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**Listening for Place, Marketing Identity:  
Latin American Composers of New Music in the U.S.  
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While living in Boston, the young Brazilian composer Felipe Lara (b. 1979) was commissioned to write “*Livro dos Sonhos*” (2004) for two musicians of New York’s experimental, “new music” scene. His fellow composers, teachers, and performers all described Lara’s piece as dramatic, but offered different explanations why. It remains unclear whether the this drama was due to Lara’s Brazilian upbringing, the influence of his education outside of Brazil, his artistic idiosyncrasies, the circumstances of the commission, the interpretations of the performers, or audience expectations of Latin American music. This paper examines the multiplicity of meanings associated with music by Lara and the other members of *Álta Voz*, a consortium of five Latin American composers living in the U.S.

The circulation of “Latin American” in the contemporary-classical-music scene in the U.S. raises questions about music, identity, place, and meaning – namely, For whom does their music sound Latin American and why? The perspectives of the composers, their teachers, performers, and audiences in this scene reveal a spectrum of answers. My analysis draws on concert recordings, interviews, and audience surveys I conducted in New York City and Boston in 2005 and 2006.

*Álta voz* (meaning “loud speaker, loud voice” in Spanish) includes Jorge Villavicencio Grossman, Pedro Malpica, Mauricio Pauly, José Luis Hurtado, and Felipe Lara – five composers from Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, and Mexico.<sup>1</sup> You can see on your handout (see below) that despite their youth, each composer has already relocated a few times with the Americas and/or Europe, often seeking new opportunities to advance a career in music. In the rhetoric of globalization, their transient lives through the network of music conservatories resonates with James Clifford’s theory of routes, while their association in the U.S. fits into Mark Slobin’s categories of diasporic and intercultural communities of musicians.

**On handout:**

José Luis Hurtado  
<http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~hurtado/>  
Mexico (Cd. Valles → Morelia → Xalapa) → Boston

Pedro Malpica  
<http://www.pedromalpica.com/>  
Lima → Puerto Rico → Boston → New York

Felipe Lara  
<http://www.felipelara.com/>  
São Paulo → London → Boston → New York

Jorge Grossmann  
<http://shadowofthevoices.com/>  
Lima → São Paulo → Miami → Boston → Las Vegas

Mauricio Pauly  
<http://www.ranchonotorious.org>  
Costa Rico → Miami → Boston → Budapest → Amsterdam

Having met in Boston while earning graduate degrees in composition, they decided to co-produce concerts of their music, a common strategy for new composers.

They formed the organization with an advisory board consisting of their composition teachers and a few established Latin American composers in the U.S., consisting of Mario Davidovsky, John McDonald, Theodore Antoniou, Lukas Foss, Tania León, and Carlos Sánchez Gutiérrez.

*Álta Voz* members chose to label the group as “Latin American” for three primary reasons: to reflect a common bond they felt after meeting in the U.S.; to promote international, cultural exchange through music; and to attract larger audiences. They distinguish themselves from the many composer collectives in the U.S. by promoting their Latin American focus.

Hurtado describes the group’s intentions as “paradoxical.” They want to promote Latin America and advertise themselves as Latin American composers, yet he does not want audiences to think about Latin America while listening to the music. A third to half of the audience members I surveyed in New York and Boston -- excluding friends and family of the composers and performers -- came specifically to hear music from Latin America or specific countries within it. Few of these attendees regularly attend classical music concerts, though they fit other demographic criteria associated with typical classical-music concert goers, such as high education levels.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the Latin American identity of *Álta Voz* reflects their interpersonal affinities and their strategies for self-promotion and intercultural education. But does their music sound Latin American? Does being from Latin America mean that the art music they compose is Latin American? Conversely, should this music genre still be labeled “European” art music, even though it has been composed in Central and South America since the early 1500s?

