which contained a lengthy chapter on what he called "Musical Nationalism in Mexico." As a matter of fact, Slonimsky acknowledges Mayer-Serra's book—and quotes it on several occasions—but chooses to maintain the concept of nationalism at a distance, purposely preferring the concept of modernism as the basis of his interpretations. We should take Slonimsky's modernist stance with regard to composers in Latin America as a very conscious choice, one that perhaps holds a key to an unexplored and new mode of representation for the art music of Latin America.

4. *Nationalism and Recent Music Scholarship in Latin America*

While Slonimsky's choice of rhetoric remains an isolated case up to this day, the scholarly crusade to establish musical nationalism as the continent's sole and undisputed *lingua franca* has many advocates. This, in fact, is still an ongoing project that has been almost unanimously embraced from the inside of the continent as well. Recent publications by Latin American scholars are examples of the extent of this project. In the late 1980s, for instance, several books were published in different countries that show the pervasiveness of this mode of representation among native scholarship. I would like to mention and briefly elaborate on three publications that demonstrates this overruling trend: Juan María Veniard's *La música nacional Argentina* (1986), Yolanda Moreno Rivas's *Rostros del nacionalismo en la música mexicana* (1989), and Hugo López Chirico's *La "Cantata Criolla" de Antonio Estévez* (1987). These texts, as most dealing with the subject, take for granted the alleged inevitability of the nationalist movement. They treat the topic in an essentialist manner, as though nationalism had a life of its own, independent of the works supposedly created under its powerful spell and the idiosyncrasies of each individual composer. For these authors, nationalism was a moving train that composers had to jump into and later jump out of—if they didn't choose to ride in it until it lost all steam—an enterprise that was much greater than the sum of its parts, bigger than the works themselves.

The extent of this mode of representation is made evident in the question that Juan María Veniard raises early on in his book: "Is the breadth and span of nationalism due to the fact that the movement stumbled upon composers of great talent or to its inherent strength, which brought out the composers' best virtues?" (Veniard 1986, 15). The question is left unanswered. But his discourse implies that had it not been for the nationalist ideology in and of itself, the talent

⁶Reprinted in 1996.

of composers who ascribed to it would have not shone and might even have remained dormant. Similarly, the wording and rhetoric in Hugo López Chirico's book can be interpreted to mean that the aesthetic features of Antonio Estévez's *Cantata Criolla* did not grow out of a nationalist sentiment in a natural, self-evident way but that, instead, they had to be justified within the movement. This meant that the analysis of Estévez's masterpiece had to be "inserted" *a posteriori* and by force into the nationalist movement's framework. Even the title of one of the chapters in the book clearly attests to this: "The Cantata Criolla's *Insertion* into the Musical Nationalism of Latin America" (López Chirico 1987, 250). In fact, in order to, in his words, "ascribe" the work to this movement, the author resorted to an elaborate account of the different stages that comprise what he calls "the evolution of nationalism in Latin America" (*ibid.*, 252). These different stages, which resemble the scheme described by Otto Mayer-Serra in his 1941 *Panorama de la música mexicana*, imply a closed and completed cycle, one that locates Estévez's *Cantata Criolla* toward the end, in what López Chirico calls *postnationalismo autoafirmativo*, or self-assertive nationalism. Restricted by this essentialist scheme, the work's aesthetic attributes are stripped of their potential to generate open-ended and visionary interpretations. Unfortunately, under López Chirico's scrutiny, however well intentioned, Estévez's *Cantata Criolla* represents the culmination of a jaded era, a last breath of air in a dying trend rather than a window into a new and potentially influential direction in music.

Nevertheless, however inevitable and imposing the concept of music nationalism seems to be for these Latin American authors, they cannot help stumbling into ambiguities and contradictions that surface in their own rhetoric. These ambiguities underscore the urgent need to revise and reconsider the so-called nationalist movement in the musical arts of Latin America. Yolanda Moreno Rivas's text, for instance, raises perhaps the most problematic dichotomy of the nationalist paradigm. At the very opening of her book, Moreno Rivas states that "during the second decade of the twentieth century, Mexico saw the birth of an aesthetic trend clearly identifiable, which we designate—for lack of a better definition—with the term nationalism" (Moreno Rivas 1989, 17). From such a provocative opening sentence, one expects the author to explore the reasons for the lack of appropriate terminology and eventually adopt a critical stance against the concept of nationalism and its indiscriminate application to the musical reality of Mexico. Instead, she proceeds to describe Mexican art music using a conventional discourse, one that, once again, portrays musical nationalism in Latin America as an omnipresent force that would have existed regardless of the works. While Moreno Rivas does formulate and attempt to answer interesting questions related to the topic*for example, which aesthetic attitudes were

promoted by musical nationalism promote and what solutions were found*she never explains what the term nationalism means and how it is applied to music, and whether or not the Latin American composers commonly characterized as nationalist are indeed nationalist.

