

Sound Art in Mexico

By Manuel Rocha Iturbide

Abstract

Sound Art is an artificial definition that nevertheless has helped us to study sound works that have their origin in different art fields and disciplines other than traditional music. A research has been made in order to find the genesis of experimental experiences with sound in Mexico as well as their development through history. Although our experience in this field has had a short period of time, in the past ten years there has been an incredible activity in sound art in our country. Also, we have discovered different happenings and actions in the sixties and seventies that used sound in an experimental way, and in this way we have contributed to rescue them from oblivion. A CD was edited with a selection of various historic and present works.

1 Antecedents

Talking about Mexican *sound art* is not easy due to the ambiguity of a term that tries to define an interdisciplinary field with vague borders and an unknown origin. Nevertheless, if we can accept the premise that *sound art* is about experimenting with sonic elements and interacting with other ways of making art, we will be able to find various forms of expressing and structuring with this relatively new language through the recent history of our country. These different forms of working with sound can be translated into sound poetry, radio art, electroacoustic music, experimental music, soundscape, sound sculpture, sound installation, sound actions, intermedia, etc.

The history of sound art in the first half of the XX century in Mexico is not very rich, because in spite that there were avant-garde movements like the “Estridentista” poetry group, there is no register of any phonetic poetry or others with a particular interest in sound experimentation. The shyness for not performing with poetry in an experimental way will be present through all our literature history, and the causes could be found in our Indian heritage¹. Only more Western oriented Latin-American countries like Chile had sound poets like Vicente Huidobro, and we can find the same case in other similar countries

¹ Mexicans have a shy introvert character caused by having been conquered by the Spaniards. As Octavio Paz wrote: “Mexicans defend themselves from the outside, the ideal of manliness is not opening yourself ever. Those that open themselves are cowards.... The colonial world has disappeared, but not the fear or our mistrustful character (Paz O, 1950).

with less Indian roots and more oriented towards European culture like Argentina, Uruguay, and even Brazil².

The only field where there was an interesting research in new ways of making sound was in microtonal music. Mexican composer Julian Carrillo (1875-1965) was one of the world pioneers in this field; he constructed microtonal pianos and harps and realized an important theoretical work, although I think it is too bad that in his compositions he used old and schematic musical forms³.

An isolated case in Mexican experimental music can be found with the North American composer Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997). He finds political asylum in our country in 1940, and from that date on uses mechanical pianos for his complex poly-rhythmic compositions. At the end of the forties, he tries to go beyond and explores the timbre possibilities of his *Ampico* pianos intending to create a pneumatic system that implies the simultaneous use of two pianos, one of them assigned to percussion instruments. The system never worked, and Nancarrow’s isolation from the Mexican cultural scene kept him unknown in Mexico until the nineties.

2 The beginning of electronic music

The first references I have of a Mexican sound art are in the beginnings of electronic music in our country. The first known composition is a concrete tape work for a ballet by Carlos Jimenez Mabarak in 1960. Later on, with the creation of the first laboratory of electroacoustic music in the national conservatory of music in 1970 (Rocha Iturbide, 2004a) there will be various essays of live electronic music with a Moog and Buchla synthesizers, where there was a lot of improvisation. Hector Quintanar⁴ did a concert with them in

² Besides European roots, Brazil has mainly a black heritage, and black cultures are known to be of extrovert character.

³ Mexican musicologist Yolanda Moreno shares my point of view: “The great extension of the open universe for sound composition offered by Julian Carrillo’s instruments and theories could not translate into a work of equivalent complexity, and this is not strange, because the composition problems brought by a microtonal focal point have a difficult solution even with the aid of the computer...it would have been necessary for Carrillo to find the grounds for his compositions in parameters such as rhythm or in the elaboration of new melodic or structural patterns, working profoundly in the durations and intensities” (Moreno Y, 1994).

⁴ Hector Quintanar was one of the two founders of the electronic laboratory at the conservatory along with the engineer Raúl Pavón.

1971, but we do not have any sound recordings of that event. On the other hand, in the seventies various academic composers will be interested in making experimental music. In 1970 Mario Lavista creates the *Quanta* group that will only last one or two years; one of Lavista's compositions was using a set of mechanical alarm clocks, and others were simply improvisations with Julian Carrillo's microtonal instruments. Another composer, Julio Estrada, makes works that reminds us of Satie, like the one called "Habitat Music" that happens in a building with 10 pianos distributed in three different levels and where a recording engineer runs with a microphone amplifying the different pianos and transmitting the signal through a radio station (Camacho, 2004).

