

Graciela Paraskevaïdis: On Women and Composing in Latin America. An Approach *

I. Introductory overview.

Not much is known outside the Latin American continent about the first appearance and later quite relevant presence of Latin American women in the field of music creation. The first examples are to be found around the middle of the 19th century, historically the period that followed the independence wars carried out by the Creoles with the interested help of England and France to free themselves and their newly-born countries from the three-and-a-half century-old Spanish or Portuguese domination. This dark chapter in the history of mankind is known to the world as the "conquest" and "colonisation" of America, a holy crusade which led to a perfectly well organised genocide of seventy million Indians and around twelve million African slaves and implied the moral, spiritual and cultural destruction as well as the depredation of a whole continent.

Following European patterns, music was taught, practised and composed in many places throughout the Latin American continent as early as the sixteenth century. It is then around 1850 that women started being creatively active. Isidora Zegers (Chile, 1803-1869), Modesta Sanjinés (Bolivia, 1832-1887), Angela Peralta (Mexico, 1845-1883), the mulatta Chiquinha Gonzaga (Brazil, 1847-1935) and Teresa Carreño (Venezuela, 1853-1917) belong to the first generations of musicians who were not only celebrated performers and respected teachers but also composers in different fields and genres.

The generations through the twentieth century show a quick updating and in several cases a deep awareness on behalf of the role of music in society and its relation to avant-garde languages. Some strong creative personalities, such as Eunice Katunda (Brazil, 1915-1990), Violeta Parra (Chile, 1917-1967), Hilda Dianda (Argentina, 1925), Alicia Urreta (Mexico, 1926-1986) and Jacqueline Nova (Colombia, 1935-1975) have made contributions to new Latin American music.

II. Dependence.

In the frame of a double dependence - that on the colonial structures established by the political and cultural centres of power in the northern hemisphere, and that on the male models generated and imposed by those very same centres -, Latin American women composers face today multiple challenges.

They share with men composers a general discrimination against new music, a point that still makes a difference regarding their female colleagues living in the northern centres of power. The latter still have to fight (although far not so hard as twenty years ago) for a place to be heard at, though in the meantime they have achieved real recognition and even occupy some important composition teaching positions.

Latin American men and women composers are still fighting for their right to exist and be acknowledged as such on equal terms with the Europeans or North Americans,

though as far as institutional composition teaching is concerned, this is generally still in the hands of men.

The question is then - far beyond individuals - not only a question of gender or biological handicaps but of ideology and of its geo-political and cultural power. The consequences of main-stream ideology - called "globalisation" today - are of course reflected on the issues of gender and of racial, social and cultural discrimination or sheer indifference, which for sure affects not only women composers. Needless to say, any kind of discrimination, be it racial, social or cultural, implies feelings of superiority.

Cultural and musical discrimination or indifference in these centres of power towards their own female music creators, who have been gathering in smaller or larger ghettos in order to survive, often extends to composers - male or female - from elsewhere.

Generally speaking, Latin American women composers have seldom been segregated at home because of gender: they are so often or - better - so rarely performed as any male composer in the same place would be. As a result of the colonial situation - clearly seen at the concert programs of official music institutions -, contemporary new art music is not played regularly but only extraordinarily. In fact, there is so little room available for Latin American contemporary male composers as for any Latin American woman composer.

We can hardly say that women composers in Latin America are underestimated, underplayed or underpaid or that they lack encouragement and support, because all this goes very often for men too and surely for women in other fields or activities. It might sound misleading not to mention that I am referring to women in new music and not to those in the factories.

III. Discrimination.

We still have to deal with multiple ways of discrimination. I will mention three of them:

1) America: Let me call your attention to a quite disturbing discrimination: the adjective "American" is being used exclusively when referring to one country - the United States of America -, although America is a whole continent and not one single country. In this sense we are not only Latin Americans but Americans in the broadest sense of the meaning. Canadians, Brazilians, Cubans and Bolivians are Americans too. But we have lost the right to be considered "Americans". In the best of cases, we live in a second or third-rate America. And this goes of course for women as well as men, be they Indians, Blacks or whatever. The newly-born label "Latino" music is of course misleading, since it implies only a commercial aspect of mass-consumption of Spanish or Portuguese sung products launched from the US of America to the rest of the world.