In short, we encounter time and time again, and almost without exception, Latin American musical scholarship that treats nationalism as a universal and inherently valid principle. It is as though musicologists think they are simply recognizing the obvious when they portray as nationalists Heitor Villa-Lobos, Alberto Ginastera, Silvestre Revueitas, Antonio Estévez, Alejandro García Caturla, as well as so many others. To them, these composers were expressing a universal goal through their music: the cultural sovereignty of their respective nations, which, in turn, are the common institutions of humanity. Therefore, they find that there is no need to theorize about nationalism. But, is there? Is nationalism really so incontestable and in no need of examination?

5. Nationalism under Scrutiny

Ernest Gellner's writings can help answer this question. His book on nationalism shows that its non-contentious appearance is paradigmatic in any topic or realm of life connected with the concept. However, Gellner is very critical of the self-asserting, universal status granted to nationalism because "cultural and social organizations are universal and perennial. States and nationalisms are not" (Gellner 1997, 5). This simple yet powerful realization can very quickly erode the apparent universal nature of nationalism. Indeed, under the scrutiny of literature by social theorists such as Gellner (or Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Montserrat Guibernau, etc.), the nationalistic representations of Latin American art music, so common and abundant in the literature of music, become trivial and unsubstantiated. Gellner makes us aware that, far from being indisputably realistic portrayals of music, these representations are a product of how nationalism sees itself, rather than what nationalism, in his view, really is.

Nationalism does indeed see itself as a universal, perennial and inherently —self-evidently— valid principle. It is, on this view, simply "natural" that people should wish to live with their own kind, that they should be averse to living with people of different cultures and, above all, that they should resent being governed by them. This is perhaps the commonest of "theories" of nationalism: in one sense it is barely a theory, because it treats the principle as something inherent in human nature, or the very principles of social organization, so obvious as not really to require any explanation." (Gellner 1997, 7)

In Gellner's view, it is not always the case that humans need, or even want to remain confined to, a particular social unit or cultural convergence among their own kind, excluding others. Very often men and women have lived in units that violate this principle, without any awareness of the alleged universal principle of nationalism. Perhaps one of the most crucial issues raised by the author is the danger that comes along with considering the supposed universality of nationalism as a theory. Not only is it false, but, more significantly, "the self-evident status which it ascribes to itself makes those who hold it fail to see that they are holding a theory at all." As Gellner explains, those who apply the nationalist principle, no matter to which subject, do not see that nationalism is a thought construct that is contentious and merits examination. Instead, they understand it to be a self-evident category, which, naturally, pervades all spheres of humanity and society. "They think they are simply recognizing the obvious," writes Gellner; "they are not theorizing at all." The danger, in his words, is that "what is not perceived as a contentious theory cannot be corrected. If, on top of all this, it is false, the situation is unfortunate." (Ibid.)

6. Nationalism: Factual Statement or Value Judgment?

How unfortunate is labeling most of the works by Latin America composers under the rubric of nationalism? In what sense is this so far undisputed characterization dangerous? and, furthermore, is this a portrayal that requires correcting?

The consequences of the representation patterns I have dealt with in this chapter should not be underestimated when attempting to understand the reasons for the current marginalized status of the Latin American art music repertoire. It should not be very hard to equate its exclusion from the musical canon with the constraints imposed upon it by years of monolithic interpretations and shallow assessments. After all, we should remember Carl Dahlhaus's assertion that "[Western] music aesthetic is shaped more by the philosophical and literary traditions that provide its categories than by music itself, which is its subject matter."⁷ In the previous chapters I pointed out some dramatic consequences of this phenomenon in relation to Latin American art music. Therefore, I want to provide reasons that make it absolutely necessary

⁷As quoted in Neubauer 1986, 3.

and urgent to reconsider the nationalistic interpretations foisted upon most of the great twentieth-century composers from Latin America.

