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The Borders of Identity, A Personal Perspective[Click here to download pdf version.](#)

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Keywords

Identity, heritage, electroacoustic music, compositional language, musical discourse

Abstract

This text deals with the concepts of heritage and identity in Latin American contemporary music with a special emphasis towards electroacoustic composition. The paper also discusses the problems of teaching and judging contemporary composition from a European perspective and the implications of the concepts of "heritage" and "identity" when working with technology. The text exemplifies these ideas throughout three recent mixed pieces.

The Borders of Identity

The Latin-American contemporary music composition environment has been clearly influenced by the European schools of composition. However, we should not forget that there are particular cases of composers and their individual ways of dealing with sound that have found a musical voice that can be defined as their own style and that is not necessarily "European". This has happened in every country in the region and even in some of the composers who where born in Latin America but now live abroad.

Due to my personal interests regarding sound exploration and the usage of available technology as a tool for sound control, I think it is important to include the concepts of "heritage" and "identity" within the discussion about the influence that the new electronic devices have upon the compositional processes.

A composer's idea of "heritage" goes beyond the simple definition of "the possessions obtained from previous generations", it is something intangible and therefore it refers to everything that is available for me as a composer. Heritage is also what I know and how I integrate it into my own musical discourse. All composers work within the intangible heritage of the ideas.

I see the idea of "heritage" as a group of possibilities with an inevitable potentiality to become the foundation of all musical ideas. Nevertheless it is at the same time almost impossible to define the limits of its influence. Such potentiality of a musical idea is almost always directly linked to the concept of "heritage" to which it is related, and in my particular case although I was born in Mexico, my family is originally from Eastern Europe. Therefore, I do not believe that Poland, Lithuania and Russia gave me only my religion and skin color, they also inherited me other things learnt within my family, namely various ways of thinking, individual perspectives and strategies to solve problems.

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My personal development and my initial stages in music happened in Mexico. I studied at the Center for Research and Musical Studies where I finished all the normal courses and academic studies. At the same time I had a few failed plans to become a rock star and I was also part of a cover band searching for my "own path to success". The process of growing as a composer occurred not only within Mexico City's contemporary music scene but to be more specific, it happened within the social environment and the possibilities I had in the city as a student, concert goer, etc.

Later I had the opportunity of studying and composing for six years outside Mexico in various countries but mainly in England, where I worked full-time in incorporating electroacoustic music into my previous instrumental language. Throughout this process I understood that the concept of "heritage" is so broad and complex to define that the opportunities of integrating it to my own compositional processes were even more important.

Suddenly, the uncommon situation of my past and the musical experiences mixed with what an academic institution was expecting from me when pursuing a Ph.D., added to the experience of living abroad with a language different from my mother tongue, created an environment that allowed me to do whatever I wanted and being free to use technology and music together in any way I felt convenient. However, at the same time I identified the enormous pressure and expectations upon my work. Expectations concentrated on the development of a unique and personal musical language that had to be at the same time somehow "Latin-American" but also coherent with a solid theoretical background worth of a doctorate.

It is worth mentioning that I do not feel at all as a composer that belongs to a specific geographical place. The concept of cultural heritage is problematic because it is usually related to a geographical place on Earth, an ethnic origin, a particular social context or the place where we work. In my case like for many other colleagues, this is not an efficient strategy to identify the individual cultural and social elements and therefore the influences and creative tools available for us.

The consequence of this is that I faced the problem of having to find a way of working with sound that fulfilled the "strong" rules of today's electroacoustic music composition which are well defined within a European conception of what music and sound is about, and at the same time, maintaining what on more than one occasion was described to me as "that Latin-American identity".

The idea of belonging to a certain group or aesthetic tendency goes beyond the scope of this text. However one's "identity" cannot be separated from the concept of "heritage" and from how this is relevant to the composer's creative activities.

To be part of a group, to belong to a specific tradition or to participate in certain musical discourse can be a deceptive way to define the identity of the compositional processes. Such processes cannot be described in terms of the elements they have in common with similar musics due to the fact that they are unique and influenced by countless factors. A composer should never be labeled by only one set of characteristics.

Trying to define "identity" as something we "belong to" and therefore something that existed before us and to which we have to integrate, instead of defining "identity" as what we are is a strategy that goes against the core idea of an artist which is "to create something new and novel, a personal perspective and an individual way of resolving problems."

