Clandestine recordings:
The use of the cassette in the music of the political resistance during the dictatorship (Chile, 1973-1989)\(^1\)

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Abstract
A number of studies have examined the intense cultural activity of the political resistance during the Chilean dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1989), which included, as one of its most significant aspects, the creation and circulation of music among political dissidents. In this context, the cassette, as a phonographic device, acquired a special usage, becoming a fundamental instrument for the transfer and distribution of censured and clandestine music. Cassettes allowed auditors, for the first time, to choose and record their preferred songs at home, and to tape forbidden material. This made possible not only the circulation of political music, but also the establishment of a financial source for the clandestinised political organizations through the sale of pirated cassettes. This paper will examine three qualities inherent to the cassette that propelled it to this central role: the unfettered public access to blank cassettes, the malleability of the tape, and its surface opacity, in other words, its ability to hide subversive messages without revealing any exterior signs. Multiple genres of music took shelter in the copied cassette: censored examples of the Nueva Canción Chilena (“New Chilean Song”), recordings carried out in exile with the support of the international community, and other productions conceived in Chile by and for those operating in secrecy.

Keywords: cassette; dictatorship; resistance; clandestinity; secrecy; Chile.
INTRODUCTION
Musical censorship is a practice that has been carried out repeatedly by authoritarian regimes, and the case of the dictatorship in Chile under General Augusto Pinochet is no exception. A number of studies have revealed the persecution of musicians linked to the government of Salvador Allende leading to exile, prison or death for some of these musicians. Not only people, but also musical productions were the object of persecution. It is known that a large quantity of phonographic materials was destroyed by the military, both through the appropriation of the national record factory as well as through the confiscation of materials considered to be “subversive.” The practice of military raids and confiscations in an environment of pervasive terror allows us to understand here why the censorship imposed on creators and interpreters, as well as listeners, was accompanied by self-censorship on the part of the population. In the same manner, listeners developed particular ways of listening and distributing musical material.

Within the networks of political opposition, the cassette, as a phonographic device, played a decisive role in the production and distribution of censored and clandestine music. It is believed that three characteristics of the cassette allowed it to be “the protagonist” in this history of musical resistance. First, the cassette’s low cost, which allowed for access en masse. Second, the tape’s malleability, in other words, the cassette introduced the practice in which listeners made their own recordings at home. And finally, the small size of the cassette and its ability to hide the tape’s “recording status”, were two characteristics that converted the cassette into an exceptional tool for hiding clandestine sounds. This study examines how this musical device helped to preserve certain censored musical repertoires, but also how this allowed for the creation and dissemination of new sounds of resistance, especially those produced from and for clandestinity.

CENSORED MUSIC
Amongst the different mechanisms of repression carried out against the musical field, the establishment of a curfew should be highlighted as it lead to the restriction of nocturnal public activity, and consequently, the closing of the job positions of many popular musicians, the creation of black lists in different work spaces and places of dissemination like universities and mass media, and certain cultural policies that played a large role in the destruction of the cultural movement linked to Unidad Popular (“Popular Unity”). One of these actions was the “famous” banning of “Andean” musical instruments, along with the intimidation of certain well-known folk artists, in a meeting led by the Colonel Pedro Ewing at the end of 1973. Another common practice was the distribution of flyers from the governmental cultural organizations, addressed to record labels, prohibiting the publication of musical material from artists like Violeta Parra, Quilapayún and Víctor Jara, amongst others. In this context, the alternative broadcasting stations like Radio Chilena – which operated under the protection of the Office of Vicaría de la Solidaridad of the Archbishop of Santiago – played an important role in keeping the restricted repertoires
“on the air”. The “pirated” cassettes also facilitated the duplication of rare albums that survived the confiscations and the destruction brought about by the listeners themselves when they realized the danger they faced by owning objects identified with the left.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO ACCESS

As studies carried out by the Centro de Indagación y Expresión Cultural y Artística (“Centre for research and cultural and artistic expression”, or CENECA), demonstrated early on, the transformation of Chile’s economic system carried out by the military government involved fostering imports, which was accompanied by the accelerated introduction of new audio technologies. As such, tape players quickly replaced record players, since, despite the increasing poverty of the population, the possibilities of buying through credit were also encouraged by the dictatorship. In the same manner, record labels replaced vinyl records with cassettes. But this replacement did not happen at the same speed when it came to radio broadcasting, which lead to the reduction of Chilean music played on air, since the new productions were edited on cassette while the radios continued to use record players. Nonetheless, a few radio stations, like the aforementioned Radio Chilena, continued to play local music recorded before the coup d'état. But in general, the acquisition of cassettes and tape players on the part of listeners coincided with an absence of Chilean music in the mass media.

