

The Colombian Cánticas of Luis Antonio Escobar

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This article recognizes the prolific composer Luis Antonio Escobar and focuses on the analysis of one of his Colombian Cánticas, and on the correlation that exists between the composer and the work. It also discusses in concrete terms the ways in which, in the contemporary world, local cultural traditions seep into the creation of universal music and specifically, of Colombian music.

When Luís Antonio Escobar died in 1993 in Miami, where he held the position of cultural attaché, he was already clearly recognized as the composer of a significant number of works, especially in the relationship between so-called 'high culture' and the popular culture. Ellie Anne Duke wrote concerning this relationship: "The composer knew how to capture the agogic accents of rural music and mix them with vivid harmonies and on-target polyphony." [1]

It is for such reasons that Colombian and Latin American choirs are drawn to his works and want to sing them in concert, since, when listening to them, we find reminiscences of the past and of rural customs.



*The composer at
the Franciscan
San Buenaventura
school (13
years) © Amparo
Angel*

Why is it important to study Luis Antonio Escobar? He is undoubtedly one of the most well-known composers in our country, as noted by Amparo Ángel: “His music, which is recognized as world-class, is performed in many countries of Latin America and Europe; it is a music that synthesizes the feelings of the Columbian and Latin American peoples and, in an exquisite way, lets you come to understand their sense of life and way of being.”[2]

As Ramón de Zubiría says in the prefatory notes to his *La música en Cartagena de indias* (Music in Cartagena, Colombia), we find implicit the patriotic emotion that resonates through all his works. As a composer and equally prolific writer, he strives to bring Colombian music out of the shadows: In addition to creating musical scores, editing books and writing essays – among them: *La música precolombiana*, (Precolumbian Music), *La música en Santa Fé de Bogotá* (Music in Bogotá, Colombia), *La música en Cartagena de indias* (Music in

Cartagena, Colombia) and *La herencia del Quetzal* (Heritage of the Quetzal) – he also undertook specific investigations into Afro-American and indigenous cultures, examining their customs, music, rhythms, and liturgies. In ‘Los Indígenas’ (The Natives), an article written in 1956 for the magazine *La música en Colombia* (Music in Colombia), a publication of the University of Antioquia, Luis Antonio Escobar states:

“Some musicians and historians generally refer to things called ‘pentatonic scales’ such as are typical of our indigenous cultures. This would be equivalent to thinking that the natives somehow unified a system and balanced the sounds. This thesis is incredible since music had to wait thousands of centuries for its melodic classification in the Western world until the emergence of such a brilliant mathematician as Pythagoreas[3].”

In an interview with Amparo Ángel in the article ‘Ecos, contextos y des-conciertos’ (Echoes, Contexts and Disconcerts),[4] he speaks about the third part of his artistic life, when he had returned to Colombia to undertake important pedagogical work for the Radiodifusora Nacional television network, giving conferences in universities and institutions, and serving as music commentator for the newspapers *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*.

Luis Antonio Escobar highly valued the choral music of Colombia, which is why he organized the university choirs, as founder and president of the student singing clubs. In the same way, to promote that activity, he brought in specialists in singing methodology to teach choral directors from different universities and government entities. With the purpose of bringing favorable attention to the repertoire of the student singers clubs, Luis Antonio also published *El libro de Música Polifónica Colombiana* (The book of Polyphonic Colombian Music), with works from colonial times through the 20th century, as well as a book on the first Colombian composer

of colonial times, José Cascante.



*With his friends of
the Colombian
Symphony Orchestra
(1964) ©Amparo Angel*

Luis Antonio Escobar's work as a researcher, particularly on the origins of music in Colombia, made however the greatest impact. When he wrote about music in Cartagena, narrating the events surrounding the arrival of music there, the first musician from the colony, the popular and the folkloric, he makes us take note of the instrumental richness and rhythmic differences, in addition to the anthropological and social connotations of these blends. Luis Antonio Escobar was passionately committed to the investigation and development of all these projects. On this subject, Ramón de Zubiría says in the preface of the book, *la Música en Cartagena de indias* (Music in Cartagena, Colombia):

"I have written these pages with almost juvenile joy, by surprise, as if it fulfilled an internal demand, with which to seek after my own oxygen or to open wide the window that

surveys all the seas and cultures from Cartagena, the Cartagena that has turned four hundred and fifty years old, the one that gave over its virgin beaches to begin producing fruit that in turn will continue fructifying and shaping our own life[5].”

