Southern currents: Some thoughts on Latin American popular music studies

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Abstract
Latin American scholars of the 1980s generation have been strongly criticised for their supposed uncritical adoption of models from European and North American musicology. Thirty years after the start of IASPM, and after a little more than ten years of Latin-American IASPM, it might be fruitful to examine this assumption and offer a reassessment. This is even more appropriate considering the fact that the “founding fathers” of Latin American IASPM received their doctorates in the late 1980s and early 1990s in North America and Europe, which means that they were aware of the establishment of popular music studies, and of the classic texts of the field, especially those in ethnomusicology, musicology, history and anthropology, with some touches of literary criticism and sociology. However, after receiving their degrees, Latin American music scholars rolled up their sleeves in order to plan and initiate graduate courses and, more importantly, establish research groups in order to construct a field for popular music studies within the academy. The results of this endeavour form the essential focus of this paper.

Keywords: musicology; theoretical approaches; Latin American popular music studies.

Popular Music in Latin America is studied from various perspectives, notably music, social history, communication (media studies), and literature. Academic programmes...
in Popular Music studies are not common in Latin America, and researchers investigate their subject using disciplinary theoretical and methodological perspectives. The IASPM Latin America branch has members from all the disciplines mentioned above, although music (musicology and ethnomusicology) predominates.

**Latin American popular music studies as seen from the Anglophone world**

The opening phrase of my abstract for the IASPM 16th conference was inspired by repeated observations made by the late Gerard Béhague (1937-2005), a position still maintained by the 2012 edition of the *Grove music dictionary*, in the article by Béhague entitled “Latin America” (in “Musicology/national traditions”):

An important issue for Latin American ethnomusicologists has been the study of origins within the tri-ethnic make-up of Latin American music (Iberian, Amerindian, [and] African). Generalizations have frequently resulted from the search for ‘pure’ retention of a given musical trait believed to be attributable to a specific cultural root. This diffusionist, evolutionist and neo-colonialist attitude is reflected in the influential theories of Carlos Vega, who raised the characteristics of regional songsters (cancioneros) to the level of universal criteria. [...] The social uses and functions of music, for example, are hardly mentioned in most studies of folk and popular music. Until the late 20th century, Latin American researchers in the field tended to believe that they possessed unique understanding of the music and culture of their country, without questioning the objectivity of their observations. However, most Latin American folklorists and ethnomusicologists come from the dominant social groups, which in general exhibit a high degree of eurocentrism. Rather than blindly following the lessons of European or American ethnomusicology, Latin American scholars must attempt to formulate theoretical objectives based on their own conceptualization of research problems and purposes in specific countries. (Béhague 2012, emphasis mine)

Interestingly enough, in his review of *Brazilian musics, Brazilian identities*, a key contemporary work on Brazilian “ethnomusicology” written mostly by Brazilian scholars (with the exception of a piece by Shuhei Hosokawa, established Japanese IASPM scholar, on singing competitions within the Japanese-Brazilian community), UK scholar David Treece (a specialist in Brazilian literature, who has written also on Brazilian popular music, as well as the culture and politics of race and Afro-Brazilian identity), expressed the opposite viewpoint:

The ethnomusicologists [...] are still largely operating within discrete disciplinary confines, speaking more often to their own community of peers and engaging little with the literature beyond their own familiar frontiers. [The] accounts [...] are presented [...] as representative of a type of research committed to reflecting the ‘multiplicity of identities that are musically constructed
within the national territory’. [However], there is at times the impression in Brazilian musics, Brazilian identities of a certain introspection, a defensiveness, even, towards the more internationalist perspective of the research community beyond its own ethnomusicological ranks [...]. This is understandable given the argument raised in the introduction [of the book] about the need for marginalized critical narratives to challenge the hegemony of the centre, but it is surely unhealthy in the long-term. (Treece 2003, emphasis mine)

Can these two viewpoints be reconciled or are they completely oppositional? For both critics (one US-based, one UK), Latin American ethnomusicologists either follow foreign models, or are too enclosed within their own disciplinary peer group. Each of these critics asks for an impossibility: how can Latin American scholarship contribute to the advancement of knowledge about Latin American musicology if scholars must find their own specific “theoretical objectives” (whatever that may mean), rather than engage in dialogue with their disciplinary peers? On the other hand, is it realistic to ask for an interdisciplinary approach from a body of scholars who are still marginalized within their own disciplines? Even if the work of Latin American musical scholars had greater impact on the mainstream academy, or even considering just the mainstream academy one might ask: how interdisciplinary and by implication unbiased themselves are Anglophone literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, historians or musicologists?