2) "Masterpieces": In today's music establishment, any music being at least one century old can become a "masterpiece". This "masterpiece" - very often wonderful music, of course - belongs mainly to the European past which, according to the colonial rules, is the only place where a real masterpiece can come from. Following male European logic which, according to the colonial situation, is a model to be respected and imitated, a "masterpiece" can only be composed by a man. The next question is: do we need models

at all? If so, let us have our own choice. And again, according to this logic, the very notion of "masterwork", which can potentially be a "model", immediately relates to the need of acceptance within the established cultural patterns: Pantheon, Academy, Museum or whatever other "consecrated" artistic commonplaces. Are we still interested in them as a desirable "status" or shall we dare open other ways of existence?

3) Another current discrimination is that of dictionaries, where women are not only frequently omitted or not sufficiently included, but also recorded as male composers. For example, the very reliable Riemann-Lexikon (1972: page 330) ignores that Pozzi Escot is not of male gender, not an "amerikanischer Komponist peruanischer Herkunft" (that is, an American male composer of Peruvian origin) but Olga Pozzi Escot, a lady born indeed in Lima, Peru, and living for many years now in the United States of America, where she has developed activities as a composer as well as organiser and editor. But how could a woman composer of art music have ever been born in Peru, of all places? And if this person has studied in West Germany and later been successful in the USA, then this person must belong to the male sex.

IV. New Music in the Twentieth Century.

Avant-garde music can be applied to describe the very short piano pieces by Carmen Barradas (Uruguay, 1888-1963), of which **Fabricación** composed in 1922 is one of the earliest examples of graphic notation not only in Latin America. This piece shows uncommon features resulting in a static structure with a sustained movement inside it.

Violeta Parra is one of the most fundamental names in Latin American popular music. Composer, poet, singer, guitarist, Violeta has made major contributions to all of these fields. Outstanding examples are her **Anticuecas** (1958/1967) for solo guitar and her song **El gavilán**, for voice and guitar, recorded in 1964, a piece which has a very particular sense of structuring very few non-developing melodic and rhythmic elements and their non-mechanical repetitions in different poetic contexts.

Violeta Parra is by far the most important and original but not the only one of a number of women composers and performers in the field of Latin American popular music, who have made their own way achieving even greater fame and success and widespread popularity than some of their male colleagues and for sure of any male or female composers of art music.

The Mexicans María Grever (1885-1951) and Consuelo Velázquez (1920), the Peruvian María Isabel Granda Larco - known as "Chabuca" Granda - (1920-1983) and the Bolivian Matilde Casazola (1943) are some of these popular music composers, though with differentiated idioms and singing and performing practices. Not to speak here of the many wonderful non-composing singers/interpreters throughout the continent.

The reason for my including these names here is very simple: It must be taken into consideration that the composing and performing of music today must also refer to popular and traditional musics which are very much alive in different parts of the continent and have a very broad audience. When talking on Latin American contemporary music, we should not limit this concept to concert or art music in the Western European sense, since we would put again in action the old discriminating mechanisms. To ignore for instance

Buffy Sainte Marie, Joni Mitchell or Suzanne Vega when talking on North American music would be at least unfair.

Eunice Katunda, also pianist, conductor and teacher, member of the pioneering Grupo Musica Viva founded by the German exile Hans-Joachim Koellreutter in Brazil, studied with him and later with Hermann Scherchen and Bruno Maderna. Katunda's strong ideological commitment reflects on her language as composer of a large quantity of works, which unfortunately still remain unknown and unperformed. Starting with a neo-classic period, she moved on to serial techniques, then to socialist realism and later on to the study of Indian and African music sources. It was Eunice Katunda who taught Luigi Nono (as he stated in a letter to Scherchen) the *lemanjá* song which he used as the basic material for his **Polifonica, monodia, ritmica**. It was Katunda who made Nono acquainted with the poetic work of Federico García Lorca and who brought him close to the Communist ideas, which she had already embraced in Brazil.