In a 1990 article in the newspaper *El Tiempo* titled ‘La clave de mi’ (The Key to Me), Luis Antonio Escobar summarized his life in simple terms, speaking of his essence, his roots, describing folklore and customs. The composer of *Las Cánticas* recounts his beginnings in musical life, making evident the importance of his environment for his growth as a person and a musician, his family, friends, and neighbors (even the town priest) all ready to support him in his initial efforts. This whole story, plus original declarations – “moderate by force, halfway between the scent of a tallow candle when it is snuffed out and a recently burnt corn muffin” – founded in Luis Antonio Escobar great hopes and the staunch decision of continuing his training until he made himself into a composer, one of the most important from Colombia.

But who was the human being Luis Antonio Escobar? As those in his immediate circle say, he was a man who freely shared his knowledge. He was characterized by his affability and by giving happiness to those who surrounded him. Perhaps this is the sense of his first *Cántica*: “*Cántica* if I don’t sing I will die from the pain, but with the *Cánticas* that I sing, my heart is at rest.” With this sentence he sets off twenty musical moments where the composer demonstrates his profound knowledge of music, but through the filter of popular culture, also taking advantage of the opportunity to include in them a dedication to his loved ones.



One of the last pictures of Luis Antonio ©Amparo Angel

What is the music's starting point: Rhythm? Melody? Harmony?

His music was the result of being formed and enfolded by the medieval spirit, uplifted with principles and in an era in which, as he himself said, the word was sacred, time was slow, and silence palpable. It was also molded by his first-hand contact with Western music, the teachings of great composers, and the practice of composing in different styles, and by his close-up assessment of different eras. In the *Cánticas*, melodies and harmonies are impregnated with different historical moments: Renaissance, Baroque, Classic, Romantic and Neoclassical, and at the same time, with the rhythms and prosody of folksong. For that reason the *Cánticas* utilize diverse rhythms, amalgamated bars, asymmetric bars, always with the intention that the metric should give an agogic effect without losing its natural form.

While recognizing and respecting the opinion of one of Columbia's greatest musicians, Luis Antonio Escobar affirmed his hatred of "rock and roll", in a clearly radical posture, because it seemed to him backward, commercial and violent; but if we analyze the implicit social value of this musical genre,

it was not only the music that attracted multitudes from the 1950s on, it was in effect a lifestyle that found in youthful rebellion the way to respond to the weariness caused by repression and coercion in a romantic search for freedom.

Luis Antonio Escobar's own words explain his position:

"We prefer all kinds of information, information that may be important, but not so much so as to leave aside the study of what we really are. All study and information should have as a reference the examination of ourselves. We still live with the yoke of servitude on the neck of our spirit, and we only use our rebelliousness and arrogance to defend, with greater or lesser capacity, theories and interests that are more in tune with other peoples or nations." [6]

Nevertheless, we should understand that all artists take sides. His concern was in finding the relationships between what is called high culture and popular culture. His musical works move in diverse genres, formats and styles – operatic, vocal and instrumental; for orchestra, piano, and chorus. But the texts of the *Cánticas* are taken from popular culture, folklore of the purest kind. Thus in one to them, a warning is given, "Forgive me if these songs seem bad, because I sing them the way they emerge." (*Cántica* no. 4). This overlapping is unacceptable for those purists who, even now in the 21st century, continue seeing high culture as a pedestal to which anyone who aspires to be called a musician must ascend.

But Luis Antonio Escobar's nostalgia went further: Although his academic training was complete, he continued growing and he admired the fineness and charm of the peasant farmers sporting espadrilles and dirty fingernails, who recited when finishing their tasks, "The night comes lowering by the hills of the balcony and, fills with sadness the mountain, ranch and heart." [7] For example, he puts his feelings in high relief and declares his love, emphasizing that other time which is now his longed-for natural surroundings. In folksong form he

says, "If the bramble doesn't entangle me, if the liana doesn't enwrap me, I will marry you if death doesn't take me." (Cántica number 6).

