Art and Sacredness of the Native Instruments of the Americas

By Susana Ferreres and Alejandro Iglesias Rossi

In the spiritual traditions of the Americas, the universe of sound begins its voyage in the ocean of pure breath, until it converts itself into the sound of the waves, the polar silence and the roar of the forests.

Musical instruments, carriers of this primal mystery, surge from the fertile humus, from woods, rocks and shells, from the shells of animals as well as from their bones, skins and hooves. They are the vectors that transmit the mystic sound of the universe, together with that of the soul of man that they carry, in a voyage back to the Spirit from which they originated.

Birds, thunder and hurricanes,

instruments of Heaven.

Trees, bones and seeds,

instruments of the Earth.

Paradigmatically, in the mystic ascent of the tree at the center of the world, or in the shamanic voyage of the rainbow, it is the instruments that act as *pontifex*, it is they that build the bridge capable of linking the worlds. Linking dance with song, instruments provide the framework capable of

projecting human beings on their ecstatic voyages towards the unknown, through terrestrial strata and heavenly circles, a spiritual geography in which *the center is in all places and the circumference is nowhere*.

In the native traditions, the construction of an instrument is as ritualistic as are the performances given on it. Each instrument is unique and personal. The shaman himself, on a specific night, will collect the wood of a tree for his drum, will stretch the skin of the animal over it with whipping, rhythmic beats of the drumstick, allowing him thus to gallop to the *other side*. It is on this *other side*, that the *Terra Incognita* of the prophetic visions, the artistic epiphanies, and the miracle cures are located.

The wisdom of the indigenous sources shows a reality that continues to constitute the profound framework and awareness of our existence. A unified approach to creation can reconnect us to the primordial trunk of the conception of *art as a way of re-linking man to his origins.*

The artist has a catalyzing role as constructor of myths, now that all creation is a regeneration and implies a return to these origins: in the construction of an instrument, in the creation of a work of art or in the restoration of a human being, he or she ritually remakes the creation of the world. The artist senses thus that in the intimacy of his or her being there exist cosmic and anthropogenic archetypical processes.

A return to this “process of initiation” is essential for avant-garde art to recover its mythological function. The multitude of forms of expressions woven into the depth of our existence may then reveal themselves as inexhaustible for all who recognize this re-connection to their origins.

Together with the rediscovery of this initiatic vision of art, it is necessary to revise the composing process as it relates

to *instrument-gesture techniques*.

Historically, the extraordinary ascent of the spiral of knowledge had unexpected consequences: the distancing of the mythic embryonic nucleus. The primordial unity ended up being fragmented into the concept of the technical specialisation of knowledge. Today it is necessary to redeem and restore this lost unity through a conceptual framework that allows us to re-encounter the path towards the fundamental ontological unity. Redirecting the parameters of musical creation in a new relationship with the indigenous instruments of the Americas may make this again possible through what the ancient sages of this continent called *the way of knowledge.*

Our challenge as contemporary creators is to generate an organic body; a theory and a practice in harmony with the spatial/temporal coordinates and the poetic matrix of *Abya Yala*, the spiritual lineage of the Americas.

Contemporary Techniques of Creation and Cultural Identity

By Alejandro Iglesias Rossi

Composers in the Americas are at a crossroads, on the one hand seeking a personal identity as creators and on the other a cultural identity as members of the community that surrounds them. The challenge consists of becoming oneself, discovering one’s “uniqueness”, with all its potential.

This process not only affects the creator but also influences and transforms the very *geoculture* into which he or she is born.

The trans-cultural elements (as in the case of avant-garde techniques and composing in the classical style of European origin) must be digested and internalized, in order to

reappear with a special force, a unique color that will expand the borders of knowledge, much as one explores the unknown lands of creation.

This challenge is not only individual and cultural but also instrumental and operative, that is to say, it entails the choice of the technique and means (the tools) the creator will choose, freed from any prejudices that might restrain his or her visionary capacity.

A number of different subjects must be taken into account:

- The conflict between encyclopedic learning and wisdom-based knowledge;
- Not assuming the space one inhabits;
- Admiration for foreign paradigms that can only lead to dissatisfaction.