It’s important to point out that this absence of local music is also related to political censorship, since a large number of popular musicians had been part of the cultural movement that was interrupted by the dictatorship. In this sense, the mass popularization of blank cassettes reveals two situations:

First, the introduction of new technology in Chile coincided with that which has been described in other countries (like the People’s Republic of China and England), since the mass access to blank cassettes had provoked, according to sociologist Anny Rivera, a negative influence on record sales (Rivera 1984, p. 15). Knowing that low cost is a predominant factor for their mass popularization, the impossibility of obtaining certain desired music in a legal way intensified the importance of having access to the cassette to preserve censored repertoires, at times when the crisis of the local music industry, the closure of job positions for musicians and the political persecution of artists generated a vicious cycle.

Second, the distancing of “leftist” music from the official sphere conditioned the development of alternative networks where diverse cultural expressions of resistance were disseminated. Politically committed organizations, intimate meeting spaces and networks of “trustworthy” people formed a favourable environment for “hand to hand” circulation of clandestine materials.

In summary, the absence of local music on the radio, the increasing poverty of consumers, the censorship of certain repertoires and the intensification of political activity of resistance fostered home-taping, resulting in the moving of musical creation and reception to private, domestic or clandestine life. Within the logic of
pirating and distribution of prohibited music existed the idea of collecting songs “to sing along with them” (Fuenzalida 1987, p. 82), indicating an intimate performance established between the listener and the recording in a clandestine space.

It should be noted that the promotion of these repertoires was also developed in meeting spaces such as the peña and solidarity actions. As such, this practice is not only individual, but community-based as well. In fact, these places served as a space to exchange materials in a multifaceted manner. On one hand, there was the circulation of cassettes between listeners, according to the logic of tape trading, with the goal of sharing music that was hard to access. On the other hand, there was the presentation and dissemination of musical creations that were censored, in a way that could recuperate a workspace and source of income. Finally, also with regard to financing, there was the sale of “pirated” recordings in order to collect money to help organizations committed to political resistance. All of these dimensions gave pirating a “benevolent” aura, as even artists offered their recordings to be pirated so as to collaborate with common objectives.

The cassette therefore allowed not only for the circulation of music with a “political message”, but also provided a financial income for clandestine political organizations through the sale of “pirated” copies. This opening was possible thanks to the unique qualities of this device.

**Malleability**

As previously mentioned, for the first time listeners were recording music in their own homes. As it became more and more mass-produced, this apparatus, which lent itself to home-usage, encouraged cassette reproduction outside the commercial sphere promoting autonomous propagation. For the first time people who were not “specialists” could record sounds, music and at any time. In this way, the line between author and audience blurred.

Undoubtedly, one virtue of the cassette is its prominent malleability, thanks to which the user could record multiple sound types. The cassette stimulated personal compilation, which began to make it feasible for people to exclusively select the elements of interest to the listener.

It’s interesting to note that, with the concept of recording a compilation of songs, the notion of reproduction or copy appears to be inapplicable, since here the act of re-recording cannot be anything but distinct and creative. In this act, the original-reproduction dichotomy would also lose its meaning if it is understood that every sample, every cassette recorded at home or outside of the industry, could be considered both unique and variable. A tape can be recorded time and again, generating layers of sound. In effect, each cassette copied at home constitutes a phonographic work due to its singularity, with its cuts and interventions, and the way it operates superseding its documentary function, being that the recorded sounds are experienced as the performance takes place. In other words, it is a work that is not meant to be an original, since it is quite necessarily articulated within a circulation that accepts its vulnerability as a modifiable “sound product”.