Electronic music will fade very soon due to little interest by composers and institutions that were not capable to continue to develop the field, and the same thing will happen with experimental music (Rocha Iturbide, 2004a). We must deviate our attention to a different realm, and look for the roots of a Mexican sound art in the inter-disciplines.

3 Experimental Theater and sound

The first germs of a Mexican sound art can be found through out different experiences of experimental theater in the sixties. The Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky came to live to Mexico and invented a theater called "Teatro Pánico" as well as performances called "Efímeros" (Ephemerals). In 1962 he made a *panic* work (*The order Opera*) where "he will cause national trouble because in the eclectic art direction, the photo of pope Juan XXIII could be seen converted into the membrane of a drum" (Prieto Antonio, 2001). In 1963 he did an "ephemeral" at the *San Carlos Art School* where he destroyed and burned a piano cooking three chickens with the fire, as well as other actions, some of them based in sound. Although Jodorowsky was not a musician, he invented rare instruments and scored many eclectic sound actions in his scripts⁵ (Jodorowsky, 1965) that remind us of the futurist, Dadaist, and Surrealist movements. Needless to say, the *fluxus* group was doing similar sound actions at the time, but with a less aggressive and violent outlook.

Another important character of this decade is the theater director Juan José Gurrola who befriended Jodorowsky. Both of them performed an action in Bogotá Colombia in 1968 where they walked along a street dressed as monks and singing psalms. Gurrola also improvised in his organ, he made an LP with experimental improves (*Zen Jazz*)⁶, and

⁵ In his book *teatro pánico* (Jodorowsky, 1965) one of his scripts goes like this: "Sound collage in darkness: door handle - crackling of a small door opening - crackling of a big door - crackling of an enormous door - Roar of King-Kong and chains - the interjection Aj! Said by a German - Gurgles - the voice of a man: five, four, three, two, one, cero!

⁶ This LP was published in the early seventies. Gurrola plays the electric organ and uses his voice. The other non-professional

performed in 1963 a "political musical" called *Jazz Palabra* where he read texts of different writers such as Juan Vicente Melo, Juan García Ponce and Carlos Monsivais (Alcázar J, 2001).

Jodorowsky and Gurrola were in a way the pioneers of performance in Mexico, in a decade of changes where our country had a "generation of rupture", a group of artists (Jose Luis Cuevas, Vicente Rojo, Manuel Felguérez, etc) that criticized the nationalist painters supported by the government (Tamayo, Siqueiros, etc).

4 The art scene

Research has not provided proof yet if there was sound experimentation in the Mexican art scene in the sixties. Nevertheless, the German artist Mathias Goeritz came to live to Mexico in the fifties, and he was at least interested in concrete visual poetry which was very musical, although it was not made specifically to sound. Goeritz influenced many architects and artists from the sixties and seventies and he was an up bringer of the inter-discipline since the 1950's when he constructed the experimental museum "El Eco", a place where the different arts converged. One of his concrete poems was built in the walls of a VIPS cafeteria in 1967⁷.

As a consequence of the student movement in 1968 and the Mexican government repression, in the seventies there were different alternative art groups, non-institutional, defenders of the popular classes, with conceptual ideas, etc⁸. Yet, I have to do a research in order to know if there was any interest in working with sound. One of the few artists I know that experimented with sound was Felipe Ehreberg, who also had connections with the international *fluxus* movement, but his "ephemeral" experiments will be lost in a semi empty well" as he expressed in an email he sent me when I asked him permission to publish his sound work "Maneje con Precaución".

Lets go back to the seventies, where we have another isolated case of an artist that had an interest in language structure as Mathias Goeritz, but in this case, he did various very interesting sound works. Ulises Carrión (1942-1989) was perhaps the first conceptual Mexican artist, as well as the first sound artist in our country, but Ulises left Mexico and went to live to Holland where he abandoned literature in order to devote himself to non object forms of art, like *mail art*, *video art* and *archive art*. In 1977 Carrión creates a couple of conceptual sound works recorded in a cassette

musician's that play in the recording are: Victor Fosado (pioneer of performing Mexican pre-Columbian instruments), Roberto Bustamante, Mauricio Vazquez and Eduardo Guzman.

⁷ This poem is anonymous and it's a game of words dealing with a few crazy crocodiles: "Pocos Cocodrilos, cocodrilos locos pocos cocos, cocodrilos y locosdrilos.... (Robina R.D, 1997).