THE STUDY OF POPULAR MUSIC IN LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America the term “popular” music refers to notions of “people’s” music as well as “well liked” music. In musicology the first generation to study popular music understood the term as related to oral transmission, and rural origin. What is usually known (although there is still no consensus) as popular music in the twentieth-first century has been interpreted as “popularesche” (Mário de Andrade), or “meso music” (Carlos Vega). That is, not popular, coming from “the people”; rather light music for entertainment purposes. The founding fathers of Latin American ethnomusicology (Vega has been quite influential not only in Argentina, but also Uruguay, Venezuela and Chile; Andrade is better known in Brazil) were looking in fact for origins, as Béhague (2012) mentions in his Grove dictionary entry. Along with Béhague, scholars of the 1980s generation also rebelled against what was considered “evolutionism”. What many of us forgot (including Béhague I would argue) was to make a contextualised critique of our positions. Being only a few years older than Adorno (1903-1969), neither Andrade (1893-1945) nor Vega (1898-1966) could have discussed the uses and functions of music, as these concepts were formulated only in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Merriam’s Anthropology of music, in which these concepts appear, was first published in 1964). However, different from their Frankfurthian counterpart who has been sufficiently criticized, and whose contribution to popular music studies is acknowledged, Vega and Andrade are just dismissed as “eurocentric”. In fact, what we see here is a difficulty in transcending
the new Anglophone musicology canon that at the time was replacing the earlier Germanic academic status quo.

When a door is closed a window opens, says an old Brazilian saying. Although the Anglophone academy might not have been able to follow closely the development of Latin American musical scholarship due to linguistic and other chosen gate-keeping tactics, the intellectual production of scholarship focusing on music has been growing at a steady rate. Since the 1980s, and particularly since the 1990s, Latin American research in music in general, and in popular music in particular, has been blooming in quantity, and also in quality. More exchange could be very productive.

In most individual countries Popular Music is an object of study, and not an autonomous field. For instance, in Brazil, according to CAPES - the Ministry of Education agency for post-graduate studies, between 1987 and 2010, there were 614 thesis and dissertations with “popular music” as a key word. Among the doctoral dissertations (133) the following fields are significantly represented: literature/linguistics (23%); history (21%); media studies (16%); music and social sciences/sociology/anthropology (14% each).

A few of those who have graduated more recently (from 2005 onwards) are writing chapters for a Routledge edited volume entitled Made in Brazil, which will serve as an example of the spectrum of topics and methodologies being developed: chapters will cover the contemporary Brazilian music market, new media, and Brazilian diasporas. Some pieces involve traditional analytical study, while others embrace the latest trends in Internet ethnography, combining fieldwork with theory. Finally, alongside new arguments concerning music that has been written about for many decades (samba, choro, fado, bossa nova, MPB), there are chapters on genres that have not yet received any extensive treatment in English (tecnobrega, manguebeat, Brazilian drum & bass, and metal scenes).

**IASPM Latin American branch**

In tandem IASPM-AL is constructing a new basis for systematic research, either by returning to the original sources of already canonised histories, or by embracing the latest trends in contemporary theory and methods. Since first founded in 1997 in Santiago de Chile, the IASPM Latin American branch has attracted a broad range of articles on topics ranging from “roots music” to various national genres (such as samba and cumbia), as well as varieties of pop and rock, including “progressive” practices (Ulhôa 1998). Recurring issues have concerned questions of popular music and identity, either in relation to nationality or region; popular music and teaching; popular music and composition; issues of interdisciplinarity; and the relationship with technical media, in particular phonography.

It has been problematic having two official languages (Portuguese and Spanish), coupled with traditional disagreement even among scholars from the same country or institution (no different to other academic settings, centres or peripheries...). In Santiago de Chile we could not arrive at a consensus about the foundation of the
Latin American branch (which was thereby postponed for two years to the second conference held in Mexico City) or whether we had enough of a critical mass to start an international organisation. Some who were vehemently opposed to starting the branch, preferred instead to join ethnomusicology-only associations (although a good number attend both IASPM and ethnomusicological events); others disengaged themselves from the branch after some attempts. In fact, in agreement with Béhague’s (2012) viewpoint, IASPM conferences are heterogeneous, with papers uneven in standard. Lack of depth is made up for by enthusiasm to hear different work from different viewpoints - in contrast to IASPM international meetings, where often some sessions particularly by established names can be very full while others by younger scholars can be almost empty.

I would suggest that the difference of atmosphere between the Latin American branch and the IASPM international conferences has to do with several factors. The main one is the establishment of a certain hegemony of the social sciences perspective to the detriment of “musicological” methodologies. One might also mention the avoidance of topics outside the time frame of the second half of the twentieth century (see Hamm 2004), or outside the rock canon repertoire. It might be that IASPM-AL will follow the same path, but at the moment it is thriving. And, it is beginning a modus operandi that might offer a solution that could be followed by IASPM International. This concerns the creation of study groups, a practice already adopted by large associations, like the International Musicology Society and its North American equivalents.

To this end, for the next biennial IASPM-AL conference to be held in Cordoba, Argentina sixty-four independent papers were accepted and 136 other ones grouped in eight symposia as follows: (1) originals, covers, recycling, pastiche/multi-style and authenticity; (2) interdisciplinary studies of rock and metal in Latin America; (3) popular music and Latin American bicentennials; (4) popular music and transmission technology; (5) jazz in Latin America; (6) Latin American popular music histories: theoretical and practical trends; (7) music and regional identities: transformations, contrasts and challenges to Latin American national identities; (8) popular music, body and sexuality.

Criticism is a constant procedure in academic circles, and that is part of the process. Although I would argue both Béhague (2012) and Treece (2003) made somewhat unfair comment in relation to Latin American music scholarship, in actual fact they are not far from what Latin American scholars themselves are indeed looking for while consolidating the field of popular music studies. Academic rigour and openness to the work of international academic circles will be the two conditions for Latin American popular music studies to have an impact outside the region.

REFERENCES