But this is a man who also created ballets for the greatest dancers in the world (Ballet Theatre of New York with choreography by George Ballanchine) and who shared the stage with musicians of the caliber of Andrés Segovia, Aaron Copland and Carlos Chávez, among others. Yet he deeply missed his friends, hence the dedications of his songs. In one he inquires of his great friend Gustavo Yepes, "When I wait you don't come, when you come there is no place, this is how we pass the time and this is how it will pass us by." (Cántica 11). The query finishes in a recrimination: "Don't tell me some other day, because this life lasts only a second and after I die what does it matter to me if the world exists?" (Cántica 11).

This same sensitivity at a very young age also allowed him to be moved listening to Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 20 and Palestrina's Missa Papae Marcelli, one of the most famous polyphonic works of the Renaissance. His familiarity with other cultures, the ability to understand other musicians, and the influence of other great composers, never moved Luis Antonio Escobar away from his proposed goal, to compose drawing from folklore. On the contrary, to know so well what the National Schools did in Romanticism, including knowing that from 1742, as Hamel and Hirliman say in their *Encyclopedia* (Vol. I, p. 275), summaries of popular Scottish, Welsh and Irish melodies had already appeared in England and that in 1793, George Thompson incorporated these melodies into cultured music, when ordering the harmonization of the great composers of the time – a dynamic linked to the thought of that historical moment:

"The discovery of the traditional values of the historical past and, with it, as much as in politics, in the spiritual as in the artistic, the formation of a new national conscience

with the premise, a new eruption of the national essence.”[8]

The popular melodic spirit in cultured music had already borne fruit from the 18th century: Beethoven used popular Russian melodies in his Quartets op. 59 (variations on a theme); Schubert made use of melodies and rhythms from Hungarian folklore for an entire series of compositions; and the Hungarian nationalists, among them Béla Bartók, and the Russians, Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky, as well as the Mexican composers Chávez, Revueltas and Ponce must all be mentioned here.

These were palpable things which helped Luis Antonio Escobar to reassert his principles. For this reason, the *Cánticas*, the ‘*bambuquerias*’, the madrigals, the rural cantatas for chorus and orchestra, and the cantatas of Colombian singers all share a common theme and particular rhythmic pulse. His own words reflect those roots with more clarity:

“When we speak of true folklore, we contemplate the first drawings of men, the ambrosial melodies resonate, rondels and music of medieval poets, those praised by our blacks of the Pacific or the out-of-tune scream of the *guabina* that tints the soul and the cheeks of our ingenuous peasants red, are songs that, in one way or another, lock essences of Olmeca sculpture, gestures of severe figures like the ones on Easter Island, songs that retain the vibrant wave of Mayan architecture or the subtle symmetry and fine color of the cloth of Paracas. Everything that makes the man is from his interior, it is their own sculpture, and nothing better than his own song.”[9]

Luis Antonio Escobar was definitely a man in love – in love with life, with people, with the theater of pantomime and of Quevedo, Cervantes and Shakespeare. As he said in the article in *El Tiempo*, ‘*la clave de mi*’ (The key to me): “Men of synthesis, of feelings, towns and eras”. And speaking of feelings, *Cántica* no. 5 is a sketch of the man of feelings,

the romantic man. It is poetry of a high level, it is Quevedo, it is Cervantes, Machado, Silva, Haine. "You are a gold nugget and a drawn pearl and you are the star that lights the dawn, you are as the blond wheat selected grain by grain, you are you, the most beautiful that my eyes have ever seen, you are as the blond wheat selected grain by grain, you are you the most beautiful that will ever be born in the world" (Cántica no. 5). In contrast, Cántica no. 6 is a folksong with a more picaresque style, making reference to the texts used in the *bambuco*, *pasillo* and *guabina*, to those texts of the mountain folk, ingenuous and sincere but shy, of double meaning. "Come here and get a little bit closer to he who wants to give you a kiss and a tight hug; last night I had a dream and in the dream it seemed that your mouth kissed me and I slept in your arms." (Cántica no. 6). In Cántica no. 7 the double meaning is more evident, especially in the use of words like 'aigre' that are so characteristic of the highland regions of Cundinamarca and Boyacá: "I fell in love with the air of the air of a woman, as the woman is air, in the air I stay." (Cántica no. 7). There remains only a slight suspicion regarding the meaning of the text. But it is possible to make conjectures, as a single word 'aigre' proffers many interpretations, as poetry, or value judgments, and so on. Amid such picaresque texts it is possible for that type of uncertainty to exist.