Regarding the history of Latin American composition, some musicologists and composers emphasize cultural colonialism, describing the music as inherently imitating European models.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars are reexamining the assumed mono-directionality of compositional influence from Europe to the New World, and instead present a history of interdependent exchange among art-music composers over the past 500 years.<sup>4</sup> Akin Euba prefers the labels “international art music” and “world art music” over “Western art music” to describe more accurately the global production of a genre rather than its emanation from Europe or the U.S.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, “international” describes well the lives of the *Álta Voz* composers.

Even though most of the *Álta Voz* composers have moved around the Americas and Europe, they tend to single out Boston – more than Miami or São Paulo – as their first exposure to people, culture, ideas, music, and composers from around the world. Some noticed that their influences and approaches to composition changed in Boston, reflecting their new experiences and new teachers. Jorge Grossman believes that as the *Álta Voz* composers remain in the U.S. and are affected by their new surroundings and teachers, their composition styles will sound less similar to each other, and perhaps less Latin American. He noted a recent concert review that described José Louis Hurtado’s music as “North-Atlantic.”<sup>6</sup>

**Hurtado:** Since arriving in the U.S. three years ago, Hurtado in particular consciously tried to “stretch,” as he says, the compositional techniques he learned from more conservative teachers in Mexican conservatories, one of whom also studied composition at Harvard. Hurtado has been recently developing a new technical approach that uses timbre in a more “personal way” than those he used in Mexico and while

studying with Davidovsky during his first two years at Harvard. Hurtado understands the changes in his music as indicative of his new experiences: “And music I see as a reflection of your self. So if you’re changing in the good sense of the word, then your music is changing.”

Of all the *Álta Voz* composers, Hurtado describes his approach through the most technical terms with the least amount of personal symbolism. A recent trio work, “*De relieve doble*” (2005), utilizes his new personal approach to timbre by intertwining two compositions simultaneously: each uses a different set of pitches, one is loud and assertive, and the other quiet and gentle. Although each composition would sound cohesive on its own, according to Hurtado, they fuse into a single sonic texture and narrative. **[play an excerpt from “*De relieve doble*”]**

**Malpica:** Pedro Malpica considers his approach non-formalist and therefore anti-academic. He has been working on an emotionally self-expressive approach to composition in a series of works called “*Exabruptos*” (“Outbursts”). **[play an excerpt from “*Exabruptos I*” scored for clarinet and percussion]**

Hurtado explained to me that “*Exabruptos*” and especially another work by Malpica called “*Mi Silva*” (My Jungle) remind him of the Peruvian jungle. When I asked Malpica about these jungle references, he denied their existence. The title “*Mi Silva*” actually refers to the metaphorical jungle of personal emotional strife. Still, memories of Peru did inflect his composition: “Nothing specific to the Peruvian rainforest, but it has some freely interpreted rhythms from Peru. I think more about the Sierra than the jungle.” Malpica has been striving to express an emotional quality in his music that is both personal and universal. Yet, by referencing Peru in his titles and liner notes, his work has

quickly been interpreted as Peruvian rather than personal, emotional, or universally human, even by Hurtado, his friend and collaborator.

**Lara:** If communicating the individual composer's personality is the goal, it is not easily accomplished. The task becomes more complicated when the performance is considered in addition to the score. Of the *Álta Voz* composers whose personality is most evident in his compositions, Malpica singled out Felipe Lara, whose music he describes as wonderfully aggressive, eclectic in influence, and ever searching. Utilizing extended instrumental techniques and extreme dynamics, Lara's "*Livro dos Sonhos I*" ("Book of Dreams 1"), was commissioned by clarinetist Jean Kopperud and pianist Stephen Gosling. With their abilities and tastes in mind, Lara decided to showcase their virtuosity. **[play excerpt of "*Livro dos Sonhos I*"]**