The act of committing oneself to the demands of finding a “way of being and doing” that is rooted in the time and culture we belong to erases the supposed dichotomy between contemporary creative techniques and cultural roots.

Finding that path, accepting the challenge, reveals an unexpected place of freedom. This journey, this maturing, is one the composer undertakes personally and as a member of a community, although these are fundamentally one and the same.

Hypostasis

For us, Americans, the only possibility of remaining open to the best of what modernity has to offer while simultaneously being rooted in our culture is to find that which early

Christian theology called *Hypostasis*.

The Greek term *hypostasis* was first used in the fourth century, to describe the concept of "unicity", this special something in each one of us: **our deepest self.**

Hypostasis cannot be defined rationally, as opposed to the theological concept of human nature, which encompasses all that we share (ie. two legs, two eyes, a psyche, etc.). It constitutes a mystery, and the only way to access it is through revelation. This is the new name mentioned by the Book of Revelation: *To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone will be written a new name that no one can know except the one receiving it.* If we wish to go beyond the state of "potential" hypostasis and become a "fulfilled" person to whom this new name can be revealed, we must go through a process of awakening, we must free ourselves from all the masks, all the "personalities" we believe ourselves to be, and from which we suffer, because in spite of all this, we know that those personalities that condition us do not reflect "our true self".

Just as we cannot refer to hypostasis outside of an ascetic, mystic and eschatological context, composing cannot be conceived outside of those three contexts either. Each and every one of our compositions must constitute a step closer to our true self. Technically speaking, if upon completing a composition we feel that nothing has changed within us, that there has been no transformation, then no *metanoia* has taken place in our selves, and that piece of work is meaningless, for it was composed in a state of spiritual absence and lacks the power to transform. We had best forget it. True works of composition are those that constantly allow us to move towards uncharted territories, keeping us constantly at the edge of the abyss. Paradoxically, it is thus that we acquire the courage to confront the abyss, not before jumping, but during the fall itself. It is in the practice of composing and not

in theorizing that progressively our personal potential is illuminated. This point is fundamental: we apprehend our essential self through spiritual practice.

Composing unveils our true self, which composers should take into account.

This point is well described in a medieval story:

A man walks past a quarry where there are two men hammering stones. He asks one of them what he is doing. The man replies: "I'm hammering stones". He asks the other man what he is doing, and the second man answers: "I'm building a cathedral".

Composing should imply full commitment. We may wonder, why is this so. The reason is that hypostasis, the real person, is an absolute consideration. We can only draw near it through relentless and fierce commitment and with a sense of absolute freedom. As I have already said, our deepest hypostasis is radically free, and when the true person emerges he or she does so carrying the apparition of an unsuspected area of inner freedom.

Another characteristic of our deepest self is that of being incomparable. We can compare that which is similar, but given the uniqueness of each person, there can be no comparison. No better or worse hypostasis exists, nobody is more or less beautiful than any other person. As a mystical master said some centuries ago, "*Each one of us is a name of God".*

Only if composers are fully and clearly committed to the search for their deepest selves, forming a total spiritual vocation through their compositions, is it possible for them to freely assimilate any material they wish and to process it in a personal way, offering a unique synthesis.

Back in the 50s, responding to a journalist's question "What

is folklore?", the great Brazilian composer Hector Villalobos tried to sum this up and answered with a quip, saying, **"Folklore? … , I am folklore."** To further explain this concept, I'd say that I am the result of the land I live in, I am made of the air of the pampas, the snow of the Andes, the bodies of the condors turned to dust, the hope and despair that have impregnated the sky of the Americas for generations. That is why if I discover who I am, the result will not be only personal but will reflect the geography and culture in which I was born and raised. And just as modern science nowadays accepts that the fluttering of a butterfly in the Amazon region might give rise to a cyclone in Japan, I am also the product of the dreams and the suffering of souls that for generations have dwelled upon this strange planet, of the color of the Sahara sands and the stones of the remotest and most forgotten village on earth. We are, as St Paul said, one body, and each of us has a unique part to play in this cosmic symphony, allowing us thus to be one with the universal.

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