The Cánticas were certainly created by a man moved by emotion and sensitivity, not only in the beginning but throughout the course of his life. Such is the case in Cántica no. 17, where the text states: "Life passes soon like the waters of the river and it takes in its current her thoughts and mine." The same work reconfirms these words: "Thought, stay quiet; at least stop tormenting me for a moment so I can speak calmly."

As for musical analysis of the Cánticas, we paraphrase here a text by James Manheim, one of the members of the US chorus America's Vocal Ensemble. They recorded the Cánticas in 1982,

undertaken as an exchange project between North America and Latin America, a matter of much interest for the new century. These *Cánticas* and madrigals were transformed into a singular work premiered at a performance in 1983. For Manheim, the *Cánticas* were not thought of by the composer as a homogeneous whole; number one of the sequence could just as well be followed by number five, and so on. And although they are of several sizes and degrees of harmonic colors, they are as simple as the madrigals and with many parallel harmonies. Manheim states:

“Luis Antonio Escobar does not have the hypersimplicity of Ariel Ramírez, nor the nationalism of Carlos Chávez and neither the ‘Bartokianos’ experiments of Alberto Ginastera. Luis Antonio keeps the squared forms of the texts from his roots and develops a flexible harmony, language that expresses the content in detail.”[10]

This seems to be a unique recording and the chorus is well qualified to examine globally the real sense of the rural folksongs, so closely connected as they are to folklore and the daily life of that region. These are: “concise and absorbing pieces: anyone who likes the choral music of America, or is looking for something attainable, will be able to obtain it from these, and will end up knowing them.”

Musical analysis of the *Cánticas*

One general feature of the *Cánticas* is that most are of a homophonic texture. *Cánticas* nos. 6 and 2 have particular features: *Cántica* 6 has piano accompaniment; *Cántica* 2 begins with a slight indication of polyphony before becoming transformed into homophonic texture; it also shares the beginning of the text with *Cánticas* 16 and 22. “When I saw her coming, I told my heart what a beautiful pebble she was to trip over.” The character of the three *Cánticas* is different;

no. 2 is marked *Presto marcato*, number 16 is quarter note = 104, is more lyrical and lighter, and number 22 is marked *Allegro*; nos. 2 and 22 begin in 3/4 time, and no. 16 in 6/8 time with an anacrusis.

(Click on the images to download the full score)

a Alfred y Elton Greenfield

CÁNTICAS COLOMBIANAS
CÁNTICA 2
"Cuando la vida viene" (I)

Luis Antonio Escobar

Presto, marcato

Tenor I
Cuan-do la vi-da ve-nir - le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

Tenor II
le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

Bajo I
Cuan-do la vi-da ve-nir le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

Bajo II
le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

a Cruzelena Orozco

CÁNTICAS COLOMBIANAS
CÁNTICA 16
"Cuando la vida viene" (II)

Luis Antonio Escobar

♩ = 104

Soprano
Cuan do la vi da ve - nir - le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

Contralto
Cuan do la vi da ve - nir - le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

Tenor
Cuan do la vi da ve - nir - le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

Bajo
Cuan - do la vi - da ve - nir - le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra -

a Nelly

CÁNTICAS COLOMBIANAS
CÁNTICA 22
"Cuando la vida viene" (III)

Luis Antonio Escobar

Allegro

Soprano I
Cuan-do la vi-da ve-nir - le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra - (Quié - ro - ir - me -)

Soprano II
le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra - (Quié - ro - ir - me -)

Contralto I
le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra - (Quié - ro - ir - me -)

Contralto II
le - di - ja - ra mi co - ra - (Quié - ro - ir - me -)