The cause of this current predicament is twofold. In the first place, there is much to be concerned about in relying on a self-evident assumption rather than on a proper theoretical framework when attempting to interpret or portray any sort of musical expression. By applying Gellner's critical stance to the representational modalities offered in this chapter, one becomes painfully aware to what extent the works by Latin American composers have been victims of a great methodological error. This vast repertoire deserves a chance to be studied and interpreted under more scientific and suitable analytical strategies than the ones employed so far. Secondly, and perhaps more obvious, the stigma attached to all things nationalistic, especially when they relate to music, has without doubt inflicted a great deal of damage upon the repertoire in question. No other label encountered in musicological literature bears more pejorative connotations than nationalism. This is understandable if one considers that all the other -isms, like Romanticism, Classicism, Impressionism, place music within a certain philosophical framework that is linked, in turn, to a historical continuum. Instead, nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be, if not one and the same, at least congruent. Nationalism is an ideology that has very little to do with philosophy or aesthetics. Thus, labeling a work as nationalistic inevitably binds it to some kind of self-serving, exclusionist ideology--a primitive one, I might add. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, while nationalism is a powerful political aid, as a philosophy it is poor and even incoherent. He reminds us that "unlike most other -isms, nationalism has never produced its own thinkers: no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes or Webers. This 'emptiness' easily gives rise, among cosmopolitan and polylingual intellectuals, to a certain condescension . . . one can rather quickly conclude that there is 'no there there'."⁸

I have always found it surprising that, even though this "certain condescension" attached to nationalism has never been foreign to the realm of art music, conventional musicology dealing with Latin American art music has seemingly remained oblivious to it. As early as the middle of the nineteenth century the narrow brand of nationalism in music had outspoken critics, among whom were such unlikely composers as Schumann and Wagner. While accepting that musical creation was inevitably bound to the land of each particular composer, in his music reviews Schumann advocated the need to sacrifice a particular music physiognomy for what he

⁸Benedict Anderson, "The Nation and the Origins of National Consciousness," in Guibernau 1997, 44.

called the *weltbürgerlich*, or those supposed "universal" features that makes music capable of reaching the most cosmopolitan of souls (Dahlhaus 1989, 37). Wagner was even more adamant about doing away with the term "nationalism" as it was commonly applied to music. For him, the nationalist trend, with capital 'N,' only served the interests of the old order. Nationalism was the enemy of what he liked to refer to as *das Allgemeinmenschliche* or the common denominator of humanity, the "general human lot," which, according to Wagner's own terminology, was synonymous with the "natural" and "original" —as opposed to the contrived "historical" and "conventional" (Dahlhaus 1980, 83).

Already by the early 1900s, composers in North and South America were making statements that also demonstrate how conscious they were of the belief that, as Benedict Anderson points out, "there is no there there" in nationalist artistic endeavors. For instance, in a lecture given at Columbia University, Edward McDowell was quoted as saying,

“National music has no place in art for its characteristics may be duplicated by anyone who takes the fancy to do so. On the other hand, the vital element in music--personality--stands alone. . . . Music that can be made by ‘recipe’ is not music, but ‘tailoring.’” (Levy 1983, 16)

One hears echoes of McDowell's condemnation of nationalist artistic endeavors in the writings of Mexican Carlos Chávez. Perhaps one of the composers who has been most victimized by nationalist interpretations, Chávez always made sure to maintain his music at great distance from the nationalist ideology. In her article "Los escritos periodísticos de Carlos Chávez: Una fuente para la historia de la música en México" (The journalistic writings of Carlos Chávez: a source for the history of Mexican music), Leonora Saavedra uncovers the great contradiction between what historiographic accounts say about Chávez, commonly characterized as one of the leaders of the Mexican nationalist school, and his conscious effort to disassociate himself from nationalism. Most illuminating is the conclusion that Chávez arrives at in 1952:

“The problem surrounding the issue of national art music has nothing to do with whether the so-called "musical nationalism" is a good or bad doctrine. To claim to possess masterpieces of a "national" stature, a country must, first and foremost, possess a true personality, and, in addition, it must also possess great composers. The problem is that simple.” (Saavedra 1989, 86)

Adding to the evidence that proves music nationalism a highly contested and even dysfunctional concept are several books and articles that have become popular for their critical stance toward the narrow interpretations of this principle. Examples are Ralph Vaughan Williams's *National Music and Other Essays* (1987; first published in 1963) and Sidney Finkelstein's *Composer and Nation* (1960). These authors were moved precisely by the misconceptions surrounding musical nationalism and by the prejudice they found against works that, perhaps arbitrarily, had been ascribed to it. The gist of their argument is that there is no contradiction between "national expression" and "universality." These two terms should not be understood as antonyms--nor should one be considered the norm and the other the anomaly. "The tunes of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert are so very much like [German] *Volkslieder*," writes Vaughan Williams; "what we call the classical idiom is the Teutonic idiom, and it is absolutely as narrowly national as that of Grieg or Mussorgsky" (Vaughan Williams 1987, 55).