When I discussed the piece with Lara and Hurtado, our conversation switched from analyzing the score to various performances of it. They compared two performances by Kopperud and Gosling to four previous performances by clarinetist Michael Norsworthy and pianist John McDonald -- Lara's former composition teacher. Lara felt that Kopperud and Gosling played the score more "precisely," in terms of note-wise accuracy. However, the heightened expressivity of McDonald in particular caught their attention: he exaggerated gestures more and produced a more "raw or rough" character unlike the "purity" of the others' performance. Hurtado insisted that he "heard more of Felipe" in McDonald and Norsworthy's performances. Lara immediately responded on this irony, while laughing: "But how can [this be?]. Felipe writes the piece as accurately as he can. And the less accurate [performance sounds] more [like] Felipe?" After Lara's wife Roberta joined the conversation, the three of them concluded that

although Kopperud and Gosling played the score more accurately, McDonald was able to express more of Lara's personality because he knew Lara's intentions. McDonald generally agreed with this assessment.

In addition to providing insights into the complex relationships among a composer, teacher, score, and performer and the difficulties locating a musical work between a score and performance – major topics in musicology – this anecdote addresses the larger question of Brazilian-ness and individuality in Lara's work. Its many receptions exemplify the multiplicity of interpretations available to the analyst: The commissioners of "*Livro dos Sonhos*" knew Lara's style when requesting his services. Lara knew their style when composing a highly virtuosic piece, a type of musical drama. Davidovsky briefly considered that the drama in Lara's work may reveal his Brazilian-ness. McDonald dismissed the idea of hearing Brazil in Lara's work, yet he interpreted Lara's score in a more dramatic manner than Gosling. Hurtado heard more of Lara in the rawness and drama of McDonald's performance. Malpica thought that the aggressiveness of the piece expressed Lara's personality. Everyone heard drama in Lara's work, but provide a wide range of theories as to why.

As Gerard Béhague discussed in his book *Music in Latin America*, the concepts of universalism and individualism, as well as avant-garde composition techniques, appeared in Latin America before World War II. Such approaches responded to nationalist trends in Latin American art music, especially integrating folk, popular, and Amerindian music into romantic forms.<sup>7</sup> Rather than being obliged to a nationalistic approach, the discourse of universalism believed that it allowed composers to emphasize their individualities.<sup>8</sup> As well, by concerning themselves with the same technical issues of

composition as composers elsewhere and by adapting experimental compositional techniques of the Euro-American avant-garde and more recently electroacoustic methods, Latin American composers became less interested in constructing a national or regional musical sound.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Béhague affirms the presence of a Latin American quality even in the most experimental compositions. He concludes his music-history tome by extending Gustavo Becerra's notion of the Brazilian *sotaque* ("local, regional accent") to describe all of Latin American art music.

Most *Álta Voz* composers think similarly as Béhague, that composers cannot help but evoke their many cultural contexts, Latin American being but one of many. Each composer can detect some similarity in their music, a Latin American quality, however difficult it is to describe or identify. Yet they also consider early performance training, the influence of teachers, and personal aesthetic choices to be critical influences on a composer's style.

When discussing the *Álta Voz* composers, Davidovsky highlighted the complexities of their backgrounds, their idiosyncrasies, and the subtle level at which these references may operate, which have less to do with the composer's culture than his/her personal motives. As he told me, "I don't want to diminish the definitive character of the culture, but at the high end of high music, really, those difference are there, but much, much more subtle. It's not the *quotation* of the tune, it's the quotation of something that is much more *abstract*."

Perhaps any compositional technique universalizes a composer by using a language of international art music, while simultaneously maintaining the ability for the composer to localize himself or herself. But instead of defining that locale as regionally,

nationally, or otherwise spatially bound, composers can metaphorically localize themselves to their experiences and spheres of influence, wherever they may be. However, labeling the music, even generically as Peruvian, Brazilian, Mexican, or even Latin American, may actually be impossible, for pinpointing influences on compositional styles can say more about the analyst than the composer.