⁸ Some of these groups were: *Tepito Arte Aca*, *Peyote and the company*, *SUMA*, *No Group*, *The Pajamas A go go*, etc (Prieto Antonio, 2001).

called “The poets Tongue” (edited by Guy Schraenen). Carrión states how these works were presented: “All the pieces included here have in common a rejection to verbal communication. They aren’t either true or pretty. Each work is a series of vocal unities that unfold according to simple rules. The beginning and the end are arbitrary, they could continue infinitely, they have to continue, they continue” (Camacho, 2004).

In the Mexican Sound Art CD edited in collaboration with the Spanish sound magazine *RAS*, I published and excerpt of “Hamlet for two voices” (one of the works of “The Poets tongue”). Here a man and a woman read the names of the characters of the play by Shakespeare in an alternate way. Carrión lives aside literary content but maintains a preoccupation for language and structure.

5 The eighties

Clear manifestations of a Mexican Sound Art will grow in the eighties decade, thanks to the interaction between artists of distinct fields (sculpture, painting, poetry, photography, music) most of them born in the fifties. They conformed art groups for the creation of happenings, actions and exhibitions as well as concerts where the sound element had an important role. Some of these groups were *Atentamente a la dirección, Música de Cámara, La Sonora Industrial, Centro Independiente de Investigación Musical (CIIMM)*, etc, where various experimental composers participated such as Roberto Morales, Samir Menaceri, Antonio Russek, Vicente Rojo Cama, Eduardo Soto Millán, Arturo Márquez, etc, and also artists such as Gabriel Macotela who created a series of sound sculptures in metal called “Metalophones” and which were played in various concerts by some of the composers before mentioned. On the other hand, in 1984 Radio UNAM produces a radio series untitled “First Biennale of imaginary sculpture” that consisted in commissioning short sculptural sound works (no more than one minute each one) to different artists in which the element of the spoken word predominated (Camacho, 2004). It is also important to mention the intermedia activities of the sound engineer Raúl Pavón (born in 1927), pioneer of electronic music in Mexico and who realized various works called “icofón” where electronic sounds were translated into images through oscilloscopes and colored filters (Pavón, 1981), as well as the iris doctor, musician and inventor Ariel Guzik that started his research and efforts to create an electromagnetic sound instrument called “The Plasmath Mirror” that consisted in a big kind of harp with strings that resonated through electronic currents of ions, obtained by certain types of cetaceans and other electrical signals produced by other plants.

6 The nineties

In 1992 a performance festival was born in the “Chopo Museum” (from 1993 on it was celebrated in the *Ex-Teresa*

Arte Actual Museum). This event contributed to the development of sound art in Mexico because various national and international experimental musicians were invited to perform sound actions. The same thing could be said of the “International visual/experimental poetry biennale” created in 1986 by Cesar Espinosa and Araceli Zúñiga, who invited international sound poets, although unhappily, we can’t see any trace of a Mexican sound poetry through the eight passed biennales, only a big interest in visual poetry.

Mexican sound art will not become a new discipline in Mexico until the middle nineties, when diverse curators and artists found a big interest in this new interdisciplinary media and various cultural institutions started to promote it. In 1996 the first “International radio biennale” is born. The radio station Radio Educación, directed by Lidia Camacho has produced it. This biennale organizes a radio art competition as well as other activities related to sound art. In 1997 the art exhibition “La resurrección del San Martín” showed in situ installations by many artists, where six of them produced sound installations⁹. In 1998 the contemporary art museum “Carrillo Gil” presented during one year Mexican and international sound works at the entrance of the building¹⁰. This same year the first *encounter of sound art*¹¹ had place in San Miguel Allende Gto, and the following year the first *international sound art festival*¹² will be born at the *Ex-Teresa Museum*, a venue (1999-2002) that created the ideal ground for Mexican artists and experimental musicians for the production and presentation of their works.

I have to say how important has been the work of different curators towards sound art, especially Guillermo Santamarina, director of the *Ex-Teresa Museum* till 2003, who supported the work of artists working with sound since the end of the seventies, as well as the experimental music work in Mexico. Other curators that have contributed are Elías Levín and Príamo Lozada, particularly with the development of electronic art and video art, but always

⁹ Guillermo Santamarina was the curator of this exhibition and the artists that did sound works were Manuel Rocha Iturbide, Pedro Reyes, Xavier Rodriguez, Keneth Bostock, Antonio Fernandez Ros and Fernando Ortega.

¹⁰ Elias Levin curated this exhibition and the Mexicans that participated were Laura Corona, Gustavo Artigas and Ivan López.

¹¹ Organized by Michael Bock and Manuel Rocha Iturbide, this encounter had an exhibition with works by Rolf Julius (Germany), Luz María Sanchez (Mexico), Fernando Ortega (Mexico) as well as sounds scapes by different international authors. There was also an electronic music concert.