But perhaps no musicologist tackled the problematic implications in ascribing nationalism to music better than Charles Seeger. For the First Inter-American Seminar of Composers held at Indiana University in 1965, Seeger wrote a fascinating paper that blatantly criticized the theme chosen for the meeting, which was entitled "Nationalism, Traditional Music and the Composer." Seeger begins the paper by pointing out the effects of attaching the suffix "-ist" or "-ism" to adjectives such as "national" or "traditional." He makes the reader aware that adding a suffix changes the reference from one that is a mere matter of fact to one that also implies critical judgment. Implying that the wording of the topic chosen for the meeting is already prejudiced in and of itself, Seeger writes:

“Probably few of the composers who like being referred to (...) as "national assets" would enjoy being called "nationalist" or "traditionalist." But it is when these words are regarded as nouns and fresh adjectives are made of them that the full weight of pejorative critical judgment appears. To be *nationalistic* or *traditionalistic* is virtually to be damned. We must distinguish, then, between an ascription of the terms "national" and "traditional" to a composer or his work and the claim by him that it is national[ist] or traditional[ist]. The former is merely a factual statement; the latter, a value judgment. In the latter case, the author automatically lays

himself open to a charge that he is trying to make people believe his work is to be valued in terms other than its own worth.”⁹

I find that Charles Seeger's appraisal could not have been more correct. One is constantly reminded of the devastating results of arbitrarily attaching adjectives to composer's name. Not only scholarly texts but casual journals and magazines are sources of great injustices perpetrated against Latin American masters. Many examples can be found. One cannot help being shocked, for instance, when reading how the significance of a Mexican genius like Silvestre Revueltas —commonly categorized as a nationalist— is dismissed in an article by *Village Voice's* regular music contributor Tom Johnson. His review of several issues of a 1970s West Coast avant-gardist magazine called *Sounding* commends the editor for including essays on Harry Partch and Lou Harrison but shows little enthusiasm for articles devoted to Revueltas because, in the author's words, "the emphasis of Revueltas seems to have a political basis, since as an early 20th-century Mexican, he represents the Third World." The condescension toward Revueltas expressed in this article becomes even more evident when the composer is reduced to being described as one who made "extensive use of Indian and folk material in his music and had strong nationalistic tendencies. He identified with the lower classes and often spoke out against the American and European oriented musical life in his country, which he viewed as a kind of imperialism" (Johnson 1989, 96).

Reviews and commentaries like this one are not rare. As Charles Seeger explained, assessments of the music by composers that are labeled as nationalists cannot escape prejudice, because the adjective itself implies a value judgment *a priori* rather than a factual statement *a posteriori*. The representations of Revueltas's music, as well as that of most other Latin American so-called nationalist composers, are often conspicuously lacking in aesthetic evaluation. Instead of a richly original and vastly complex artistic expression one is left with the impression of a highly politicized shadow covering an impoverished skeleton.

⁹Charles Seeger, "Tradition and the (North) American Composer: A Contribution to the Ethnomusicology of the Western World," in *List* 1967, 196-97.

7. Representation and the Manipulation of Time and Space

Rather than representations, this chapter has shown that we most often find misrepresentations of the art music from Latin America. The supposed Latin American national school of composition is one of the clearest examples of these misrepresentations. As a consensus-seeking picture of Latin America, nationalism is suspiciously simplistic. The reality is devilishly more complex. The pejorative nature of musical nationalism is so obvious and the negative effect upon works ascribed to it so profound that one cannot help but think that the insistence upon categorizing Latin American works as nationalistic hides an ethnocentric strategy of segregation.

It should be pointed out that the patterns of representation exposed throughout this chapter correspond in some way to the musicological interpretations of European nineteenth-century so-called nationalist music, which Carl Dahlhaus criticized so outspokenly. Hence, I believe that Dahlhaus's argument may hold a key to disentangling the mechanisms of this strategy. In his studies of the music of the late nineteenth century, Dahlhaus makes a substantial case against the simplistic usage of the principle of nationalism and the mistake of confusing it with the concept of a "national" musical style. He stresses the fact that it is impossible to pin down successfully the nationalist sentiment of a composer "by the mere act of describing tangible musical characteristics" (Dahlhaus 1980, 85). Similarly, one cannot pin down the aesthetic attributes of a piece of music solely by describing the ideology of its creator. Dahlhaus also shows the complexity of the relationship between music and nationality and the changes it has undergone over time, recommending, for instance, that distinctions be made between different types of nationalisms, such as "bourgeois nationalism" as opposed to "socialist nationalism." What Dahlhaus finds most problematic is the inability to judge music for something other than its "ideological tendency." As he concludes, this inability "obviously has more to do with the explainer's desire for simplicity than with the true nature of the matter in hand . . . a tendency which doesn't describe nexuses but instead attempts reductions" (Dahlhaus 1980, 79-80).

