

On the Struggle for Music Technology in Latin America

(Extended Abstract)

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Introduction:

Music technology comprises fields not only in relation to musical instruments and luthiers but further in relation to composition heuristics, sound manipulation and performance methods. Recently, with the aid of Cognitive Science and Neurosciences, it has also encompassed subjects dealing with perception and human behavior. If for some years most of the work was framed into acoustics and the physics of timbre, for more than couple of decades, music technology is now seen as a truly interdisciplinary field and a good instance for representing the relationship of arts, science and technology.

Suffice to say, music composition was deeply influenced by technological developments of early twentieth century by electronics, radio and reproduction media. Consequently traditional contexts of musical production were changed because of a transitional role of musical instruments, leaving their prime importance for composers. While these changes were taken as a natural evolution of an art form in Europe, the U.S. and other countries around the globe, in Latin America these developments took years if not decades. The role of the orchestra as a bureaucratic institution promoting traditional values has also shielded new expressions and forms of music, preventing many composers from searching outside western and European traditions. Similarly music conservatories on these countries have always relied on thought and principles of same institutions from the 18th and 19th centuries at the old continent.

In addition to institutional issues, there is also an over promotion of Folklore trends that certainly shadows research of composers and avant-garde performers dealing with music technology in Latin America. Global scale economies have also brought the concept of cultural industries and that of the music entrepreneur, thereby constraining the field to issues reflecting profitability and sustainability. To its own detriment these models only assure music that conveys to the masses and that it is easy to understand.

Background:

In spite of the previously described context, a handful of visionaries and risk takers brought and develop music technology to the continent. Post world-war era saw the spread of radio stations in various countries of the region as well as broadcasting of new cutting-edge music, and

electroacoustic works. In some countries stations followed the model of a “radio studio” first achieved at Radio Cologne and Radio France, and where composers could go and experiment with electronic sounds. But it was not until the late fifties, when the *Instituto Torcuato di Tella* in Buenos Aires[9], came out with the opportunity of doing “real” research and use of new music technologies. Their development of a composition device named “*Catalina*” in the hands of Fernando von Reichenbach[8], was a landmark for electroacoustic music in Latin America. Composers from various countries on the region were able to go and work at the di Tella institute, mostly on scholarships.

The product of their work was usually a piece on magneto-phonetic tape which was broadcasted on each country on local stations, and seldom on concert stages. This music-tape practice gave rise to several electroacoustic music festivals on the continent, most notably in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Cuba, where music technology was always discussed[2]. It is important to remark that similar opportunities were also given to more composers by Cuban composer Juan Blanco through contemporary music festivals at La Habana and Varedero, Cuba, and through the Cuban Laboratorio Nacional de Musica Electroacustica (LNME)[4]. Further it should be noted that new music compositions by Latin American composers were also performed in Europe, the U.S., and other countries as well.

The promise of computer music:

The struggle for music technology in Latin America saw some promise with the advent of computer music. Although computer music mainframes of the eighties known as the *Samson Box*[7] at Stanford University and the *4X* at IRCAM in Paris[1] were not feasible anywhere else in the world, with new generations of smaller computers, the idea of the computer workstation, and the “pc”, composers who practiced “*tape-music*” composition saw “*computer music*” as a logical step. *NeXT* computer systems also used at IRCAM and Stanford, were quickly installed in several studios, for example at LIPM in Argentina[3] and at LNME in Cuba[4]. These systems had all the features supplied by its ancestors plus more, but required high computer skills and technological background [5][6]. Therefore composition activities and experimenting required the assistance of another person, usually a system’s engineer with surface knowledge of music.

The promise of computer music technologies was framed not only around composition but also around performance and education as well. Musical dexterity is good among many performers in Latin America, however the way they learn their instrument is practically intuitive. Computer music technologies have paved the way for new paths on real-time performance, assisting performers who didn’t necessarily read music, in addition to opportunities for avoiding performers at all. In education the use of computer technologies has assisted on music instruction, for example by a machine seldomly taking the role of the teacher itself.

Current perspective::

Although the digital revolution has brought most music technologies, previously available to only a few, the struggle in the region prevails. Perhaps one constraint is the level of fuzziness over new music aesthetics, but other constraints deal with music backgrounds and the role of music among society as well. Many musicians don’t know about a given technology because of language barriers or education and consequently naively avoid it in favor for easier paths. Electroacoustic and computer music workshops and courses sprout every now and then, on institutions that want to risk on these paths, however not very often on music schools and conservatories. Although

these options are better than nothing, they leave out essential knowledge needed for new music practices and furthermore add to the struggle. A escape valve for some practitioners has been opportunities in sound art, in some cases succeeding but usually ending as an experiment or a try.

In this paper this author will go deeper on the influences that brought music technology to Latin America, in addition to the people who took care of it. It will also show how these technologies were appropriated and used for the benefit of extending the state of the art in the region, and also the struggle to be acknowledged as a subject which is understood in other parts of the world. Although economic factors play a role as to how feasible are developments in new music technologies, historically they have not shown a negative impact for development of the field. Consequently other factors that play a more important role will be researched. Historical perspective might envision future work, thus achievements by key Latin American figures will certainly be portrayed. This paper aims as to why music technology is important for the region and will go into some reflections and probability, as to how to ease this struggle.

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