Somehow the definition of "identity" is not linked directly to the idea of the "heritage" available to the artist, who is solely in charge of defining the framework within which the compositional process takes place.

"Heritage" is reduced to a group of possibilities available to integrate everything around us into the musical discourse in a unique and original way. Therefore, the composer has to choose and define his point of view in order to make it relevant to his work. On the other hand, "identity" will be the set of rules used to define us as "belonging" to a certain group or the characteristics that describe us.

Both concepts "identity" and "heritage" necessarily depend on the past to be described. Therefore, the task for the composer is to articulate these elements and project them into the future as processes that control how musical identity is presented, in such a way that personal heritage is re-visited to create new sound ideas and a personal musical language.

It is paradoxical that identity is defined as the group of characteristics that

distinguishes someone as different and unique. However in music, identity is defined in terms of the similarities obtained through analytical processes. Such processes can be either done by ear or be the result of theoretical analyses of the musical ideas and strategies implemented in a piece. They are also an aid when identifying similarities within many works by the same composer (sometimes called “the search for the composer’s own voice”) or between works by different composers (sometimes called “influences”).

A problem with the idea of identity emerges from the fact that in Latin America we have followed a European approach trying to define and tag contemporary composition as a set of rules and schools of thought. On the other hand, very often we have forgotten the possibility of implementing the personal heritage and social framework of the composers from this region.

By this I mean that there is a need of a “Latin-American framework” of musical composition that works at the same time as a generator of ideas and as a magnet for the unique perspectives proposed by Latin-American sound artists. Regarding what we can call contemporary concert music and the implications of the latest technologies within the creative process, it is possible to identify in Latin America a trend that emphasizes a European perspective. This should be complemented by an exploration of the processes and tools from a point of view that does not consider the idea of “belonging” to a school of thought as the only way of validating or justifying the work of the composer.

A Practical Approach

All the ideas included in this text have a special meaning when we talk about electroacoustic music because the detailed sound control available today allows us to work and explore variables such as timbre and space in new and unique ways not available before.

The control that an electroacoustic composer has over the “identification of a sound” is a central tool available to develop the piece’s language. Musical discourse in electroacoustic music depends on how recognizable a sound is in terms of the possible identification of its source, the materials involved or the physical action that was necessary to generate the sound.

For example the implications of an ethnic element or of an instrument with a timbre that is characteristic or easily identifiable can be used within a musical discourse in order to define the direction of the overall musical idea. The technology is therefore used to emphasize the unique timbres that could be related to a specific place or culture.

“Identity” in electroacoustic music is also shown in the coherence of a sound and its musical function within a sound or rhythmic environment, together with the possibility of recognizing the sound source or the processes involved in its generation or transformations. Therefore the success of a musical discourse depends on the possibility to identify its elements and link them to different sources or musical processes.

“Identity” is reflected upon all the spaces where we exist, in musical composition the identity of a sound is a variable available to the composer to develop discourse. Nevertheless, the “identity” of the elements is relative to the function they have within the piece and that is why, the spatial placement and the overall context where the events occur is what defines the relationships and creates the sense of “belonging” that a sound can have as part of certain group of timbres, rhythms or musical events.

To incorporate our personal context and experiences into our compositional activities can be described as a “poetic” description of our surroundings. This description can be a literal one when we include timbres that are clearly related to a specific culture. Such description can also be indirect and more abstract when a composer recreates his social, historical or personal contexts. In these cases, the recreations become a reinterpretation of the variables that the artist considers important.

In contemporary music the integration of these concepts depends on the ability to convert variables that belong to other realms into interesting sound elements. In other words, to incorporate sound metaphors that are related with elements that exist in areas other than those perceived by the ears.

In my own music, these ideas can be exemplified in three different ways:

1. *Dolor en mi* is a piece for guitar and electroacoustic sounds that explores a literal approach to the use of sound sources to generate a defined “identity”. This is done by

using a recording of a Latin-American folk music group without any electronic transformation. The piece's guitar was then adapted and it plays the same music as the pre-recorded group. This idea explored the possible convergence of the pre-recorded and live parts of the piece by using a clear and obvious quote of the selected folk tune. There are no transformations and the listener perceives a similar gesture in both media avoiding any simultaneous changes in other variables that could distract the central intention of the musical passage.