¹² Founded by Guillermo Santamarina and Manuel Rocha Iturbide. Besides promoting sound art in our country, this festival brought to Mexico a few of the international pioneers of this genre: Alvin Curran(EUA), Pauline Oliveros (EUA), Phil Niblock (EUA), Paul Panhuysen (Holland), Juan Hidalgo (Spain), Maurizio Nannucci (Italy).

giving an important space to the sound phenomena. In other places other than Mexico City, the curator Marco Granados organized a sound exhibition in Monterrey called “Nipper” (at the University Library Raúl Rangel Frías) in 2000. That same year the exhibition “Artistas emergentes, esculturas cinéticas y sonoras” had place in that same city. On the other hand, the *Multimedia Center* in Mexico City (created in 1994) has had a bigger interest in sound, inviting different artists to propose projects and organizing concerts with electronics and visuals

7 Sound artists in present Mexico

In the 2005 CD *RAS 7* edited by the *Centro de Creación Experimental* in the *University of Castilla La Mancha* in Cuenca Spain, I was asked by the director Jose Antonio Sarmiento to do a CD about Mexican sound art. Through all the research I made, it was not easy to make a selection when trying to reflect the different aspects of this wide field.

I chose sound works from artists of the following fields: experimental theater, electroacoustic music, experimental music, sound poetry, sound installation, sound sculpture, conceptual art, and radio art. However, important works and artists had to be excluded.

There are for example experimental composers from different generations that should have been in the CD, like Julio Estrada (b 1943), Roberto Morales (b 1955), or Rogelio Sosa (b 1987). There have also been very interesting artists not represented that have worked with sound in different ways like Fernando Ortega, Francis Alys, Javier Rodriguez, Gustavo Artigas, etc. On the other hand I could only include two radio artists, while there are more that have interesting works. In 2001 *Radio Educación* created a workshop called LEAS (Laboratory of experimental sound art) where I was invited to participate in order to teach new generations of radio artists.

There are today many young sound artists in Mexico, Mario de Vega and Daniel Lara are included in the CD, but there are also the collectives of Monterrey City “La lucha Libre” and “Los Lichis”, or “Toro Lab” in Tijuana, and “Suauu” in Mexico City. Also Taniel Morales, Amanda Gutierrez, Alex Casales, Hugo Navarro, Hugo Lugo, Alexis Ruiz, Victor Sulser, Arcangel Constantini, Alfredo Salomón, etc.

Experimental music has also had a big boom in the last years but it would be here impossible to speak about all the people involved. The POP music movement in Mexico in the 50’s gave way to a couple of traditional popular music based musicians that nevertheless became experimental within their scenes. Juan García Esquivel was a pioneer in stereophony, quadraphonic sound and in introducing all kinds of daily noises into his lounge music. Same thing with Dámaso Pérez Prado, the Mambo king that made all sort of experiments. Some of the non academic musicians that have had some influence in younger generations are Jorge Reyes

with his Mexican ambient music style, Antonio Zepeda with his ethnological insight into Pre Hispanic music, German Bringas and Remi Alvarez with their free improvisation styles, etc.

A new research would have to be done to have a better insight into the experimental music scene and its evolution. Yet, I have to mention some of the outstanding non academic young musicians composing electronic experimental music these days such as Alvaro Ruiz, Manrico Montero, Israel M, Metaculto, Ricardo Rendón, Resistol 5000, Machintosco, Muu, etc.

8 Conclusions

Although I have had a good start with my research work, there is non-existent bibliography and still some fieldwork to be done. Particularly for everything that happened before the eighties, it will be important to interview some essential people like Juan José Gurrola, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and other artists in order to see what other activities related to sound had place in the fifties, sixties and seventies.

While experimental music and sound art haven’t been areas where we have had an important past, it is nonetheless exciting to remark how such people as Jodorowsky and Gurrola were pioneers of sound “actions” at the international level. Also, the development of these fields in the last ten years has been remarkable and I could state that Mexico has one of the first places in Latin America today. Only in the sound poetry domain we might have to accept a non-existent realm, as it happens with most Hispanic countries in our continent¹³. Last, a survey of the development of Latin American sound art should be made in order to understand our similarities, differences, and our deficiencies and uniqueness when compared with other cultures. A book with articles by different Latin American artists, curators and critics is envisaged in the near future by the author of this paper.

¹³ With the exception of the mentioned conceptual artist Ulises Carrión in the seventies, and Guillermo Gomez Peña in the eighties, an artist and performer that has centered his political artwork in the Mexican USA border, making use of a hybrid invented language (“spanglish”).

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