Tenth	Eighth	Eighth	Eighth	Seventh	Ninth	Seventh
Opens in G and closes in E flat	Opens in Dm and closes in C	Opens in Bm and closes in F	Opens in F and closes in C	Opens in Am and closes in Dm	Opens in Dm and closes in G	F
Maria Cristina Sánchez	Ellie Anne Duque	Eduardo Mendoza	Gustavo Yepes	Rodolfo Pérez	Titina y Jaime	Rito Antonio Mantilla
Womens Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus
Neoclassical	Romantic	Neoclassical	Romantic	Renaissance	Romantic	Renaissance
Folkloric	Folkloric	Folkloric	Folkloric	Folkloric	Folkloric	Folkloric
Intro A-Intro B-C	A-B- c-B1	A-B	Introduction A -B	A-B	A-B	Intro and A intro B and coda
33	17	20	25	33	20	55
0:55	2:21	1:08	1:41	0:41	1:45	2:40

C.16 'Cuando la vida venir' (II)	C.17 'La vida se pasa pronto'	C.18 'Lucero de la mañana' I	C.19 'Lucero de la mañana' (II)	C.20 'Te arrullo en la cuna'	C.21 'De tres amores que tengo'	C.22 'Cuando la vida venir' (III)
Homophony	Homophony	Homophony	Homophony	Homophony	Homophony	Homophony
Ninth	Eighth	Eighth	Ninth	Ninth	Seventh	Ninth
Opens in D and closes in A	Opens in Dm and closes in C	Opens in Dm and closes in F	Opens in D and closes in A	Opens in C and closes in F	Opens in Dm and closes in D	Initial in D and closes in E flat
Crucelena Orozco	Maria Cristina Lanao	Amparo Ángel	Amparo Ángel	Diana Vesga Sánchez	Nelly Vuksic	Nelly
Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Mixed Chorus	Feminine Chorus
Neoclassical	Neoclassical	Renaissance	Neoclassical	Renaissance	Neoclassical	Neoclassical
Folkloric	Folkloric	Poetic	Poetic	Poetic	Folkloric	Folkloric

A-A1	A-B	Introdu y A-A1	A-A1	Intro y A-A1-A2	A-B	Intro y A-B-C	
16	13	10	16	17	27	31	
0:41	1:41	0:46	0:41	3:21	2:05	2:08	

Epilogue

Luis Antonio Escobar was a Colombian composer of great transcendence at both the national and international levels. The history of his achievements in his own country and the outside world demonstrates how his music has shared the stage with that of world-class composers such as Aaron Copland, Andrés Segovia and Carlos Chávez. His investigations into indigenous Colombian culture, his thesis of pentatonic scales as typical of our indigenous cultures, prove that he was one of the country's most renowned figures.

Of his choral works, *Cánticas Colombianas*, published in 2011 by the Fondo Editorial Universidad EAFIT, stands out. From a total of 22 *Cánticas*, 20 remain extant. (*Cánticas* nos. 3 and 13 are lost.) These twenty moments of music and poetry, or popular sayings, find their roots in folklore. Studying the *Cánticas*, the composer's incentive for writing them is palpable, namely the healthy relationship he enjoyed with the people to whom they are dedicated. From that perspective, the *Cánticas* were conceived on a very human scale. The attractiveness of the texts, their rhythmic variety and articulation, the composer's respect for the prose, content of conflicting feelings, and the composer's treatment of *tessitura*, – all these transform the *Cánticas* into a most interesting collection of music.

[1] Article published in the newspaper El Tiempo, August 5. Taken from the magazine Credencial Historia, No. 120, December, 1999.

[2]

<http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/musica/blaaaudio/compo/escobar/indice.htm>

[3] ESCOBAR, L. La música en Colombia, "Los Indígenas" Emisora cultural Universidad de Antioquia, Agosto 1956, publicación mensual, numero 81, Pg. 1-6.

[4] Research project at Universidad EAFIT-2003 Gil Araque, Fernando, Ecos Contextos y Desconciertos.

[5]

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[6] Prelude to *La música en Cartagena de indias* by Luis Antonio Escobar (1985).

[7] ESCOBAR L.A.: La Clave De Mí – Archivo – Archivo Digital de Noticias de Colombia y el Mundo desde 1_990 – eltiempo_com.mh)

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