Departing from the type of logic set forth by Dahlhaus, we can begin to understand how musical nationalism in Latin America is not so much a fact as a musicological construct. In other words, we may well have to conclude that the representations of Latin American twentieth-century art music speak more about the nationalist interests of musicologists than about the

intentions of the composers —and even less about the music itself. All the issues raised by Dahlhaus in his essays on nineteenth-century nationalism can be transplanted and applied to the interpretations made of Latin American twentieth-century music. With this parallelism in mind, several questions arise: is it unreasonable to think that musical nationalism in Latin America is actually a smoke screen for the struggle of conventional musicology to understand and come to terms with different theories proposed for nineteenth-century European nationalism? Is it too farfetched to conclude that Latin America became a laboratory of musicological inquiry in which to test the effects and side effects of the nationalist interpretations made of European nineteenth-century music? Could musical nationalism in Latin America, as described so far by conventional musicology, be the product of nostalgia for the old-fashioned concept of the nation-state, nostalgia for the supposed inherent "natural" or "universal" quality of nationalist sentiments?

Borrowing from anthropologist Johannes Fabian's explanation of how the object of anthropology gains scientific status (Fabian 1983), we can say that Latin American art music made it into the musicological literature "by undergoing a double visual fixation, as perceptual image and as illustration of a kind of knowledge." Its status and validity within Western musicology has depended on distance, spatial and temporal. As object of knowledge, this music had to be separated, distanced from the Western musical canon. It seems that for scholars like Chase, Mayer-Serra, and Béhague, as well as for many Latin American scholars, musical nationalism is not so much the result as the prerequisite of musicological inquiry. In other words, conventional musicology has not "found" so much as it has "posited" nationalist traits in the music by Latin American composers. In doing so, musicology has succeeded in maintaining distance between North and South, West and non-West, mostly by manipulating, however unconsciously, temporal coexistence through the denial of coequality.

I believe this distance to be the result, in part, of what Dahlhaus calls the "retroactive effect" of nationalism. "Like historicism," he writes, "a theoretical approach to music which influenced its historical development, nationalism has a retroactive effect on the facts of which it was or purported to be, the reflection" (Dahlhaus 1980, 80-81). This would explain one way in which Latin American art music became territorialized. Nationalist interpretations seek to frame the parameters by which a certain "imagined community"¹¹ is identified. While there is no doubt about the great extent to which history and tradition fuel the process of imagining a community, the only sure way an imagined community materializes is through validation of the space or

¹¹Term coined by Benedict Anderson.

territory it occupies, which is the sole embodiment of the "nation." Thus, music that is valued as the epitome of nationalism, like so many great works by Latin American composers, would naturally belong to a community that is valued more for the land and territory that nourishes it rather than for its historical and cultural significance.

The unfortunate result of this complicated dynamic is a polarized and asymmetrical picture of Western art music. This picture is clearly delineated by a high fence created by the tacit strategy of sublimation on both ends. To use Fernando Coronil's terms, the fence guards the separation between historicity and territorialization. On one side of the fence are the composers whose voices have been sublimated and glorified in such way that they have transcended and dwarfed the territories and socio-political realities in which they originated. These are voices that live perpetually in time, historicized, almost in a spaceless vacuum. In sharp contrast, on the other side of the fence are territories and socio-political realities that have been exalted and revered to a point that the voices contained in them appear dwarfed, inhibited, and asphyxiated. These voices have been confined exclusively to the parameters dictated by space, and territorialized by representational practices resembling quicksand.

Both of these paradigms are the product of occidentalist representations made by individuals on both sides of the fence. Both sides are impoverished by the distortion inherent in Occidentalism. Unfortunately, there is one side that has much more at stake than the other; there is one side at a greater disadvantage because the remembrance of that side's past and future achievements has been jeopardized. There is a clear loser in this picture. It is not necessary to mention on which side of the fence lie the voices at the greatest loss. Clearly a revision of the ongoing distorted representation of Western music is way overdue.