OPACITY

Finally, the quality that inclined the cassette towards clandestinity is identified as its “opaque” nature. The notion of “opacity” was chosen to be able to understand the aspects of this phonographic device, which, as opposed to records, helped with storage and circulation, not only of music, but also of other types of clandestine sounds. Here, tapes are the main point of reference because, as this medium does not reveal the traces of the recording at first sight, it implies that a new listener has to attentively explore the entire tape to “know what it contains”. While this characteristic may appear insignificant, it becomes less so when the purpose is to hide sound information, making it even more useful when the material is re-recordable, as previously explained.

The cassette’s opacity therefore comes from the possibility of not having to title or be left with a final recording. This device allows for successive interventions without “marking” its surface. As such, the tape’s constant availability to be recorded on resides in its capacity to remain blank, or at the very least hide its “recording status”. Even though it is possible to protect the recording by breaking the tabs on the top of the plastic casing that holds the tape, it can potentially be covered again, with tape for example, in which case it would continue to be opaque. In addition, since the cassette is small and light, so much so that it can be discreetly tucked away and transported, it easily avoids discovery. This put it in an advantageous position as compared to the vinyl record, the size of which prevents it from being hidden.

Recordings

So now, what type of music was found in these cassettes? There was the Nueva Canción Chilena (“New Chilean Song”), prohibited since the coup d’état; Canto Nuevo, one of the most important alternative music scenes during the dictatorship; and the Nueva Trova Cubana, just to name the canonical repertoires of the political opposition. Earlier studies have described quite clearly how Silvio Rodríguez’s recordings survived (Morris 1986, p. 129; Rivera and Torres 1981, pp. 15-16), for example, or the large number of “emblematic” recordings of the Chilean left among young listeners of the 1980s, such as Violeta Parra and Victor Jara (Rivera 1984, p. 19).

However, other nearly unexplored sound repertoires are those that are far from the “artistic” sphere, adhering solely to truly militant actions. These were recordings coming from those in exile and from international solidarity as well as to productions imagined and carried out within Chile from and for clandestinity. Their purpose was for them to be used as weapons of resistance, openly proclaiming the slogans of the opposition and exacerbating their propagandistic, unifying and financial function for the political cause.

Such is the case, for example, of the production of material by the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (“Revolutionary Left Movement”, or MIR), whose clandestine publications included “the production of cassettes with special programs from Radio Liberación, containing recorded testimonies of the Chilean people’s
struggle. The cassettes are copied by the hundreds and have a wide reception by the masses” (El Rebelde en la clandestinidad 1983, p. 5). This quote suggests an optimistic expectation of the network where cassettes circulated. The quote continues, “El Rebelde is part of an abundant agitation and political dissemination circulating within the clandestine labyrinth of the mass movement” (ibid.). With similar goals, in 1985 the communist newspaper El Siglo launched El Partido a Violeta (Unknown 1985b), a cassette paying homage to Violeta Parra, whose cover announced “The songs that your people sing” (Boletín de Prensa 1985, p. 2).

Musical albums produced within militant activity included El camotazo (Various authors 1986a), edited by the Juventud Comunista (“Young Communist League”) in 1986, which included the participation of various distinguished musicians, such as Mario Rojas and Transporte Urbano; FPMR Canto popular (Unknown circa 1985), the political cassette of the Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, about which there is not much information; and Vamos Chile (Various authors 1986b), produced through an alliance among the cultural sectors of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, under the direction of Gabriela Pizarro, accompanied by renowned folk artists (see Jordan and Rojas 2007). One of the folk groups that participated in that cassette, Sendero, also recorded another clandestine production – title unknown, which told the story of agrarian reform in Chile.

The recording Canto por la vida. ¿Dónde están? by the Conjunto Folklórico de la Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (1978; “Families of disappeared detainees folk group”) holds a special place. Although the group enjoyed a favourable public image due to international support, it carried out its recording clandestinely in 1978. This production included “La cueca sola”, an emotive song and dance which expressed the struggle of women searching for their loved ones.

Nano Acevedo (2007), composer and vocalist, indicated that during the first years of the dictatorship, the Communist Party recorded at least two cassettes containing protest songs, by various artists, with the aim of contributing to the resistance. However, he claims to not remember the name of the cassette in which he, Ana María Miranda, Jorge Venegas and seven other musicians recorded in the studio of the record label Círculo Cuadrado.