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<sup>1</sup> I conducted ethnographic fieldwork between February, 2005 and May, 2006 in Boston and New York City, though the bulk of the research occurred October through December, 2005. I interviewed in person, by phone, or by email each of the composers as well as one advisor/teacher (Mario Davidovsky) and one advisor/teacher/performer (John McDonald): Lara (in person, 18 Feb 2005), Hurtado (in person, 29 March 2005), Hurtado and Lara (in person, 10 Oct 2005), McDonald (in person, 1 Nov 2005), Grossman (telephone, 1 Dec 2005), Pauly (email, 2 Dec 2005 and 5 Jan 2006), Davidovsky (telephone, 6 Dec 2005), and Malpica (telephone, 9 Dec 2005). I also conducted a "feedback interview" with two composers (Lara and Hurtado) in which we discussed their music while watching a video-recorded concert. (On feedback-interview methods, see Ruth Stone and Verlon Stone, "Event, Feedback and Analysis: Research Media in

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the Study of Music Events," *Ethnomusicology* 25, no. 2 (1981).) I conducted two audience surveys the following year during concerts at Paine Hall, Harvard University (May 20, 2006, 8 p.m.) and at Paul Hall, The Juilliard School (May 22, 2006, 6 p.m.). Conversations with student members of The Juilliard Pierrot Ensemble at those concerts yielded additional perspectives on the compositions and the nature of the collaboration between the ensemble and *Álta Voz*.

<sup>2</sup> Paul DiMaggio and Toqir Mukhtar, "Arts participation as cultural capital in the United States, 1982-2002: Signs of decline?," *Poetics* 32 (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Coriún Aharonián, "An Approach to Compositional Trends in Latin America," *Leonardo Music Journal* 10 (2000): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Malena Kuss, "Round Table II: Contributions of the New World to the Music of the Old World," *Acta Musicologica* 63, no. 1 (1991). Aurelio De la Vega uses the analogy of the global melting pot to describe post-1950s art music, concluding that the pot is "no longer centered exclusively in Europe but now most prominently encompasses the New World." Aurelio de la Vega, "Music in Latin America: An Introduction," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 60, no. 4 (1980): 174.

<sup>5</sup> Euba also describes "Intercultural composition": the way composers integrate elements from different cultures, not always nationally bound, but also regional, e.g., African, Asian, or Latin American. Akin Euba, "Intercultural Music in Africa and Latin America: A Comparative View of Fela Sowande and Carlos Chávez," in *Musical cultures of Latin America : global effects, past and present*, ed. Jack Bishop (Los Angeles: Dept. of Ethnomusicology and Systematic Musicology University of California Los Angeles, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> David Cleary, Review of Concert: *altaVoz: Concierto VI* (*New Music Connoisseur* [website], [cited 21 Dec 2005]); available from <http://www.newmusicon.org/reviews2005/altavoz.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Davidovsky takes great issue with the indigenous-ness or local-ness of the vernacular tropes that were allegedly appropriated, as he explained to me: "When I was a young guy studying in Argentina, one of the big icons was Bela Bartok. And many composers, including Ginastera, were writing Argentinean music that sounded *Hungarian*, because they were looking at methods that Bella Bartok used to develop sets and material out of Hungarian folk songs. He was explicitly interested in investigating all that area of ethnomusicology, and in a way that "Salon Mexico" [by Aaron Copland] was such a success, that Mexican composers would have to write Mexican music ala *Copland*, because those pieces became certain models in a way. Certainly the "*Sinfonia India*" of Chavez was a major impact in Latin America, almost defined Latin American national music. So everyone started to sound like Mexican-Indian music. So the layers of complexity are really quite amazing when you start to think of those things."

<sup>8</sup> Gerard Béhague, *Music in Latin America, an introduction*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 283.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-6. Juan Oreggo-Salas, "Traditions, experiment, and change in contemporary Latin America," *Latin American Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1985): 152-3. Electroacoustic, computer media, and the communications infrastructure to support them are still prohibitively expensive for most composers in Latin America. See Ricardo Dal Farra, "Some Comments about Electroacoustic Music and Life in Latin America," *Leonardo Music Journal* 4 (1994).