Hilda Dianda, a student of Honorio Siccardi and later of Gian Francesco Malipiero and Hermann Scherchen, well acquainted with avant-garde languages and interested in studio techniques, realised two of her major works as a personal statement in face of the Argentinean military dictatorship that started on 24 march 1976: ... **después el silencio**, an austere electroacoustic piece realised at the CICMAT studio in Buenos Aires. Her **Requiem** (1984), an eighth-part large piece for orchestra, choir and soloists, is dedicated to "*our dead ones*" (meaning also the missing people) and signalises the end of that period. Dianda takes her dramatic resources from a neo-expressionistic gesture and includes an eclectic synthesis of microtonality, aleatorics and highly differentiated timbral layers and sung and spoken articulations.

Jacqueline Nova, Colombia's major composer, realised **Creación de la tierra** in 1972 at the Estudio de Fonología of the University of Buenos Aires. She uses as sole sound material a cosmogonic chant of the Tunebo Indians together with a few electronic procedures, paying her own homage to the old American cultures destroyed by the European conquest. Till her early death in 1975, she composed several major compositions, among them **Doce móviles** (1965) for string ensemble with piano, **Omaggio a Catullus** (1972) for speakers, percussion, tape and electronics, a desperate music theatre piece on life and death. Two different worlds confront each other in Nova's work: that of the European tradition and that of the destroyed Indian heritage.

In some countries like Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina there is a rather old tradition of composing ladies which continues and increases with the appearance of younger generations.

The Mexicans Marcela Rodríguez (1951), Ana Lara (1959) and Gabriela Ortiz (1964), the Colombians Claudia Calderón (1959) and Catalina Peralta (1963), the Venezuelan Adina Izarra (1959), the Brazilians Esther Scliar (1925-1978), Jocy de Oliveira (1936), Maria Helena da Costa (1939) and Vania Dantas-Leite (1945), the Argentinians Nelly Moretto (1925-1976), Marta Lambertini (1937), Leandra Yulita (1963) and María Cecilia Villanueva (1964), and the Chilean Francesca Ancarola (1968), are some of the stylistically differentiated creators of these recent years.

V. Some common concerns.

Following features prevail in the music of these composers, all of them living and working in Latin America:

- 1) The scarce interest shown for theoretical studies and explanations about their own work, written by themselves or by others. Even the younger ones seem to be more involved in the act of composing itself than in analysing or explaining it. Composing techniques have never been a major preoccupation, not even among men. This does not at all mean that complex compositional techniques are ignored or not applied. It is only a question of priorities: it is taken for granted that a composer today is acquainted with all kinds of procedures and techniques, but this is not a major issue in composition. Have we not often been disappointed when listening to a piece of music after reading a brilliant essay on it? Analytical explanations become sometimes an issue in itself, a sort of composition on the composition, substituting the final act of listening, understanding and enjoying sound structures by means of verbal rhetoric which very often tells us very little about how a music really sounds and acts on our listening, our mind and our perception.
- 2) All kinds of structures, forms, materials and media are freely used and combined: from music theatre and opera to short solo pieces, from diverse instrumental settings to computer music.
- 3) Last but not least: the concern about the direct or indirect, implicit or explicit, incorporation and presence of the own soundscape, of the own environment and reality, often putting a stress on emotional and expressive gestures and on timbrical tissues, instead of only favouring an abstract way of thinking and composing.

VI. Overcoming the models?

Since culture and therefore music is something we can acquire, learn, enjoy, share, transmit, transform and also create ourselves, it should be our right to try to contribute our own word to it, hopefully no longer as complaining victims, but fully aware of our responsibilities and of our freedom to do so.

* In: Martina Homma, editor: Frau Musica (nova), Komponieren heute / Composing today. studio-verlag, Sinzig, 2000.