[Around 1979] a clandestine cassette came out, well, you couldn’t buy it in any store, but there were many cassettes in a lot of places, and I would give them out to people […] And they were really good songs! They were protest songs that called for rebellion, political work, opposition to the dictatorship. […] They didn’t have a name, we called them Canciones de la resistencia, they didn’t have a title. (ibid.)

The singer Catalina Rojas (2006) affirms having recorded a cassette live for the Communist Party (PC), without specifying a date or name. Héctor Pavez Pizarro (2007) also remembers having participated in another recording of the PC – as well as Vamos Chile – singing a “cueca”, yet he cannot remember the title of the cassette. Also Mark Mattern (1997) referenced a recording called El paro viene... Pinochet
se va!!!, which, according to the author, was recorded and put into clandestine circulation. There, “the musicians remained anonymous, enabling direct calls for the national strike and explicit denunciations of Pinochet” (ibid.).

It is also relevant to note that part of the material published by the record label Alerce like La fuerza de un pueblo. Documental sonoro 1973-1989 (Alerce 2000) circulated informally, especially the radio fragments that were transmitted on September 11th 1973 during the coup d’état (Davagnino 2007). The publication of a pair of cassettes with recordings of the coup, called Chile entre el dolor y la esperanza (“Chile between sorrow and hope”, Unknown 1985a), were particularly important and were made possible thanks to the materials provided by the magazine Análisis, which published a report in 1985 on the sound recordings of the coup d’état, including their full transcription. These recordings were released by Alerce, whereas the article was written by the reporters Fernando Paulsen and María Olivia Monckeberg (Insunza 2009, p. 22).

What all these recordings had in common was that they were destined for clandestine circulation, as many of them had been completely created from clandestinity itself. Clearly, on cassettes of musical albums a large portion of the information about the musicians was intentionally left out. As such, the name of the artist loses its relevance, being that sometimes it was even “better not to know”.

Undoubtedly, this study sheds light on the production of tapes whose echoes clearly incited uprising, relegating concealment to their dissemination while keeping frank proclamations adhering radically to the resistance for the recording. Directly related to political organizations or other institutions, these recordings had specific goals: ideological acclamation, dissemination of specific information, fund raising and strengthening of opposition networks. Productions such as Vamos Chile, Pueblo, conciencia y fusil, and El camotazo, are examples of this. In such productions, the music’s functional quality appears to be intensified, to the detriment of aesthetic concerns, in order to place civil disobedience front and centre. There are even explicit allusions to militia activity, through song calling for different modes of resistance, for example via arms, strikes, demonstrations, and grassroots organizing. That was the objective of these creations – to point out the fundamentals of rebellion, remind people of the reasons behind it and cast judgment on the ruthlessness of the regime. In sum, it aided in the formation of a universe of sound for the opposition, helping to strengthen the resistance.

**SUMMARY**

During the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, the music of resistance found cassette tapes to be a genuine base of support for dissidence since they provided for the first time the possibility of independent and secret recording – outside of the industry – allowing for personal control over homemade recordings. Via tape recorders, a large number of people managed to access diverse music, including music that was banned, as well as the commercialized products sold at high prices in the market. Non-commercial home-taping thus became massively popularized, fostered by the
listeners’ eagerness to obtain the recorded material. The cassette offered a viable mode to select the content of the recording at will, providing the potential to record and re-record infinite “layers” of sound and facilitating the concealment of the rebellious sounds. The device’s malleability fully coincided with the requirements of clandestinity, as it enabled its traces to be erasable, with the capacity to also be fragmented, mixed or definitively erased. By way of the cassette, censored music and other sounds, imagined especially for clandestinity, were housed in every copy. The cassette epitomized the clandestine experience.

ENDNOTES

1. This paper was initially presented at IASPM 15th Biennial Conference Popular Music Worlds, Popular Music Histories (Liverpool, 13-17 July 2009).
2. Furthering Brown’s (2000, p. 365) idea that “[o]ne might say that a work of phonography is the recording itself”.
3. For similar cases in Brazil and Uruguay, see Marcadet 2005 and Masliah 1987, respectively.

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Due to the clandestine nature of most of the recordings, nearly none of the authors have been identified.