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LAP 50th Anniversary Reflection

by
Jonathan Ritter

In the fall of 1990, during my first semester of college, I was introduced to the music of British punk-folk rocker Billy Bragg. Bragg had just released an album of Leftist anthems and protest songs (*The Internationale*, 1990), and that cassette—purchased live at one of his concerts, in the company of several thousand student environmental activists—had as much of an impact on me as anything I learned in a classroom that year. Amidst socialist classics like “The Internationale” and an homage to Phil Ochs, Bragg included a haunting acapella version of Carlos Mejía Godoy’s “Ay Nicaragua Nicaraguaita.” Coming in the wake of the Sandinista defeat at the ballot box just months before, it was a compelling reminder of both the ongoing struggle in Nicaragua as well as the coalition politics that had inspired Central American solidarity activism internationally over the previous decade. For me personally, it was also a profound introduction to the idea that music could play a role in struggles for justice in the world. Within a few years, I was laying bricks in Nicaragua with other activists while amassing a music collection full of artists that reflected and lived that belief, from Ruben Blades and Mercedes Sosa to Inti-Illimani and, coming full circle, Carlos and Enrique Mejía Godoy. Studying the links between music and politics in Latin America would become the central concern of my career as an ethnomusicologist, and one that continues to this day.

That interest and career path did not lead me immediately to the pages of *Latin American Perspectives*, for reasons that are worth exploring. At the time the journal was founded in 1974, musical activism and so-called “protest songs” were at the peak of their popularity in Latin America. From Chilean *nueva canción* to Brazilian *tropicália*, Cuban *nueva trova* to Nuyorican salsa, Latin American musicians of the time were successfully using their art and their platform to articulate messages of working-class solidarity and resistance to political oppression, and they did so to broad acclaim. Yet very little of that music or activism made its way into the journal in its first decade. Popular music studies were still in their infancy, and the dominant strains of music scholarship in much of the world, including in Latin America, were dedicated either to musicological studies of Western art music or ethnomusicological accounts of rural, traditional music forms. LAP’s stated interest in class analysis and a critique of capitalism was simply not on the agenda for most music scholars of the time.

But the opposite was also true. As Regula Burckhardt Qureshi (2002: xiv) notes in her introduction to one of the few volumes dedicated to the Marxist analysis of music, “if Marxist perspectives rarely found their way into music studies, music, too, has figured only marginally in Marxist social analyses.”

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Whether a reflection of the disciplinary training in the social sciences of most Latin American Studies scholars of the time, or an echo of orthodox Marxist approaches that relegate “culture” to a superstructural byproduct of political economy, few LAP authors addressed musical topics in those early years. Even the exceptions are revealing. Brazilian anthropologist Paulo de Carvalho-Neto’s 1978 article “Folklore of the Black Struggle in Latin America,” the first article in LAP to substantively address a musical subject (though limited to a discussion of song texts), begins with an editorial note positioning folklore as a “mirror of the class struggle” and an “instrument of class hegemony,” in which the “folklore of resistance represents primarily an adaptation to the violence of domination” (Carvalho-Neto 1978: 53). Though the textual examples analyzed by Carvalho-Neto provide fascinating source material, the theoretical frame precludes any serious consideration of music as a vehicle for political action or ideological formation.

This began to change in the 1980s, when the growing presence of musical topics in LAP’s pages reflected both a shift in music scholarship toward popular music and political themes, making LAP a more likely venue for music scholars to submit their work, and a cultural turn in the social sciences that made the political dimension of music and the arts the object of more serious study, particularly in Latin America. That shift is borne out in the numbers: a keyword search for “music” in LAP’s index today produces 377 results, with only 25 mentions in the first decade (1974-84) and then growing consistently for each decade up to the present; a majority of the research articles about music in LAP have been published in the last 15 years. Increased attention to musical topics was accompanied by changes in theoretical frameworks and approach. The 1989 translation of Cuban musicologist Leonardo Acosta’s essay “From the Drum to the Synthesizer,” drawn from his 1983 book of the same name, provides a compelling example. Sketching the history of Cuban popular music, Acosta argues that rather than a mere distillate of existing class relations or histories of power (à la Carvalho-Neto), Cuban music has grown and developed within the dialectics of tradition and innovation in a continuously unfolding process. That process is one subject to the distortions of the market, but also open to the creative agency of musicians and audiences to craft their own national and political identities (Acosta 1989: 44).

Since the turn of the millennium, LAP’s musical coverage has grown substantially more frequent and diverse, reflecting new and different disciplinary engagements as well as musical genres and countries not previously addressed. This was the context in which I joined the editorial collective in 2010, and which continues to inspire my participation in the journal. Two articles published months apart in 2016-17 provide a study in contrasts of the range of this new scholarship and what I have found compelling in reading and working with LAP. Patrice McSherry (2017), a North American political scientist, offers a Gramscian analysis of the Chilean New Song movement in “The Political Impact of Chilean New Song in Exile,” positioning New Song musicians as organic intellectuals who promoted counterhegemonic ideals through their music and international activism in the wake of the Pinochet coup. Taking a very different ethnographic approach in “Choreography of a Massacre: Memory and Performance in the Ayacucho Carnival” (2016),

Peruvian anthropologist and historian Renzo Aroni Sulca (2016) analyzes a Carnival music and dance performance that reenacts a brutal massacre that took place during Peru's armed internal conflict in the 1980s-90s. Aroni explores how the children of survivors today reconstitute intergenerational memory through their performance and enact new forms of political resistance through accompanying demands for justice from the state. Despite all their differences in subject matter, disciplinary background, and methodology, both authors take seriously the possibility that musicians and their audiences can be protagonists, even central figures, in contemporary political struggles for justice and human dignity.

In its 50th year, and in that spirit of studying and championing musical activism, *Latin American Perspectives* published its first special issue dedicated entirely to music. The issue, entitled "Music, Politics, and Social Movements in Latin America" (LAP 50/3), had long been a dream of mine as a member of the editorial collective, with the strong support of the other editors, but it also reflected a natural outcome of the growing presence of musical scholarship in LAP over many years. The issue pushed the journal's boundaries even further, presenting some of the first articles in LAP's history to discuss rap and hiphop, queer pop music, and electronic dance music, alongside more typical explorations of protest songs and folk or traditional genres. All, however, maintained a focus on music's capacity to fuel, inspire, channel, and shape social movement activism in Latin America, and by extension, foregrounded the necessity of studying music and the arts as critical components of political action in the twenty-first century. Whether referencing crowd frenzy during a militant sung anthem at a protest march, or examining the delicate poetry of Carlos Mejía Godoy's ode to Nicaragua that first inspired me more than 30 years ago, I hope to see scholarship about music continue to flourish in *Latin American Perspectives* in its next half-century.

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