(Mp3, 613kb, 0:39sec)

[Click icon to hear *Dolor en mi*](#)

2. Sound control with today's tools can be so sophisticated that the potential of a sound to be recognized is an important musical discourse variable. In my electroacoustic piece *Boredom of familiarity* I was commissioned a piece that required the use of sound sources created by the Italian artist Luigi Russolo in order to reflect upon his approach to sound. Today Russolo's sounds and ideas about working with sound are already part of a global "electroacoustic heritage", and they do not belong to any specific person or geographical place, but to the community of composers who identify themselves with the problems and concepts that Russolo brought forward. The project required me to compose a new piece using the sound world defined within a 20th century futurist European conception.



(Mp3, 736kb, 0:47sec)

[Click icon to hear *Boredom of familiarity*](#)

3. In other recent work called *CDTi* for ensemble and electroacoustic sounds, I used the voice of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and his texts together with pre-hispanic instruments such as Tarkas, Zampoñas and a chromatic Bajón. The idea was to incorporate the literary "heritage" of a place where I lived temporarily. This can be described as an exploration to utilize a foreign "heritage" and transform it into personal elements to construct my own musical discourse. To make someone's "heritage" mine through composition.



((Mp3, 595kb, 0:38sec))

[Click icon to hear *CDTi*](#)

Conclusion

This article presents an exploration into personal strategies to integrate my "heritage" into my work as an electroacoustic composer, searching for new ways of using the ideas and elements in an original musical discourse.

When composing, it is impossible to avoid the use of the "heritage" because the sonorities and musical elements are always being judged by the listener from his own personal point of view and social environment. However, it is the composer's task to give direction, attach meaning and design an original approach towards the problem of sound identity.

Notes

1. The three audio examples and the text are available from www.rodrigossil.com
2. This text was originally presented at the "Second International Symposium for Contemporary Music and Traditional Instruments" organized by the Academic Extension Department of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in October 2004 in Santiago de Chile. The paper was presented at the "Problems of the Latin-American musical heritage" seminar. This paper was presented thanks to the Center for Research and Musical Studies from Mexico City.
3. The English revised version of this paper was done for the 2005 "Unyazi Electronic Music Festival and Symposium" in Johannesburg South Africa, September 2005.

Relevant Websites

Centro Mexicano para la Música y las Artes Sonoras, <http://www.cmmas.org>

Festival Internacional Visiones Sonoras, <http://www.visionessonoras.org>

Conoce la Red de Arte Sonoro Latinoamericano en, <http://www.redasla.org>

Also visit <http://www.dam-music.org>

Author Biography

Rodrigo Sigal (Mexico City-1971) holds a Ph.D. in Electroacoustic composition from City University in London, a B.A. in Composition from the Musical Studies and Research Center (CIEM) in Mexico City, and was part of the composition workshop directed by Professor Mario Lavista. He also studied with Denis Smalley, Javier Alvarez, Franco Donatoni, Judith Weir, Michael Jarrel, Alejandro Velasco and Juan Trigos among others. He finished a posdoctorate at the National School of Music in Mexico and he is the director of the Mexican Center for Music and Sonic Arts (www.cmmas.org).

Since 1991 he has been working as composer, sound and recording engineer in his private studio in Mexico, London and Santiago, composing chamber music, electroacoustic music and works for dance, cinema and other media. He coordinated the Computer Music Lab at CIEM from 1994 until 1998.

He has received awards from the Mexican National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA), The CIEM, The Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, ORS and The Sidney Perry Foundation in England and the LIEM Studios and The Ministry of Culture in Spain, the 1st prize (Cycles, 1999), honorary mentions (Tolerance, 2000 and Twilight, 2001) at the Luigi Russolo Composition Prize and was a finalist at Bourges 2002 (Twilight). "Friction of things in other places" won the 3rd place at the JTTP prize in 2003 by the CeC (Canada) and the SAN (UK).

His work is available on more than 13 compact discs, and his solo CDs "Manifiesto" and "Space within" received excellent reviews and radio broadcast in Mexico and abroad. His music is presented in different countries and he performs his laptop multimedia projects "Oreja Digital" and "Luminico" with flutist Alejandro Escuer constantly.

Since 1998, he has taken active part in DAM (www.dam-music.org), a group of six composers that is working on different interdisciplinary projects and since 2004 he is a member of the board of the Latin-American Sonic Arts Network (www.redasla.org). The CDs and more information are available from www.rodrigosigal.com



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